

THE NORTH AFRICAN REVOLUTIONS: THE GENIE IS OUT OF THE BOTTLE

LEO NNOLI, Ph.D.

Department of History and International Studies,
NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka.
nnoliuk@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Arabs of North Africa and the Middle East crave for liberal/democratic values like the other peoples of the world, but this craving had remained bottled up by religious orthodoxies, cultural inertia and the “Genie” of fear. This Genie of fear kept agitation in check, though simmering in the so called bottle. The events of the “Jasmine Revolution” of Tunisia sparked off by the spontaneous act of self-conflagration of a 26 year old unemployed high school graduate, Bouazizi Mohamed in Dec, 2010 shattered this bottle of fear and liberated the spirit to fight for liberal values in the minds of the ordinary citizens and with this cataclysmic development the story, status quo ante, has changed in the region. Using qualitative analysis of data gathered, including consultation of primary, secondary and internet sources, this paper therefore seeks to investigate the moving force namely, the genie behind the December 2010 Arab Spring otherwise known as Jasmine Revolution. The intention also is to examine the impacts the revolution had on the long tradition of monarchies and religious orthodoxies following the enthronement of democracies in the North African states.

Key words: Genie, Revolution, democracy, governance, reforms, liberal, values.

Background

As the body craves for food, so does the soul of man crave for liberty. This realism led Robert Green Lingersoll to say “what light is to the eyes, what air is to the lungs, what love is to the heart, liberty is to the soul of man”. However, owing to a long tradition of monarchy, cultural inertia and religious orthodoxies, this craving remained bottled up in the Arab world until a few years ago when the steam of liberal consciousness began to heat this repressive bottle.

In December 2005, an Egyptian appeals -court judge Hishan Bastawisi rocked the boat by criticizing Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian regime alleging ballot rigging in the country’s parliamentary elections. For crying foul and defaming some of his fellow jurists for complicity in the flawed election saga, he and his colleague

Judge Maahmoud Mekki were hauled before a disciplinary panel that could strip them of their robes, but the two judges would not budge. According to Judge Hisham Bastawisi “the people have begun to desire reform and are ready to sacrifice for it. The number of these people is increasing.”¹ Thus, this jurist was one of the first to fire the shots of change in Egypt and by so doing enkindled the fire of reform activism in the minds of the Egyptian people. In a separate incident an Egyptian feminist and leader of Arab Women Association, Nawal El Saadawi claims that Egyptian people have been fighting for years against authoritarian rule. She refused to give the United States of America credit for the wind of reform blowing across Egypt and by extension North Africa and Arab world. Despite her years in prison Saadawi ran against Hosni Mubarak in September 2005 presidential elections. She dismissed as a “ridiculous joke” President George Bush’s claim that “By our efforts we have lit a fire in the minds of men. It warns those who feel its power it burns those who fight its progress”². Saadawi instead salutes the courage of the ordinary Egyptians who risked life and limb to challenge the authoritarian regime in her country which typified the leadership scenario across the region. Egypt became a republic in 1953 and ever since had had three leaders- Col Gamel Abdel Nasser who became head of state after deposing Farouk I in July 1952, and hung unto power till he was felled by a stroke in September 1970.³ He was succeeded by Anwar Sadat who ruled Egypt until he was assassinated by his fundamentalist bodyguards in 1981. Following which his vice, Hosni Mubarak an Air force commander stepped into his shoes and held sway for thirty years before the Tahrir Square demonstrators said enough was enough in February 2011.

In Egypt and elsewhere in North Africa the authoritarian leaders had mouthed off all sorts of polemics to justify their hold on power. The Moroccan sociologist Professor Abdessamad Dialmy echoed the sentiments of North African leaders thus “In North Africa there are no citizens, only subjects. There is no rule of law, only use of force”. He went further to say “when the police or army are absent, there is disorder, then the leaders would say ‘see, they cannot choose for themselves, there is chaos’”.⁴ With this kind of logic the Arab leaders perpetuate their “benevolent” dictatorship that promises everything but democracy.

In terms of liberal and democratic values, the North African states and the Arab world are lagging behind the sub-saharan African states but the protagonists of Oligarchies and “benevolent” non- democracies argue that “there is nothing wrong if a wise leader or group of “oulema” (educated leaders) rule by edict

provided they consult and are fair and just. This thinking is presumably based on a conservative interpretation of the Qur'an. Such protagonists are quick to add that North African states are streets ahead of sub-saharan Africa in terms of culture and mentality, maintaining that they have more political stability and higher economic and development indicators. The events of the recent past in the region have proved how perverse this posture had been.

Before the so called Arab Spring Revolution that swept across North Africa and Arab world, the most potent opposition came from the Islamist groups, thank to the relative safety of the mosques within which they could rally and organize support. However, the governments and the ordinary people were dubious of them. The fear was that if Islamist parties win power they would replace autocracies with theocracies which was hardly the goal of democracy activists. In 1992 in Algeria this fear or phobia scenario was played out when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) seemed poised for victory in the country's first multi-party elections. The Algerian government moved quickly to cancel the elections, a move which generated a lot of heat/ upheaval. Within the country and incurred the criticisms of the West. The furor that followed the government's annulment resulted in the death of about 100,000 Algerians and the imposition of a state of emergency that lasted all of 19 years and was only lifted in February this year.

The Islamic parties on their own part maintain they are not averse to liberal values. Mohammed Sayyed Hameed, the deputy leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood said "we believe in democracy and political pluralism. What we want is civilian rule within an Islamic framework. There should be no contradiction between democracy and Sharia (Islamic law). But Joost Hiltermann, head of the Middle East programme at the International Crisis Group in Amman, questions their democratic credentials. Hiltermann went further to say:

Opposition parties in the Middle East, as in other parts of the world, always call for democratic reforms. It is their way of coming to power. There is great hunger for democracy (among the people), but very little experience with democracy and so the likelihood of a truly democratic group coming to power in any of these countries is remote.⁵

Closing the Democratic Experience Gap

It is important to point out the underlying mistrust of the Islamic parties' commitment to true democratic values by the ordinary people, the government and other secular groups in the region. This phobia or mistrust had helped keep the "genie" of change/ reform in the bottle. Equally pertinent to keep in mind is Hiltermann's submission that "there is great hunger for democracy (among the people), even though they have very little experience with democracy.

Talking about this democratic experience lacuna, Hala Mustafa, editor of the Cairo based journal, *al Dimuqratiya*, says " without instilling liberal values, votes will not alone bring about positive change".⁶ yet this positive change Mustafa talked about was slowly but progressively creeping into the consciousness of the Arab world in a series of events before the " Spring Revolution", notable amongst which was the creation in 1996 of the Al- jazeera independent television channel by the Emir of Qatar, the first independent television channel by the Arab history. Al- jazeera broke the monopoly of authoritarian regimes that used Arabic broadcasting to peddle propaganda. It also inspired the birth of rivals like Al- Arabiya headquartered in Dubai. On the political front, hereditary rulers in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates appointed women to cabinet posts for the first time, which amounted to a significant step aimed at changing attitudes towards women in the patriarchal Gulf States. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI broke ground by pushing a major women's rights law, establishing an Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC) to address rights violations committed during his late father's reign.

In Bahrain the Shi'ite Muslims who make up the majority are using political associations to press the Sunni monarchy for sweeping political changes. A group named Women Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) led a campaign for women voting rights in Kuwait, resulting in the passage of a law in May 2005 by the country's parliament establishing women's suffrage. In ultra conservative Saudi Arabia where the ruling al Saud family and Wahhabi religious establishment, have tightly controlled affairs for a more than 75 years, groups of petitioners and individual writers were making a case for the liberal opening up of society. King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud responded to pressure for change by sponsoring national dialogues which included women and other religious minorities, and put the issue of women's driving rights on the table for discussion.

Young Lebanese formed groups to demand an end to the sectarian system that divvy up power amongst feudal bosses. The most significant initiative was the Martyrs' Square Independence Revolution rally of March 2005 in which one million Lebanese took part protesting the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. This protest brought down the Syrian government backed administration in Beirut and forced Syrian military forces to end nearly 30 years of control over Lebanon and inspired hope that the country's system of feudal power sharing would give way to full democracy. Even though sectarian politicians who supported the revolution later sabotaged the cause and shared parliamentary seats amongst themselves.

Undoubtedly, from Morocco to Bahrain, activists like Judges: Hisham Bastawisi and Mahmoud Mekki of Egypt opened up democratic space in North Africa and the Arab world to an extent that was only dreamed of before 2005. Arab democrats are demanding everything that democracy has to offer, from proper elections, a free press and human right monitoring, to gender equality.⁷

Thus, the so called political stability of the region which the protagonists of non-democratic leadership alluded to is analogous to an ideological prisoner who feeds on the ideological food he is served not because he likes the menu but to avert starving to death. This stability or peace was therefore a sham concealing the simmering but bottled genie which symbolized the true psyche and aspirations of the ordinary citizens of the region.

"Genie", (also Jinee) in muslim mythology is a spirit lower than angels, able to appear in human and animal forms, and having super natural power over men.⁸This "bottled genie" which symbolized the fighting spirit of the Arab masses was broken and let loose by the spontaneous but cataclysmic events of the "Jasmine Revolution" of December 17, 2010 in Tunisia. The event which was as dramatic and as it was spontaneous, involved one Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26 year old unemployed high school graduate turned fruit vendor. Mr. Bouazizi could not contain his frustration anymore following the trashing of his wheel barrow of fruits in the Tunisian central town of Sidi Bouzid by the police for allegedly refusing to pay a bribe. Mohammed Bouazizi had set himself ablaze in an act of self-immolation, in protest against the systemic decadence of his Tunisian society.⁹ The bizarre nature of this act spontaneously sparked off sympathetic demonstrations in the town in question which culminated in a revolutionary movement that spread through the country like wild fire, claiming

as its casualty, no less a personality than the President Zine al- Abidine Ben Ali. The success of this revolution provoked a domino effect which swept into Egypt's Tahrir square where the Egyptian President - Hosni Mubarak after talking tough for a few weeks bowed out in a manner similar to the Tunisian helmsman's. From Egypt the ball rolled towards Libya where Maummar Gadaffi had held his people in political bondage for 42 years. In his characteristic defiance Gadaffi fired on all cylinders but had to capitulate to the superior fire power and collective will of the revolutionary council forces assisted by NATO air strikes. After pockets of resistance held in his hometown of Sirte, he was rounded up, made to die ignominiously and was buried in a secret desert grave contrary to his wishes.

In Algeria providence seems to be on the side of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika being the only serving leader in North Africa who first took office through an election in 1999. This antecedent is still working to his advantage. Recently a rally was organized by some Algerian Youths in the capital Algiers to garner support for him. President Bouteflika though is not completely immune to the revolution. Fever on account of which he has rolled out a series of concessions and largesse aimed at appeasing his populace, it is believed that the human and material costs of a revolution viewed against the backdrop of the concessions the government has made would keep the people in check.¹⁰

The Genie Is Out of the Bottle

In Egypt, a state of emergency had been in force for nearly as long as Hosni Mubarak had been in office. This state of emergency was lifted in the wake of the so called 'people power revolutions'. Before this revolution the governments had little qualms applying all the coercive apparatus it could wield to suppress their citizens. In Algeria, where similar state of emergency was imposed for 19 years the story is the same, facilitated by the information technological accoutrements of the internet social network namely facebook, twitter, etc. These coercive instruments or apparatus of regimes that have hindered the aspirations of the people for change, this paper has chosen to call the bottled genie, in other words the moving force behind a sea change. This allegory of genie was employed by a veteran Egyptian civil- society activist, Saad Eddin Ibrahim who said "the genie is out of the bottle- the fear barrier has been broken".¹¹ This fear which had held the people back for decades had been broken and the evidence in the people-driven revolutions across the region is there for all to see. This agitation is different from what happened in Africa in the 50s and 60s where nationalist

movements for independence centered on powerful individuals, who spoke for their people. Today the people of the Arab world are speaking for themselves. Viewed philosophically, the current revolution in the Maghreb and in some other parts of the Arab world could be perceived as a dialectical process of history, dialectical idealism, a continuous struggle for power and a clash of theses and anti-theses. The true spirit of the nations in the revolution is the democratic hunger of the real or scientific majority against the ruling traditional or orthodox despotism sometimes, mixed with theocracy. Philosophical historians like Frederick Hegel would perceive the moving force in the context of worldspirit. According to this school of thought:

Every nation has a peculiar contribution which it is destined, in its turn, to make to the process of world history. When a nation's hour strikes, as it does but once, all other nations must give way to it, for at that particular epoch it, and not only they, is a chosen vehicle of the worldspirit.¹²

By implication, Tunisia became the chosen vehicle for this so-called world spirit which Hegel made reference to by the events of Jasmine revolution 2010. They are demanding for their rights to shape their destinies, they are saying what is sauce for their leader "gander" should also be sauce for the led "goose". Their message is that they have a right to know how the common wealth of their nations is managed. The people are simply telling their leaders you owe us allegiance but not to external paternalistic donors or some super leaders located outside our shores. They are saying our God-given riches should not be resource conflicts, death and destruction of our people, or serve the interests of a privileged few, instead of being deployed for the common good of all. The people are demanding for accountability and ethics in governance. They have demonstrated they are prepared to die that their children may know greater social and political freedom. These masses are out to challenge the conscience of the West who while enjoying the dividends of good governance in their home countries ally or collude with despots and autocrats in Africa and the Middle East for strategic interests. They are sick of watching the oligarchs grow fatter and fatter at the expense of the hapless masses. Their succinct message is just that enough is enough.

Standing On The Right Side Of History

The uniqueness of this Spring Revolution is that it is homegrown. Earlier in 2005, Hisham Rassem, editor-in-chief of the independent Egyptian daily newspaper,

“Al-Masry al Youn” argued, “you cannot impose democracy. The reform process has to be home grown”. And homegrown it has been, with the international community playing a supportive role, although this role has been variously criticized as interference and hypocritical or worse still self-serving. Yet, as Shadi Hamid research director at the Brookings Doha Centre argued that:

*We have meddled in the Middle East and North Africa for so long and hurt the people of the region in the process is not an argument for getting out. It is an argument for getting it right.*¹³

The onus of getting the interference right weighs heavily on the West. Else, their credibility in the region will be rubbished. In Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, violent repressions of defenseless but peaceful demonstrators were said to have taken place, but intervention by the West, the kind of which took place in Libya was not made. In Libya, NATO argued it was intervening on humanitarian grounds to protect the lives of defenseless civilians. This is selective treatment which amounts to double standards.

Double standards will be costly now and in future. Anybody seeking equity keeps his hands clean. In Syria, hundreds if not thousands of helpless, hapless demonstrators were being mowed down on daily basis by government forces. As yet the response of the West was mere verbal condemnation and call for sanctions, which of course the other permanent members of the security council of the United nations who do not have strong democratic traditions abstained from. Viewed dispassionately, this abstention was not sufficient to tie the hands of the West but they were making a big excuse of it, simply because “allies” were involved. Such excuses were not made when Iraq was invaded. America swept into Afghanistan to fight the Talibans on self-defense. I do not remember what reason was given to rattle Somalia to combat- international terrorism or Al-Queida may be. But I know the **Igbo** people of Nigeria say “If you hold a woman hostage where she would rather be or feel comfortable, she makes no effort to free herself”. I do not see the West making fervent efforts to ignore the “abstention” imposed by Russia or China in so far as the dictators involved in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria are not on the West’s pariah list. Pariah states run by pariah leaders evoke a different kind of sentiment. It is therefore safe to assume that the West will be re-echoing the sentiments of one of its statesmen of the blessed memory President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States of America,

who, while referring to the Nicaraguan dictator, more than 75 years ago, said “Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he is our own son of a bitch”.

The Challenges Ahead

Revolutions everywhere are supposed to be corrective. They are provoked by injustices, misrule, corruption, racism, lack of accountability and their likes. Any revolution that fails to meet standards of fairness, justice, transparency and the rule of law, has wasted everybody’s time. It is important that the revolutionary leaders of North Africa do not lose focus of these virtues, else the whole exercise would amount to mere change of guards. They should not rest on their laurels, having recorded the initial success of dethroning the despots. Ironically, a bigger challenge consists in managing the opportunities created by this success to sustain what has been generally referred to as “republican virtue”. This challenge is daunting but not impossible to achieve. History is replete with revolutions whose champions compromised the so called republican virtue as was the case in the 1789 French revolution.¹⁴

To this end, the revolutionary leaders should be minded to nip the evils of derailment in the bud. In Libya, the revolutionary council forces were said to have attacked black immigrant workers and infrequently black Libyans on the pretext they were employed by Gaddafi as mercenaries. In Egypt, a group of overzealous soldiers, on October 2011, attacked and killed worshippers at the Coptic Church.¹⁵ These are disturbing reports and condemnation of the revolution if the revolution should sustain its legitimacy. A Kenyan named Mukoma Wa Ngugi once argued that “A revolution that is xenophobic or racist is a contradiction in terms”. In furtherance of this submission, Ngugi went further to say that “if such atrocities were allowed to be perpetrated, the rebels or revolutionaries of today could well be Gaddafis of tomorrow”.

Apart from portraying the revolution in bad light, atrocities could trigger off counter-revolutions. It is my submission that in the countries where the revolutions have succeeded, post-revolution reconstruction, reconciliation and rehabilitation, should carry everyone along, recognizing and respecting the rights of the majority and minorities alike, putting behind them the abuses of the past and forging ahead with optimism and accountability in governance as their watchword. It is important they draw their lessons from the experiences of the French Revolution of 1789 and not spread their efforts too thin, but concentrate on what is achievable within the limits of their resources and strength , making

sure that their answerability to external allies does not undermine their accountability to their own people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if the west led by the United States of America, could be considered to live up to its status as the custodian of liberal values, she has to and be seen to be fair, promoting ethical values and being just. Such posture will confer legitimacy or credibility on their role across the globe, including the North Africa and Middle East as champions of human rights, good governance, democracy and global security. The wind of change has begun in North Africa and the Arab world and with it greater social and political freedom. It is a positive development that should not only be supported, but also gladden the hearts of men and women of goodwill. As Ex-President George Bush put it, "the fire has been lit in the minds of the ordinary citizens of the Arab states". It is important that, in lighting this fire, the United States of America and her allies make fair-play their central focus. If considered by all to be so, it will be more difficult if justifiable to put off the fire.

Endnotes

1. Nicholas Blanford and Lindsay Wise, " Science of Freedom" in *Time Magazine*, May 22 2006, Vol. 167, No21, p.50.
2. Pascale Harter, " Shouting for Democracy" in *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*, June- Sept2005, Vol. 16, No. 3, p. 20.
3. Philip Curtin et al, *African History*, (London: Longman, 1982) p. 586.
4. Pascale Harter, "Shouting for Democracy" ...pp. 20, 22.
5. Pascale Harter, "Shouting for Democracy", p. 22.
6. Nicholas Blanford and Lindsay Wise, "Science of Freedom" ... p. 51.
7. Nicholas Blanford and Lindsay Wise, "Science of Freedom", pp. 50,53.
8. *The Concise Oxford Directory English 6th Education*,(London: Longman, 1976) p. 582. Also see *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 153.
9. Al Jazeera, *Riots Reported in Tunisian City- Africa- Al Jazeera English*, (December 20, 2010)
<http://english.aljazeera.net> Retrieved 18/06/2016
10. HamoudSalhi, " Charm offensive" in *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*, July/ Sept,2011, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp 20, 21.

11. Nicholas Blanford and Lindsay Wise, "Science of Freedom" ...p. 52.
12. Wash W.H., *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, (London: Hutchison & Co. Publishers, Ltd., 1977) p. 141.
13. Shaad Hamid, " Has the Case for Foreign Intervention been Strengthened?", *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*, July/ Sept. 2011, Vol. 22, No. 3.
14. Denis Richards, *An Illustrated History of Modern Europe, 1989-1945*, (London: Longman, 1973) p. 98.
15. Maggie Michael, *Egypt Coptic Church Decries Attack on Christians*, (October 10, 2010) <http://news.yahoo.com> Retrieved 18/06/2016