

ARAB SPRING - 1989? NOT REALLY. 1848? PERHAPS*

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Revolutions are by their very nature unpredictable. Hence it is tempting to compare ongoing revolutionary upheavals to preceding ones so as to get some indication or roadmap of where they may be leading. For years, both supporters and opponents of the Soviet revolution tried to look for parallels to its various stages in post-1789 French developments: were Lenin's communists analogous to the Jacobins; was Stalin a reincarnation of the anti-radical Thermidor? The most famous attempt at developing such an overarching theory of revolution was made by the Harvard scholar Crane Brinton in his 1938 *The Anatomy of Revolution*.

While obviously enticing, such attempts may also be misleading, as became clearly evident when President Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski tried to use Brinton's theory when the US became suddenly confronted by Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. The consequences of trying to find such parallels without a closer study of local conditions were, to say the least, less than helpful.

Yet the recent series of demonstrations and revolutions in the Arab world, some successful, some less so, does call for an attempt to look for possible parallels. If applied carefully and with due acknowledgments of historical social and cultural differences, this can be helpful.

The obvious parallel – because recent and still on people's minds – is the dramatic series of 1989-90 upheavals which spelt the end of communism in Eastern Europe. There, just as in the Arab world, a sudden and unpredictable wave of dissent, public demonstrations and popular anger brought down, one after the other, a series of dictatorial regimes which until then looked not only formidable but also unassailable. Almost overnight, strutting tyrants, bolstered by a seemingly powerful ideology, proved to be paper tigers.

The parallels are appealing. Yet there are at least two aspects which suggest that the analogy may be misleading.

The first is the outcome. In Eastern Europe, within a few months all communist regimes – from Moscow to Tirana, from East Berlin to Belgrade – came crushing down: leaders were deposed, ruling communist parties were dethroned if not banned, the dissenters and revolutionaries headed new provisional governments which led their countries within a few months to democratic, multi-party elections. First steps were made to dismantle the communist command economy. Not in all countries the outcome was a successful transition to a consolidated democracy – Russia is a prime example

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of such a failure. But in all cases, the old system was dismantled, and in no case did the *ancient regime* fight back successfully or maintain its hold on power.

At least until now, this is not the picture in the Arab world. Only in Tunisia and in Egypt have the dictatorial leaders been deposed. In Syria, Assad's regime holds on and continues in its violent oppression of its own people; in Libya, the outcome is still unclear, despite NATO's intervention, and even if Qaddafi is finally routed, the chances for an orderly democratic transition are problematic; in Bahrain, the Sunni dynasty managed to stay in power, thanks at least in part to Saudi support; and in Yemen, the confused outcome may herald a long period of chaos, rather than democratic transformation. And the strongest, richest and most influential Arab oppressive regime – Saudi Arabia – appears almost tally immune to change and transformation.

The picture is even unclear in the two countries where dictators were ousted. In Egypt, effectively ruled by a military junta, the difficulties in crafting the mechanisms of a transition to an elected form of government suggest that the jury is still out: will the country end with a combination of military-cum-Islamicist rule, or will a truly democratic outcome prevail. A similar conundrum is facing Tunisia.

The second difference has to do with the fact that in Eastern Europe, the revolutions succeeded because they were led by well-organized groups of dissenters (Solidarity in Poland, Carta-77 in Czechoslovakia) with a clear ideological message (away from communism and the Soviet system and towards Western-style market economy). This made it possible for them to take over successfully the machinery of government; these movements were also blessed with charismatic leaders (Walesa, Havel) or internal reformers (Gorbachev). All this – both movements and leaders – is sorely lacking in the Middle East, not only in Syria but also in Tahrir Square. This is evidently not 1989.

Yet there may be another, but more nuanced parallel: the European 1848 "Spring of Nations". Here too a host of oppressive regimes was toppled almost overnight through popular demonstrations and uprisings – from Paris to Vienna, from Berlin to Napoli. Great hopes were in the air – for national self-determination, for representative government, even for socialist revolution. Yet within a few months the powers-that-be (emperors, kings, princes, the Pope) were able to regain control, mainly due to the lack of articulation and organization of the democratic forces. It turned out that bringing down tyrants is relatively easy and can sometimes be achieved in a couple of days, but developing, maintaining and sustaining a democratic transformation is a long-term effort anchored in a well articulated civil society: and this Europe in 1848 was still lacking.

Yet – and this is the silver lining – despite the success of the European reactionary rulers to regain power, the re-established conservative regimes were never the same: to pre-empt a repeat of revolutionary attempts, they

had to make concessions by introducing elections, even if on a limited scale, social legislation, accountability; new social classes inched their way to power. The almost total disregard for *vox populi* by the pre-1848 regimes could not be regained: old-type absolutism was dead. Thus, despite the immediate failure of 1848, Europe did eventually change: slowly, gradually, but definitely.

The lesson for the Arab world is obvious: even if the current balance is problematical, the region will not be the same again. As Heraclitus has said more than two and a half millennia ago, you can never step twice into the same river.