

People Power Across the Arab World

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The Gladstone Club
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Saudi troops will enter Bahrain and the Libyan domino will not fall in the pattern of Egypt and Tunisia. Veteran Middle East journalist and life-long liberal Jonathan Fryer was brave enough to hazard some predictions but he started by retracing events in Tunisia that launched the Arab Spring on 17th December 2010. A young fruit vendor in a provincial town set himself alight outside the governors office. Within 28 days the regime had fallen and the president fled ending his 23-year rule.

President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali visited Tarek Bouazizi in hospital 2 weeks after the event but too late, as Jonathan put it, for Bouazizi who died on 4th January and too late to stem the tide of opposition to his regime. Refused entry by France and Italy Ben Ali found refuge in Saudi Arabia, sealing that country's status as the destination of choice for exiled despots – joining Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif and Uganda's Idi Amin already living there.

It was being called 'Jasmine Revolution' partly for the national flower of Tunisia and in the tradition of romantic names from Tulip in Kyrgyzstan 2005, Orange in Ukraine 2004 and the original Velvet of Czechoslovakia 1989. But with irony too as the name originally was coined for the coup in which Ben Ali seized power in 1988. Media soon predicted 'jasmine revolutions' across the Middle East and North Africa and even for China invoking memories of how five weeks of pro-democracy protest ended in 1989 with the massacre in Tiananmen Square.

Egypt

Within a month copycat self-immolations followed in Algeria and Egypt and by 25th January 50,000 protesters occupied Cairo's Tahrir square rising to a million and within 18 days Hosni Mubarak resigned ending his 30-year tenure. The role of the army is critical. In Tunisia the army supported the protesters and in Egypt remained neutral but Mubarak handed over to an army Council. The Muslim Brotherhood considered terrorist by many Middle East states and banned in Egypt for 60 yrs could do well in elections.

Concessions elsewhere

Tunisia and Egypt are to dismantle their hated secret police services and hold free elections. Meanwhile Yemen promises electoral reforms, Bahrain is making a £2000 hand-out per family, in Algeria Bouteflika lifted a 19 year 'state of emergency' and subsidised food prices. In Jordan King Abdullah sacked his Prime Minister, announced political reforms and \$225m in food subsidies and Kuwait's Sheik Sabah announced food subsidies.

Libya

Dissidents in Benghazi in the east started a revolt on 15th February that spread to Tripoli by 20th and a National Transitional Council formed, recognized by France on 10th March. Mustafa Abdul Jeleil former justice minister defected and two airforce officers took their Mirage jets to Malta rather than fire on their own people. The regime has responded with tanks and aerial bombardment, 1000s are dead within days and the country looks like it is in civil war. Gaddafi vanished until on 21st February he made his bizarre TV appearance in an old truck with an umbrella outside the Bab al-Azizia palace destroyed by Ronald Reagan in 1986 in retaliation for the Berlin discotheque bombing. He called foreign news media 'dogs', and the demonstrators 'cockroaches and rats' under the influence of variously of the West, Israel, Al Qaeda and even 'hallucination pills'. It has been chilling to hear Saif promising to "fight until the last bullet". This is Gaddafi's favourite son who charmed London society with promises of reform. Now his school the LSE is being criticized for accepting a £1.5m gift. Only £300k was received but it is enough to trigger the resignation of head Howard Davies.

Bahrain

Among the Shia majority only hardliners are calling for the Sunni ruling Khalifa family to go but Jonathan's warning that this would rattle the Saudis more than events elsewhere proved prophetic. On 9th March 1000 Saudi troops were helping suppress protests in the capital, Manama.

Motives and the nature of tyranny

There are contested claims that Bouazizi was slapped across the face by the female official implying motives of humiliated male pride in the highly strung gender politics of the Arab world. Jonathan Fryer reckons that is superfluous. Scratching a livelihood is tough in the context of unemployment at 14% and perhaps as high as 30% in Sidi Bouzid. Confiscation of the fruit seller's stock or equipment was the final straw in a society where business is subject to daily indignities and obstruction from corrupt petty officialdom demanding license fees, bribes or penalties of the 'unlicensed'. To fight the system is to run up against a powerful, pervasive and ruthless secret police with the usual concomitants of beatings, torture and disappearances. The pattern of tyranny is familiar. Press ownership concentrated in the president's family, imprisonment of journalists critical of the regime, restraints on internet use and suppression of political opposition. In Egypt Ayman Nour stood against Mubarak in 2005 earning him 7% of the popular vote and a 5 year jail term.

Economics

Egypt was posting economic growth figures of 5-7% annually from at least 2005 but the majority of the population did not experience the benefit. If anything the opposite as rising fuel and food prices pinched and 20% are below the poverty line. It now transpires that the Mubarak family secreted personal wealth in Swiss banks accounts and UK and US properties valued at \$70bn. In Tunisia Ben Ali's wife allegedly withdrew £37m in gold bars out of the Central Bank a day before they fled.

These are common threads across the Arab Spring states. The other to emerge is demographic. All these countries have in excess of 60% of the population under the age of 30 and high unemployment among the youth. Fertility (children per woman) is at 2.3-3 but this should be a source of wealth not poverty. The western world's 1.7-1.9 is the prime cause of our pensions and debt problems – too few working age people to keep the retired population. If young people in the Middle East are not productive the problem is corruption not population. Many of this generation have been educated abroad. They have seen how liberal societies function and are not so quick to believe their woes are the work of the Great Satan (America) or other external enemies. Neither will they accept enforced idleness and poverty indefinitely.

Syncretism

An uprising of educated young liberals excites European polite society but our enthusiasm will diminish to the extent it joins common cause with conservative religionists seeking an Islamic State. It is never clear which will emerge with the upper hand but history, not least in Iran in 1979, suggests the latter is most likely.

In the end, despite Orwell's pessimism in '1984' tyranny cannot be imposed upon a free people and its dynasties are short-lived measured in decades rather than centuries. But when they fall the question is what will follow? If the people's first response is to loot x-ray machines from hospitals as they did in Baghdad in 2003 then tyranny may be the only form of government adequate to the temper of the people. That may remain so until religious spiritual or cultural forces are able to effect an uplift in the ethical capital of society.