

Can \223Power to the People\224 Get Egyptians Democracy?  
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Reporters standing amidst the throngs in Independence Square in Cairo seem to be carried away by the excitement of this demonstration of popular will. I do not share their enthusiasm; I fear human beings in mobs. Nice, ordinary people can be transformed by group-think (and a handful of manipulators) into deadly and destructive monsters. It takes only moments to go from a peaceful demonstration to organized burning, looting, and murder. But so far, this \223revolution\224 has been remarkably peaceful.

The Egyptians have much to be unhappy about. They have plummeted from the most important and most civilized modernizing Arab Muslim state a century ago to a grossly overpopulated country that cannot keep up with its needs. They have seen their aspirations to lead the rest of the Arab world into the modern secular world fail. Nobody seems to have a roadmap to a thriving and more egalitarian Egypt. They have tried monarchy, dictatorship, sham democracy, and the only other roadmap not yet tried is that offered by the Muslim Brotherhood\227an organization that believes that ultimately, Sharia Law, not democracy, is the answer for Egypt.

So what are we seeing in the streets? We see very angry (and mostly male) faces, and hear group chanting of slogans that someone must have started before being picked up by the crowds. We see shoes held high and ready to throw (an Arab custom that harkens back to hails of slippers hurled by women in bordellos to mock an inadequate customer. Remember the shoes hurled at President Bush by an Iraqi reporter some years back?) It is the utmost symbol of scorn for another\227and the shoes are being aimed at President Mubarak, whose offer to step down after a next election was not enough for the crowds.

We hear cries of \223freedom, we want freedom\224 but what does this mean? Do the protesters want freedom from their authoritarian government? How about from their authoritarian fathers? Are the men shouting for freedom ready to give it to their wives and daughters too? How far do they want that freedom to go?

If Mubarak steps down right now, who then has the power to hold a government together until the next election is held? And how is that election to be managed? Are there candidates ready to run, and is there time for them to campaign so that the voters know who they are?

A parliament must change the constitution so that there can be new election rules. But will the crowds trust the parliament that is already there? Which comes first\227an election for president or an election for a new parliament?

What these Arab revolutions need to recognize is that demonstrations are not enough. They need caretakers to manage the government until desirable changes can be effected. Haste can be the enemy here.

While we worry about the uncertainty of revolutions sweeping the Arab world right now, we might consider what we can learn from history. In 1848, Europe was swept by revolutionary fervor, led by France and then spreading everywhere. Europe\222s establishment governments (monarchies) put them down (amidst bloodshed and imprisonment of radicals) and the next round of changes did not come for decades. But changes did come\227and have continued to come since then in the developed world. It is a gradual and slow process.

Prosperity does not come when population explosion cannot be stabilized and women not admitted to equality in the society. Real freedom means opportunity for all to learn, to participate, and to encourage values that promote honesty, respect for law, and an end to nepotism and corruption.

The US is condemned by many for not rushing in to support this Arab revolution. We are criticized for wanting democracy, and then when an election is held in Gaza and Islamists win, we do not support it.

We are not obliged to support an election that has given one man, one vote, one time.

656 words

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