

Return of the People

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Revolutions against Arab autocracies: this is what the current events in Tunisia and Egypt are often called. This characterization invokes powerful imagery from the Western political tradition that strikes a cord in our hearts. But it does not really enhance our understanding of what has happened.

Only further developments will show if these events will amount to a revolution in the sense of a profound change of the political system. So far, two dictators are gone. This in itself is a huge accomplishment, verging on the unbelievable; it is a cause for rejoicing and will have profound consequences. But in neither country have power structures been more than scratched. How far structural change will go and what will be the nature of change will be determined by hard painstaking work that does not make headlines, in the weeks, and months, and years to come.

Second, neither Ben Ali nor Mubarak were autocrats. An autocrat, by definition, is one who rules alone. There are no autocracies in the Arab world today. The men whom our global media like to call “Arab autocrats” rule with our — Western — help and support. Without our arms and money, without our “development aid,” military cooperation, security expertise, diplomatic backing, and tourist consumption, they would not have lasted long. These are our men. We do more than suffer their embarrassing existence. We hold them in power. They rule for us — the West — as well. They help us shape and maintain the world in the order we have made ourselves believe is in our best interest. From this my third preliminary point follows. The events in Tunisia and Egypt are not about the Arab world alone, perhaps not even in the first place. They are a threat to Arab dictatorships, for sure, but no less important is their challenge to our world order. Tunisia and Egypt were both model countries. They were success stories. Tunisia had reaped much Western praise. Former French president Chirac spoke about the Tunisian “economic miracle” that allowed the regime to feed and house the people and to give them health and education. What else, he added, should the people want? President Sarkozy declared two years ago that the space for freedom was expanding in Tunisia. The former US secretary of defense Rumsfeld praised Tunisia as a “successful country” because it created an “environment that is hospitable to investment, enterprise and to opportunity for their people.” A senior State Department official commended Tunisia for its “impressive economy and social structure.”

True, politicians speak with a forked tongue. Those who speak for economic power are often seen as more credible. The World Bank 2010 report on Tunisia stated that “Tunisia has made remarkable progress on equitable growth, fighting poverty and achieving good social indicators.” It explained that “Tunisia has consistently scored above its income category and the Middle East and North Africa average on most dimension of comparative governance ranking and development indexes.” And more: “Tunisia is far ahead in terms of government effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption and regulatory quality.” Tunisia was also extolled, in the words of an US congressman, for

playing “a crucial role in stabilizing Middle East politics.”

This last item was Egypt’s forte. Egypt was a good country also with regard to adopting “neoliberal” economic experiments, guidelines, and imperatives. But the main value of the country was its role as a cornerstone of “stability” in the Middle East. It was a friend to Israel, a partner in the so-called peace process, an enemy to Islamism, an ally in what we still call the war against terrorism, and the final destination of many an extraordinary rendition flight.

From “our” perspective in the West, there were only minor problems with Tunisia and Egypt. Periodically, rumors surfaced in our media about corruption and torture. Suggestions were voiced that there was certainly room for improvement of human rights record. But the two regimes did not have to endure much pressure on these accounts. Those murmurs were more about appeasing political sensibilities of a still relevant portion of Western public.

Egypt and Tunisia looked stable, I want to suggest, also because we wanted to see them stable, because we needed them the way they were. The massive outbreak of popular discontent and anger, and the fall of the dictators, came as a complete surprise, both to the dictators and to us. Neither the local nor Western intelligence mega machinery, not even the Israeli, anticipated the revolts. The US needed 22 days to officially react to the events in Tunisia. France still wanted to help Ben Ali’s security forces even two days before he had to flee. The foreign minister, to her lasting disrepute, offered “the *savoir-faire* of [French] security forces, recognized throughout the word, in order to settle security situation of this type.” When Egypt’s turn came, US foreign policy was like a weathercock, and EU politocrats duly followed the (lack of) lead. President Obama’s first response may have looked promising, but what followed was an array of frequently changing positions, none of which managed to clearly express support for the protesters. That was not the finest hour of American diplomacy. If all ended well it was because all ended well in Egypt — for the time being.

How are we to explain this cluelessness — this shock and confusion? One part of the explanation is that those who rule by terror grow to believe into the efficacy of terror. With opponents crushed at home and with unquestioning support from abroad, dictators become complacent and arrogant. They measure stability by the size and strength of the repressive apparatus. We then share their confidence, or arrogance, and cultivate our propensity to see what we wish to see.

Another element is surely the idiocy of the “war on terror.” This gigantic mobilization of resources against a predominantly imaginary enemy of our own construction, which eroded the safety of citizens from their own governments in our part of the world and which wrecked havoc safely outside western borders, has blinded us not only to the fine texture of social and political relations worldwide but also to a more fundamental conflict than fundamentalism.

As we pursued our interests and our fancy in a war unbound by the laws of war against inflated Islamic extremists as the fundamental enemy of our western civilization, we unwittingly choose to disregard a growing conflict between the interests of our policies, tied up as they were with our allied dictatorships, and the interests and aspirations of the Arab people. The people in the Arab world became, at best, a figure of speech — our speech. They were by definition speechless.

We then went on to believe the scientific models we constructed to provide alternative

pictures of realities we had chosen to ignore. There is no reason to doubt the honesty of the World Bank report on Tunisia. The problem is not with the reporters but with the standards they employed and with the objectives they pursued. The popular uprising in Tunisia demonstrated that what we regarded as good for Tunisia was not regarded as such by the Tunisian people. Our objectives were shared by the regime; people rebelled against those objectives. What was for us a model country was, we have now learned, an unbearable nightmare for the people. What was for us an "impressive economy," failed to impress the people. The "economic miracle" does not seem to have benefited the populace in whose name it was effected. We praised the investment and enterprise-friendly environment and enjoyed our affordable vacations. We shared a language, business, and interests with the local elites. But what the people got out of this success story was poverty and repression, chicanery and humiliation. This we learned from the words of Egyptian protestors. They said quite clearly that they acted to prevent the further plundering and degradation of their country and to protect their public goods. They wanted to partake in the wealth of their country instead of being impoverished and dispossessed. The Tunisian and Egyptian peoples rejected what we call, for the lack of a better term, the neoliberal economic model.

They also rejected our model of political stability. Political stability of the West for the Middle East has rested on the denial of rights and liberties and on repression of the people. That stability, which is the stability of the pressure cooker, has been imposed and maintained in order to ensure freedom and security of our and our friends' investments, to guarantee our access to natural resources we deem essential for reproducing our way of life, to keep routes for trade and military movement open and under control, and to position our armies in strategic locations both for the preservation of the status quo and for envisaged future conflicts with Russia and China.

At the core of that stability is also what we have come to refer to as the "safety of Israel." As the events in Egypt unfolded, Israel was among the very few open supporters of Hosni Mubarak. In diplomatic rescue efforts, Israeli government whipped up the specter of Islamic fundamentalism taking possession of Egypt and warned Western leaders of the dramatic threat to stability of the region. Israeli officials created what looks like a public relations disaster by proclaiming that they did not think "the time is right for the Arab region to go through the democratic process." (That conviction was unreservedly shared by Mubarak and Suleiman.) The Israelis posited their own political interests in contradiction to the fundamental political interests of the Arab people. They posed Israel as the linchpin of dictatorship in the Arab world.

If it were indeed true that the safety of a few hundred millions of Arab people from oppression, repression, torture, and fear has to be sacrificed for the safety of the self-styled Jewish state of 7.5 million (a quarter of which is Arab), that would mean that something has gone seriously wrong. However, really at issue here is not the safety of Israel but of its determination to push forward with colonialism unhindered and unchecked. At issue is the safety of Israel's illegal and at times criminal colonialist policies. At issue is not anti-Semitism and the safety of Jews. That much became clear when Mubarak's regime began its vicious campaign against the protestors and foreign journalists and pulled out the old tool of anti-Semitism to incite hatred and violence. Israel did not protest one bit.

Such a complete disconnect between our ideas of the right order, implemented by local

dictatorships, and that which is tolerable or acceptable (not to speak of desirable) for the Arab people, begs more explanation. It would be easy to say that we do not care about those people, which to some extent is probably true. As the old abbé de Saint-Pierre said of the Arab Muslims, we should get rid of the idea that they are people like us. We are the heirs of that Enlightenment celebrity, who was an apostle of peace and crusade simultaneously. Things might be worse than that. The problem is less that we do not care about those people, and more that we do not really see them. They are out of our field of vision. We pay tribute to our own political, or ideological, self-understanding by making it clear, or even gently demanding, that the dictatorships in the Arab world should ideally take on a democratic form. In order to please us, they may have elections, some political parties, and parliaments, and media might occasionally voice some criticism — knowing that if elections produce wrong results, we will cancel them, as happened in Algeria and Gaza. But when democracy, which in the classical political literature is a form of government, becomes a form of dictatorship; when democracy is practiced under emergency law that suspends law (*necessitas non habet legem*), as was the case in Egypt (and is the case in Israel since its establishment); then these “circumstances” determine the nature of democracy. This is democracy in which the *demos* has no say, from which the people are structurally excluded. The democracy that we — the West — have wished for the Middle East was democracy without the people. What has happened in Tunisia and Egypt, is this absent entity taking central stage. Unmade by our political and economic models and kept in that state of “unmadeness” by regional dictatorships, the people have made their presence and majestic strength felt. Uninvited, on their own, and not playing to anyone else’s script. That emergence of the people was for us and our friends and allies the cause for shock and awe. This was a popular uprising, a popular insurgency. What happened was populism at its best. Not the provincial delirium of European and American right wing populists, but people asserting their dignity to create a chance for a more dignified life for themselves and the future generations. In Egypt at least, dignity was a key word of the uprising. Whether all this will end in democracy, whether such an outcome is desirable, and what are the dangers of democracy, is another set of questions.

Notes
