

Reflections on People's Revolutions in the Arab and Muslim World in a Contemporary Context
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Introduction

Approximately a decade ago, on September 11, 2001 a series of attacks on the United States redefined the global political terrain in a manner that forced the international community's attention onto a region of the world that had up till that point been known largely for its vast oil deposits, its exotic bazaars and souks, its veiled women, its apparent lack of democratic values and its long serving dictators, viz the Arab and Muslim world. Ten years later the global community once again has its attention firmly focused on the Arab and Muslim world however the reasons are somewhat different. No longer can the argument be made that democracy is a foreign concept to Arabs and Muslims, and no longer does it hold true that long serving dictators will remain an unchallenged feature of the political systems in these countries. The stepping down from power by the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents in the first few months of 2011 as a result of sustained and disciplined political movements which demanded the removal of long standing dictatorships and the birth of democracy in these countries have been hailed by pundits as nothing less than revolutionary in the mould of the great revolutions in human history such as the French, Russian, Cuban and Iranian revolutions all of which brought down corrupt and politically oppressive regimes. Of course each of these revolutionary moments had different trajectories, and they may very well have ended very differently. So the question that we need to ask ourselves here is, is what has happened in Egypt and Tunisia and may soon happen in other parts of the Muslim and Arab world such as Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and so on, truly revolutionary, marking a coming of age of what were once considered somewhat medieval societies whose tribal and deeply patriarchal societies, with long serving dictators, could never understand much less implement democracy? And more importantly can this energy and momentum which has been generated to overthrow dictatorships and instil democracy be replicated in other countries where people still languish under political and social repression? In order to ponder on this question and interrogate this prospect more deeply, I will reflect briefly on the notion of revolution first.

Revolutions are usually very messy affairs with uncertain outcomes. They generally require that the people who undertake them abandon living their daily lives as they have known it and enter an indeterminate political terrain and an imprecise period of struggle either peaceful or armed, which may bring with it either successes or failures. Often it is precisely because of their daily lives as they have known it, under conditions of political oppression and the denial of basic human rights that people have no choice but to choose revolution and advocate for change. And despite the uncertainty that comes with this choice, the human spirit and desire to pursue a better tomorrow becomes the driving spirit, urging everyone in that society to act in unison and build a united political movement, one which is principled has clear goals and is visionary. However whether a political movement ultimately becomes a revolution depends on many factors, such as context, end goals, and what resources

are at ones disposal. Revolutions are generally characterised by 5 core features, viz, i) the formation of an opposition political movement constituted by the people / citizens of a polity, ii) the overthrow of an oppressive or unjust regime by either peaceful means or armed struggle over a sustained period, iii) regime change, iv) the crafting of a new political and socio-economic dispensation and v) the successful implementation of a democratic dispensation. There are however sometimes circumstances which bring about some kind of political change but cannot really be called revolutionary. These are usually in cases where a political coup has taken place carried out by either the military or a combination of forces. In other words every regime change is not necessarily the result of a fully fledged revolution, nor does every revolution necessarily bring about a result which is desirable in the long term. An example of a revolution whose long term outcomes are arguably ultimately undesirable, is the Iranian situation where 30 years after the initial revolution, a large majority of the population are once again agitating for regime change as they feel repressed by the very system that replaced the previously oppressive one. This was evident in the 2009 presidential election where the opposition movement's supporters were demanding full regime change through staging peaceful protests, however ended up facing the full wrath of the Iranian state military machine and many lost their lives in the demonstrations. Some may argue that the outcome of the Cuban revolution is also one such instance where a group of people now feel aggrieved about the current status quo and want change. History hence comes full circle once again and one revolution ends and the conditions are created for another to potentially emerge. Whether it does or not again depends on context, end goals and resources. The complexities of interrogating the unfolding of revolutionary projects ultimately however raise more questions than providing answers. I will therefore not claim to provide any answers in this paper, but will instead articulate some critical questions that may allude to a few broad arguments I wish to offer for further reflection.

What makes the overthrow of a dictator in Egypt for example a quicker exercise than overthrowing a dictator in Libya is a question that requires us to peel away the complex layers of history and political realities that have coagulated around each situation and attempt to reflect on each case based on its individual merits. And indeed why is it that some countries have despite a long standing desire for democracy been unsuccessful in beginning the process of revolution or indeed faced further repression because they did try but could not match up to the military might of the brutal regimes under which they live? Nations such as China, which has witnessed the Tiananmen Square massacre or Myanmar and Zimbabwe, in addition to others, whose regimes have arrested and tortured pro-democracy activists, stand out as examples where revolutions or at least regime changes are yet to take place. And if and when they do happen, will these countries be inspired by what is currently unfolding in the Arab and Muslim world, or will they only revolt at a time and place when circumstances on the ground present the ideal conditions? And what would these ideal conditions be ?

Let me however state at the outset that I do not wish to make the claim that the political events unfolding in North Africa and the Middle East are in some way going to have a domino effect on other parts of the world and present a political panacea which will automatically lead to all dictatorships to somehow topple. Nor do I wish to

suggest that these other countries look to North Africa, Middle East or the Muslim world, for a handbook or blueprint on how revolution is done, given that the dynamics in each case differs quite dramatically. What I do wish to argue however is that the factors that shaped the transition from the last decade of the 20th century into the first decade of the 21st have presented us with some remarkable historical shifts of politically seismic and epic proportions that have effectively laid the groundwork for the events that we now see happening, particularly in the Arab and Muslim world. Furthermore I want to explore the possibilities that these new political realities offer us to imagine and craft a new world order; one which moves us away from the kind of militarised violent societies which defined much of the 20th society to a political reality where peoples revolutions mean not just regime change but a new kind of participatory politics, where state and civil society relationships are reconceptualised and the state thinks twice before it shoots at and kills its own citizens. In presenting these ideas I will attempt to accomplish 4 basic things. Firstly speak to the historical context that has led to the current political shifts and briefly reflect on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, secondly make the point that Egypt and Libya in particular are critically significant nations of geo-political strategic importance, particularly to the western imperialist project, thirdly reflect on whether other Muslim and Arab countries currently agitating against their governments, have some hope of accomplishing what Tunisia and Egypt have done and finally look briefly at the prospects of revolution or regime change in some other parts of the world. With regard to the broader theme of this talk it is also important to point out that at least two major instances of people's uprisings have already happened in the first decade of the 21st century, viz the Rose Revolution which took place in Georgia in 2003 / 2004 and the Orange revolution which unfolded in Ukraine, around 2004 / 2005. Both uprisings were around contestations relating to national elections and the peoples dissatisfaction regarding the results. The fact that they are called revolutions at all is intriguing although technically they would not qualify as such, given that they unfolded in circumstances that were very different to what we witnessed in North Africa.

Historical Context

It would be fair to make the argument that no major political event unfolds without there being some catalyst shaped by a historical trajectory which leads us to a given point in time. One can even assume that many people could have guessed that for example the Berlin Wall would eventually fall in response to the growing global call for economic integration between Eastern and Western Europe. However to have predicted in 1990 or even the year 2000, that a decade or two later the people of North Africa would rise up and remove two of their long term despotic rulers, in an almost bloodless revolution would at the time have seemed to most of us nothing short of speculation and indeed the product of someone's very vivid imagination. In fact the western world and certainly most of the Muslim and Arab world had resigned itself to the fact that leadership and political engagement in this region was going to in the long term be shaped by dictatorships, patron – client relationships between the west and these despots, petro-politics as well as those other somewhat undesirable aspects which have come to characterise the broader Muslim world, particularly since global attention has been focused on this community since 9 / 11. These

include violations of human rights, honour killings, the inappropriate application of Shariah law, and that all encompassing term, “Islamic extremism”, amongst others. Major organisations such as the Arab League, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference amongst other regional bodies representing Muslims, knew full well the shortcomings evident within the Muslim world, particularly the lack of democratic systems and consolidation of democratic practices, yet often did not manage to sufficiently mobilise their member nations to tackle head on, what had by the end of the Cold War become endemic and structurally debilitating problems within the broader Muslim world, despite the collective financial and military resources at their disposal. In fact the inability of the Arab League to act effectively on any issue has by now become legendary. When the Coalition of the Willing led by the United States, invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 using its superior military power, most Muslim governments looked on from the sidelines, basically refusing to come to the defence of innocent civilians who were getting caught in the crossfire. The foolhardiness of that exercise by the United States and its coalition partners has now been substantively documented as perhaps one of the worst military and political errors of judgement of the last 100 years. This helplessness and indeed lack of political will by Muslim governments and bodies to openly challenge the ongoing assault of the Muslim world by western powers, a project broadly referred to as Orientalism by the intellectual Edward Said, has arguably become one of the most serious dilemmas faced by the global Muslim world in the post cold war era.

So what did Muslim organisations do instead of substantively tackling the military and political quagmires that faced them, over the last half century? Most such as the OIC chose the path of diplomatic, intellectual and cultural engagement, in order to create dialogue between its member nations as well as between the Muslim and broader western world. These activities however accomplished in my opinion limited goals, but perhaps they could do no more than that, given the existing balance of power. They enabled and facilitated a discursive intellectual, political and theoretical space, issuing on the odd occasion statements but never really being able to substantively implement a radical vision that would dramatically change the face of the Muslim and Arab world. Let me clarify however, that it is not my intention to vilify any of these organisations given that they operated within a climate that did not necessarily present an ideal environment for radical change. Certainly since the collapse of the Ottoman empire in the early years of the 20th century, Muslim governments have not been able to harness any significant level of political influence they may have had to change the balance of power in the global community. While the establishment of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al Muslimin) by Hassn Al Banna in the Middle East and the Jamaa – e - Islami on the Asian sub-continent by Abul Ala Mawdudi, attempted to create ideological momentum in an effort to galvanise Muslims as part of a post – colonial exercise, to establish a pan-Islamic fraternity, this lasted only so long, before the realities of the cold war era such as the creation of Israel, the Afghani Jihad against Soviet occupation and resistance against foreign occupation of the holy lands such as Saudi Arabia led to the creation of militant non state groupings who began to pursue political goals, outside the traditional framework of the state. Notable exceptions to this however would be countries like Turkey and Iran who effectively have become key power players in the international community, Turkey because of its location in

Europe and Iran because of its historical opposition to US imperialism and more recently its pursuit of nuclear power.

There is of course the dilemma of extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban who appear to still hold some sway amongst some quarters in the Muslim world. I don't wish to say much about these suffice to make the point that actually both groups have now been rejected by a fair percentage of Muslims globally as effectively not representing the core interests of the broader Muslim world. Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Taliban presence in Pakistan were for a brief period hailed as a heroic and revolutionary force fighting off the imperialist western powers who had invaded their respective territories, however their presence amongst civilian populations has created deep resentment amongst the people, for seeking protection within these communities and especially exploiting them in order to achieve their own narrow objectives. Other militant groupings in the Muslim and Arab world such as Hamas, Hezbollah and so on, continue to maintain a presence in the Middle East, but these should be regarded as largely a response to the creation of Israel and the project of seeking justice for Palestinians who continue to be denied self-determination.

Tunisia and Egypt

I have attempted to thus far paint a brief historical picture of the Muslim and Arab world in order to reflect on what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. It is important to say at the outset however that the Arab and Muslim world is not some homogenous entity where everyone goes to mosque, looks exactly the same or speaks Arabic. The presence of Christians and other religious minorities as well as the Iranians, who don't speak Arabic, but rather Farsi (Persian), creates a very diverse and interestingly complex picture of this region and this religious community. Of course there is also a significant Muslim presence in the western world which we must of necessity, include as part of the broader Muslim world. It is also not possible to capture in this short lecture the entire spectrum of factors that have shaped developments in the Muslim world, and so I have been selective in addressing these.

I now move to engaging in some more detail on the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In mid December of 2010, a young fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi encountered for the umpteenth time, as he had on many previous occasions, the corrupt police and municipal system which had come to typify life in the poorer neighbourhoods of Tunisia. Having had his fruit cart and his only form of livelihood confiscated, and having been denied justice when he sought it, he set himself alight in frustration at the situation which faced him, and he eventually died in hospital some days later. This single act galvanised initially the residents of Sid Bouzid, the town where this incident happened, to begin protest at the actions of the officials who forced Bouazizi to take such drastic action. Subsequently there were other instances of poor people engaging in extreme acts out of frustration, faced with poverty and unemployment. Eventually the protest action began to gain momentum spreading to other parts of Tunisia. The call for the Tunisian leader Zine Al Abideen Ben Ali who had been in power since 1987, to step down, became the singular call of the growing people's movement. Professionals such as the legal fraternity and the labour movements

joined the protests and it effectively became a national people's movement. Despite facing the brutality of the state's police and military the people came out onto the streets for 28 days and eventually Ben Ali resigned in January 2011. Despite his stepping down however, the protests still continued as the corrupt system was still very much in place. Eventually most of the entire government which represented the old regime including the prime minister Mohamed Ghannouchi resigned as a response to the ongoing protests. There is currently an interim government in place led by interim President Fouaad Mebazza which will govern until a constitutional council is elected in July leading to general elections later in the year.

One of the key developments post the departure of Ben Ali has been the return of Rashid Ghannouchi the leader of the opposition An Nahda party, which had effectively been banned under the Ben Ali regime, but its members had traditionally stood for election as independents. Clearly its history as an Islamist party makes some people nervous not least western leaders, who actually supported dictators such as Ben Ali and Mubarak precisely because they believed that they would keep so called Islamist elements in check in their respective countries.

Egypt of course is arguably perhaps the more popular of the two uprisings. Some have argued that Tunisia happened while the world was not really watching until the latter part of the uprising, whereas the call for Egyptians to take to the streets from January 25 2011, happened in a very public global forum, viz online, through social media sites such as facebook and twitter. Also many have claimed that it was a people's movement led primarily by the youth, at some level inspired by the events of Tunisia, but also driven in anger at the killing of a young Egyptian blogger Khaled Saeed who was tortured and killed by the Egyptian police in 2010. In addition the role of other youth leaders such as Asmaa Mahfouz, a member of the April 6 youth movement who posted an online video saying that she would go to protest in Tahrir Square on 25 January against Hosni Mubarak, and asked fellow Egyptians to do the same as well as Wael Ghonim, one of the people who founded the We are all Khaled Saeed facebook page, have been regarded as being central to the early mobilising phase of the uprising. As a result of these calls from youth leaders, the world community was effectively glued to their television screens from the 25 of January to the 11 of February in particular focusing on Al Jazeera, which covered in great detail both the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings and continues its coverage on the current peoples uprisings happening elsewhere.

The Egyptian people's movement is arguably now being held up as the model for how a largely peaceful sustained mass demonstration can take place and bring results, viz the removal of a much feared dictator. There are some key defining moments of these 18 days which are worth highlighting. When the police disappeared from the streets of Cairo, we saw how the city's residents took it upon themselves to take on the task of security, and protecting each other as well as landmarks in the city such as the National Museum. Also people opted to sleep over in Tahrir Square, in fact set up camp consistently for the period of the protests, fearing that if they gave up the space, the army may move in and they could lose the hard fought ground that they had acquired in the early days. The solidarity that was built up amongst people during this time also gave rise to a unique political momentum which saw concerts, even weddings take place in the square to keep

peoples spirits up. And there was certainly no lack of humour in the space, calling on Hosni Mubarak to go quickly so that people could return to their normal lives. When it also became clear that paid thugs were being set loose on the protestors to create friction and division, the people organised themselves so they could apprehend the thugs and hand them over to the army. When Mubarak did finally step down on February 11th, it effectively became a global event with people from all over the world cheering on from wherever they were for what the Egyptians had managed to accomplish. Again however like in the Tunisian case, there was some uncertainty around the post Mubarak phase, and the protestors opted to continue remaining in Tahrir square until they knew for sure that the army, who had taken control of the country, would not deceive them, and things would not return back to the previous status quo.

It has clearly not been all smooth sailing in Egypt since February 11th. A number of disturbing events have continued to unfold alongside more positive ones. For example the call to open the Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza has provided some relief to Gazans, however the border has yet to be fully opened. The secret police still seem to continue operating behind the scenes and were recently found by protestors to be destroying documents that would implicate their members, and serve as evidence of torture in court proceedings. In addition, the level of patriarchal chauvinism in Egyptian society still seems to remain a challenge as was illustrated when a group of men attacked women marchers who had organised an event commemorating International Women's Day. Nevertheless in the last few days, Egyptians have come out in large numbers to vote on the issue of constitutional reform, many ecstatic at the opportunity to have a say and role in their future, something which was largely denied to them under Mubarak's regime.

Comparative Perspectives

I wish to now reflect briefly on the key aspects of the people's uprisings in both Tunisia and Egypt and articulate some broad conclusions around this. Firstly can they actually be referred to as revolutions? I would argue that within the context of the criteria I outlined at the beginning of this paper, they are effectively revolutions in the making. It is only when real constitutional reforms have taken place and the people can feel the full weight of the democratic process, could we argue that a total revolution has happened. However there are a few significant similarities in both cases that are worth noting. Firstly, both dictators were able to sustain their oppressive regimes on the back of a brutal security apparatus which consisted of secret police and a network of informers who monitored pro democracy activists, detained and tortured them. That system has now been largely exposed and we hope totally dismantled. Secondly, the fear of religious or Islamic extremism has been the reason that groups like the Nahda and Muslim Brotherhood were banned, however their reappearance on the scene does not necessarily signal any danger of the establishment of some kind of religious theocracy. Clearly the very secular democratic process that began the unseating of these dictatorships will continue to shape the political processes moving forward. The new political formations have to however be mindful of ensuring inclusive processes of participation as opposed to exclusive ones. And lastly, the long held assumption that the Arab Muslim world does not have the capacity to bring about democracy by itself and needs external

forces to show them the way, has been dealt a severe blow, as both these instances illustrate that the will of the people will certainly always prevail.

One of the key questions that I believe is important for us to pose at this point is, why is it only now, that the Arab and Muslim world is responding to the call for democratic change and reform, and why are other countries in the region still lagging behind on this issue. I think one can point to some of the salient points I alluded to earlier regarding the inability of Muslim governments and organisations to sufficiently tackle the challenges they have faced in the post cold war period. In addition the guarantee of patronage from powerful western powers served as an incentive for many of these long standing governments to not try too hard to bring about democratic reform in this part of the world. However it is in the face of a rapidly changing global world order with particular demands that the peoples of these countries have decided to take matters into their own hands. We can safely say that many of the longstanding dictators of the Muslim and Arab world have managed to remain in power, because the majority of western leaders have looked the other way, while their own interests were being serviced at the expense of the needs of the citizens of these countries. I believe the game has now changed substantively in favour of the masses, as these two cases have illustrated that absolute state power is no longer guaranteed, and that the will of the masses must be heard.

Clearly the western world is watching the political developments in this part of the world very closely. Egypt and what happens in this country domestically is of great interest particularly to the United States because of its close association with Israel, given that Mubarak effectively served as the proxy agent who carried out both Israel's and the United State's bidding and kept the Palestinians in Gaza, within a massive open air prison, restricting their movement significantly. Clearly the United States will at the behest of Israel, attempt to prevail on any newly elected Egyptian government to continue to do the same, However I doubt that they will have much luck in convincing any new Egyptian government to continue with this policy. Given the sympathies of the Egyptian people with Gazans it is unlikely that the siege which has been in place for many years now can go on indefinitely.

The Libyan situation which is currently still unfolding also merits some significant mention. Muammar Gaddafi is clearly someone that the West really doesn't know what to do with, much like its relationship with Saddam Hussein. And so while people have been protesting since February 17, it is only in the last few days that the international community takes some kind of action, and places a no fly zone over Libya. Except however the reality of maintaining the no fly zone means that a full scale military operation must unfold, where missiles are fired at the Libyan government's air defense system unfortunately targeting civilians who may be living in close proximity to these areas. The loss of life from these missile attacks by the coalition that is maintaining the no fly zone has already been mounting up, and may effectively end up taking more lives instead of protecting people from Gaddafi, which is what the supposed aim of the mission is meant to be. Is it the case that Libya may become another Iraq, and if so, what should we as global civil society do in response? This is however a scenario that is still unfolding, and while most people would concur that Gaddafi has got to be removed from power, the way in which the western coalition powers are attempting this, is certainly raising eyebrows globally.

Of course the fact that Libya has vast deposits of crude oil is being cited as an incentive making it easier for Western nations to undertake the patrolling of the no fly zone and possibly establishing a long term presence in the country. Questions are being raised for example about why these same powers are not taking similar actions in Yemen and Bahrain, where the state has effectively brutally killed peaceful protestors and unleashed what amounts to state terrorism on its citizens. The close alliance between these governments and the United States for example creates another complicated dynamic, however one can only admire the tenacity of the citizens who continue to protest in these countries. It is possible however that the toppling of the Yemeni regime is imminent, given that many members of the army in Yemen have already defected towards the people's movement and many Yemeni diplomats have resigned from their posts.

One of the challenges of how to respond to these many uprisings is that they are all happening at the same time. This is perhaps both a good and bad thing. It is good because one uprising continues to provide momentum and energy for the others and effectively creates solidarity across the region. It is perhaps problematic in that the world's attention may for now be fixed on Libya, leading the other movements to make the argument that they are not being given the same level of attention while they are being attacked by their government. Of course given the multiple protests happening in nations with key geo-strategic importance one cannot ignore any one of them for too long. For those of us monitoring these developments, we can only continue to provide moral support to each once, with the fervent wish that the people accomplish their goals. And no longer can the argument be made by these governments that these peoples uprisings are foreign plots being carried out to destabilise these respective countries. We can only hope that these governments heed the call of their people and step down to allow the respective democratic processes to unfold.

Conclusions and Possibilities

So what broad conclusions can we draw from these multiple uprisings which I will for the moment refer to as revolutions in the making, and what prospects exist for those countries who are still aspiring to rise up against their oppressive regimes. As I indicated at the outset I will not make the claim that there is a one size fits all revolutionary blueprint. In fact it would be very ambitious of one to make any claims at all regarding what model one can follow. Can Zimbabwe for example successfully replicate the Egyptian model and bring down the oppressive Mugabe regime ? I would argue that there are a few key differences between Zimbabwe and Egypt which one would have to keep in mind. I think that the movement to bring about regime change in Zimbabwe would have to be constituted largely from the outside given that the resources to do so exist mostly outside of the country, within the larger refugee community which has to find a way to mobilise. Secondly the army and state apparatus of Zimbabwe has to be convinced to defect to the cause of the people in the same way that Egypt's army and later Libyan and Yemeni army officials were motivated to move over to the popular people's camp. This of course is easier said than done, however the army in all of these countries seem to hold the key to the success of the unfolding processes towards democracy.

I wish to devote the last few thoughts of my talk to the project of re-imagining the relationship between the citizenry and state in a contemporary context, especially in situations of conflict. I have written and reflected elsewhere about the futility of state terrorism and how the primary task of any state is first and foremost to protect its citizens from any danger even if that danger comes from the state itself. However one will observe that the immediate reaction of most governments, especially long standing despotic regimes to people protesting peacefully, is to unleash the full and brutal might of the military apparatus on the citizens. It is usually only after many people have died or been injured or severe international condemnation that the respective government may revisit its approach. I believe that the international legal system does not have enough in its armoury to serve as a deterrent for states to think twice before they shoot at and kill their own people. And whatever legal provisions it does have, are certainly not being used effectively or are used selectively. Hence a government like Israel can get away with using illegal chemical weapons like white phosphorus against Palestinians while Libya is seen as being a country that merits and needs “intervention”. Clearly these are glaringly obvious double standards, and I would make the argument that the new governments that are elected in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere where dictatorships are toppled, ensure that they adopt a more serious approach towards eradicating state sponsored terrorism, given that their people were once it’s very victims.

In the final analysis, and surveying developments in the global community it becomes self evident that the days of protecting dictators and patron – client relationships are very much over. The patience of people living under conditions of oppression and brutal political repression has been severely tested and as Tunisia and Egypt have so clearly illustrated, they will rise up and willingly give their lives for freedom. And when they do, others will be inspired to follow suit. This is a lesson that the existing dictatorships need to learn fast, given that their days are now also numbered.