

What the people want...

When Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who sold fruit and vegetables, burned himself to death in the public square of Sidi Bouzid, a remote village in central Tunisia, he could not imagine that his protest against the humiliation inflicted upon him by the police would be

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the first blow to shake the Arab version of the Berlin wall. Built from bricks made out of collective fear, this “wall” stretched all the way from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf. How could he know – who could for one moment have imagined? – that the fire which consumed his body would be the spark to ignite popular revolutions which swept from one end of the Arab world to the other over a space of just three months? So far, those revolutions have toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, shaken the thrones of Arab rulers and kings, and induced many of them to grant significant concessions to their people. Bouazizi’s act was the spark that fired the Tunisian revolution. Perhaps another spark, at another time, in another place, might have unleashed this dynamic political awakening which has since

developed such self-perpetuating momentum across the world’s Arab communities. But in the event, history will regard Bouazizi’s action as the single event which laid the foundation for uprisings destined to shake the entire Arab world in a matter of weeks.

From the outset we can venture to say that, in spite of their diversity and complexity, all these revolutions can be encapsulated in one very expressive and politically charged concept which has been absent from the political arena for too long: “the people”. Indeed, it is the people’s will that the people should be transformed – by and for themselves – into an active nation capable of influencing the destiny of their own countries. Encouraged by the current uprisings, the Arab peoples have once again formed themselves into political entities destined to play a discerning, influential role in the political equation, despite many decades of inertia. Everything started in Tunisia, under the slogan adopted by the Tunisian demonstrators in the earliest beginnings of their popular movement: “If the people one day decide to live, destiny will inevitably respond”. Since then the spirit of the slogan – an excerpt from a famous poem by Tunisian poet Abul-Qasim al-Shabi, written in the 1930s in the midst of the Tunisian struggle against colonialism – has been adopted by all the Arab revolutions, each in its own way.

In Egypt, the main slogans chanted by the young people in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and in other Egyptian cities were: “The people want to change the regime”, “The people want to overthrow the President” and “The people want to purify the country”. With minor variations, the same sentiments have been repeated across

other Arab countries from Morocco to Iraq, by way of Algeria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain. In the Kingdom of Morocco, demonstrators raised

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a banner reading “The people want to reform the system”, emphasizing their demands that the absolute monarchy should be reformed and turned into a constitutional monarchy. In the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian demonstrators waved banners with the slogan: “The people want to end the division”, referring to the power struggle between the government of the Hamas movement in Gaza and the government of Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. Lebanon enjoys a climate of relative freedom compared to the rest of the Arab world, but in Beirut demonstrators hoisted banners proclaiming that “The people want to overthrow the sectarian system”, referring to the sectarianism which has formed the basis for the existence – and increasing corruption – of the ruling political class since the country’s independence. And in Damascus, as the first spontaneous demonstration erupted in the city’s commercial centre in protest at police aggression after a young protester was beaten up, the slogan chanted by the demonstrators was “The Syrian people will not be humiliated”, in reference to the daily humiliations suffered by citizens at the hands of those in authority who – at least at the time of writing! – still hold the reins of power in Syria in an iron grasp.

“The people” is a key term, and we can use it to analyze the revolutions which have shaken the whole of the Arab world over the past three months. If this particular political term – adopted by the demonstrators and repeated over and over again in the many different versions of the slogans and demands now spreading across the Arab world – really means anything, it means that individuals who have for many decades been deprived not only of any right to participate in the political process, but also of their most basic rights, long to be transformed into an effective political entity – a “nation” in the truest sense – and to restore due political process to their communities, while at the same time bringing their communities back onto the political scene. What we see are nations of people demonstrating in the streets, defying heavily armed authorities and paying the highest price – and all with the same goals in mind: first, to create a political and collective presence as a nation; second, to play a decisive part in managing their countries’ affairs and shaping their countries’ domestic and foreign policies, and third, to win the right to choose their own representatives to manage the decision-making process.

The “Arab Exception”

For many decades the Arab world has existed in a state of false political stability, apparently immune to the waves of democratization that swept across the world from the Eastern European states through Latin America and East Asia and finally through a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This has made it easy for racist authors to write – without shame or hesitation – about the “Arab exception”, about the “incompatibility of Islam with the Charter of Human Rights” and about our lack of a “culture of democracy”. At best, they resort to elegantly written diplomatic analyses which ultimately draw the same conclusion: that Arabs and democracy are incompatible. These authors appear to be referring to the “absence of a middle class” and the ability of oil revenues to “bribe the people and buy their silence”,

concluding that thanks to these revenues, those in power have been able to strengthen and perpetuate police states that are wholly unaffected by the will of the people.

However, in analyzing these clichés and stereotypes the authors forgot – or rather, pretended to forget – the timeless aphorism “Man shall not live by bread alone”. According to this tenet it is the right of Arab individuals – whether or not they belong to the middle class, whether or not they are saturated in the white man’s culture, whether or not they adopt

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or repudiate their Islamic heritage – to live in dignity and freedom without being humiliated or having their rights trampled upon by tyrannical authorities. Indeed, like the rest of the world’s population, Arabs are entitled to enjoy the most basic of human rights – and even to strive, as they are at the moment, to wrest these rights from the control of their oppressive rulers.

The Islamist Scarecrow

It is true that the ruling Arab authorities – irrespective of political regime or specific national circumstances – have for a long time succeeded in neutralizing the political will of their peoples by depriving them of any effective participation in the political process and trapping them between artificially polarized extremes, such as “tyranny vs. the Islamists”, or “stability vs. chaos”. This success is, in part, attributable to skilful use of the “Islamist scarecrow” by those in power. They have successfully used the threat of Islamic extremism not only as a deterrent to the democratic aspirations of their

own populations, but also – first and foremost – as a counter to Western countries, whenever the latter have dared to exert embarrassing pressure on Arab governments concerning claims of human-rights violations or repression of democratic liberties. In the analysis, however, it is fair to say that Western countries have rarely exerted much pressure in the first place, and then only in order to preserve an appearance of decency. But in most cases the West has backed away from applying pressure on the pretext of preserving the internal stability of Arab countries – a pretext that conceals substantial business contracts and arms deals worth enormous amounts of money.

This apparent stability, based on oppression and intimidation, gave the false impression that everything was calm and peaceful in the various Arab societies – unfortunately, this was nothing more or less than the silence of the grave. Except that these societies – like all human civilizations – are not and never will be mere cemeteries in which history comes to a standstill, hope dies for ever, and the people’s aspirations to freedom and dignity are buried.

Ageing Government, Youthful Society

Those who talk about the “Arab exception” have forgotten that life does not stop – even for a single day – in any society. Indeed, life goes on – at varying speeds, depending on each country’s specific circumstances, but always tending in the same direction, i.e. towards the modernisation of traditional lifestyles. Thus the demographic composition of these societies has changed entirely, becoming more youthful, and in most of them the rate of population growth has slowed. The average age of individuals has increased, as has the number of educated people of both sexes, while illiteracy levels have declined. Urban populations have increased at the expense of rural populations. The average age of marriage has risen, while the difference in age between husband and wife has fallen. Female fertility has decreased and the patriarchal family structure has been eroded, either because women are more involved in

business affairs, or because they are more highly educated, or because of the changing relationships between different generations and between men and women. But these significant developments have collided head-on with the corruption and inflexibility of those in

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political power, who are incapable of permitting participation in the political process, providing job opportunities, fighting corruption or reducing high levels of unemployment and poverty. We are facing an unprecedented situation in which ageing, mummified leaders dominate youthful populations with an average age of 25 or less.

While some oil-rich countries have sought to buy their peoples' silence with money, aid and gifts, most members of ruling authorities, when confronted by this huge gulf between a dynamic society on the one hand and a rigid political structure on the other, have been unable to respond other than by heaping oppression upon oppression. In this sense, countries have been turned into huge prisons, police states have been strengthened, and fear has been spread throughout populations. Rulers have taken extreme measures in attempts to create antagonism between different communities and social classes, whilst in the background they have kept the threat of Islamic extremism alive. People have been denied the right to organize themselves into groups, even for legitimate purposes – in fact, the only time they can make use of this right is when showing support and reverence for the country's ruler. The rule of law has been abolished, and the security apparatus

regards all members of society as fair game. People are treated as if they were subjects beholden to a ruler's mercy, rather than citizens with internationally recognized rights and responsibilities.

Individual and Collective Dignity

But this lengthy series of mass degradations must inevitably come to an end – as must the lie about the “Arab exception”. When municipal police officers wrecked the cart of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, destroying his produce and his livelihood, and when he went to the town hall to protest at the injustice, the outcome was a slap in the face by a policewoman. December 17, 2010 was the day on which Bouazizi was humiliated and stripped of his human dignity – and yet every hour of every day, millions of Arab citizens are humiliated by members of the security forces and police. Except that in this case, with the world “darkened in his eyes”, this young Tunisian man chose to carry out the last act of freedom available to him, namely that of ending his own life entirely of his own volition. Moreover he decided to turn his suicide into an explicitly political act by choosing his own local village square as the place of self-immolation. This profoundly courageous decision was also highly symbolic; it became the first spark to extinguish collective fear and kindle the flames in the pile of straw which, in the Arab world, is how we describe tyranny. When we equate tyranny to a pile of straw waiting for a burning match, we do not exaggerate, because the edifice of tyranny is based primarily on collective fear which the authorities have succeeded – over a period of decades – in forcibly instilling in the hearts and minds of the people. This edifice swiftly collapsed once the people were freed of their fear and became aware that they are part of a free nation, capable of determining their own destiny. We saw the same process happen in the countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America; today we are witnessing it in the Arab world.

Mohamed Bouazizi chose to burn himself in the public square of his home village so that

his individual act might become an expression of political protest par excellence, reflecting his rights as a citizen and his dignity as a human being. And now we find the Arab peoples choosing the public squares in their cities not as places of self-immolation, but rather as places for making collective acts of protest, where they can transform themselves into a political bloc capable of expressing first, their clear demands; second, their desire to regain the rights to which they are entitled; third, their desire to defend their collective dignity by confronting oppressive authorities. Thus from Casbah Square in Tunisia to Tahrir Square in Cairo; from Taghyeer Square in Sana'a (capital of Yemen), to Lulu Square in Manama (capital of Bahrain), public squares in Arab towns and cities have become the definitive political arena, in which the people can win back their ability to exert influence and act collectively – in a political sense – against state oppression and suppression of the people's will; against those, in short, who would deprive them of proper parliamentary representation. In all

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these squares, in country after country, people have proclaimed a single slogan, with slightly different wording in each case: "Lift up your head, O Tunisian", "Lift up your head, O Egyptian" and "Lift up your head, O Yemeni". This slogan has a single aim: to tell Arabs to wake up, to lift up their eyes, because they are, each and every one, citizens who need to reclaim their dignity and preserve their rights.

The Internet

Modern means of communication such as the

Internet, social networks and mobile telephones have hamstrung the ability of political authorities to monitor the flow of information and ideas, while at the same time allowing young activists to sidestep old-fashioned methods of organization and mobilisation such as political parties and trade unions, newspapers, leaflets or posters. Equally, these modern methods of communication have enabled young people to create wide-ranging networks that extend into the virtual world, where they are immune from seizure or prosecution by the security forces. Every time a new online initiative successfully gathered together a large group of demonstrators, young people were able to defy the iron fist of police power wielded by the regime – they were able to shatter the awe in which the police were held and in doing so create a snowball effect whereby even more people rallied to the group. In these police-dominated regimes ordinary people do not have the right to take ballot papers freely in hand – yet thanks to modern communication technologies they are able to keep mobile telephones in hand, equipped with cameras and linked to the Internet. Using their mobile phones, ordinary people are not just acting as reporters in the field, able to broadcast everything they see and experience to the outside world, but also as citizens with rights and duties, capable of adding significant weight to their side of the political equation by using the cameras in their phones – indeed, they can even paralyze battle tanks and prevent them from attacking their fellow citizens out of fear of the impact such pictures would have on the people.

Modern means of communications have made it possible for these revolutions to take place in genuine freedom, rather than relying on individual leaders or charismatic personalities. They have enabled young people to think collectively and devise the most effective solutions and best tactics for circumventing or confronting the potency of the police apparatus and the unprecedented ruthlessness of the ruling powers. These new methods of communication have also

liberated these revolutions from the burden and inertia of political convictions inherited from Islamist and nationalist ideologies, and have enabled activists to formulate clear, definite and comprehensive political demands which have, as their key objectives, the restoration of freedom, dignity and trust to the people by returning power to the people and allowing the people to make its own decisions.

What about “the Islamic Threat”?

While many of the decision-makers and media in Western nations were obsessing over the same timeworn, obsolete question – “What if fair, impartial elections were held and Islamists came to power?” – the silent language of the demonstrators in the streets of Arab cities – Islamists and secularists, men and women, old and young – was emphasizing the most fundamental principle of democracy more eloquently than any outspoken rhetoric. And the principle is this: it is vital to conduct free and fair elections, so that those who represent the popular majority – whoever they may be – can come to power. The ballot boxes which bring them to power are the sole means of removing them from power again if they should act counter to democratic principles or neglect their election promises.

The majority of the political and cultural elite in the Arab world – including the Islamists themselves – have now recognized that the only way to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of future political development is to break down the awful polarity represented by the implicit choice between “tyranny or religious extremism”. But this can only happen if the Islamists are fully involved in political life, because they represent a significant proportion of the population. It is consequently impossible – especially now – to exclude a major section of the community from the political arena simply on the pretext that their political agenda does not comply with democratic values. Using this flimsy argument, tyranny and suppression of the will of the people have been perpetuated for decades – to say nothing of the fact that the

main currents of contemporary Islamic political thought have learned from the experiences of the past and over the last few years, have made considerable progress in incorporating democratic principles into their programmes.

It is sufficient to note, in this analysis, the radical changes that have taken place over the past thirty years in the messages published and tendencies displayed by the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world, in terms of accepting the notions of, for example, taking turns to hold power, allowing the ballot box to decide matters, and accepting other people’s opinions. Of course this does not mean there is no possibility that they might renege on or reject the progressive steps that have been taken to date. But the only way to guarantee that these progressive tendencies become permanent and prevent any backsliding is to firmly establish the democratic experiment and then protect it through appropriate state institutions and through the free will of the

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people – the same people who should be allowed not only to put the Islamists in power, but also to remove them from power if they so decide.

Politics: Between the Sacred and the Profane

If we take a little time to analyze in detail the demonstrations held in the public squares of Arab cities – especially in Tahrir Square in Cairo – and if we characterise these demonstrations as being the acts of protest which laid the foundations for and became the source of the aspirations and aims of the Arab Spring revolutions, we find that secular and civilian elements were more strongly represented than

the religious or extremist elements with which some people have attempted to associate them. In Tahrir Square veiled women kept vigil alongside unveiled women, women demonstrated side by side with men, and Coptic Christians stood alongside Muslims. Indeed, after Muslims performed their Friday prayers in Tahrir Square, Christians celebrated Sunday mass in the same place. And if religious slogans were almost entirely absent from the demands of the demonstrators and from the banners on

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which they displayed them, by contrast slogans calling for religious brotherhood, emphasizing citizenship, and stressing the people's political demands have been very much in evidence in all these uprisings.

The sacred robes in which tyrannical regimes – as well as certain Islamists – have long succeeded in shrouding politics have been stripped away. The political sphere is once more clad in everyday clothing and has been given a new lease of life, joining together the sacred and profane, the merits and shortcomings which characterise human life as a whole. Just as an example: the millions who joined in victorious Friday prayer in Cairo's Tahrir Square had

scarcely finished praying than they began to dance and sing, celebrating the same victory in the same square, but in a different way. Did not Mohamed Bouazizi commit what – according to traditional Islamic law – is considered the most venal of all sins when he burned himself to inject life back into the veins of the Arab peoples after the tyrants had bled them almost dry? And yet the violation by Bouazizi of such a fundamental principle of traditional Islam was not enough to prevent millions of people from sympathizing with him and turning him into an icon and symbol of the current Arab revolution.

There are some who will assert that the aspirations of these Arab societies will, sooner or later, founder against the rock of reality – that poverty, corruption, feudalism, traditional conservatism and tyrannical authority will prove to pervade the deepest structures of Arab communities. But those same commentators are missing the fact that a new and different historical impetus has started in the Arab world – an impetus that will be difficult to stop, because a new element has entered the equation: the “people”. The people represent not only the most important aspect of reality, but also a force capable, at certain times in history, of changing reality itself.

Yes, the people want change, and are capable of change. Today, the offspring of the people are making history in the Arab world. Like the other peoples of the world, the Arab nations desire freedom and dignity – and ultimately, they will attain them.

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