

NOVEMBER 22-24, 2019

REVOLUTIONS AND THEIR REMAINS

— Nancy Okail

On the cusp of the third decade of the 21st century, the world is witnessing many changes; some promising; others more ominous. However, one fact remains: people are relentlessly continuing to struggle for better lives in a freer world.

This year marks three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a decade since the Green Movement in Iran, and the 70th anniversary of the establishment of China's communist regime. Several democracies are sliding, and the Arab Spring is (wrongly) seen by many observers as an indication that democracy may not, after all, be suitable for everyone.

There are two main issues to consider in assessing revolutions and what comes after them. First, setbacks for would-be democracies, and quelled uprisings, should not be seen in terms of a definitive defeat, or an end point in a revolutionary process. Unlike war, revolutionary changes do not typically have clear start and end points. There are moments that trigger waves of energetic mass protest, and there are other moments that lead to retreats. What might all too easily be written off as failures may only be stages in ongoing forms of resistance to unjust conditions.

The second false assumption is that these parts of the world are isolated islands, disconnected from external interventions which, more often than not, exacerbate already existing problems, especially when these turbulent zones become arenas of competing world powers, and proxy wars.

Instead of focusing on the underlying causes of the problems—which are mainly rooted in injustice, marginalization, and authoritarianism—the US and

Europe too often focus on containing the problems within the borders of those countries, while continuing to export arms to conflict zones at levels unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, thus only further fueling conflict.

The Middle East and Arab world are inundated with different forms of disconnected transactional interventions rather than long-term defense and development strategies. The United States' recent inconsistent policies toward the region—the sudden withdrawal from Syria allowing the Turkish invasion, then imposing economic sanctions on Turkey, and withdrawing from Iran's nuclear deal—have all been damaging to US interests, as well as the stability of the region.

Meanwhile, Russia and China are extending their reach in the region, further entrenching undemocratic and oppressive value systems. In addition to their military presences, they are expanding developmental and trade ties. In China's case, this involves hundreds of billions of dollars of planned investment.

Are the people of the region merely resigned to being subject to internal oppressors and competing hegemonic powers? Certainly not. They resist, whether through protests, desperate escapes, or action against oppressive conditions. At least 2,262 people died or went missing last year attempting to cross the Mediterranean. They chose that huge risk over merely surrendering to the status quo.

In spite of the difficulties, the picture is not all bleak. Take women's rights as an indicator of progress. There are eight women in Egypt's cabinet. After

long campaigns, women were finally allowed to attend soccer games in Iran, drive in Saudi Arabia, and travel abroad from that country without guardian permission. This is certainly not enough in the year 2019. And we must be cautious about equating cosmetic changes with real progress. This is especially important when women activists in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are subjected to harsh prison sentences, and tortured in detention. Nonetheless, the changes happened.

There have also been some truly significant wins in the region. This year, the notorious Omar al-Bashir was removed from power in Sudan, and the Sovereign Council has officially confirmed a woman as chief justice, a first in the Arab world and Africa. Similarly, Algerians were not satisfied with just getting rid of President Bouteflika, and have sustained protests against the ruling elites. Despite serious economic challenges, the Tunisians have gone through another free election to elect a law professor, Kais Saied, as their new president. Perhaps the most notable aspect in the resumption of protests in the Arab world is the shift in the defining discourse of resistance especially in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, and Egypt. They all went beyond sectarian, partisan, and ideological divides to focus on corruption, and bad governance. This has also been seen in Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, and Japan.

This is the most hopeful factor: increasing global connectivity among people over common goals as well as grievances beyond the specifics of their region. This year is being called the year of protest, with sustained demonstrations from the Czech Republic and Kazakhstan to Hong Kong. Remarkably, six million people around the world took to the streets in the same week, uniting across geographical borders, and the generations, to raise the alarm over climate change. These are all significant indications of the start of a global trend in which ordinary people are demanding greater accountability, and justice.

While governments are building walls, people are forging ties across the globe. With the right policies, there are reasons to be hopeful. It is crucial to recognize that people are rejecting the oppressive status quo, challenging it both locally and globally. Revolutions continue, and what remains is all to play for.

Nancy Okail is President of the Board of Advisors of The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy

