

EGYPT: A NEW REVOLUTION OR GETTING OUT OF AN OLD ONE?

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For over a week now global media have focused on Egypt, calling the events there a “revolution”, and this is something that they feel rather happy about.

But is this a revolution? And, if yes, should we be happy about it?

Revolutions are always identified as such after they have taken place. When a mob attacked the Bastille prison in Paris to release the nine inmates, no one knew this would start a revolution. Nor did people think that the Bolsheviks’ attack on the Russian Duma (parliament) would be the trigger for a revolution. And what about the burning of newspapers kiosks in Qom? Again, no one thought that a revolution was afoot in Iran.

In every case, the governments of the day could have nipped the revolution in the bud. They didn’t because they did not think there was going to be a revolution!

Those revolutions happened because the powers in place retreated in the hope of appeasing the crowds.

Revolutions remind me of a story by Chekhov in which a man is riding his sled in a snowstorm in Siberia while wolves pursue him. To appease the wolves he keeps throwing whatever food he has to them. This gives them strength to continue their pursuit. He does not know that their ultimate aim is to devour him.

Anyway, in Egypt’s case, let us wait until a revolution has actually happened before we apply this label.

For the time being, there is no revolution in Egypt.

What we have are protest marches, the sacking of some shops and private homes, and the usual cliché of tanks in the streets.

This could become a revolution, but it hasn’t yet. Supposing this is a revolution, should we be happy?

This is hard to answer because revolution is a catchword that describes many different events.

For example, we talk of the Industrial Revolution or, more recently, the information technology revolution. Sometimes the term is used for mundane purposes. Supermarkets boast of a price “revolution”, and Lady Gaga speaks of her, or perhaps it is his, musical “revolution”.

Dictators, from Hosni al-Zaim to Muammar Kaddhafi to Saddam Hussein have described their coups as “revolution”. Only Hafiz al-Assad was modest enough to label his coup a “correcting move” (Al-harakat al-tashihyah).

The French love the word “revolution” so much that they use it to describe almost any event involving crowds and changes of government. Thus we have the 1830, the 1848, the 1871 and the 1968 “revolutions” in France.

In 1848 more than a dozen events in Europe were labelled “revolution”.

More recently we have had “revolutions” designated with flowers and/or colour schemes, for example the “carnation revolution” in Portugal and the “orange revolution” in Ukraine.

Most historians assert that only two deserve the label of revolution: the downfall of the Bourbons in France in 1789 and the Romanovs in Russia in 1917. Their argument is that those events not only changed the lives of the French and Russian peoples but also led to wars, both hot and cold, that affected other countries.

I would add the 1979 revolution in Iran, although it does not meet all the conditions of the historians’ model.

However, in this analysis, I leave it aside because the regime it created has not yet been overthrown.

But, what about the French and Russian revolutions?

We know that both claimed millions of lives, caused much devastation and grief, and ultimately ended in failure.

France is today smaller than before its “Great Revolution”. The country is still suffering from the over-centralised system created by the revolution.

The belief that only violence produces reform has entered the French political DNA. This is why France suffered from terrorist activities of all kind for decades and is still the European

nation most affected by industrial disputes and violent strikes. The belligerence woven into the French political vocabulary is part of the revolutionary heritage.

The disaster that was the Russian revolution need not be re-told here. Russia is smaller than under the last Tsar and is still trying to emerge from the ditch it was plunged into in 1917. Every year new mass graves of victims of Bolshevism are discovered in a corner of that vast country. Vladimir Putin's attempt at imposing a new version of autocracy is a sign of the confusion that Russia must still dissipate.

However, the French and Russian revolutions failed to uproot cultures that had grown over centuries. Today, the weird and cruel cultures promoted by Robespierre or Lenin are laughed at if not spat upon.

Revolution is a new concept in Muslim countries.

Until the last decades of the 19th century, Islamic languages, including Arabic, Persian and Turkish, did not even have a word for revolution. Opposing the government in place was "fitnah" (sedition).

In the case of Egypt, it is supposed to have had its "revolution" in 1952 when The Free Officers seized power.

Thus, what is happening in Egypt may not be the start of a revolution but the beginnings of getting out of the one that took place in 1952.

The 1952 coup d'état put the Egyptian society on a different trajectory. Before it, Egypt was a proto-capitalist society slowly emulating the Western model. Given time, it might have shed its feudalistic features in favour of modern ones developed in Europe across the water.

The 1952 coup created a police state with centralised decision-making. Half a century later it still needs to keep the country under a state of emergency and now even a curfew.

A man of personal integrity, Nasser was an autocrat nonetheless. Anwar Sadat tried to be both the Napoleon and Charles X of Egypt, failing on both accounts. Hosni Mubarak started getting Egypt out of the 1952 straitjacket in the economic field but forgot the need to also get out of it politically.

Entering a revolution is easy, even exciting. Getting out is difficult and painful. In 1979, many of my friends in Tehran were high on revolutionary fervour. By 1983, almost all were dead, executed by the mullahs' regime.

However, I think Egypt will re-emerge by shutting the book on the 1952 "revolution" without embarking on a new one. In other words, Egyptians should try to get out of the frying-pan without jumping in the fire. Let's hope that Egypt is neither a political desert nor the house of lunatics that Iran was in 1979.

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