

Historical Powder Keg: Is 2014 going to be a 1914 Redux for Europe and the World?

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International columnists are predicting that quesstential “ Sarajevo moment” this year. A spark which would ignite an international conflagration, like the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo did almost a century ago. A radical nationalist shooting the successor to an imperial throne, is unlikely to replicate itself this year. But there is potential for serious upheaval throughout Europe and elsewhere today.

Let’s take a look. Germany the “economic powerhouse” of the EU seems to be entering a new period of uncertainty as it did just before the “great war” broke out. As the New Year begins, the sudden fall (perhaps presaging Euro zone’s break up?) of the German chancellor is an ominous occurrence. Looking like a weakened political figure (symbolised by the chancellor’s first public appearance in 2014, using crutches), Ms. Merkel has finally managed to cobble together a “grand collation”. Its life span is in doubt. Growing social and income inequities in the country have worsened during Merkel’s reign. But even before the sporting mishap, the chancellor was unwilling to take any chances (in the best authoritarian or Wilhelminian tradition) and had already appointed an “heir” to succeed her (1); as if to ensure stability and continuity, even in the post-Merkel period. In other words, neo-liberal economic policies will likely be applied at home and around the EU for some time to come.

2014 mirrors 1914: A would be Imperial Germany in the XXI century; Spain ’s decaying monarchy and the decrepit Italian republic....

With an ‘iron will” in her third term (2), the chancellor seems determined to pursue the draconian policies of austerity (further destroying economic growth and spurring unemployment). This means more pain and little gain, for millions on the receiving side of such policies such as Spaniards. Unlike the relatively calm of Berlin , the Spanish capital bears witness to on-going popular protests. Meanwhile, an ageing monarch (also hobbled due to a nasty fall, and forced to use crutches to get around) is facing a “crisis of confidence”. King Juan Carlos of Spain , who once popularly symbolised the return of democracy after decades of Franco’s fascist rule, is seeing his kingdom buffeted by growing popular protests. The growing rebelliousness among the populace is fuelled by never ending corruption scandals. His daughter is now implicated in a money laundering-embezzlement scam (3). And then there’s the prospect of evermore economic blight to throw into the mix. Spain managed to remain neutral when WW1 broke out. Yet, in 2014, the country is on the front lines of the struggle against austerity in Europe . Moreover the future of the monarchy looks unclear.

Across the Mediterranean, or in Italy (a decrepit republic if there ever was one) ended a tumultuous 2013 with “pitchfork protests” in the streets of its cities. Again as in Spain , Italy is plagued by incessant corruption, social unrest, and is seeing it institutions systematically

undermined (due to criminal syndicates) at the expense of the democratic process. Witness the rise in Italy of demagogues, or clownish populists and rising xenophobia. Anti-politicians over there, are taking advantage of the rage against Rome and Brussels (the imperial HQ of the EU).

Europe's historical powder keg, the Balkans is ready to re-ignite

Assassinations are not perhaps on the agenda this coming year in the Balkans, but political upheaval sure is on the menu for 2014. Mass strikes and protest movements which began violently in Greece back in 2008, have now spread through the southern Balkan states. The mass demonstrations against usurious price hikes (in the wake of en masse privatisation) in energy costs imposed on local consumers, have nearly toppled the government in Bulgaria (4). Next door in Romania, rampant corrupting and an epic struggle between a civil society movement and a Canadian mining company, has nearly shaken the foundation of the Romanian government (5). Despite these explosive events, Brussels adamantly refuses to do away with restrictions related to the freedom of movement, imposed on these two states' citizens. Their entry date into the "Schengen zone" is still pending or sine die. In 2014, this containment policy is a dangerous one, indeed.

Is Turkey once again the "Sick man of Europe"?

Beyond the borders on the southern flank of the EU, there is also great instability in 2014, which eerily recalls 1914 tensions on the eve of war. The benign promise of an "Arab Spring" has turned into a horrific nightmare. Situations resembling a civil war like conflict have developed in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, Yemen and more recently Lebanon. In the case of Syria, the resemblance is simply a tragic reality. This regional instability risks spilling over into Turkey (the US's close regional ally). Of course, back then, Turkey was the lynchpin of an Ottoman Empire which ruled over most of the Middle East. A hundred years ago, and in its death throes, it haplessly entered the "great war". This precipitated its collapse and then led to the Armenian genocide of 1915. How long will Ankara sit on the sidelines before it's dragged into a wider war in its neighbourhood this time? 2014 will likely determine the course of action it will take.

On the domestic side, Turkey is rife with internal dissent and rocked by ongoing protest which began last June. Popular discontent with the Sultan like authoritarian rule of PM Erdogan has not subsided. The ongoing struggle between secularist (Kemalists) and neo-Islamists (and within factions of the AKP party itself), risks fracturing the Turkish state in 2014, in ways the Ottoman Empire experienced a century ago.

Furthermore, the government's hold on power has been recently further weakened due to corruption scandals at the highest leadership levels (6). Subsequent purges within the police and security apparatus have further envenomed the situation. The truce with the rebellious Kurds in the eastern part of the country remains a tenuous one. Finally, Turkey's decades old bid to become an EU member state is essentially "on ice" due to repressive actions taken against activists and journalists there. Hence, as in 1914, the country is a boiling cauldron floating on a sea of regional instability.

Echoes in Asia of the Mexican revolution

Shifting to Asia in Thailand, Cambodia, and Bangladesh there seems to be growing popular movements or revolts against an entrenched and corrupt oligarchy underway. So far these

uprising have been brutally repressed with military force. Do today's events in these places risk sparking a 1914 like conflaguration? Probably they don't. However these developing countries seem to be in what I like to refer to as being in a "pre-revolutionary mode". What we see happening in these parts of the world in 2014, bears striking similarity to the Mexican revolution (1910-20) which saw a decade long struggle to rid the country of a corrupt regime known as the "Porfiriato". Add to all this the risk of a military confrontation between rising and falling "great powers" as was the caseback in 1914 (witness today's sabre rattling over the disputed Diaoyu and Tiaoyutai in the far east), then one really gets the sense history is repeating itself once again.

Notes

(1)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/10519011/Heir-to-Angela-Merkel-appointed-Germanys-first-female-defence-minister.html>

(2)

http://zeenews.india.com/news/world/angela-merkel-chairs-first-cabinet-meeting-of-third-term_902729.html

(3) <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7ed70efa-7924-11e3-b381-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2pw5aXkiA>

(4) <http://www.rferl.org/content/bulgaria-unrest-protests-students/25167938.html>

(5)

http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_round_up/2196555/romania_rejects_rosia_montana_gold_mine.html

(6) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/09/world/europe/turkey-corruption-inquiry.html?_r=0

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