

# Beware the anger of a patient people

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I've been in Beirut for the past two months, surrounded by news of the incredible uprisings against dictators and kings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Morocco, Algeria and elsewhere in the region. It is a commonplace to say that the circumstances in each country and revolution are different, but there are far more similarities.

For four to five decades people have suffered almost silently from corrupt governments. The rich grow ostentatiously richer while the poor can scarcely feed their families; almost every encounter with officialdom requires a bribe; there is hardly a free press; police routinely beat and harass citizens they are meant to protect, the secret police arbitrarily arrest and torture anyone even remotely suspected of opposition. Elections, even when held, are rigged to eliminate any other candidates. In such countries unemployment is high, education substandard, and hope for one's children a useless dream. Daily humiliations accumulated over the years until one day, some spark sets things off — in Tunisia and Egypt, the beating deaths of two simple vendors trying to make a living.

**Yes, an opposition** had been building up over several years, led by a group of educated young persons, rehearsing, communicating via Facebook. But in the main it was the mass of ordinary people finally fed up that sustained the uprisings, even when the regimes tried to suppress them with tear gas, bullets, hired thugs and militias. In the end, the armies of Tunisia and Egypt refused to shoot any longer, and this helped bring down the dictators. We saw on television how joyous the people were when they realized they were no longer afraid, that they could overcome the cruel oppression by peaceful, non-violent means, even when threatened (and several hundreds did die).

As quoted in the New York Times, a 40-year-old electrician in Egypt summed it up for all: "I learned to say no, I am not a coward anymore. All I cared about before was making a living, but now people have started to care about each other. I feel like I have been born again. I am Egyptian again, not marginalized, not without value or dignity," he said. "I feel like I have planted a tree. Now I need to look after it."

There has been concern that some Islamic movement is behind the uprisings; or at least, that as in Iran, militant Islamists will take over in the midst of the chaos. Every analysis I've seen indicates that the revolution was not about ideology or religion but about the desperate and ordinary quest for dignity. The Muslim parties in Tunisia and Egypt have long given up violence, and must be allowed to take part in the democratic political process.

Turkey serves as a good example of a nation moving to full democracy led by a government with roots in Islam. If anything, the success of non-violent revolution is the best response to the violent terrorism of Al-Qaeda. For once, Osama Bin Laden had nothing to say. But will armies become the new dictators? In Turkey, South Korea, Philippines and Indonesia, they did not, so we must have hope, or the people will come out again.

**Yet, not every revolution** ends so well. In some countries - China, Burma, Iran under both the Shah and then the clerics - the despots are willing to kill as many civilians as it takes to stay in power. In some countries extremists have hijacked a successful revolution: France in 1789, Russia in 1917, Iran in 1979. No one can predict what comes of any one uprising, in the near or long term. When Henry Kissinger asked Premier Zhou Enlai of China, in 1972, what he thought of the French Revolution, Zhou replied, "Too soon to tell."

But it's not too soon for hope that people of the Arab world (and wherever under oppressive rule) will be able to assemble freely and peacefully; that a civil society will form so that many different voices will be heard; that the government will truly be of, for and by the people.