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The Arab Revolt: What it means for US in Afghanistan

By Sophie Ng

Synopsis

25 January 2011 marked the day thousands of Egyptians marched to Cairo’s Tahrir Square and successfully forced the resignation of President Mubarak. Subsequently, the Taliban issued a statement warning that US forces in Afghanistan would be next.

Commentary

THE EVENTS of 25 January 2011 were a watershed moment for Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. Usually seen as a mainstay of the United States in the Middle East, the Hosni Mubarak government collapsed in the face of the unprecedented revolt by the people, long dissatisfied with the way the country was being run.

Controversy arose soon after, when the Taliban in Afghanistan declared on its website, that “many weapons and soldiers and much foreign assistance cannot keep a regime in power”. Drawing parallels with the Egyptian revolution, the group has said that the Afghan people would rise up and overthrow the US-backed Afghan government due to its corruption and ‘atrocities’.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the foreign troops remain unaware of local history, tribal structures, languages, customs and politics. This will not help the US win over the people to their side; instead it has come to a point where Hamid Karzai has stated that the prolonged presence of so many foreign soldiers will only worsen the conflict.

After almost a decade in Afghanistan, the US has made limited progress in improving the lives of the people. Currently, what seems to be foremost on American minds is spending as much as is needed to keep the Taliban from capturing power rather than improving conditions on the ground to help win the ‘hearts and minds of the people’.

In addition, the Karzai government continues to suffer from a lack of public legitimacy and detachment from the rest of the country. The sanctuary Pakistan offers the insurgents is intact; and the insurgency continues to be resilient as it wages a violent intimidation campaign against supporters of Karzai and the foreign allies. This allows them to expand their reach into more areas.
What It Means for US

What does the turmoil in the Middle East mean for the US position in Afghanistan?

First, it is important to remember that the Afghan situation is not the same as those of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa currently facing the waves of revolution. Historically, loyalties on the ground have always been split amongst tribal lines. Although the Peshawar Accords ensured that a unified government was formed, militias supported by foreign governments have continued fighting, resulting in a distinct lack of policing and a stable governing structure.

In Afghanistan, the US has prioritised degrading the insurgency while strengthening local governing capacity. This has resulted in the perpetuation of anti-US sentiment on the ground. The US is increasingly seen as complicit in the political repression of most of the people.

Calls for the Afghans to look after their own security remain unrealistic as long as the insurgency is strong. Recruits into the army, government and civil service fear retaliation by the Taliban, hindering their capacity to be effective. The challenge here is whether Obama and his administration, fighting the rising wave of anti-war popular opinion back home, will be able to negotiate an optimum timetable for withdrawal that satisfies both sides.

Recognising that the Taliban will always maintain a presence in the region could ensure that engagement and collaboration are better parameters within which to work out an effective Afghan strategy. Counter-terrorism and nation-building have to be carried out separately, yet simultaneously, rather than merging the two into one militarised strategy.

This was acknowledged last December when the Obama administration pledged itself to a political resolution of the conflict and to intensify regional diplomacy in order to enable a viable political process, including an Afghan-led national reconciliation. This has to include the Taliban, if need be.

Lessons

Washington should remember the key lesson of 2011: that the US needs to practice what it preaches. The US has long been the shepherd of democratic ideals, yet it continues to support repressive regimes in exchange for strategic alliances. This places the US firmly on the ‘wrong side of history’, especially in the minds of the people. This failure to nudge the allies onto the road of political reform robs the US of the moral high ground and hurts its interests.

Whatever happens to Afghanistan will definitely influence the policy direction the US adopts toward the region. An all-out collapse of the already shaky government would lead to a power vacuum that could play into the insurgents’ hands. If the US remains bogged down and distracted in Central Asia because of such a development, it can only redound to the detriment of Washington’s engagement with other areas such as the Asia-Pacific.

A weakened US would encourage insurgencies elsewhere. US allies in the region would look to other powers for their security, thereby further undermining the US position in the region.

Many Afghans are turning to the insurgency because it offers an alternative to Karzai’s rule. It might be unpractical to remove Karzai from power, but if the US wants to avoid a repeat of Egypt’s 25 January in Afghanistan, it needs to realise that political reform goes hand in hand with security. A government is, ultimately, weakened in terms of its legitimacy, if the people refuse to recognise it.

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