Freedom Springs Eternal

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Who was it who had said that revolutions are plotted by the clever, fought by the brave, and profited from by cowards?

Adrift on the Nile, Naguib Mahfouz[1]

Revolutions are chaotic affairs. In February 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers declared victory, Iran's future seemed uncertain. After a long night of hostility and bloodshed, an eerie silence fell on Tehran, and in some corners fear supplanted exhilaration. Those of us who witnessed these historic events did not fully fathom what Islamic politics augured. Within weeks, on the occasion of International Women's Day, it became clear that women had become targets of the regime's cultural indoctrination. Other matters remained murky for months and would play out gradually in the first decade after the revolution.

Looking back on those days, it may be easy to forget that political and ideological wrangling dominated post-Pahlavi Iran. We lacked answers to simple questions. What shape would the new government take? How would Islamic ideology be implemented as policy? Analogous questions are undoubtedly on the minds of Arab revolutionaries. Still, a towering and charismatic figure, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, held sway and emerged as the political face and spiritual leader of this mass movement—a detail that distinguishes Iran's revolution from other similar incarnations in the contemporary Arab world.

It is difficult to generalize about an "Arab Spring," as doing so runs the risk of effacing important cultural and political differences among Tunisians, Yemenis, Jordanians, Egyptians, Libyans, Bahrainis, and Syrians. Nonetheless, for the sake of argument, let us identify broad trends that have emerged in the Arab world as a result of the recent popular demonstrations. For one thing, ordinary citizens in some of these Arab countries ousted deep-rooted dictatorships. They did so initially by eschewing widescale bloodshed, in some cases even after becoming victims of their regime's violence. Regardless of regional and religious differences, the mass movements in the Arab world repeated a simple refrain: freedom. Islamic ideology may have emboldened some rioters to take to the streets but, by and large, the Arab Spring lacked an overarching Islamic sentiment.

At a glance, it may appear as though the Iranian Revolution and the Arab Spring arose from a similar landscape. Both movements toppled entrenched autocratic regimes. Street politics and the zeal of ordinary citizens likely accelerated the outcome in both settings. Important differences set apart these uprisings, however. The Arab Spring erupted somewhat spontaneously and was relatively short-lived. It did not completely come about as a result of years of activism promoted by vibrant oppositional groups inside and outside of the country. This lack of preparedness explains to some extent the relative ideological paucity of the Arab Spring. In many ways this absence of ideology has also accounted for the equally important absence of a new police state in countries

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such as Tunisia and Egypt where democracy movements have successfully overturned their regimes. Unlike the Iranian Revolution, the protests in the parts of Arab world were not necessarily united by a prevailing Islamic sentiment, but by another ideal: freedom. We cannot pinpoint important religious or intellectual works such as the writings of Khomeini, Al-e Ahmad, and Shariʿati that inspired virtually an entire generation to take to the streets. Perhaps they will surface in the months ahead, but at the moment their words and pictures have not dominated the evening news. The Arab Spring therefore can be considered a genuine grassroots movement much like Iran's Green Wave of 2009.

By contrast, bloodshed stained Iran's revolution of 1979. For weeks after the regime changed hands, it was customary to initiate the daily radio news service with a recitation of the names of Iran's executed former officials. The emerging class of leaders and ideologues who took the place of the slain promptly represented this new order through rhetoric and attire. Such stark class and cultural warfare has yet to cleave the societies of Egypt and Tunisia, though existing tribal rivalries may have temporarily prevailed in Libya. Although the Arab Spring seemed to escape the initial violence that characterized Iran's 1979 revolution, killings and authoritarianism have increasingly soiled the Arab season of harvest.

In Syria and Bahrain the situation remains somewhat comparable to Iran because of long-standing ethnic and sectarian divides. The rule of the minority over the majority has exposed deep-rooted fissures in national and political unity in these countries. While Iran's revolution was not inspired by ethnic and religious difference as much as by class distinction, the movement was nonetheless about empowering a group of people who had previously been largely excluded from power. In a similar vein, the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria call for equitable representation in local government.

Two other points merit a brief mention. First, modern technology has become a friend to political rebels in the Middle East. Even in 1979, Iranian revolutionaries used available technology to circulate Khomeini's speeches clandestinely on cassette tapes. In 2009, and again in 2011, Facebook and Twitter became the weapons of choice for Iranian and Arab protestors. As these demonstrators have shown the world, modern technology has made it possible for ordinary citizens to promote democracy. In other words, the quest for freedom does not always need a figurehead. Headless revolutions, however, can sometimes fall short of achieving their ends. Although Iran's Green Movement, for example, broke out with a bang, it ended with a whimper, in part due to a leadership vacuum. Headless revolutions also run the risk of being co-opted by less liberal elements. In parts of the Arab world, we still await the coda of these uprisings, but in Egypt and Libya, for example, the Arab public is justifiably wary of the involvement of military stalwarts or religious zealots in local politics. Second, Iran quickly faced an external threat after 1979 unlike the countries involved in the Arab Spring. Iraq's invasion of Iran lasted eight years and cost many lives on both sides. Somewhat ironically, the war solidified the nascent and fragile Islamic regime and likely legitimated the government's heavy curtailment of individual liberties in the name of national sovereignty.

Revolutions eventually run their course. They make cynics out of believers and believers out of cowards, as Najib Mahfuz pithily reminds us. Whatever their shortcomings, these revolutions leave their imprint on our lives. They invent new national narratives and heroes. Above all, they invite us, however briefly, to fight for lofty ideals worth pursuing, such as equality or freedom, even if the struggles sometimes come at a heavy

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cost. Although my charge in this essay was to reflect on two contemporary revolutionary movements, I conclude by taking us back more than a century to another revolutionary time.

In 1907, the editor of the popular Persian newspaper, *Habl al-Matin*, asked about the meaning of despotism, contending that it was tyranny, or the absence of freedom, that caused slaughterhouses to be filled with the blood of children.[2] While the constitutional movements of Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt failed to implement democracy at the turn of the century, they planted the seeds of freedom and equality in the minds of contemporaries and of future generations. In 1979, although the Islamic message overrode the impulse for freedom and democracy, these urges did not lay dormant forever. They found new life in the streets of Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran.

NOTES

[1]Naguib Mahfouz, *Adrift on the Nile*, trans. Frances Liardet (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 19.
[2]*Habl al-Matin*, 5 May 1907, 1.

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