

Comment by Michael C H Jones

In my view Egypt and its current social revolution has immense importance for West Asia with very significant implications whether political/ strategic, economic/trade or social/cultural for Australia. With about 80 million citizens Egypt is the key to a political realignment and an economic growth path for the entire region linking Mediterranean North Africa through the Arab States to the Persian Gulf and Indian sub-continent. From Australia's geo-strategic perspective Egypt and Turkey are really the Muslim extremities of West Asia for which India is the regional economic power similar in some ways to China in East Asia.

Now I recognise all the inconsistencies and contradictions with that assertion. For example the role of the Jewish State of Israel, the predominance of Islamism with its Sunni/Shiite divide, the importance of Europe for the bordering regions of North Africa particularly Libya and Tunisia, the emergence of the silk-route countries of Central Asia, and the ASEAN connection especially Indonesia and Malaysia. However sense needs to be made of any global/regional 'smorgasbord' - from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Straits of Hormuz and from the Caucasus Mountains to the Tian Mountains. If we live in a multi-polar world than spheres of influence again become important and this inter-connected landscape has three Great Power players - Europe, India and Russia - with three regional powers - Turkey, Israel and Iran. Could Egypt emerge as a fourth regional power? Is Pakistan a 'failed state'? What about Saudi Arabia?

What role can and will India with approximately 140 million Muslim citizens play in this cocktail of diversity and tension? If Egypt could follow the India model where secularism dampens religious fundamentalism, the military remains truly in the barracks, and the public/private economic sectors are in balance, then there is no reason to believe that over the next two/three decades Egypt could not attain a standard of living approaching the present day ASEAN countries. Certainly the Sovereign Wealth Funds of the Arab Emirates might see business opportunities in Egypt given its low-wage workforce whilst India could not afford to allow a potentially hostile rival such as China to gain too strong a foothold in a country with such a geo-strategic position across Afro-Asia.

The big question is whether the current social revolution can bring about governance which is acceptable to all the political and religious tendencies, and whether global institutions such as the UN and G20 can bring about the economic growth necessary for stability. Kevin Rudd, the Australian Foreign Minister, played a leading role in the UN intervention in Libya and is currently urging similar action in Syria on humanitarian grounds. He also needs to urge the global support so necessary for the new institutions of Egypt over the longer-term. A new social democratic society in the region would be of great benefit to Australia.

References

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Arab_Emirates

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2011/kr_sp_110609.html

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2011/kr_sp_110509.html - Gulf Economic Relations - Rudd 9th May

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2011/kr_sp_110324.html - Statement on recent

developments in the Middle East - Rudd 24th March

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2011/kr_sp_110222.html - Australia's Foreign Policy Interests in the Middle East - Rudd 22nd February

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2011/kr_sp_110210.html - Ministerial Statement - Egypt - Rudd 10th February

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2011/kr_sp_110201a.html -Comments on the Signing of the Australia-Turkey Joint Action Plan - Rudd Ankara Turkey 1st February 2011