

'Pro-Democracy Movements' in North Africa and the Middle East: The Arabs' Dreams, the West's Woes

by Tesfaye Habisso, March 2011

Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic worldwide expansion in the number of democracies, transforming political systems in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, as well as parts of Africa. Quite recently the masses of North African and Middle Eastern states seem to have set off in quest for democracy and to assertively demand their long denied socio-economic and political justice by the autocratic rulers of the region. After several decades of absolutist, monarchical rule (Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman) and military tyranny (Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen), the long oppressed and brutalized Arab masses of North Africa and the Middle East have experienced a sort of rude awakening to rise up against their dictators demanding their human rights, basic political and civil liberties, and fundamental freedoms. Through these popular uprisings, so far, the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak respectively, are tossed out of power and the fate of the rest is hanging in the balance, as they are, out of desperation, promising some reforms, job opportunities and financial handouts to the disgruntled sections of the populations (except, of course, the adamant Muhammad Gaddafi of Libya) and at the same time utilizing their military power to resist these unpredicted and sudden regime changes, with the aim of perpetuating their rule at the cost of a few modest reforms. On the contrary, the 'pro-democracy movements or fighters' are vehemently opposed to accepting any offers short of revolutionary changes to the status quo, and instead fighting to the death to establish political systems, institutions and governments based on the will of their respective nations. For the first time in their long history they seek to determine their affairs by themselves, to formulate their socio-economic, political and foreign policies, as well as to shape their future or destiny on their own, without the interference of alien powers. So far, thousands have been brutally murdered, wounded and seriously injured as well as imprisoned by the security forces of the aforementioned countries. But the bitter struggles for a just and democratic order is continuing without pause or hesitation. These forces, old and young, men and women, should be assisted and hailed by all peace and freedom loving peoples of the world. The heroes and heroines, and the martyrs of these struggles should always be remembered by the peoples of the world.

Yet the growth of democracy is by no means a stable phenomenon, let alone a universal trend. Some new democracies progress towards consolidation, while others stall or revert to authoritarianism. Emerging democracies often experience persistent problems of regime legitimacy, political participation, and stable competition, compounded by economic difficulties, corruption, ethnic and religious conflicts, producing an uncertain future. Under these circumstances, it cannot be denied that the ongoing bitter struggles and efforts of establishing viable democracies among the Islamic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East today pose particular difficulties. Whether these states will successfully transition to true democracies or revert to theocracy and authoritarianism or other shades of political Islam, at best, or slide to chaos, civil war and failed state, at the worst, only time will tell. It is indeed sad that the peaceful pro-democracy movements that ended in peace in Tunisia and Egypt have turned sour and opened a reign of terror in Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, snuffing

out the lives of many hundreds of innocent and unarmed civilians fearlessly and passionately struggling for their long-denied basic rights and freedoms.

Some Western commentators are upbeat about the pro-democracy movements and the soon-to-happen changes in the whole region, from North Africa to the Middle East and beyond. Writing in *The Washington Post*, former Bush administration official Elliot Abrams argues: "The massive and violent demonstrations underway in Egypt, the smaller ones in Jordan and Yemen, and the recent revolt in Tunisia that inspired those events" suggest that "Arab nations, too, yearn to throw off the secret police, to read a newspaper that the Ministry of Information has not censored and to vote in free elections." Bush's "freedom agenda," he argues, has been vindicated.

But others are understandably quite cautious; for them, these are early days and there is still treacherous ground to cover. There are serious reasons to be tentative in one's judgment of the changes taking place not only in North Africa but in the broader Middle East today. There are deep concerns by the Western world similar to those voiced by American diplomat Richard Holbrooke on the eve of the 1996 elections in Bosnia: "Suppose the election was declared free and fair and those elected are racists, fascists, separatists, who are publicly opposed to peace and re-integration. That is the dilemma." [*Newsweek*, 1997].

Yes, despite the rhetoric being disseminated by the pro-democracy fighters from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya, from Yemen to Bahrain to Oman, many pundits and seasoned hands predict a very different scenario: that if democratic elections were held, they would more than likely represent a landslide for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Al-Qaeda in Yemen and similar other terrorist groups or clerics in Libya, Bahrain and the rest. In other words, far from ushering in a new era of democratic prosperity and a stable peace, the ongoing revolutions could lead to a period of virulent anti-Americanism and Islamic extremism. Why? Because, it is just that elections are no panacea in nations or region with little liberal democratic traditions. The values of democracy and human rights, for example, are not easily transferable or replicable assets in nations that have never embraced and internalized them in their political and cultural history.

As the Iraq experience has unambiguously shown over the past eight or so years, removing a dictator is the easy bit; insuring people power leads to peace, democracy and freedom is far more complicated and fraught with dangers. Clearly, it is a fallacy to assume that a democratic society can be established with guns and canons. Democratisation of undemocratic societies is a highly complex social, political and cultural process. For democracy to blossom, certain elements are indispensable. Among these are pluralism, economic development, the evolution of an educated and robust middle class, a loyal opposition, civil society and a democratic political culture, a well-informed citizenry, the emancipation of women, the independence of the judiciary and the presence of an independent and responsible media. In short, the modernization of society is a prerequisite for democratisation.

Look at Egypt, for instance, and it appears that none of these conditions can easily be met anytime soon. The protesters might be young, but they are not wholly secular and many are unemployed. Further, the movements still lack clear ideologies as well as credible and capable alternative leaders to steer the supposed democratic transitions, if they ever occur in the first place. Under the prevailing circumstances, the Muslim Brotherhood is the only organized and cohesive political group, but it has always been

an extremist outfit that supports Hamas and Tehran, opposes Israel, the US and the 1979 Camp David peace accords, and threatens regional and global counter-terrorism efforts and wars.

In these circumstances, it is surely simplistic to romanticize about democratic transitions in the said nations and the whole region. What if elections brought to power jihadists and terrorist supporters such as the Muslim Brotherhood? What if voters in Saudi Arabia prefer an Islamist zealot in the mould of Osama bin-Laden to a moderate reformer, so to label comparatively, such as Crown Prince Abdullah? What if electors in Yemen replaced Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for nearly 32 years, with Islamist hardliners and Al-Qaeda supporters (the country is already well-known as a suitable haven for the latter for some time now)?

In his book *THE ARABS: A HISTORY*, Eugene Rogan says that in "any free and fair elections in the Arab world today, I believe, the Islamists would win hands down." He goes on to say that "the inconvenient truth about the Arab world today is that, in any free election, those parties most hostile to the United States [and the Western world in general] are likely to win."

As it happens, Islamists have a lot of things in their favour to exploit any political chaos: the talent to develop a compelling ideology, the enthusiasm to create parties and appeal to supporters, the money to spend on election campaigns and the will to intimidate rivals. History, moreover, shows how the most unsavoury groups can use elections to win power. Remember a democratic process produced Adolf Hitler in Germany, in 1933. In 1991, Muslim fundamentalists had more or less won free and fair elections in Algeria before the French convinced the government to stop the democratic process. So also, Hamas in the recent past; it was forced to vacate state power to the vanquished Fatah Movement because of Western pressure and force, as the former posed an imminent danger to the very existence of the state of Israel.

All in all, the US administration in particular and Western powers in general will only allow the peoples of North Africa and the broader Middle East to have peaceful transitions of power and choose the governments they want...provided that those governments are the ones THEY want. Notwithstanding the sweet rhetoric of the US administration and the EU member states to allow the peoples of this region to independently decide and shape their political and economic future, they cannot, however, afford to relinquish their traditional steering role to people- power changes that may be detrimental to their short-run and long-run OIL interests that are crucial to their ever-growing energy needs. Full stop! And the nature and type of government that will thus be allowed by the West to evolve in any country of the region, including Libya, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen, I am afraid, will not be determined by the leaders of the pro-democracy fighters at all but depend on the outcome of the regime-minting process being closely guided, supervised and controlled by the US administration officials in close collaboration with the Mubarak-era corrupt military generals behind closed doors and without the full and transparent participation of the leaders of the pro-democracy movements of Egypt that have paid so much sacrifice in their quest for independent, prosperous and democratic Egypt. Yes, what happens in Egypt is surely to become the blueprint for the rest of the countries and thus the linchpin for the whole region. The desire of the pro-democracy movements to exercise their inalienable rights of self-determination will remain an illusion for a long time to

come, I am afraid. Whatever the case, the peoples of the region have scored great achievements in shaking the foundations of oppression and dehumanization that they have endured for generations in the past under successive brutal regimes, and whatever governments will evolve in the near future cannot possibly continue to pursue the defunct policies of the ancien regimes. Thanks to the bitter and bloody struggles as well as the immense sacrifices made by the pro-democracy fighters, the politics of North Africa and the broader Middle East is changed once and for all. The brutal past will never resuscitate in the region. Never again!