Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 11
Issue 8 *September Roundtable: "The Syrian Spring" and Human Rights*

Article 2

9-1-2011

The Arab Spring: Endgames as Framing Battle

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Abstract

The narrative of the Arab Spring (including the Syrian uprising) in the mainstream media appears clear and linear: a cruel dictator is challenged in a series of street demonstrations that rapidly coalesce to become a popular uprising. The dictator resorts to increasingly brutal repression, but this fails to end the challenge. Within a relatively short time the dictator is overthrown. Elections within a reasonable period are announced, promising the creation of a democracy that is representative not only of the protest movement, but of society as a whole. Raghida Dergham's Huffington Post article largely reflects this perspective, drawing attention to the increasing support the analysis is receiving from powerful international actors.

Keywords

Human rights, Arab Spring, Syria, Revolution, Minority rights, Women's rights, Ideology

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The narrative of the Arab Spring (including the Syrian uprising) in the mainstream media appears clear and linear: a cruel dictator is challenged in a series of street demonstrations that rapidly coalesce to become a popular uprising. The dictator resorts to increasingly brutal repression, but this fails to end the challenge. Within a relatively short time the dictator is overthrown. Elections within a reasonable period are announced, promising the creation of a democracy that is representative not only of the protest movement, but of society as a whole. Raghida Dergham's *Huffington Post* article largely reflects this perspective, drawing attention to the increasing support the analysis is receiving from powerful international actors.

Much of this narrative is manifestly true: Bashar al-Assad has employed degrees of repression throughout his rule, and his attempts to subdue protesters have been egregiously bloody. But there is space for a degree of skepticism that can be captured in two images of liminality. The first has to do with the degree to which the Spring will ultimately be seen as representing a line between a repressive past and a democratic, tolerant future. The second has to do with the kind of liminality represented by icebergs, i.e. what we see is interesting, but most of the action is below the waterline. These doubts can be explored through a focus on three issues: minorities, ideology, and the position of women.

With regard to minorities, while all of the regimes in question have been dictatorships, they have all been secular as well. Bashar al-Assad (like his father Hafez al-Assad) belongs to a minority sect (the Alawis). This sect is generally considered a branch of Shia Islam (dating from the 9th/10th centuries CE). However, some Sunnis consider them apostate, an accusation facilitated by the extent to which the Alawis appear to have absorbed elements of Christianity. The point is that Hafez al-Assad's political base was willing to install a member of a minority religious group as leader and, more prosaically, that Bashar al-Assad has had a vested interest in seeing minorities protected. In Egypt, Coptic Christians (who were apparently secure under the Mubarak regime) have voiced increasing unease at their treatment in the wake of regime change. Syrian Chaldean Christians may find themselves in a similar position. The dynamics of the Iraqi situation are of course radically different, although it is clear that the position of Iraqi Christians has deteriorated sharply since the 2001 invasion.

In part this relative protection of minorities (as long as they acquiesced with the regime) may have a deep historical resonance: Most countries affected by the Arab Spring had been part of the Ottoman Empire. Its vast scope meant that it included a wide religious mix, and crucially the Empire displayed rare degrees of tolerance for Jews and Christians, as well as for some varieties of Islam beyond the mainstream (had it not done so, today's minorities would not exist). But there are also ideological imperatives. The political organization through which Assad exercises his power is the Ba'ath party. Originally one with the Iraqi Ba'ath party, its foundational ideology can be described as "Pan-Arab socialism." The original ideologues drew on a variety of streams of anti-colonial thought, and on a number of European thinkers (Marx rarely made an appearance). In Egypt, Nasserite thinking followed a similar though distinguishable path, so that Mubarak (while certainly no Nasser) inherited a state that had been significantly influenced by this legacy. The salient issue is that this was a 20th century secular ideational spectrum.

Ideologically, therefore, there was no imperative to favor one religious group over another—indeed, all of these regimes saw political religious fundamentalism as a threat, to be strongly repressed.

Since this 'pan Arab' politics was secularist, and partly leftist, there was also little ideological imperative to subjugate women. This did not mean that the societies in question achieved anything like gender equality, but there were multiple instances of women attaining positions of influence in the university world, in public affairs, etc. By contrast, post-occupation Iraq has frequently become a place where women are excluded from the public domain, where citizens risk acid attacks for going out without a veil.

To return to the iceberg metaphor: the Spring, in virtually all geographical sites where it has emerged, almost certainly involves what social movement scholars would call a "framing battle" (Egyptprovides the most obvious example). This is one between fundamentalist political Islamists and other elements in a heterogenous protest movement. While both are in partial agreement on the starting point, they disagree radically on the destination. Eventually, one narrative will resonate with historical events, while the other will be relegated to the "failed enterprise" category.

So what are the implications of this analysis? Does this mean that the Spring is fated to end in the institution of governments in which the dominant groups repress minorities and women? Is the current wave, in the words of Talking Heads, "on the road to nowhere"? No. The overthrow of regimes like Mubarak's by movements voicing claims for democracy is good in itself. Where caution is needed is in the assumption that there is an inevitable trajectory from the overthrow of the dictator to the establishment of a liberal, pluralist democracy. Virtually no commentators have pointed out that the closest historical precedent for the Spring is the overthrow of the Shah of Iran by "people power" in 1979. It is almost certain that the new democracies will not be liberal. And there is a real risk that, rather than benefiting from pluralism, minorities and women may suffer. Realizing the risk, and curbing the enthusiasm, may help to focus attention on the architecture of a democracy that, while it may not be liberal, is nevertheless pluralist, and that creates a place for women that at the very least is better than was the case before the transition.

Professor Campbell is one of the founding directors of the Transitional Justice Institute at the University of Ulster (UU), serving as Director/Associate Director between 2004-2010. In recent years he has held Senior Research Fellowships from the British Academy, the Leverhulme Trust, and from Jesus College, Oxford. Prior to joining UU (2000), he served as Professor of law and Dean of the Law Faculty at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and as Director of the Human Rights Centre at Queen's University Belfast. He has an on-going focus on the Middle Eastern peace process, and has served on several expert groups addressing aspects of

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