

The Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt

The People without Populism

The Egyptian revolution has reinstated the concept of the people. A little earlier, the Tunisian revolution had done the same. Now signs of similar developments are spreading from Algeria to Yemen, from Jordan to Iraq, while in Damascus, a pregnant silence hangs over the city. In the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent, there has been an explosion of humor at the wave of generous “gestures” by kings, princes and presidents – a direct outcome of the fear engendered in rulers’ hearts by the eventful days in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and other squares around Egypt – while in Iran, the Egyptian revolution came conveniently to bring back spirit to the suppressed Green Revolution.

It was not by choice that the populations in these countries abandoned the notion of people power (indeed, for a long time the people appeared to have forgotten their own existence). After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the wind of freedom which blew over the rubble seemed to die away before reaching the borders of the Arab countries: the world preferred to regard us as the exception to democracy. It appeared that the only innovation in the Arab world was radical fundamentalism and the terrorism associated with it. Indeed, terrorism dealt a deadly blow to Arab societies long before any enemy – real or imagined – had any such effect. It was the manifestation of despair and fatalism, as experienced by these societies, in its most extreme form; a despair of their history of which these societies chose to believe that they could bring to a stop and closure. In reality, this despair of history was not exclusive to the supporters of fundamentalist terrorism, but it rather seemed to be encompassing of

these societies. No answers to basic questions were found: What are these societies doing to themselves, and where are they heading? Is there still any willpower left in these societies, or have they allowed their will to be overmastered by the resolve of their enemies – both at home and abroad – and by the resolve of the enemies of their enemies, who may be these societies’ worst enemies?

Today, those of us who had been thrown into despair by our history are beginning to feel that we can return to being ourselves once again, both individually and collectively – free to exercise our own willpower as part of a greater whole. In spite of the horrors of misery and humiliation, this widespread social movement represents nothing less than freedom in motion, a movement of opposition and rejection. It was inevitable that something all-embracing should demolish our submissive attitude towards these horrors and put an end to our tolerance of them. These current events can in no way be ascribed

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to fate or any similar concept of it. Despite the strength and unrelenting power that the current movements display, one cannot but fear for them and for all those involved in them – from one day to the next, from one stage to the next.

The outcome of the Egyptian revolution in particular was dependent, day by day, on good



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conduct and sound judgment in the making of decisions regarding which path to take and which path to avoid at every juncture. To those involved, it was clear that these junctures shifted from one day to another, and that there was no predetermined outcome or certain victory. There were only people who excelled at conducting peaceful demonstrations, motivated by a just and strong will to win their victories at each stage. Furthermore, they imposed their will

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upon themselves before imposing it upon the regime which they wanted to sweep away. The regime played for time by scheming, engaging in dirty tricks and obstinately refusing to give in. People held their breath for fear that divisions may break the ranks or that suddenly violence may spread among them, paralyzing the ongoing initiative and opening the door to unacceptable behavior from regime and revolutionaries alike. There was also uncertainty about the identities of the organizers, about how the movement was being led, and about the multiplicity of aims underlying this young people's initiative. At the same time it was also very clear that traditional opposition to the regime had become feeble and exhausted. What became obvious, in any case, was that these movements were led by free people rather than by destiny. This is what we shall continue to experience as the Egyptian revolution marches forward into the future, and this is what we shall continue to witness in other troubled areas where events are still unfolding.

So the people have regained their power, setting free the will of its sons and daughters without practicing the oppression that characterized the previous regime. Today people in Egypt are no longer afraid to air their opinions, whatever they may be; they

no longer fear that expressing one's views will result in imprisonment or death. It is now up to Egyptians to ensure that the benefits of this great moment endure. So far the people are not populist.

Recent and current events suggest that the notion that Arabs are an exception to democracy has begun to fade away, and that its revolutionary height has been concluded in one of the most significant countries of all: Egypt. Prior to these events, perhaps out of desperation, perhaps out of self-interest, some Arabs accepted the Bush administration's claim that the allied occupation would liberate Iraq from the tyranny of one individual, the one-party rule and the rule of clan, paving the way to warmhearted democracy. Today, Tunisia and Egypt represent two models that – aside from their socio-historical differences – we might usefully compare with the Iraqi model. The Egyptians took to the streets and strengthened their own sense of unity: they began cleaning up Tahrir Square in order to demonstrate their determination to rebuild and improve their nation. In the course of the revolution, the previously growing tensions between Islamists and Coptic Christians regressed, as did civil violence that found its expression in the sexual harassment of women. In the meantime, the violence in Iraq continues as a direct consequence of the devastation caused by the war; indeed, it is feared that with the departure of the occupation forces from Iraq, the violence will simply worsen. So divided are the Iraqis that the latest elections ended in a stalemate which lasted for nearly a year. Once a government was finally formed, the Iraqis – like their neighbors in the Arab world – also felt the need to demonstrate and demand the most basic rights of which they were deprived during the years of occupation and internal fighting, destruction and looting.

In Tunis and Egypt, the Islamists neither started nor led the revolutions. Islamists of the likes of Salafists did not make an appearance, nor did followers of the "moderate" schools of Islamism, such as the revivalists or Muslim

Brotherhood, attempt to seize the reins of revolution. This came as a surprise to all those who were apprehensive of change – a change after which they thought would be no more change: a change that would lead to a situation in which no one would hold enough power to demand further change, resulting in a democracy for one-time use only. The regimes of Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali capitalized on this very calculation to ensure the survival of their regimes and to justify their “right” to loot the two countries and to humiliate their citizens.

The Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia now have the chance to create their own opportunities, just like any other group. So long as the rules of what might be termed the “game” of democracy are observed, the gains of the Islamists will be acknowledged as being rightfully theirs, provided that they in turn acknowledge the rights of other players. It is not in the interest of the revolution to diminish its basis through the exclusion of social groups, as has been done in Iraq. The Islamists would not have the right – it would even be difficult for them – to confront others with the threat of exclusion. Equally, no other groups would have the right to exclude others, turning the latter into victims without that the accusations against them of being perpetrators holds, such as Islamists, for example, or supporters of the previous regime who did not actually commit a pronounced crime or violated a right.

Today Egypt is attempting to restore its status as an influential, indeed pivotal, nation in the Middle East. However, and in the first place, Egypt is making its return for its own sake and not to be in the service of causes outside its own borders, no matter what those causes may be. Egypt will decide which causes to serve and how best to serve them, and make its own decisions regarding any conflict it may be involved in and to what extent. Even in smaller countries, democracy acts in itself as a preliminary obstacle to subservience, so it is reasonable to ask what will happen in a country the size of Egypt, where citizens have

just regained a measure of dignity, or are in the process of regaining it. Initial hints that the political movement in Egypt was being masterminded from outside its borders were – and are – laughable. It is clear that an uprising of such magnitude and dynamism could only be driven by the people themselves. The same applies to any authority which eventually comes into being as a result of this movement: such an authority cannot be hijacked or subverted

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Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Egypt’s recovery will give the Arab world a focus through which it can define itself. Anyone of us can conclude – without being biased or narrow-minded – that the way Egypt has been staggering around for the last few decades has created a need in the Arab region which no other Arab country had been able to adequately meet: the need for a political pole and the need for leadership. This unfulfilled need is what made it possible for Iran – since the time of the Iranian revolution – and more recently, for Turkey, to directly influence and interfere in the affairs of the Arab region. While the consequences of the “older” Iranian interference on many Arab societies – including the Gulf, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq – are eminent, the consequences of Turkey’s involvement are still unclear. Perhaps one of the first benefits we might hope for from the Egyptian revolution is the quelling of sectarian disputes, which have threatened to wreak havoc in the region for years. By the nature of its culture and the paths of its leaderships, Egypt – which is primarily a Sunni Islamic

country – tends to place leadership issues at a higher level than that of sectarian divisions; this is what binds the country to all of the “three circles” described by Gamal Abdel Nasser in his work *The Philosophy of the Revolution*.

Egypt’s absence from leadership has also opened the doors for Israel to continue with its abuses. Israel has continued to freely implement its policies that pursue the elimination of the Palestinian homeland. On the grounds, this translates into, most probably, driving the Palestinian people out of their land for a second and last time with the explanation that more than five million Palestinian Arabs have no place in the “Jewish State” – a state that stretches over the entirety of the Palestinian territories. No other country in the Arab world was able to compensate for Egypt’s absence: neither the Saudi Arabian leadership which adopted a “moderate” stance, nor the well thought-through Syrian positions that shifted from a long period of acquiescence to the Iranians to an awkward period of alignment with Saudi Arabia and, last but not least, to Qatar’s growing ambitions.

In recent years nobody living in, visiting or analyzing Egypt has had a positive or reassuring word to say about the country’s circumstances or those of its citizens. There was a more or less general consensus that the situation in Egypt had become intolerable – indeed, beyond intolerable. The media did not lend its attention to this situation in the way it deserved. It seems that the resigned despair was translated into a language of silence and neglect. Consequently, nobody anticipated the events that have taken place before our very eyes and tested our nerves over such a brief – but highly significant – span of days.

This was a peaceful revolution, which responded to the spilling of blood by rejecting violence. These were the days that rekindled our vision of the way our modern societies should work; a vision that brought forth our recognition of the determination of the young people, their new-found methods of communication and organization, their mobility

and the new relationships they forged between different classes and social groups. In Egypt in particular there was a broad, strong foundation where people from different backgrounds worked together within one movement for

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one project. These were uplifting days for the Egyptians as they restored their pride, and many others in the region found, in turn, pride in them. The revolutionaries absorbed the wave of violence directed towards them by the government’s thugs, and they overcame them. The revolutionaries protected their families, and their built and cultural heritage. They created a new language for their revolution that expressed remarkable tolerance, kept far from indecencies, developed a sense of humor of its own, and took distance from credulous revolutionary talk that sounds like the boots of soldiers and embeds the potential for oppression. Language promoting baseless revenge, which neither waits for the law nor cares to establish true facts, remained absent. Most supporters of the ousted regime stayed safely in their large houses or met in the elegant cafés of the popular urban neighborhoods. They voiced their views on television, showing their faces without fear. When an artist who was one of the revolutionaries was asked about a fellow artist who opposed the revolution, the former responded that if Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum had been brought to trial after 1952 for eulogizing King Farouk, then Egypt would have lost one of the country’s greatest artists!

During the days of the revolution, we listened and learned, – in particular, from the responsible young people who showed such extraordinary strength, but also such an extraordinary sense of social responsibility. They

did not use overstated slogans, or demanded or did anything that reflected a reckless disregard for potentially negative consequences or risked reducing the country to chaos. In Egypt in particular, there is a profound historical fear of power vacuums and hence a lack of willingness

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to reject authority and so it seems that a priori respect for the future government-to-be could already be felt. Undoubtedly, then, there is much we can still learn from those who did the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, as they relate events and shape history themselves; as they create new formations, come up with slogans, write stories and produce films. If what happened in Cairo and Tunis is reminiscent of what Tehran witnessed in 2009, then we can conclude that lessons are being passed on and that peoples can indeed learn from another, even though each people must follow its own path according to its own circumstances and capabilities.

What we witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt were democratic revolutions par excellence, driven by the quest for freedom. This demand for freedom was linked to a demand for dignity, and these two demands together formed the backbone of both revolutions. To protect this dual demand – the combination between the demand for freedom and the demand for dignity – revolutions should be followed, presumably, by a state of alertness; the extent and mode of alert protection should be the criteria by which the values of regimes and of achievements should be measured. Such a dual demand is strained by nature; it is the origin of the tensions that the modern world has witnessed over the

past century. Is it right to forsake freedom in the name of social justice? Is it possible to have justice without freedom? And can justice exist without imposing certain limits on freedom? These questions become even more poignant in societies which have been stripped to the bone by prolonged tyranny, overwhelming corruption and deprivation, and which are now setting about the task of ridding themselves of such regimes and their vast burden of issues.

Over a sixty-year period Egypt, in particular, first experienced a “socialist” model characterized by repression, lack of development, self-indulgence and the creation of parasitic social strata. This was followed by a period of rapacious liberalism that was to the liking and benefit of the ruling elite; a liberalism that spread looting and corruption from top to bottom of the social ladder, subjected the majority of the population to humiliating poverty, and that brought about a type of “freedom” that did not preserve the people’s dignity, that did not make right what was wrong, and that did not allow for accountability. These historical experiences are presumably what nourished the impetus for the revolution in modern Egypt – the leadership of this new phase in the country’s existence should draw on the experiences and sacrifices of the Egyptians who have walked a long path of sacrifice and struggle. Many difficult decisions will have to be taken, and inevitably mistakes will be made at various critical stages.

In Lebanon and other countries, the political movements in Tunisia and Egypt and the uprisings in other parts of the Arab world resulting from those movements, all represent an opportunity to take a critical look back, but not to intrude or to boast about having come earlier than another, or belonging to this revolution or the other. No one can claim to belong to any one revolution which united the people’s willpower in city squares who previously indulged in the abysses of sectarianism, and who accepts – for the sake of preserving the interests of his sect – that his country be the playground for foreign powers

which are divided between two political camps! Furthermore, no person can claim belonging to a democratic revolution who derives his or her

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core political existence and identity from aligning with neighboring regimes which fall nothing short of the characteristics of regimes against which the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions arose. While it is important to be aware of the unique features of every political system, there appears to be no significant difference, in this respect, between the regimes of “moderation” or the “rejectionist” regimes – if, indeed, such descriptions are appropriate in the first place. In either kind of these regimes, rights are violated, freedoms are curtailed, resources are looted;

inequality and humiliation grows and lying is the language of the authorities. The Lebanese, in particular, are in a position by which they are cheaply exploited. While the Lebanese are being pushed to the brink of destruction, they nevertheless maintain that those holding the threads of power over them in their hands are rightfully driving them to the brink, or keeping them away from it, or throwing them in the throes of an internal or external war – as suits the times. This surrender of self-control – whether to one power or another – expresses nothing less than unmatched animosity towards the values that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions held up high. How can the claim of truly relating to the values of freedom and dignity hold true for those Lebanese who are being led in chains, even if they were being led to Paradise? And how then, how does this claim hold true, if they are being led to destruction?

Published as editorial in Kalamon, 2nd issue, spring 2011. Re-published with kind permission of the author and Kalamon.

Translation from Arabic by Word Gym Ltd.