



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### **Lessons Learned: Protesters Stay One Step Ahead of Rulers**

**by Dr. James M. Dorsey**

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,323, October 27, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Violent protests have accelerated across the Arab world every day since they re-erupted on October 1. The evidence suggests that it is the protesters, not the rulers, who learned lessons from the “Arab Spring” protests of 2011.

This year saw the toppling of the leaders of Algeria and Sudan as a result of popular revolts, a harking back to the 2011 protests that overthrew the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

Protests are now taking place in [Iraq](#), [Lebanon](#), Jordan, [Egypt](#), and [Morocco](#). It appears that it is the protesters, not the rulers of the illiberal or autocratic regimes, who learned lessons from the events of 2011.

Had the rulers been the ones to learn the lessons, they would not have been taken by surprise once again by mass protests, which are often sparked by a black swan event.

Lessons learned would have meant putting their ears to the ground and listening for groundswells of anger and frustration boiling up to the surface over lack of economic opportunity and basic services and widespread corruption that benefits few and complicates life for many.

Lessons learned would have meant addressing those concerns before it was too late – before they spilled into the streets in massive votes of no-confidence in the political and economic system and in the leaders.

This lesson is valid beyond the Arab world. Protests similar to those of 2011 are taking place in [Hong Kong](#), [Russia](#), [Peru](#), [Haiti](#), [Ecuador](#), and [Indonesia](#), and climate change-related demonstrations are occurring worldwide.

For their part, the demonstrators in Algeria and Sudan concluded from the 2011 protests that toppling a leader was the beginning, not the end, of the process.

In Algeria, [protesters remain in the streets six months after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepped down](#). They are battling the army for a political process that will guarantee structural change rather than enable an electoral process that ensures that the military and its aligned business interests remain the power behind the throne.

Sudanese demonstrators [surrendered the street only after an agreement had been reached with the military](#) on a three-year transition to civilian rule.

The Sudanese and Algerian experiences, like the 2011 revolts, suggest that in the wake of the fall of an autocrat, a balance must be struck between protesters' demands for fundamental change and the determination of elites and the military to preserve their economic interests, some degree of control over security, and safeguards against being held accountable for past abuses.

What demonstrators have going for them, beyond the power of the street, is that popular discontent is not the only factor mitigating against maintenance of the pre-protest status quo.

Countries across the Middle East and North Africa, characterized by youth bulges, can no longer evade economic reform that addresses widespread youth unemployment, the need to create large numbers of jobs, and inevitable diversification and streamlining of bloated government bureaucracies.

Algeria is a case in point. Foreign exchange reserves have dropped from [\\$193.6 billion in 2014](#) to [\\$72 billion in 2019](#). Reserves cover 13 months of imports at best in a country that imports [70%](#) of what it consumes.

Algeria scholar Dalia Ghanem writes:

If the state can no longer deliver goods and services, socio-economic discontent will rise further.... In order to avoid such a situation... the state and its citizens will have to renegotiate their relationship. In the past the state provided, and Algerians abided. [This is no longer economically feasible today](#), nor is it what Algerians appear to want as they seek more transparency, less corruption, and better governance of Algeria's resources.

Attention in the years since the 2011 Arab revolts has focused on the consequences of the Saudi-UAE-led counterrevolution, which brutally rolled back protesters' achievements in Egypt. The counterrevolution also contributed to the Iranian-backed military campaign of Houthi rebels in Yemen and the devastating subsequent military intervention in that country, as well as the civil wars in Syria and Libya.

Yet the past eight years have also been characterized by issues-oriented protests that have often involved [new, creative forms of expression of discontent](#).

Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan, rather than Egypt, contain lessons for the future.

Egypt's field marshal-turned-president Abdel Fatah Sisi may have quashed recent protests with [mass arrests and security force violence](#), but his [conspiratorial depictions of a plot engineered by the repressed and weakened Muslim Brotherhood](#) are unlikely to dampen widespread discontent with his failed economic policies, which have benefited the elite and impoverished many.

Sisi may have ended the protests for now, but his continued refusal to address the protesters' grievances makes Egypt a crisis waiting to happen.

The [demography of protesters in Iraq](#) proves the point. The protests could have been avoided had the Iraqi government focused on tackling corruption, ensuring the delivery of basic services, and creating both jobs for university graduates and opportunities for those who returned from defeating ISIS.

One lesson of the protests in Iraq and Hong Kong is that repressive government responses like the [killing of more than 100 demonstrators in Iraq](#) or the [banning of face masks in Hong Kong](#) fuel, rather than calm, public anger.

Said Hong Kong pro-democracy lawmaker Fernando Cheung: "[This is adding fuel to the fire](#). This will mark the beginning of riots in Hong Kong."

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.*