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Commentary

The Unity of Consciousness

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Commentary Series

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The outbreak and spread of unrest and revolutions in a number of countries is not surprising, especially following the successful overthrow of the regimes and heads of state in Tunisia and Egypt, and the start of a process of change affecting the constitutional and legal constellations according to which political life is organized in these two countries. States that have been united in their repression of dissent for so long now witness a new type of union we can call a “union of popular anger,” based on a “union of consciousness”.

The revolution spreads

After spreading throughout North Africa, from the far Maghreb to the Nile Basin, the revolution is now raging in Libya, uprisings and protests are succeeding in forcing Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh out of the country. Simultaneously, popular rage is spreading throughout Syria.

It is obvious that the Syrian regime and their Libyan counterpart are, in fact, in their last phases, for when a political regime runs out of political options, and can only maneuver a popular crisis by means of killing, then that political regime is, essentially, politically dead.

It is also obvious that civil and democratic revolutions are redefining the political map in the Arab World in ways that raise numerous questions of strategic magnitude in Israel and the United States. It is, therefore, inevitable that these revolutions will have a lasting impact on those regimes popular rage has not yet reached – regimes which have, for so long, disregarded popular demands for basic rights, as well as advice from Western allies. This impact will be a positive one if it empowers reformists under autocratic regimes with the prerogatives necessary to embark on reforms that address the social and political dynamics of their populations before it becomes ‘too late’. Inevitably, change has become the inescapable fate of all societies; the earlier political regimes achieve this change, the more likely they are to preserve a degree of credibility and legitimacy – provided they are genuine reforms.

The struggle in the 1970s and 1980s

It is worth noting that the political and economic frameworks and dynamics of the Arab world started to shift significantly in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of a population explosion, the oil boom, and the emergence of a new generation with better chances and more access to opportunities and education unavailable to their predecessors. These changing dynamics produced new demands, problematizing the foundations of established in the immediate post-independence era. In this context, a strong political phenomenon emerged under a variety of names: the Islamist current, the Islamist revival, and Muslim fundamentalism, amongst other titles. Despite these different titles according to various countries, these political currents have shared a very similar core critical of the “imported solutions” – capitalism, communism and socialism – and their failure to address the social ills of Muslim societies. As such, these political entities refuse to leave the delegation of power and authority to ‘experts’, especially those

backed by international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and refuse to acknowledge ruling regimes as legitimate. Instead, “Islam” was presented as the alternative solution.

Consequently, this fundamentalist current attracted a large following from amongst the youth and granted them the capacity to organize, associate, and struggle against autocratic rule. Nevertheless, this political movement soon found itself, much like secular opposition movements, excluded from the political arena in all North African, as well as Middle Eastern, countries. Like its secular counterparts, the Islamist movement suffered repression and oppression at the hands of ruling regimes. Importantly, this current did not trigger, move, or influence popular revolutions in any country, contrary to what many believed. In fact, it only succeeded in ‘tagging onto’ the revolution once the masses were on the streets in Tunisia and Egypt already – much like a number of other forces.

I, therefore, argue that Arab youth only joined the Muslim Brotherhood and the more fundamentalist Islamist currents in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the absence of alternative frameworks capable of containing and channeling political activism and social dynamism towards constructive opposition movements. By that, I do not refer to political parties per se – after all, both Tunisia and Egypt were home to a number of ‘opposition’ political parties acknowledged and authorized by the law long before the two January revolutions. Why, then, did the revolution occur in both countries despite the presence of partisan ‘opposition’?

Reasons behind the revolution

It does not suffice for the state to merely acknowledge opposition political parties, trade unions, and syndicates, in addition to allowing independent newspapers and television channels. Instead, it is necessary that the state gives meaning to this political process through legal and constitutional frameworks that safeguard and enshrine the people’s freedom to choose. In other words: effective measures that allow the people to effectively and genuinely exercise their sovereignty. These measures include, among others, the ability to: choose their representatives in Parliament through elections; be guaranteed freedom and fairness in such elections; implement popular election monitoring; possess unrestricted and indivisible freedom of the press within the ethics of the profession itself; uphold freedom of expression, association and protest; hold the military, as well as the entire executive authority, accountable to the legislative and judicial authorities; and ensure the freedom, independence and integrity of the judicial system.

Civil and democratic revolutions have erupted with the precise aim of achieving these important changes even though they are, supposedly, enshrined in the Constitution. However, because these important processes and rights remain absent in much of the Middle East and North Africa,

and as far away as Afghanistan, a number of other political earthquakes and popular demands for reform can be expected in the region. The reasons for these popular outcries are twofold. On the one hand, the fear barrier has been broken. On the other hand, political regimes and governments still do not realize that if repression is aimed at terrorizing the opponent – in this case, the people – and sending strong messages that the state has the upper hand and is in control of coercive force, repression does have a limit. If regimes cross this limit and commit atrocious massacres unacceptable by the people, its repressive grip and control may in fact be lost, exacerbating popular anger and hastening the downfall of the regime.

Instruments of the new generation

Moreover, the new generation, the vanguard of the revolution today, possesses opportunities of information and communication technologies inaccessible to older generations. The internet, for instance, has united the youth with the older generations throughout the Arab world and beyond in ways that allow people to forward news and share experiences on social and protest movements from one place with another thousands of miles away. It also allows the youth to coordinate, collaborate, organize, discuss, share information and pool in experiences and advice. This is what has taken place and continues to take place with the knowledge of secret police and intelligence services who are incapable of censoring the rapidly increasing and evolving avenues of information and communication technologies. It has become clear that a shutdown of communication media will inevitably harm the state, its institutions, and its interests and transactions more than anything.

Let us not forget that many of the youth today are university graduates with extensive knowledge of and expertise in information and communication technologies, who can, almost always, find ways to bypass censorship. In fact, technologies and software to overcome proxies and other forms of internet censorship are now available to the layman, not only experts and activists. For instance, some international organizations, such as the Global Internet Freedom Consortium, specialize in publishing documents, guidelines, and user manuals on bypassing proxies and overcoming censorship on a regular basis.

It is clear from the above discussion that the globalization of information and communications renders the preservation of rigid political and legal frameworks by a political regime impossible as populations change in size and knowledge. Citizens today are well aware of the fact that many organizations and associations today can exercise authority, play important organizational roles, and mobilize in spite of the powers and authorities of any autocratic regime. In other words, it suffices for protest movements to emerge in one country, and for cells to emerge and mobilize in support and solidarity in the same country and far beyond. Eventually, pressure on repressive

regimes becomes, not only local, but also international. This is not only the result of globalization of information and communication technologies, but also a result of the globalization of political consciousness.

The globalization of consciousness

Who today can deny that the individual human being aspires the same political goals regardless of nationality, race, gender, religion, sect or ethnicity? Among these political aspirations, humans everywhere aspire a state that upholds an unrestrained commitment to personal freedoms and the basic right to life, mobility, thought, and expression within a legal framework set by the people's freely and fairly elected representatives.

Whether you are Arab or Chinese, American or Russian, Muslim or Buddhist, white or black, man or woman, the fact that all share the same consciousness and aspiration does not change. These rights and freedoms with everyone else in every other society have now become an integral part of our expectations for our daily and normal social existence, much as their absence has become utterly inexcusable.

The “unity of popular anger” I mentioned at the start of this essay is, in fact, premised on this common consciousness among individuals and communities from various socioeconomic classes and segments of society; that they have a certain interest in demanding change when they are being deprived of their essential rights and freedoms by autocratic rulers. It is equally impossible for these rulers to perpetuate the same practices and behaviors – namely, ignorance and negligence of the changes that their societies are witnessing as a result of modernity and globalization. Similarly, they can no longer afford to discard their citizens' demands and repress their people when protest movements erupt on the streets through the use of force and mass murder. Even if regimes are capable of limiting change and holding revolutionary times back for now, they will not be able to do so for long. What we have learned in the few days that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt is that history expedites the downfall of authoritarian and repressive regimes regardless of these regimes' ability to resist change and suppress dissent. We all know that the ousted presidents of both Tunisia and Egypt did not spare an instrument of repression unused to support and consolidate their grip on power – both domestically and internationally. The mistake such regimes make is to assume that their ability to repress and terrorize the masses make them immune to popular outcries. Such a mistake could be justified in a time prior to the internet and satellite television, which allow news to travel in synchrony with the event itself, enhancing popular reactions and interactions with events in ways which render police and intelligence agencies incapable of predicting, controlling, or containing dissent.

Security and stability then, become contingent on the state's partnership with the people, society and social actors.

The right to opposition

Opposition is not treason, nor are oppositionists enemies that must be fought. This is, essentially, what authoritarian regimes do not grasp. In fact, the opposition's critique and its alternative proposals and viewpoints are an important and constructive contribution. After all, perfection is an attribute of God alone.

It does not matter whether the regime is monarchical or republican. Great Britain, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and others, for instance, are all monarchical political systems. Even under these monarchies, government may be criticized and even brought down without that bringing the state and its institutions to a complete halt, and without it jeopardizing national interests. In fact, these nations remain advanced and developed, with their monarchies continuing to be supported by the masses as symbols of the sovereignty of the people. On the other hand, France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States are all republican systems where hereditary rule does not take place, a political party cannot monopolize the government for thirty years, and the President, his ministers and his entourage do not enjoy impunity and are not considered above the law. When protests break out in these countries, police forces do not open fire on or arrest demonstrators; freedom of the press is upheld and is not intermittent; governments fall; ministers and heads of state rotate. None of these occurrences paralyzes the state or jeopardizes its interests.

In reality, democracy is only bad for autocrats and their collaborators. For the reasonable, democracy is the guarantee that upholds state sovereignty, which is, in itself, people sovereignty, as well as equality before the law. In other words, it is what guarantees the rights of the governor and the governed alike and enforces their duties and obligations. Once the value of freedom controls peoples' minds, it becomes hard to suppress the popular outcry. Defenders of authoritarianism in Syria, Libya and elsewhere may open fire on demonstrators and kill scores, but they will no longer be able to suppress the desire for freedom.