

ARE BETTER DAYS AHEAD?

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In multiple places around the world the established order is threatened. Sometimes it survives, sometimes it peacefully concedes, sometimes wrenching, horrific bloodshed occurs. Change and its possibility appear to be the order of the day.

In some ways, this is not new. A view backwards informs that those seemingly immutable national boundaries and fixed forms of government that we've known are, in fact, historically transient. Just as the continents are mobile but far, far, far more rapidly, nations and their fixed borders and institutions are also impermanent.

From this perspective, it is change which endures. Cyprus itself is an example. Over the centuries, how many rulers has it known, how many empires claimed it permanently, how many supposedly fixed institutions were obliterated?

As can be seen today, sometimes change occurs peacefully, as may soon happen in Scotland and Catalonia and did happen in Czechoslovakia, where national institutions recognize their possible impermanence.

Regrettably, these are exceptions. More common are the bloody scenarios played out in the former Yugoslavia and in Sudan, for example. Unfortunately common too are the repression (and the violent reaction to repression) that occur when minorities seek their own authority. The Kurds in Turkey and the Uighers in China know this response all too well and know how long it sometimes endures.

Given the multitudes of minorities, those societies that welcome and capitalize on diversity may be better able to avoid divisiveness. But the ability of groups to focus on differences rather than similarities is painfully legendary. Recall the history of Christianity during its 2000 years or the Sunni-Shia divide and the further contemporary divide among the Sunni if you seek evidence of differences turned into bloodbaths.

The tendency to differentiate from others is capitalized on for good and ill – but mostly for ill. This is the opportunity for the demagogic criminal. Antipathy toward others and protection of differences are typical arguments that are created and emphasized on both sides of the divide. Ancient and recent abuses, historical power relationships, real or imagined promises and conspiracies become the raw material to further raw feelings and acts. The less powerful are victimized by those with more – whether the more powerful are nations or ethnic groups or religions – and no matter how trivial the differences are to an outsider.

As this is written, variations on this theme are being played out notably in Africa, in the Middle East, in the Ukraine. The conjunction of these most distressing events, and in particular the rapid achievements of the Islamic State and its violence and rhetoric, lead to the uneasy query about whether we have entered a new era of upheaval.

Viewing the present state of turmoil, commentators have placed emphasis on the seeming rapidity with which dissenters can be mobilized. A prime example is the outpouring of people during the Arab Spring. The common explanation is the availability of the internet and of social media. Credence to this view has been given by authoritarians of every stripe and variety, whose attempts to control use and content are evidence of the potency they ascribe to them. This may well be a correct view though prior to the internet there have been massive demonstrations, such as those surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

However, there is a prior issue. Why are people so ready to be mobilized? What leads them to answer the call, sometimes individually (as in the case of Islamic State) or in the tens or hundreds of thousands (as in Pakistan)? Perhaps part of the answer can be found in the exposure through modern communication to the better life being lived by others. Frustration can turn to rage when that comparison is compounded by governmental repression instead of fulfilled promises and further inflamed by those who seek to capitalize upon it.

Accepting this, the economist asks the question: Is it feasible under any social arrangement to provide a comparable scale of living for all to that attained by the average person in the more prosperous societies? Given our present technologies, human and non-human resources, state of the environment and the rate of population growth, the regrettable answer is NO.

The world of the foreseeable future, therefore, may be one of enlarging populations with enlarging frustrations, providing opportunities for those who thrive on divisiveness and for whom rapid, widespread communication is a boon.