



From the SelectedWorks of Josep M. Colomer

January 2011

Yes, Cairo Can Happen in Havanna

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/josep_colomer/35

Cuban Affairs

Quarterly Electronic Journal



Vol. 6, Issue 1

2011

Yes, Cairo Can Happen in Havana

Josep M. Colomer

Cuban Affairs
Quarterly Electronic Journal

Editor: Jaime Suchlicki

Assistant to the Editor: Susel Pérez

Assistant Editors:

Eric Driggs

Hans de Salas del Valle

Book Review Editor: Juan del Aguila

Copy Editor: Kathy Hamman

Business Manager: Eugene Pons

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies or the University of Miami. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's expressed written permission. However, subscribers may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

© Copyright 2006 Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami
1531 Brescia Avenue, Coral Gables, 33146-3010;
Tel: 305 284-CUBA (2822), Fax: 305 284-4875, Email: cubanaffairs@miami.edu

Posed with the question as to whether Cuba can follow the Egyptian model of regime change, the answer must be, yes, it can. Another question is whether Cuba will follow that path and when, to which the answer is uncertain. But let us first address the conditions for such a model of regime change, as is developing in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries in early 2011, to be reproduced in Cuba.

Some structural similarities between Egypt and other Arab countries currently experiencing massive popular revolts and Cuba are relevant. First, their precarious economic situation has produced a vast young population that is a victim of underemployment and frustrated professional expectations. This may prompt an explosion of social protests and demands outside the ranks of the traditional, weakly organized political opposition.

Second, the central role of the Army in the existing dictatorship can make the interaction between protesters and the military the crucial game. Paradoxically, the broad economic interests of the Army may favor its decision to get rid of the dictator and open the gates to new political actors.

Third, the critical point for such a decision can appear as a dilemma as to whether or not to crush the revolt by violent means, which may challenge the army leaders and generate difficult resolutions. In 2011, while Tunisia and Egypt seem to have opened the path of transformation, in other countries a repressive course might prevail. It is likely that the same kind of harsh choices would come into play in Cuba if an analogous situation materialized. Let us analyze these elements separately.

The Youth Revolt

In January of this year, the Tunisian uprising was prepared by groups of young activists dedicated to spreading democracy in the Arab region. They broke free from older veterans of the political opposition and relied on tactics of nonviolent resistance and the use of communication technology.

In Egypt, the first demonstration was called a “day of revolution against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment.” Young physicians and lawyers, unemployed college graduates and students with professional concerns, but also significant political motivations rallied poor people in slums and deprived neighborhoods with complaints about basic economic issues.

While the Arab news channel Al Jazeera broadly covered the unrests and thousands were engaged into action through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, the elders of traditional political parties shied away from taking to the streets. Only a group of young Egyptian expatriates in Qatar, called the Academy of Change, and a few prominent individuals just returned from exile played a significant role.

Regularly summoned rallies in the main cities were reproduced across the countries. The new youth organizations in Tunisia and Egypt shared their experiences with similar movements in Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Iran. Imitation and contagion spread to other countries as well.

The Power of the Army

The crucial weakness of dictatorships is that they lack regular institutional mechanisms for the peaceful replacement of rulers when the people’s expectations decrease and protests arise such as those to which we refer above. Even though some dictatorships can last for several decades, as is obviously the case of the countries mentioned, democracies are more resilient to

economic crises and other failures because some responsibility can be attributed to a specific team of rulers, who can be overthrown by means of regular elections. In a dictatorship, by contrast, when doubts about the future spread, it is the entire political regime that tends to be questioned and eventually loses ground.

The dictatorial regimes in the Arab countries currently under stress and that of Cuba share certain relevant characteristics, such as their military origins, the central role of the army and the lack of articulated institutional mechanisms to deal with crises and dissent. In Egypt, in particular, the current regime originated from a military coup in 1952 organized by young army officers. The subsequent three presidents (Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak) were all high ranking military commanders. Both Egypt and Cuba have oversized armies in terms of the relative number of soldiers (more than 0.5 percent of the total population, about double than the developed and the Latin American countries). As in Cuba, the Egyptian Army is the most powerful, the best-organized and the most secretive institution in the country. Comparable military origins and character of the regime can also be found in other several countries in the Maghreb and the Middle East.

As in Cuba and China, in Egypt the Army has built up its businesses and operates as a parallel economy, a kind of "Military Inc." Military-owned companies are not only defense and security issue-related, but they build roads and airports, are involved in the water, cement and gasoline industries, manage hotels, and produce electronics, household appliances, clothing and food. During food shortages in 2008, it was the Egyptian Army that used its bakeries to provide bread for the civilian population. Military officers and retired generals hold not only government and provincial posts, but run companies and enjoy a variety of other economic perks, such as belonging to clubs and reserved commercial networks.

Some analysts have speculated that the economic power of the Army, both in Egypt and Cuba, as in other countries, could be an additional obstacle in a process of political reform since the high members of the military would be more eager to defend their privileges by fierce means. However, the experience of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the 1990s showed that precisely in order to keep their advantaged economic positions, the incumbent rulers, if sufficiently threatened, can be ready to get rid of the dictator and help establish a more inclusive political system that can protect and serve their interests best. Actually, a military business class can find better opportunities to thrive in a more open economy. The prospect of new economic opportunities for state and military officers can diminish their loyalty to certain traditional policies of the regime, in particular if they require their active participation in the repression of mass revolts.

A Tipping Game

The dynamics of the people's mobilizations in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries can be mirrored by the "tipping game" model. Accordingly, different people can start or join a collective action at different stages depending on how many other people are already participating in such an action. For each individual, the existing participation can be reasonably taken as an indicator of the likelihood that the action will succeed in reaching its aims. Information and news about the scope of previous mobilizations can provoke different reactions from different individuals. If the news is disappointing regarding preceding expectations, further calls for street actions may fade and eventually the movement may disappear, as has happened on many occasions in the past. If, on the contrary, the initial groups are unexpectedly successful in attracting thousands of citizens, others may feel motivated to join.

The first to initiate such action might be daring, risk-prone people. Some may hesitate, but others may feel encouraged and follow suit. “For us it is new to talk. We are still a little bit scared, but we are too many now, we are too big, it is more difficult to silence us,” as one Tunisian woman said to foreign journalists, grinning. At some “tipping point,” when hundreds of thousands parade in rallies, even for some initially reluctant people, remaining outside the action can be more uncomfortable than joining it. Very broad participation can be achieved after reaching a critical mass, which, as in nuclear engineering, can cause a chain reaction.

In this approach, the success or failure of collective action may not depend on the intensity of the underlying conflict and the sincerity of people’s preferences for an alternative formula, but on a few crucial elements of leadership and organization and the relative success of the very first initiatives. Of course, whether a critical moment able to generate massive action is reached also depends greatly on the reaction on the other side, whether in the form of frontal repression or of concessions to people’s demands.

In Tunisia, the protests quickly evolved from bread-and-butter issues to an assault on the perceived corruption and self-enrichment of the ruling family. On the regime’s side, dictator Ben Ali made a series of attempts to placate the protesters, from firing his interior minister to pledging an investigation into corruption, promising new freedoms and his resignation at the end of his term of office in 2014, dismissing his whole cabinet, and pledging to hold parliamentary and perhaps presidential elections in six months. All of these concessions were conceived as appeasing people’s demands, but they backfired as they encouraged further action. Against initial expectations, the dictator fled the country after just four weeks of popular protests.

In Egypt, likewise, dictator Mubarak successively responded to increasing mass demonstrations by reshuffling his government, appointing a new vice-president, ruling out the

succession of his own son, replacing the prime minister, and promising not to seek re-election in September while intending to remain in office. As each of these decisions encouraged more and more people to take the streets, Mubarak found himself increasingly isolated, eventually leading him to flee to his palace in a Red Sea resort, resign and escape. In this case the whole process from mass passivity to the overthrow of the dictator took only 18 days.

The Military's Dilemma

As people's participation in demonstrations increases, the standoff between the protesters and the dictator poses a crucial dilemma for military commanders. During the first weeks of protests in Egypt, the regime reacted by sending the police to fire water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas as well as supposedly supporters of the regime attacking demonstrators on horse and camel back. Soon, however, Mubarak ordered the army out on the streets to restore order. Tanks and armored personnel carriers were deployed to guard government buildings and archeological sites, while the police largely disappeared.

While crowds shouted "the army and the people are united!" soldiers fired occasional shots into the air but largely stood watching from their vehicles. The high commanders appeared as unwilling to order their troops to fire on the demonstrators. At some moment, the defense minister and new deputy prime minister, Marshal Mohamed H. Tantawi, and the chief staff of the armed forces, Lt. Gen. Sami H. Enan, visited Tahrir Square in Cairo, talked briefly with protesters and suggested that their demands would soon be met. According to American officials, general Enan made it clear to them in several telephone calls to Washington that his troops

would not fire on the protesters, even as the military sought to protect the government institutions.

Indeed, the Egyptian high military commanders are not fiercely pro-democracy. In fact, Tantawi, who had long been derided by some military officers as Mubarak's "poodle," had stridently opposed economic and political reforms. However, in the peak of the waves of popular protests, the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces made a calculating, cool-blooded decision about the dictator. Doubtless, the Army leaders would have preferred not to have to face people's demonstrations and be capable of maintaining the regime. But they likely felt that protecting the military's status and authority was more important than standing behind an increasingly isolated and weakened president. This was the tipping point. As the military estimated that they risked too much by supporting Mubarak and it was not in their interest to retain him, they ushered him out.

In the past few decades, many replacements of dictatorial regimes have created such a kind of dilemma for hard-line rulers. Among Communist party-dominated regimes, both possible responses have come about, most prominently in Beijing and Berlin, respectively. On the one side, the process of the liberalization of the regime and the mobilization of the people in China ended in June 1989 in Tiananmen Square when the Army crushed the protestors and re-established the hard-line rule. On the other side, in East Germany, as well as in Poland and other Eastern European countries, just a few months later that same year, mostly peaceful changes, including the opening of the Berlin wall, were put into operation.

Even if a process of internal liberalization of the authoritarian regime has not started, internal protests and external pressures can provoke rapid action in favor of a mostly peaceful and negotiated political change. If hard-line rulers face the dilemma of provoking a civil war or

general decomposition of the country, they may prefer to concede the call of a competitive multiparty election. By doing this they can expect to retain some of the society's respect and, thus, their substantial positions in the administration and the economy preventing further damage.

A Cuban Precedent

So far, Cuba, in spite of some of its rulers' rhetorical statements, has not followed the "Chinese way," neither regarding the wide scope of economic market reforms nor the harshness of Tiananmen-style mass repression. As an illustrating precedent of possible future events, it may be worth remembering certain revealing aspects of the so-called "rafters' crisis" in 1994.

In August that year, the police attempted to curb an increasing process of escapes from the island when a few thousand people had gathered in Havana harbor on hearing the rumor that a fleet of ships was coming from Miami to pick up everyone wishing to flee. As the police attacked, some people responded with shouts of "Freedom!" and "Down with Fidel!" but retaliation came in the form of some 300 arrests. That evening Fidel Castro appeared on television to explain that he had "ordered the Border Guards to prevent any incident and avoid, as much as possible, the use of weapons. Actually they have been told: don't use your arms," he announced. A few days later, as the flux of rafters trying to flee the island continued, Castro explicitly ordered "the maximum possible flexibility of the coastguards' actions regarding illegal exit from the country," not to shoot a single bullet, not to block any ship, nor persecute "conspiracies to emigrate."

Raul Castro then recorded a video to be shown in private sessions in state offices and barracks in which he declared himself to be in favor of certain economic reforms with the aim of

preventing further social conflict, since otherwise he, in his own words, would be “the one who would have to call the tanks to calm the situation and play the role of the ‘bad of the movie’.” A few weeks later, in December 1994, a few posters and mural graffiti still remained in Havana solemnly proclaiming that “the Revolutionary Armed Forces will never intervene against the people” (personal observation).

These insights may support the hypothesis that if the Cuban military leaders faced episodes of broad popular unrest such as those in Beijing and Berlin in 1989, as well as in Tunis, Cairo and other places in 2011, they may be inclined to choose the search for a settlement with the protesters rather than launch harsh repression against their own citizens. Berlin and Cairo have become references for opportunities for relatively smooth and quick processes of political change, while Beijing, on the contrary, evokes civil strife for the continuity of the dictatorship.

Nonrevolutionary Transitions

The model of political change discussed here is not a “revolution,” in spite of recent journalistic uses of the word regarding the ongoing processes in the Arab countries. A revolution implies that the insurgents take over power and completely replace the existing incumbent regime. But neither are we dealing with a mere military coup capable of introducing minor façade adjustments or establishing a new dictatorship, as certain American observers and politicians seem to fear. Most currently existing democratic regimes in the world have been established during the last forty years not by means of revolutions or wars, as had been the case in previous historical periods, but by transition processes involving both pressures from “below” and reforms from “above,” that is exchanges, negotiations and pacts between the incumbent authoritarian rulers and the leaders of the opposition movements.

Certain conditions must be fulfilled for this type of transition by agreement to happen. First, the authoritarian rulers must be unable to rule as usual, whether as a consequence of the dictator's disappearance or some dramatic failures of the regime generating a surge in social unrest, as in the cases referred to here. Second, as the underground or exiled political opposition may lack the sufficient power as to attain a complete victory by itself; unexpected exchanges even with hard-line rulers may take place.

Nothing of the sort has yet happened in Cuba. The dictatorial regime maintains a solid grip of power both by the repression of dissidents and the control of the population, including, in particular, on transnational television channels, communication technologies and the type of social networks that have appeared to be so effective in the Arab countries. At the same time, periodical waves of emigration somehow managed by the dictatorship play the role of escape valves for getting rid of potential protesters.

However, certain features of the Cuban situation, such as the strength of the Army and the relative weakness of opposition political groups, which are shared with the Arab countries now in disarray, should not be determining elements to discard the possibility of regime change by sudden collapse. Deteriorating economic conditions and widespread frustrated expectations, especially among the educated youth, if they are artfully exploited by a handful of skillful activists, might generate a broad popular revolt. This may put the Army in the crucial dilemma of whether or not to shoot its own people, thus in turn opening the gate to rapid political transformations.

About the Author

Josep M. Colomer, a political scientist, is currently a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Georgetown University, in Washington, DC. He is a life member of the American Political Science Association and a member by election of the Academia Europaea. He is author of numerous academic publications, particularly on democratization and on Cuba, as well as his most recent textbook *The Science of Politics. An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010).