

**The Arab revolutions present disappointments  
Long- term hopes and permanent achievements**

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Eight months after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, disappointment and doubts seem to dominate the scene of the Arab revolutions. One wonders if the Arab spring has not turned into a summer of discontent. One also wonders if the rapid elimination of Ben Ali and Mubarak was not the exception, whether in Tunisia and Egypt themselves discord and distrust have not replaced the early popular unity, and whether the old – military and social – structures are not still in place, as well as the economic crisis, in particular the unemployment, which were the immediate causes of the revolt. Elsewhere, dictators fight back ferociously and even if they are to be finally overthrown, their legacy may well be civil war, or at least civil strife between ethnic, tribal, regional and/or religious factions, with neighbours and outside powers unable or unwilling to affect the situation decisively.

Syria has in the last few months offered the most extreme example of ruthless, obstinate and indiscriminate repression on the part of the rulers. But even more remarkable is the incredible courage and persistence of the people who keep demonstrating while knowing that quite a few of them will be shot. This is the moral and psychological victory of the Arab revolutions, which even if they were all defeated politically and in the short run, is bound to have long-term consequences on the way the Arabs see themselves and are seen by the world.

A European researcher who is not a specialist of the Arab world but a student of revolutions may be forgiven for being struck by analogies and lessons from the European ones. The most striking is the series of revolutions which covered the whole of Europe, before the era of Facebook and Twitter, through a real chain-reaction in 1948. The situation and the priorities among motivations were different from country to country: political and social change in France, national independence in Hungary and in the Balkans, national unity in Germany.

They were all defeated one way or the other, but they planted the seeds of movements and transformations which led to their posthumous victories in the 20th century.

The case of the 1848 revolution in France looks uncannily like a prefiguration of what may happen in Egypt. In February 1848, intellectuals, liberals and socialists, as well as workers, and the emerging middle-class were united against the monarchy. In June, the bourgeoisie and the military turned against the revolutionaries and the workers in a violent repression and shortly thereafter, the republic was replaced by the empire of Napoleon the Third, which finally gave way to the Republic twenty years later.

In its way, the French revolution of 1789, which served as a model both for that of 1848 and for the Russian one of 1917, is interesting. After an apparent victory and a show of unity and reconciliation in 1790, it led to the reign of terror in 1793. According to a famous remark, “the Revolution started devouring its own children” (a phenomenon which, in a non-violent form, is also present for the East European revolutions of 1989: the dissidents who started them have all been marginalized or eliminated from political life.)

It led to many crime, and wars, to monarchic restoration and to the imperial rule of a former general. Yet Hegel saluted it as “a marvellous dawn”, a complete reversal of the order of things, through the idea that political society could be based on the rights of individuals and of citizens and, before him, Kant, who disapproved of many actions of the revolutionaries, to begin with the execution of the French king, saw in the sympathy awoken in foreign public opinions by the sight of a people taking its fate in its own hands, the signs of “a moral disposition of the human species” which justified hope for its future evolution.

Today, the Arab revolutions have to a great extent, achieved the same result. After a period of spectacular spread of democracy, in Southern and Eastern Europe and in Latin America, the trend was one of democratic disillusionment and decay. Authoritarian capitalism in China

and Russia, oligarchic liberal capitalism in the West, particularly in the United States (more and more threatened by a reactionary populism manipulated by Big Money and its support for dictatorships in the rest of the world in spite of its rhetoric and sometimes good intentions seemed to dominate the picture.

In this context, the initiative and the courage of important parts of the Arab peoples has produced, almost worldwide and certainly in Europe, a rebirth of the belief in democratic societies which seemed driven by selfish individualism were rediscovering the example of sacrifice in the pursuit of individual and national freedom and dignity.

From time to time, the faith on this possibility needs to be rejuvenated. It happened in 1980-81 with the Solidarity movement in Poland.

It is particularly important that this time, the example comes from the Arabs. In a way, it represents a revelation or at least a rediscovery both in a sense to themselves, and to the rest of the world. In recent years, the Arab states seemed to be falling behind, both in terms of social development and in terms of international power and influence.

The rising powers were Turkey and Iran. Most Arab states had a leadership ruling for several decades over a population including a majority of young men and women. These leaders often cared above all for the security of their power. They entered arrangements with the United States and Israel which limited their freedom of action and their ability to respond to the aspiration of their peoples, while compensating domestically, by adopting some of the agenda and the language of their more extreme opponents. The opposition to their missions and their hypocrisy had few outlets other than terrorism. Democratic governments will, in a sense, be much more free to have their own foreign policies and much more careful, on the other hand, to be in time with their own public opinion. More freedom means more unpredictability. More unpredictability may mean less security. It may make an Israeli attack or a Chinese confrontation between Sunnite and Shia Muslims more plausible. But at any rate it will make for important geopolitical change which may involve such factors of global importance as oil and nuclear weapons.

Domestically, it would be naïve to believe that the revolution will necessarily bring a peaceful harmonious representative democracy, a social system from which inequality and corruption would be eliminated and an economy from which the curse of underpayment would be eliminated.

As I noted at the beginning, Arab states have entered a time of division and distrust. It has never been true that the Tahrir was representative of the whole of Egyptian society, or Benghazi of the whole Libyan one. Bashar-al-Assad and Khadafi were ruling above all by inspiring fear, but also by the loyalty of tribal affiliates and the interests of favoured social groups. Revenge and civil strife will certainly occupy the scene in several countries, with the accompanying dangers of exploitation by terrorists and/or of foreign intervention. The passions I described in an earlier paper, the religious and the economic one, may turn nastier and inspire an increase in fanaticism and corruption.

However, this other passion which has surged during the revolution – for dignity and freedom – has been accompanied not only by so much courage but also by so much self-control that it is not naïve to hope that it may inspire a culture of mutual respect, toleration and responsibility, in increasing areas of society, if youthful idealists keep their passion but also learn the art of compromise which is part of politics in a democracy or in a constitutional monarchy.

Perhaps the most difficult and ominous factor is the economic one. In a world of general

crisis, with the decrease in tourism, in investments and in the already limited solidarity of the developed world, the economic causes of the revolution may persist and be increasingly attributed by parts of the population and of the outside world to the revolution itself. This may well lead to political instability or restoration.

It is worth pointing out, however, that one of the main lessons of the Arab revolutions is that they exploded the myth (cultivated by many Western governments and private investors) of the superior stability of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. They may last longer and avoid day-to-day variations but one day they collapse and leave behind them a chaos infinitely less manageable than that of constitutional regimes. The spectacular worry with which Russia and China met the revolutions in distant and much less powerful countries (to the point that China banished the word “jasmine” from its internet) testifies to this fragility.

Finally, there is another mistaken idea which has been punctured by the Arab revolutions but is relevant to the whole of the international order and of history: that of the clash of civilizations. The formulation belongs to the American scholar Samuel Huntington, but the notion is shared by Al Qaida as well as by American Christian fundamentalists or by white supremacists or Scandinavian anti-multiculturalists. It implies that the world is divided in several (or sometimes two) civilizations, usually defined by religion or by race, which constitute close, coherent and permanent entities fated to fight each other for supremacy or at least to keep their respective identities from contamination by each other.

There are at least three great errors in that conception. First, it negates the universality of certain grievances, aspirations and values, be they economic, political or moral. Second, it negates the internal conflicts within each civilization between various tribes and nations, various economic and political interests, various attitudes towards life, between various versions of the interpretation and practice of religion. Third, it negates mutual influences and dialogue across civilizations and alliances, between individuals or groups, belonging to different traditions, but having some elements in common, such as age, economic situation or cultural references and instruments of communication.

Of course, globalization by itself represents a permanent refutation of these negations, as well as of the opposite belief in harmonious uniformization or convergence of interests, beliefs and ideas. It produces new inequalities, resentments, rejections. But it also produces common practices (going from self-immolation by Buddhist monks during the Vietnam war, by the Czech student Jan Palach during Soviet occupation and by Mohammad Bouazizi, to the use of the new social media or to the movements more or less inspired by the Arab ones in

Europe, like that of the ‘Indignados’ in Spain). Above all, it makes us aware of parallel aspirations like the search for dignity and recognition and of exceptional but recurrent gestures and movements on their behalf.

Nothing shows this and other truths better than revolutions. For this the Arab spring, whatever its fate and its consequences, deserves universal recognition, gratitude and solidarity.