

Stuart Laing, Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge spoke to the Cambridge Society in Düsseldorf on St David's Day 2014. His topic was "Arab turbulence: what comes after spring?"

Laing, a former British Ambassador to Brunei, Kuwait and Oman, opened by observing that after the Spring comes summer which is followed by the FALL. The Arab world has not seen fall or collapse everywhere, but the picture is worrying.

The Arab Spring was not the same as the Prague Spring which was against identifiable external enemies. Starting in *Tunis* it spread to *Egypt* where Mubarak's own people told him to go. Laing showed a picture of the demonstrators in Tahrir Square and pointed out a section of the crowd set aside for prayer - a portent of the future direction of the revolution.

In Syria 140,000 have been killed, nine million displaced and two million are refugees. Britain has spent £600m on humanitarian aid for the refugees. There was a short moment when intervention might have worked but that moment has passed. Negotiation for a "transition" with the regime is difficult - "transition" to what? It could only be to the exit of the ruling regime.

Turning to the six *GCC countries* he observed that in *Saudi Arabia* and in some Gulf countries two types of opposition are found to the ruling regimes: conservative and liberal. A major problem in several Gulf societies is unemployment or under-employment of indigenous youth and employers prefer to take on S Asians rather than locals who have lower motivation for hard work. Succession of the crown is an issue in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia dwarfs the other GCC countries, with a population several times the size of the other states, and with 17% of the world's oil reserves.

Imbalance of foreigners to natives. Of four million in *Kuwait* only one million are Kuwaiti; in *Oman* there are two million Omani against one million foreigners. 20-30% of the populations are Shia including the Eastern region of Saudi Arabia, except Bahrain where the majority are Shia. In all Gulf countries hereditary rulers hold power, but generally use processes of *shura* (consultation) to understand popular opinion.

In *Bahrain* GCC troops had to rescue the situation and the situation is now more stable

In *Oman*, there were some demonstrations, in response to which Sultan Qaboos replaced several long-serving members of his Cabinet with members of the Shura Council.

In *Kuwait* the Americans insisted on a democratically elected parliament after the expulsion of the Iraqis in 1991. While the Emir and his family are reformers the majority in parliament is conservative and insist on segregated education etc.

In *Dubai* 93% of the population are foreigners.

With *Iran* some progress has been made towards a comprehensive agreement over nuclear issues, but the road will be tough. Rohani is a genuine reformer but he is subject to Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard.

In conclusion Laing posed the question “Why have democratic systems failed to take root in the area?” He dismissed the usual arguments that it was the history of Ottoman domination or that it was implicit in Islam. He made reference to a recent article in the Economist “What’s gone wrong with democracy?”. There was a discussion of how people from the Middle East and Africa were looking towards the regime in China as a model. He discussed the mistakes made by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, especially in assuming that they could disregard the interests of minorities. In democracies, minorities are willing to accept democratic elections on either of two bases:

- They know that they will have a chance to win at the next election, and/or
- Minority rights are respected by the winners.

Neither of these conditions prevailed in Egypt.

The Economist article stated:

“Western countries almost all extended the right to vote long after the establishment of sophisticated political systems, with powerful civil services and entrenched constitutional rights, in societies that cherished the notions of individual rights and independent judiciaries.”

Could we conclude that a benevolent dictator with a respect for minorities and the institutions of a civil society presents the best outcome for many of these countries?

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Laing has published a book. “Unshook till the end of time: A history of relations between Britain and Oman 1650-1970.”