

Interview with Prof. Gerd Nonneman*

By Rahman Dağ**

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irst of all, I think, the reason of Arab uprising should be questioned. From your point of view, what is the fundamental reason for Arab insurgency from Morocco to Bahrain? Is it only because of the worse social and economic condition of local people or is there something more?

Gerd Nonneman: There is no question at all in my mind that the causes are a combination of grievances, first, over poor economic conditions, second, over the lack of human dignity and room for expression that came with authoritarian regimes, and third, the extent of corruption and misallocation of resources that those same regimes were responsible for. Three key things enabled it to happen. The first was a spark that had to be struck and reported on: the suicide of the Tunisian market seller became that spark. The second was the widespread availability of communications networks, both internal and external. Internally, such things as Facebook were important; externally, the key role was initially played by Al-Jazeera, and this was built upon by other Arab and international networks. The third was the wil-



Prof. Gerd Nonneman



lingness of traditional external supporters of these governments to criticise and then drop them.

Any ideas that these events might have been somehow caused by external forces or conspiracies, are without foundation, even if some may afterwards have tried to make the most of the events.

It seems that Bahrain and Libya is occupying a central place on the discussion on Arab insurgency and its causes and possible effect on the Middle East. What do you think about what makes them so special? Is it because of the level of violence in these countries or there is something more political concern on them?

Gerd Nonneman: Bahrain and Libya are not the only ones at the centre of attention: so are Syria and Yemen. The reason is fairly obvious: they're the cases that have most recently featured serious violence and may put into question the wider success of the Arab Spring. There are also serious wider security questions raised by all these cases: in Bahrain because of the impact on the GCC states and the country's role as a US base; in Yemen because of the fear of state collapse; in Libya because of the effect on Egypt and Tunisia as well as on immigration to Europe; and in Syria because of the impact on Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli theatre.

In terms of Bahrain, there is a common debate as to being a centre of cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Do you think that the only problematic issue is the rule of Sunni government over majority Shiite population? Is not there a global perspective on this issue? For instance, power struggle between Iran and the USA in the region?

Gerd Nonneman: Clearly Bahrain does play a role in both these cold wars, but the Saudi and US reactions have nevertheless been different. Saudi Arabia simply wasn't willing to accept any apparent challenge to monarchy or even the least hint of Iranian influence. Hence the hardline reaction. This clashed with the US, which did want to see genuine reform in Bahrain, both because they do not believe that Iran was behind the upheaval, and because they felt it was the best way to avoid medium term instability. The difficulty for the US, of course, was that in this case Bahrain also is a hard-to-replace base for regional and even wider operations, including for repairs etc. Also, there is a realisation that a majority of the Sunni population probably do not share the agenda of the protesters, so it is not a clear-cut regimes versus the people scenario. For both these reasons, US and Western condemnation of Bahrain have been more restrained than in other cases.

It might come to you really strange but if somebody asked you about possible emergence of religiously conservative and democratic Middle Eastern powers against the conservative and democratic Western powers what would your answer be? One of them is originally coming from the Islamic civilization and the other one from Christian civilization.

Gerd Nonneman: The geopolitical landscape is certainly shifting to some extent, and relations between Western states and many in the Middle East, whether reformers or non-reformers, will be affected, albeit not in any drastic

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way. The reformers, whether or not Islamist movements gain a measure of power, will be more willing to challenge Western policies or preferences that don't fit their own preferences. Pro-Western non-reformers will treat the West with less deference too, but in this case because they will see them as less of a reliable partner than in the past. But that does not mean that previously pro-Western states will simply turn around: basically positive relations will remain in existence, even if they will be attenuated and less 'taken for granted.' However, it is by no means so very likely that one would get a united 'conservative' Islamist style of government in any of these states.

As you know, as soon as an insurgency erupted in an Arab country, the main concern of some countries in the Middle East and the western counties commences to articulate a danger of that political Islam or radical Islamic groups would take the power in these countries. Do you agree with this concern or not? Could you please explain why?

Gerd Nonneman: While it is likely that Islamist groups and parties of different types will get a greater role in politics and government, I do not think that this is a serious reason for concern for the outside world, nor that a coherent Islamist 'control' of government is at all likely. None of them played a significant role in the Arab Spring, the agendas were set elsewhere, they are for the most part willing to play the political game, and they are in any case not united internally. Paranoia about Islamist take-overs, and policies based on such fears, are the one thing that can produce self-fulfilling prophecies in this regard.

Continuation of apprising within the Arab World led some scholars to think about the changes in political map in the Middle East. Do you think it is possible after nearly a hundred years experience of current borders? And what might be possible result of these discussions for several states whose artificialities are still the subject of many academic works?

Gerd Nonneman: If you mean changing borders or new states, I do not believe this is at all likely. Adjustments in levels of autonomy is a possibility, as is the way border issues are treated, for instance the new Egyptian attitude to the Gaza border. But there is no appetite for major changes to the map, either locally or internationally.

Do you have a belief that all these uprisings or insurgencies or whatever it can be called would bring democracy to the Middle Eastern states? As it is known that most of the Arab states are still ruled by authoritarian monarchs or dictators and these states mostly have good relations with the Western powers which on the contrary advocates democracy. If their democratization is completed or they become more or less democratic states, do you think that the relationships between the Middle Eastern and the Western states would change? If you do, in which ways, positive or negative?

Gerd Nonneman: I do think varieties of 'democracy or let us call it 'pluralist, participatory and accountable politics' are likely to emerge, although the process is likely to be in fits and starts and may take a long time to see full fruit.

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tion. For the remainder of this question I would point to my previous answer to preceding question. I would like to just add: in many ways it may end up being more, not less, comfortable for many Western democracies to deal with these countries: the need to deal with them positively even though they were autocracies was always something of an embarrassment. Of course it may mean having to become more accepting of local perceptions over issues such as Palestine, but that will in the end be a positive, for instance, it is likely to cause hand-wringing mainly in the US, The Netherlands and Germany, not so much elsewhere.

What do you think are/can be the implications of uprisings in the Middle East for oil prices and the economies of Middle eastern countries?

Gerd Nonneman: For oil prices, I think very little indeed. Policies have been driven mainly by interest and the market, even under Saddam or Qaddhafi. Temporarily, of course, some disruption or nervousness may cause price rises, but that will settle. All emerging governments will be equally interested in maintaining long-term oil markets. On the domestic economies, though, there may be an effect. In the short term, of course, again disruption is already occurring. But in the medium and longer term, more legitimate and less kleptocratic regimes can only be good for the economy.

What do you think about the possibility of an economic integration among countries in the region after the regime change in some of the countries?

Gerd Nonneman: I doubt that very much, just as has never happened in the past under a variety of regimes. The state, and locally-defined identities and interests, have, if anything, grown even stronger. And of course the thing is that one will in some ways have another strong division, between more democratic regimes and the remaining autocracies. It is worth noting in any case that the most advanced kind of economic integration thus far has taken place among the autocratic monarchies of the GCC.

As you know that in the 1973 war with Israel, Arab states used the oil power against industrial Western powers. Do you think whole of the revolts in the Middle East could result in an unintentional oil crisis in the world? In other words, what result will the revolts bring to the world in the realm of political economy?

Gerd Nonneman: No, I don't think there will result an oil crisis - other than short-term spikes due to uncertainty. The rest of the answer would be almost the same with the second previous question but it can be generally said that there certainly won't-would not be a new edition of the oil weapon. **PR**

Notes:

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