



UNDERSTANDING THE MIDEAST REVOLUTIONS: HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY; PLAN FOR SOMETHING WORSE

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So which is it to be: the end of communism or the rise of the Ayatollahs? As we consider the extraordinary wave of revolutions sweeping the Middle East there is a certain inevitability about the struggle for an appropriate frame of historical reference against which to judge what is happening. This, after all, makes sense. Those of us who do not have the habit of consulting fortune tellers to make our political predictions are always on the lookout for familiar structures, recognizable patterns matching events from the past or, if it really comes down to it, something to at least pin our hopes (or fears) on.

Vaclav Havel, one time dissident and former Czech president, is convinced that it's 1989 all over again: "The authoritarian Arab regimes are the product of the same decades that produced the Iron Curtain," he said. "It turns out that there are core moral and political standards common to all cultures."

The Times of London also had its analytical sights set on Havel's part of the world, but from a different era yielding a very different outcome. Drawing on the ill-fated Prague Spring of 1968 which ended with the fall of the reformist Slovak leader of communist Czechoslovakia Alexander Dubcek and the Soviet invasion, it splashed across a front page the headline: "Rebellion spreads as 'Arab Spring' takes hold."

For Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, the great worry was a re-run of Iran in 1979. Referring to Egypt and the prospects of the Muslim Brotherhood in that country, he said: "If extremist forces are allowed to exploit democratic processes to come to power to advance anti-democratic goals -- as has happened in Iran and elsewhere -- the outcome will be bad for peace and bad for democracy."

Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen preferred to look at continental Europe after

World War I where, he reminded readers, Germany "reeled from Weimar Republic to Nazi dictatorship in virtually no time at all".

Taken together, the choices on offer run the full gamut from magnificent success to total disaster. And it is not unreasonable to point out that three of those four possible frames of reference predict outcomes that are unedifying, to say the least.

So, how should we understand what is currently going on in the Middle East? Ultimately, it is probably best to discard all such frames of reference and substitute a political cliché: Hope for the best; plan for the worst. Here's why.

First, the mainly Sunni, Arab speaking Middle East is not Europe or, for that matter, Farsi speaking, Shia Iran. Divorcing political analysis from the prevailing political-cultural context is a recipe for analytical failure. What happens now in countries such as Egypt will depend to a great extent on what feels right to decision makers who are unlikely to be searching through the history books for blueprints. In addition to calculations of personal risk and reward, as well as of economic advantage and diplomatic congeniality, they will make their decisions on the basis of what resonates with the people who have given them power.

Second, the Arab Middle East has no tradition of liberal-democracy or law based, constitutional government. Nor is there a tradition of developmental liberalism with universal suffrage as a long term outcome. From the signing of Magna Carta – the first legal document limiting the power of the English king – to universal suffrage in 1928, 713 years had passed. In that time, battles had been fought, won, lost, and won again, embedding liberal practices in culture and law. It may not be necessary to wait three quarters of a millennium but it takes time to establish the customs associated with liberal democracy.



Third, those people who remain obsessed by comparisons with the collapse of the Soviet bloc should take note that, in alphabetical order, the following post-communist countries are still ranked "Not Free" by Freedom House more than two decades after the fall of communism: Azerbaijan; Belarus; Kazakhstan; Russia; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan. Several others are ranked as only "Partly Free". The majority of people born in the Soviet bloc do not live in countries designated as "Free" by Freedom House.

Fourth, brute anti-Semitism is rife in the Arab world. No country in history has ever produced enlightened political outcomes when anti-Semitism (and anti-Americanism) has dominated the political discourse. According to a major survey conducted by Pew in 2006, 97 percent of Egyptians admitted to holding "somewhat unfavourable" or "very unfavourable" opinions about Jews while none (zero percent) said they had favourable opinions. In Jordan 98 percent said they had unfavourable opinions of Jews with one percent holding favourable opinions. Do with those figures as you please. But history will laugh at you if you ignore them.

Fifth, the best organized political forces in many Arab countries are Islamist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt being the most widely talked about example. Islamism is best understood as a form of fascism, an ideology incompatible with liberal-democratic values and practices.

\This is indeed a bleak and austere summary. But it is better to be aware of the problems the region is going to face in building free societies than to censor them out of our consciousness. We will know soon enough which way things are going to go. The first clues will come with the conversation the emerging leaders start having with their peoples. If you start hearing too many references to Jews, Islam and the perfidy of the West don't expect things to turn out well. I say again, hope for the best; plan for the worst.

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