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Patterns in the Arab revolution

The Arab leaders need to recognise their failures in dealing violently with the peoples' genuine calls for freedom.

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A clever promo on Al Jazeera Arabic shows in the simplest and clearest way a pattern of failure on the part of Arab autocrats.

It juxtaposes the grand statements made by Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi, since the earliest days of the popular uprising.

All three started by underlining their legitimacy as servants of the state and its people. And when calls for reform intensified they underlined how they seek no glory or position and are more than happy to move on.

And in no time, regimes began to escalate the use of force as they repeated slogans about the greatness of their nations prompting protesters to call for regime change.

Indeed, all autocrats, including those of Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, have thus far responded to peoples' demands for serious reforms with oppression. And when that didn't work they turned to empty appeasement that was transparently deceptive, but instead of containing the upheavals ended up emboldening the opposition.

It is mind-boggling how these Arab autocrats continued to repeat the same mistakes in reaction to the same intensified popular defiance when the lessons from the fall of their neighbours were too obvious to ignore. And in each and every case they underlined why their countries differed from Tunisia and hence immune to dramatic change.

Meanwhile, it's becoming clear that despite the tension and violence, the Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and Gaddafi will sooner or later join the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents, and that no degree of violence will help either leader to salvage their regimes.

Lessons learned

The Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has had the advantage of time and precedence to learn from the experiences of his Arab counterparts and to effect serious reform during a transitional period that includes breaking the Baath hold on power and calling for elections.

However, Assad's long-promised speech at the outset of the popular Syrian uprising was disappointing at best, indeed insulting to those who patiently awaited similar promises over the last decade. The second speech brought too little, too late.

Watching the dramatic events of the last few days, it's evident that the Syrian people have learned the right lessons from their fellow revolutionary Arabs. Contrary to official claims, the uprising has been inspired by Tunisia and Egypt, and hardly deterred by the violence seen in Libya, Yemen and Bahrain.

Cowardly as it is, fear has switched sides. People are on the march and autocrats are on the defensive regardless of their firepower. Paradoxically, the more they use it, the less effective it becomes.

That's why the Syrian president seems to have drawn the wrong lessons from the patterns of change in the Arab region repeating each and every mistake made by his fellow autocrats.

He also seemed to have drawn the wrong conclusion from Western and Arab support for peaceful reform as the US threatens to harden the sanctions against Syria, a step that is likely to be followed by Europe.

For now, Iran and Turkey remain supportive of the Syrian regime, with the latter, reportedly, attempting to mediate with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood that will include wide-ranging reforms.

For the last decade, Assad has been seen as a promising young leader capable of reform and changing the course of his country. But recent weeks has shown a man incapable of putting the interests of the country ahead of those of the party, and the interests of the party and regime ahead of those of his extended family.

It's abundantly clear that he rejects any notion of stepping down and refuses to embrace far reaching reforms beyond theoretical annulment of the emergency laws.

Instead, he accused the opposition of betrayal, collaboration with foreign powers and carrying armed insurgency against the state.

With a history of armed crackdown on its opposition killing thousands especially in the 1980s, the Syrian regime is making it clear that it won't be taught any lessons by others, instead, it is adamant on teaching the Syrians another lesson they wouldn't forget!

Pre-empting escalation

For all practical purposes, Assad has concluded that Mubarak and Ben Ali were too quick to quit, and Gaddafi and Saleh were too late to respond by using decisive force.

That's why the Syrian regime is likely to follow in the footsteps of Bahrain and beyond. In other words, it's pre-empting further escalation of popular upheaval through a campaign of nation-wide arrests and military deployment to the country's civilian hotspots in the south, middle and north of the country. So far, hundreds have been killed in only a few days.

It's not clear whether -or rather how - disproportionate use of force will end the Syrian uprising. Many are expecting further escalation regardless of the bloodshed; that the emboldened population has broken the fear barrier and there's no turning back.

As one Syrian activist wrote on Facebook last week, demonstrating is like martyrdom: when he goes out to demonstrate, he doesn't expect to come back!

A new dangerous pattern is emerging as the Arab Spring heats up, with more violence and many more lives at stake as regimes stop at nothing to keep their hold on power.

Perhaps the most dangerous of the new patterns emerging from the transformations sweeping through the region, is the leaders' failure to recognise their failure in dealing violently with the peoples' genuine calls for freedom.