The bright promise of Arab popular protests and revolutionary change risks souring, warns Lebanon's former finance minister ***Georges Corm****. He explains why foreign interference and the exploitation of internal divisions in Arab societies must be vigilantly guarded against*

The opening months of this year were marked by two surprising events in the Arab world; political change in Tunisia and then in Egypt after decades of dictatorship, corruption and repression. And Egyptians and Tunisians both invented a peaceful approach that required neither a political party nor a charismatic leader to bring about revolutionary change. There was no revolutionary doctrine to guide the masses in Cairo or Tunis, only stubborn demands that their dictators should resign immediately and open the way for a pluralistic political system, and that the dictators and corrupt family members be judged and punished along with their business associates.

Other slogans during the long days and nights when people gathered in public spaces were simple and direct. They were without ideological content but asked simply for an end to the one party system along with social justice, better employment opportunities and social and political dignity for all. They also asked for the dismantling of the security apparatuses that controlled the lives of citizens, together with constitutional reforms to guarantee political liberties and fundamental human rights.

It was remarkable that all social strata were being mobilised, along with Tunisians and Egyptians abroad. Symbolic but important civic behaviour ranging from free food distribution to caring for children, arranging for hair cutting, cleaning of the streets and public places and free transportation ensured that citizens felt responsible for changing the course of the history in both countries. Each seemed ready to risk life and limb in the face of aggression by officials or secret police trying to disband huge gatherings of peaceful citizens.

But who in the Arab world could have imagined such events even a few months ago? After decades of stagnation under implacable dictatorships that failed to provide even the basic needs of their peoples, the crumbling of their power in just a few weeks now heralded a new era. And of course similar protests began in many other Arab countries. In Libya we've seen the ousting of Gadaffi, and in Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman and even Iraq, there have been mass demonstrations to support demands for political reform, social justice and jobs. In the Arab monarchies, the reformists' main demand

has been for the transformation of the absolute monarchy system to constitutional monarchies comparable to those in Europe. The most remarkable feature has been the way that Arab societies that have lived their own separate life for decades, suddenly felt linked once again by their common history and destiny. Yet the popular movement for change also began to encounter difficulties. In some, like Saudi Arabia and Oman, financial handouts helped calm the situation, backed by strong repression that was generally unreported in the media. In others, like Bahrain, there was direct repression, with Saudi troops sent to help suppress revolt. In Yemen, despite huge mass demonstrations, the president refused to quit and instead managed to win both domestic and foreign support. In Syria, President Assad at first believed that his support for Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon would protect him from the popular protest movements, but this has not been the case. The world still awaits the outcome there.

But the enthusiasm and optimism that prevailed during the Arab spring have since begun to recede, and an atmosphere of gloom and anxiety now surrounds the fate of other Arab revolutions. The causes of this dramatic change are both domestic and foreign, reflecting the complex geopolitics of the region. In most cases, domestic factors are facilitating foreign interference, or foreign intervention is using domestic politics as a pretext.

However peacefully a revolution begins, it will always encounter resistance from those socio-political segments of society that fear losing privileges or influence. Neighbouring countries and other powers may worry that the changes taking place could affect their own political and economic interests, and therefore act to increase tension and make the population less supportive of change.

Egypt and Tunisia were coherent and unfragmented societies in that there were no strong regional, tribal, ethnic or religious differences. But this is not the case for other countries where there has been unrest or outright revolt, like Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Morocco and Syria. Ever since the decline of the Ottoman empire there has been a long history of foreign intervention taking advantage of this fragmentation of Arab societies. And efforts to transform authoritarian monarchies in Bahrain, Jordan or Morocco into constitutional monarchies have met strong resistance from Saudi Arabia, the largest and most powerful Arab monarchy. In Bahrain, the fact that the majority (but not all) of the protesters belonged to the Shia religious community raised suspicions of Iranian intervention and “legitimized” the Saudi intervention there. Saudi interest in having a Yemeni political regime under its influence for many historical reasons might have contributed to the present dangerous political stalemate in Yemen. In Jordan and Morocco, the revolutionary movements were conscious that the monarchy was the

key element binding together the various ethnic groups, so they never demanded change to a republic or challenged the king in the way that Egypt's Mubarak or Tunisia's Ben Ali were targeted.

Another domestic factor complicating the Arab revolutionary scene is fear of the Muslim Brotherhood taking over through free elections. Although the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in both the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions was low profile, it is clear that in Egypt they have become supportive of the Military Council and are now a growing force that is determined to thwart the aspirations of many Egyptians to a secular state. Elsewhere, there are fears in a number of Arab countries of possible takeovers through free elections of various brands of Muslim fundamentalism. Iraqi Jihadists have reportedly been sent to Syria to support the protest movement, while Turkey's support there for the Muslim Brotherhood risks provoking yet more violence. Given the fragmented nature of Syrian society, nobody knows if the country's social fabric can be safeguarded should the Assad regime fall.

Meanwhile, the economic situation in those Arab countries most affected by the new revolutionary fervour is deteriorating fast. The poorest strata of society along with the lower middle classes that were so devoted to revolutionary change now risk becoming seriously disaffected, and may well turn their backs on revolutionary change if they feel there's no improvement to their daily lives. Attracted during the Arab spring by secular political slogans, these people could easily be influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and its simple slogan that "Islam is the solution". Acute tensions are already surfacing in Egypt over the new constitution and the role to be given to religion. When the G8 leaders offered financial assistance packages to Tunisia and Egypt at their Deauville summit in June, their decision to associate the IMF with this initiative caused Egypt to decline conditional assistance that might reflect neo-liberal IMF recipes. Egyptians still have bad memories of hunger riots provoked by its structural adjustment programs.

The Arab scene seems set for a long period of instability, for revolutions never achieve their objectives in a short period of time. It took Europe more than a century and a half after the French revolution to consolidate democratic regimes, secular values, religious liberties, constitutional monarchies and the rule of law. So the best way for Europe to contribute to peace and stability in the region is to abstain from intervention and any meddling in the domestic affairs of Arab countries. There must be no double standards in taking positions for or against what is happening in different parts of the Arab world. And the international media should be careful to avoid amplifying revolts and denouncing repression in one country, but keeping silent on what's happening in others. Regional powers, be it Saudi Arabia, Iran or Turkey should remain neutral and the U.S. should stop giving daily official opinions according to its own geopolitical interests. And Israel should contribute to the region's stability by changing seriously rather than cosmetically its ongoing policy of denying Palestinian rights. Sadly, though, these

closing thoughts may be no more than wishful thinking.

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