

Cautious optimism may be best U.S. response to Egyptian revolt: expert

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David A. Westbrook, University at Buffalo Law School professor and recognized voice on the global political economy, says that although there is a great deal of understandable anxiety that current events in the Middle East may end tragically, "Cautious optimism may be an appropriate response here.

"However much worry is provoked by current events in Egypt and other Middle Eastern nations, the situation just may represent a real opportunity for the United States to develop alliances with democracies, in place of the deeply troubled authoritarian, often despotic regimes that we have been supporting, often at considerable expense," says Westbrook, professor of law and Floyd H. and Hilda Hurst Faculty Scholar.

Westbrook is the author of several influential books, most recently the widely praised "Deploying Ourselves: Islamist Violence and the Responsible Projection of U.S. Force" (Paradigm, 2010). He is frequently called upon to speak to academics, business and financial leaders, members of the security community, civil institutions and governments throughout the world, often with the sponsorship of the U.S. State Department.

"Instead of the maintenance of autocratic, even despotic governments that rule societies with deep structural problems and profound social antagonisms," he says, "we may be witnessing a move toward fundamentally more democratic systems that serve their people better

and that may even do a better job of building peace in the region. I am prepared to be saddened, but I have great hope."

Westbrook points out that authoritarian regimes tend to have succession problems. In addition, "countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen have fundamental economic and demographic problems, and in consequence, deeply conflicted social structures," he says. "So at one level, nobody should be surprised that we are seeing widespread unrest."

"And we also should remember that even in authoritarian nations, regime change -- even constitutional change -- can come relatively peacefully, as it did in the Soviet Union and after that, in nations throughout Eastern Europe," he says. "Not all political uprisings result in a Tiananmen Square."

While it is easy to understand the sources of conflict in these cases -- at least after the fact and in general terms -- Westbrook says it's almost impossible to know the specific causes and to predict when discontent will become social unrest, or how that unrest will manifest and then resolve itself.

"In many parts of the Middle East, disaffection and discontent have been in place for a long time, without much change," he says. "And so when change finally comes, even if it was expected, an element of surprise remains. Similarly, Communism 'works' for half a century until one day, it doesn't.

"So last week a street vendor immolates himself, and the government of Tunisia falls. And if Tunisia, why not Egypt? The day appears to be upon us. But beforehand, nobody really knows when that day will come, or what the day will bring, what will follow the change. But I'm hopeful. It is possible the current unrest across the Middle East will provoke peaceful or 'velvet' revolutions, at least in some cases.

"This could be a point of inflection," Westbrook says.

"Perhaps, from a long period of despotism and unrest, we now are moving into a period of better, peace-loving, governments across the [Middle East](#)," he says. "And if that is the case, then the implications for U.S. policy, especially security policy, are profound. We, not just in the United States, but in the Muslim world as well, have an opportunity to begin thinking about security in far more collective --and democratic -- terms than we ever have before. That hope, not so incidentally, is the topic of my latest book, 'Deploying Ourselves: Islamist Violence and the Responsible Projection of U.S. Force.'

In addition to "Deploying Ourselves," Westbrook is the author of "After the Crisis: Rethinking Our Capital Markets" (Paradigm Publishers 2009), "Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters" (University of Chicago Press 2008), "Between Citizen and State: An Introduction to the Corporation" (Paradigm Publishers 2007) and "City of Gold: An Apology for Global Capitalism in a Time of Discontent" (Routledge 2003).

Westbrook lectures and publishes widely on aspects of the global political economy, including security policy, corporations and fostering confidence in order to encourage economic development. He regularly participates in programs and policy roundtables on development with government, academic, media and private sector participants, most recently in Pakistan, Jamaica, China, the European Union, Brazil and the United Kingdom. Next month he will speak on "Key Ideas and Paradigms in the American Economy" in a Slovakian videoconference with students at Bratislava Economics University, sponsored by the U.S. State Department.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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