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Book Reviews

Soft Power Revolutions in the Arab world: Towards the Deconstruction of Dictatorships and Fundamentalisms

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Book Title: *Soft Power Revolutions in the Arab world: the Deconstruction of Dictatorships and Fundamentalisms*

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The revolutions being witnessed by several Arab countries have prompted the Lebanese philosopher and writer Ali Harb to examine them and to “deconstruct dictatorships and fundamentalisms”; the book is a collection of articles covering these revolutions.

Harb says that he did not originally intend to publish this booklet on the ongoing revolutions in several Arab arenas. The disparate articles contained in the book represent readings, from multiple angles and perspectives, of the escalating events in question, including their surprises and shocks, ramifications and effects. Harb concluded that combining these essays in a book would constitute a contribution that may enrich the continuing debates, on the Arab and global scenes, regarding the transformations and shifts witnessed by the Arab world, which are transporting it from one era to another, changing the face of life in the region, and liberating it from the prisons of both history and its determinisms to open the horizons of the future.

Harb focuses chiefly on the events in Tunisia, followed by those in Egypt, because the revolutions in these two countries have succeeded – in the shortest periods and with the least amounts of losses in both lives and property – in achieving the minimum of their objectives, which was the fall of the political regime, it being understood that revolution also is intended to change the entire cultural system, together with its tools, habits, and mechanisms.

Harb opines that the Arab world is witnessing multi-dimensional uprisings. These are civic, political, and economic uprisings as much as they are technical, rational, and ethical; furthermore, they are global as much as they are Arab. They also are intellectual revolutions representing a new model that changes the relationship of humanity with the vocabulary of its existence in time, space, and potential, as well as in reality, the world, and the “other”. These revolts emerge from a global advance represented by the information and digitization revolutions, which have afforded the new Arab generation immense potential to think and act to change reality by deconstructing dictatorial regimes and undermining fundamentalist systems.

For Harb, these revolutions will lead to the shaping of a different world in which educational programs, maps of knowledge, and rules of debate will change, as well as the language, mentalities and sensibilities. Similar changes will apply to the manners of managing things, exercising authority, and edifying the national identity.

This is what Harb hopes the Arab revolutions will achieve, rather than being content to depose political regimes, or even to put into practice the slogans of freedom, democracy, justice, and human rights. Instead, he would like them to develop these concepts, to enrich and reconstruct them by innovating new and effective means, formulas, and patterns. In this way, these revolutions would represent not just change the face of the Arab world but also constitute a valuable contribution to human history.

The Arab peoples exit their prisons

Despite the fact that the Arab world reached its civilizational crisis, in all possible forms, some time ago, the Arabs refrained from engaging in changing their reality and from participating in global transformations, such as the multi-faceted changes witnessed by other regions of the world. Even when both the slogans and the states of the socialist camp collapsed, Arab regimes that had adopted its model or remained in its orbit during the Cold War continued to formally maintain their policies – with the result being further delay and underdevelopment. There was no surprise in that for he who is incapable of changing by understanding events and managing transformations does not maintain his principles and specificity; instead he lapses backward in a global reality characterized by perpetual movement and rapid change.

But here are the revolutions, Harb adds, erupting in most Arab countries, demanding comprehensive and radical change that surpasses partial and formal reforms in constitutions and regimes of rule. These revolutions' demands have reached the manners of states in managing public affairs and practicing power, in addition to their attitude towards rights and liberties.

Harb sees these regimes as having failed on the internal level to achieve their slogans on progress, freedom, and social justice, instead transforming republics into monarchies, armies into militias styled as “revolutionary guards”, and civilian police into intelligence services that spy on people. They also have produced armies of jobless people, both educated and not. Thus, Arab societies have lost the benefits provided by the traditional regimes – as limited as they were – without achieving new gains, which has made many people nostalgic for the times of monarchy and colonialism.

After the emergence of the new wave formed by the globalization and information ages, these regimes failed advance in terms of democracy, development, and economic modernization; in fact, they added to the calamity of despotism that of corruption, with its associated theft of

resources and pillaging of public and private funds. In foreign policy, things were no better, especially with regard to the central issue, Palestine and the Occupied Territories, with the regimes back-tracking after 60 years of the slogans of liberation, resistance, and rejectionism.

Added to all this came the rise of religious fundamentalisms, which benefited from the failures of the nationalist project and the socialist program. This led to further deterioration and backwardness, because fundamentalisms are reactionary waves governed by memories of revenge and doctrines that divide, and whose adherents think within a mentality of hatred towards everything that is modern and imported. All such ideologies can do is to bring down a regime and sow havoc in its realm; they are incapable of reform or improvement. Fundamentalisms, in Harb's view, act like the dictatorships by importing from the West the technologies, equipment, and weapons that they employ in their wars, while using the unlimited openness of the markets to amass huge illegal funds. At the same time, however, they reject the values, concepts, and systems that could be invested in projects of modernization and development, or be embodied in respect for rights and the permitting of the freedoms of thought, expression, and organization.

As such, the fundamentalisms retain the ills of past projects, whether nationalist or leftist, while adding terrorism and sectarian sedition to poverty, underdevelopment, and despotism. This has placed Arab societies in the throes of a deadly pincer: escalating despotism, organized corruption, extraordinary wealth and abject poverty, security islands and financial mafias, nightmarish intelligence services and hellish terrorism.

Harb opines that this perpetual failure has found its expression in the conditions obtaining in Arab countries: blocked horizons, a dearth of ideas, the failure of programs and the fall of ideologies; that was the case, whether on the front of dictatorships or at the front of fundamentalisms, as the two warring camps worked in concert to foment impotence, backwardness, and underdevelopment in the Arab world.

Thus, the blockage has caused the explosion, as witnessed by the continuing revolutions through which Arab societies are expressing their creative dynamism by releasing their paralyzed capacities in a manner allowing them to regain initiative and effectiveness –benefitting from the potentials heralded by the age of globalization, information, and communication.

Each era has its revolutions and currents; with all of its technologies and transformations, globalization has shaped a new actor represented by the model of the “Digital Man”, who has been taking center-stage – in the last two decades – in contributing to the making of the world and the changing of reality, as is the case with most of those engaged in social networks, with their various forms.

Harb believes that the rulers and the fundamentalists, as well as the intellectuals, preachers, theorists, and proponents of the slogans of progress and modernization, were all incapable of reading these transformations. Some felt concerned about the identity, doctrine, and modernity of the changes, including some who waged attacks against globalization as representing pure evil, while others buried their heads in the sand, ignoring what was taking place around them and waiting for the occurrence of a miracle at the hand of a preaching prophet or a savior.

The world was changing its tools, concepts, maps, and actors, while those involved in projects of change were afraid or incredulous, these new revolutions came to wake them from their ideological and cultural slumber, alerting them that facts have changed in the same manner as the world.

Hyper-power

While each age has its revolutions, each revolution has its methods and vocabulary. As for the method, we are confronted by peaceful revolts that operate through soft power, not hard power, as was especially the case in Tunisia and Egypt. Violence had sabotaged the previous revolutions dashing dreams and slogans and producing mutual destruction in the age of mutual dependence.

If the digital revolution has presented us with a lesson, it is that soft power and hyper-power are stronger than security regimes and their intelligence apparatuses. We are faced by revolutions that were not made by machine guns, but through digital books, screens, and dogmatic doctrines.

Where the previous revolutions, with their opposing Manichean binaries and destructive strategies, saw the individual as a slave practicing the rituals of adoration for the revolution and its gods and heroes, the new soft and civic revolutions treat the individual as a productive participant in building his or her country, as he or she participated in making the new revolution.

For Harb, the creativity in Cairo's Tahrir Square – in terms of the methods, terminology, jokes, poems – was notable in that it enabled Egyptian youth to interact with the revolution as an ascetic work of art, i.e. as a source of creativity and joy. That is what the values of freedom and dignity were focused on at the expense of the slogans of liberation, resistance, and rejectionism. And calls for democracy, pluralism, partnership, and development were raised instead of those for one-person control, centralization and top-down organization.

A common Arab world

Harb believes that we are witnessing multiple Arab revolutions taking place in more than one country and not a broader Arab revolution. While each country has its specificities, Arab societies identify with each other, in the sense that each affect others and is affected by them, and

that can be seen in the mutual influences among various revolutions and uprisings. In this manner, Arab peoples are practicing unity without pretention or theorization. Herein lies the irony, because the current revolutions are breaking material and mental barriers to throw open the door for interaction among Arab countries.

Harb believes that the international approval for these revolutions, especially from US President Barack Obama, puts an end to the theory of conspiracy and foreign agendas while simultaneously lifting the “sanctity” of sovereignty when leaders become butchers who shed the blood of their people, citing as evidence the Libyan people who called upon NATO’s intervention in Libya after Moammar Ghaddafi used violence against those demanding his overthrow.

Harb believes that such massacres give the United Nations the right to intervene against any leader who attacks his people, hence justifying the international intervention in Libya in order to protect civilians. Unquestionably, such positions draw argument and disagreement, especially since the United States and NATO exceeded the terms of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which declared a no-fly zone over Libya, when they conducted aerial attacks against Libyan forces, establishments, and locations belonging to Ghaddafi and his government, which resulted in the deaths of two civilians. One cannot entirely exclude the conspiracy theory as long as oil remains a factor in Libya, enticing the appetite of Western countries. In addition, we do not see these similar Western or international intervention against the continued Israeli aggression in Palestine and the blockade of the Gaza Strip, which brings us back to the matter of double standards.

A new Arab regime

Harb says most Arabs and Westerners, including high-level intellectuals, feared for identity, privacy, and freedom in the face of globalization and its revolutions and transformations, because these opened the widest possibilities for breaking chains and gaining independence from the yoke of despotism. This is what scientists and economic commentators resort to, such as the French philosopher Jacques Bouveresse and the British economic commentator Martin Wolf. This comes as no surprise, since modern economics, with its pattern of open production, goods, and market, allows the freedom of exchanging thoughts, ideas, persons, and things, at the same time, the past Arab revolutions, with its new slogans and ideologies, work to undermine freedoms and enslave minds.

Harb notes that the rapid fall of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali –who terrorized the public with his security forces – means his regime was a vulnerable one that feared its people more than they feared it. What the Tunisian Revolution indicates is that despotic regimes are too inept and weak to resist or overcome a people who have broken the barriers of fear while

demanding both political and social change. This may well be the most important lesson of both the Tunisian uprising and the Egyptian one.

It was natural for what took place in Tunisia to have echoes elsewhere in the Arab world, whether out of fear and concern, or in terms of inspiration and irritation, and whether among senior leaders, or among private citizens.

Harb believes that the uprisings taking place several Arab countries are not in favor of the concept of an Islamic Middle East, as Iranian officials believe, because the notion of the “Middle East”, which is a Western/American concept, is based on displacing the Arab term. In that sense, the Americans and the Iranians agree on the exclusion of Arabs from any effectiveness or role. The strategic void currently in place in the Arab world is now being filled by regional states under religious slogans which is partly due to the weakness of Egypt and its loss of dynamism and initiative. Harb predicts that Egypt’s regaining of its influential role will have an effect on the Arab level, strategically. If the Arab uprisings succeed, they could change the face of the Arab world, which could overcome its weakness by regaining its health, effectiveness, and presence on the world stage, with all that this would signify in terms of weakening both American interference and Iranian influence.

The shock of elites and intellectuals

Harb directs criticism to many intellectuals who, for him, have no credibility behind their declared positions. For they are against despotism in some places but support it elsewhere. They are against Israeli massacres in Gaza, but cheer for Al Qaeda’s massacres of civilians in Iraq; they are in favor of freedom in Tunisia and Egypt, but they are against it in Lebanon. Thus, intellectuals belonging to ideological, revolutionary, and liberation projects expose their weakness, their vulnerability, and their ignorance of both self and the other, and of society and the world.

What took place in Tunisia and Egypt, and may take place in other Arab countries awaiting their turns, deconstructs the duality of the elite and the masses, breaking the mentality of “guardianship” over values and societies with a narcissistic mind and one-dimensional thought. The lesson to be learned from events in Tunisia is that there is no more room today for countries to be run with a centralizing, authoritarian, policed, or totalitarian mind that which turns societies, authorities, and wealth into security prisons, intelligence apparatuses and/or financial monopolies. In the age of social networks and satellite channels, when information is disseminated, ideas are globalized and interesting identities are formed, successful and effective governments open up to social movements, with all their circles and levels, while also acting with a horizontal and democratic communicative logic.

Also among the lessons learned is that no one should treat his country as his own private project, monopolizing matters of truth, power, wealth, and legitimacy. No political group or power, in the opposition or the government, can monopolize guardianship over justice, development, freedom, identity, the nation, resistance, and other public values. These are not the property of anyone, because every citizen is engaged with these values, participating to build his country with his work, specialty, production, and creativity. The age of revolution and ideologies and divisive fundamentalisms, whose advocates claim to have the final answers and ultimate solutions, has led to failure or catastrophe.

What took place in Tunisia, leaving a deep impression, may repeat itself to the letter in other Arab countries suffering from corruption, poverty, and enslavement. And if the event does not repeat itself, this signifies that each Arab country suffering subjugation and enslavement makes its own model and changes its reality in its own way.

The new actors

Most importantly, what took place in Tunisia and other Arab countries, especially Egypt, is the result of the revolution of information and communication, which allowed lightning-speed transmission of pictures and information. This new age is also the fruit of new emerging powers which have become a constant in current world affairs, such as China, India, Brazil and Turkey: this signifies the undermining of existing models, poles, and centers in development, politics, and knowledge.

There is also the rise of new young generations that are capable of escaping antiquated ideologies and terrorist jihadi organizations. These factors, especially the youth and the media, have played a paramount role in the continuing revolution, which is a peaceful civic revolution, unlike those that came before it.

Harb argues that the ongoing revolts lend credence to the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama and not to his late compatriot Samuel Huntington, since the latter saw the past from the perspective of a tense and vengeful mentality, as his thesis on the “Clash of Civilizations” testifies. Fukuyama, on the other hand, expected the victory of democracy in the age of liberal democratization.

Harb says there is a notable image in the center of the scene, namely that of Wael Ghonim, the Internet activist in Egypt’s revolution. He did not threaten to set fire to the country under the slogan “me or nobody”; instead, he cried upon his release from prison, insisting that he was not a hero but one of many who were participating in making the event. This model does not resemble past revolutionary models in their various forms: dictatorship, fascism, etc. It appears to have more in common with Gandhi and Mandela; it is the model of the new actor who participates in

the making of a different world and the opening of a new era that is not made by divine books or material philosophy, but through digital books and peaceful uprisings that register the end of the era of bloody heroisms and cultural bureaucracy.

Harb hopes that the current revolution, and others that may occur, will succeed in the tests of democracy, development, justice, and dignity. This would enable them to make a new future that breaks with the negative stereotypes surrounding Arabs, and endowing them with a new bright image as builders of civilization and makers of knowledge, modernity, and progress, participating with other groups and nations in designing a better future for humanity.