

Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia

***Beyond the Arab Spring - Public protest in authoritarian states***

Summary



This is a summary of a seminar conducted by Eurasia Forum in Stockholm on 26 October 2012.

The seminar was held in English and was the second in a series of three on the topic Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

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## Introduction

The Arab Spring, the series of popular protests that started in Tunisia in December 2010, will no doubt leave marks in future history books. The final legacy of these events is yet to be determined, but it is clear that the outcome has differed widely, from the ouster of an authoritarian president replaced by an elected government, as in Egypt, reform with the ruling elite still in place, as in Morocco, to the full-scale civil war still raging in Syria.

Even though these events did not spread outside the Arab world, the ruling elites in Central Asia seem to have drawn parallels between the conditions there and in their own societies. But while the response of the rulers in e.g. Morocco was to accommodate some of the real or perceived demands of the population, the response in Central Asia in general was rather one of stricter control and hardened oppression. In state-controlled media, there were attempts to silence news about what happened in the Arab world. This was made all the more urgent by the protests in Russia after the elections in late 2011.

Are there then any similarities between the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Central Asia beyond the fact that they mostly belong to the larger Muslim community? Politically, there has not been any global Muslim unity for a long time. The European colonisation also left a very different legacy - British, French and Italian incursions in MENA were generally of a shorter duration than the Russian presence in Central Asia (with an interesting exception in the long French presence in Algeria, a country so far relatively little affected by the spring movements). But there are other similarities. Like in many MENA countries, the population is young, literate, but without credible prospects of job and career. Also, this younger generation has so far effectively been denied influence in the countries' affairs by a ruling elite largely rooted in Soviet times. In terms of governance, pre-Arab Spring MENA and the Central Asian countries were also generally seen as having some of the world's most authoritarian governments.

## The Arab Spring - a brief assessment



The Arab Spring is a term not entirely accepted in the region itself, since developments have been so different. But it can generally be assumed that lack of economic development with resulting unemployment was a major factor in igniting the events, as *Marianne Laanatza*, long-time expert on the Middle East and North Africa, points out. The stagnant autocratic governments failed to pursue economic liberalisation, while by imposing complex rules on the free trade agreements with its southern neighbours, the European Union also has its share of the guilt in preventing economic growth in the MENA region.

Laanatza points at the strong cultural links between MENA and Europe with popular television shows in French, Italian and English, which have created an awareness among the youth in particular of a new, modernising way of life. The EU and the US had long-standing support programmes for engaging young people and women in particular, which along with increasing usage of social media, which raised the awareness of democratic principles in at least some

*Illustration 1: Marianne Laanatza*

segments of society.

The Muslim Brotherhood in its various guises was actively suppressed and often prohibited, but nevertheless as one of the few organised forces maintained attraction through non-overt political work in mosques. According to Laanatza, the era of the moderately Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in *Turkey* contributed to mainstreaming the thought of Muslim influence in politics. However, looking at *Egypt* as an example, both these movements were to some extent urban in their influence. A neglect of the southern village areas by the Brotherhood created a space for more radical *salafist* networks. Adding to the complexity, among the *salafī* adherents there are also many islamised Copts, who by being seen as inferior to the Arab majority have other reasons for discontent in addition to poverty and religion.

In *Libya*, after a first democratic election generally seen as a positive step, tribal differences have come to the surface. In *Bahrain*, there were recurring protests among the shia majority towards the ruling elite even before the Spring events. In *Morocco*, king Mohammad VI has long had an, albeit limited, reform agenda, which accelerated with the Arab Spring events and paved the way for the Islamic Justice and Development Party (PJD), which won the largest number of seats in the 2011 election. At the same time, the PJD has also been influenced by its Turkish namesake and other modernising movements. Secular and Islamic tendencies, both with large popular support, are now reshaping Morocco.

Regarding the situation in Syria, which after the initial protests deteriorated into full-scale civil war, Laanatza points out that since the role of the Muslim Brotherhood had been repressed a number of more radicalised groups had already emerged. In her view, because of the large differences in objectives, she does not see a consensus forming between the various groupings opposing the Assad regime.

The Arab Spring created unparalleled conditions for change, but it remains to be seen if economic development will be possible, how *shari'ah* will be interpreted in the new legal systems, what will happen to the rights of women. For many western observers, the underestimation of the views of the large rural population in the Arab countries in favour of the visible urban manifestations of discontent makes this interpretation difficult.

## Central Asian responses

*Andrea Schmitz* and *Alexander Wolters* are the co-authors of research on social movements in Central Asia after the Arab Spring. Dr Schmitz summarises the features that made the Arab Spring possible. Firstly, it was motivated by the condition of frustration with authoritarian rule, corruption and social problems. Secondly, there was a dynamisation made possible by new communication and information aggregation technology and thirdly, the Arab Spring would not have taken place had there not been a civil society to formulate the alternatives. Now, what relevance does this have for Central Asia?

At a first glance, the Central Asian countries, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, appear stable with no major upheavals. But under the surface society is becoming increasingly polarised. In *Kazakhstan*, economic development has widened the gap between rich and poor without creating channels for political participation. The previously quiet country has seen several problems in the latest years. Long-running workers' disputes erupted in violent clashes in 2011 in the oil-rich western parts and brutal police crackdown resulted in several deaths. Although they shouldn't be seen as representing widely spread social discontent in Kazakhstan, the events point to a vulnerability in the social contract, which holds that citizens denounce their right to political participation in exchange for a share in economic development. According to Schmitz the Islamist groups in Kazakhstan do not represent a unified community, but this can change with further repression.

In *Tajikistan*, the government enjoys practically no legitimacy in some regions. Neglect of the public sector is a problem with education quality and school attendance at low levels. Although the moderate Islamic Renaissance Party has a few seats in parliament, the government denounces most religious activity as promoting terrorism and extremism. According to Schmitz it must be assumed that any growing protests will be met with harsh repression rather than negotiation, something which is true also for *Uzbekistan*. In this country, wealth is extremely unevenly distributed with a large proportion living below the poverty line, which makes it vulnerable to price increases. The population is expected to increase to more than 33 million by 2025, which in combination with lack of water resources may lead to acute shortages.

But while there are similar preconditions for discontent as in MENA, there are factors speaking against these types of movements. The expectation to be met with violence, as was the case in the harsh response to protests in Andijan in 2005 where hundreds were left dead, is an impediment to spontaneous social protest becoming a mass phenomenon (with the exception of *Kyrgyzstan*, where this has become almost commonplace). The societies also, unlike in the Arab world, lack a common vision. Instead, the Soviet experience has created exclusive narratives between ethnic groups and regions. The urban middle class as well as civil society groups are both relatively marginal. Therefore, protests may remain sporadic, and a "Central Asian Spring" remains unlikely.



*Illustration 2: Andrea Schmitz and Alexander Wolters*

## **A role for social media?**

However, the role of the new mass media and information and communication technologies (ICT) make things more unpredictable. One question is, are they a potential force for democratic change or do they just have a dynamising effect?

Except for Kazakhstan, Central Asia has comparatively low Internet access possibilities. But Internet usage rates at between 20-40% are comparable to the Arab countries, as is mobile coverage, which is rising rapidly. Recent events, such as the above-mentioned protests in Kazakhstan and the explosion of a munitions depot in Turkmenistan in 2011, were made public by individual mobile phone and Internet users rather than via official news channels.

*Kyrgyzstan* is different from the other countries in political dynamism as well as in the spread and openness of public dialogue. According to Dr Wolters, during and after the April revolution of 2010, when the president was ousted, social media undoubtedly helped the protesters get global attention. Like Wolters, who was himself in Bishkek at the time, many - including official news channels - followed the events using Twitter. In the clashes in the south of the country a few weeks later between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, the effect of widespread mobile phone usage had a double effect. It helped people stay in contact with their relatives and get information, but it also made rumours spread even further. Above all, the reactions of the then provisional government could not keep up with the speed of the information flow.

To the authoritarian governments, new communication technology is a mixed blessing. While stimulating economic growth, it also limits their control of information. The central topic of the

CSTO<sup>1</sup> meeting in Astana in June 2011 was how to prevent an Arab Spring scenario in the member countries. The use of Internet censorship and website blocking, liability laws encouraging self-censorship, and other measures to restrict the spread of information has increased.

To conclude, the closed nature of the regimes makes it difficult to predict events like the 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan. But what is clear is that if such an event does happen, social media will influence how it unfolds.

## Contact

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<sup>1</sup> Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Current members: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan.