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The resurrection of pan-Arabism

The Egyptian revolution has resurrected a new type of pan-Arabism, based on social justice not empty slogans.

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**The Egyptian revolution has resurrected pan-Arabism but this is not the pan-Arabism of previous generations
[GALLO/GETTY]**

The Egyptian revolution, itself influenced by the Tunisian uprising, has resurrected a new sense of pan-Arabism based on the struggle for social justice and freedom. The overwhelming support for the Egyptian revolutionaries across the Arab world reflects a sense of unity in the rejection of tyrannical, or at least authoritarian, leaders, corruption and the rule of a small financial and political elite.

Arab protests in solidarity with the Egyptian people also suggest that there is a strong yearning for the revival of Egypt as a pan-Arab unifier and leader. Photographs of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the former Egyptian president, have been raised in Cairo and across Arab capitals by people who were not even alive when Nasser died in 1970. The scenes are reminiscent of those that swept Arab streets in the 1950s and 1960s.

But this is not an exact replica of the pan-Arab nationalism of those days. Then, pan-Arabism was a direct response to Western domination and the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel. Today, it is a reaction to the absence of democratic freedoms and the inequitable distribution of wealth across the Arab world.

We are now witnessing the emergence of a movement for democracy that transcends narrow nationalism or even pan-Arab nationalism and which embraces universal human values that echo from north to south and east to west.

This is not to say that there is no anti-imperialist element within the current movement. But the protests in Egypt and elsewhere promote a deeper understanding of human emancipation, which forms the real basis for freedom from both repression and foreign domination.

Unlike the pan-Arabism of the past, the new movement represents an intrinsic belief that it is freedom from fear and human dignity that enables people to build better societies and to create a future of hope and prosperity. The old "wisdom" of past revolutionaries that liberation from foreign domination precedes the struggle for democracy has fallen.

The revolutionaries of Egypt, and before them Tunisia, have exposed through deeds - not merely words - the leaders who are tyrants towards their own people, while humiliatingly subservient to foreign powers. They have shown the impotence of empty slogans that manipulate animosity towards Israel to justify a fake Arab unity, which in turn serves only to mask sustained oppression and the betrayal of Arab societies and the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian pretext

The era of using the Palestinian cause as a pretext for maintaining martial laws and silencing dissent is over. The Palestinians have been betrayed, not helped, by leaders who practice repression against their own people. It is no longer sufficient for regimes in Syria and Iran to claim support for Palestinian resistance in order to stifle freedom of expression and to shamelessly tread on human rights in their own countries.

Equally, it is no longer acceptable for the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas to cite their record in resisting Israel when justifying their suppression of each other and the rest of the Palestinian people. Young Palestinians are responding to the message of the movement and embracing the idea that combatting internal injustice - whether practised by Fatah or Hamas - is a prerequisite for the struggle to end Israeli occupation and not something to be endured for the sake of that struggle.

Events in Egypt and Tunisia have revealed that Arab unity against internal repression is stronger than that against a foreign threat - neither the American occupation of Iraq nor the Israeli occupation galvanised the Arab people in the way that a single act by a young Tunisian who chose to set himself alight rather than live in humiliation and poverty has.

This does not mean that Arabs do not care about the occupied people of Iraq or Palestine - tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands have taken to the streets across Arab countries at various times to show solidarity with Iraqis and Palestinians - but it does reflect the realisation that the absence of democratic freedoms has contributed to the continued occupation of those countries.

The Arab failure to defend Iraq or liberate Palestine has come to symbolise an Arab impotence that has been perpetuated by the state of fear and paralysis in which the ordinary Arab citizen, marginalised by social injustice and crushed by security apparatus oppression, has existed.

When they were allowed to rally in support of Iraqis or Palestinians it was mainly so that their anger might be deflected from their own governments and towards a foreign threat. For so long, they put their own socio-economic grievances aside to voice their support for the occupied, only to wake up the next day shackled by the same chains of repression.

All the while, both pro-Western and anti-Western governments continued with business as usual - the first camp relying on US support to consolidate their authoritarian rule and the second on anti-Israel slogans to give legitimacy to their repression of their people.

But now people across the region - not only in Egypt and Tunisia - have lost faith in their governments. For make no mistake, when protesters have gathered in Amman or Damascus to express their solidarity with the Egyptian revolutionaries in Tahrir Square, they are actually objecting to their own rulers.

In Ramallah, the protesters repeated a slogan calling for the end of internal Palestinian divisions (which, in Arabic, rhymes with the Egyptian call for the end to the regime), as well as demanding an end to negotiations with Israel - sending a clear message that there will be no room left for the Palestinian Authority if it continues to rely on such negotiations.

In the 1950s and 1960s, millions of Arabs poured onto the streets determined to continue the liberation of the Arab world from the remnants of colonial domination and the creeping American hegemony. In 2011, millions have poured onto the streets determined not only to ensure their freedom but also to ensure that the mistakes of previous generations are not repeated. Slogans against a foreign enemy - no matter how legitimate - ring hollow if the struggle for democratic freedoms is set aside.

The protesters in Cairo and beyond may raise photographs of Gamal Abdel Nasser, because they see him as a symbol of Arab dignity. But, unlike Nasser, the demonstrators are invoking a sense of pan-Arab nationalism that understands that national liberation cannot go hand-in-hand with the suppression of political dissent. For this is a genuine Arab unity galvanised by the common yearning for democratic freedoms.

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