

June 2012

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Recommended Citation

Samson, Steven A., "The February Revolution of 2011: A Harbinger of Arab Spring" (2012). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 400.

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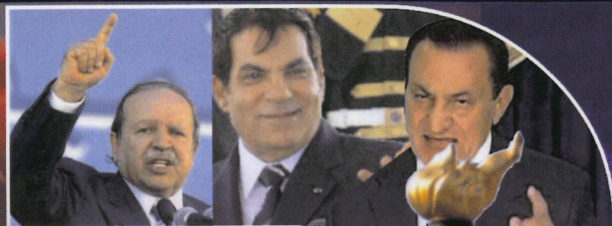
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Anul IX nr. 43

GeoPolitica

Revistă de Geografie Politică, GeoPolitică și GeoStrategie



CRIZA UNUI SISTEM?

DE LA "PRIMĂVARA ARABĂ" LA "OCCUPY WALL STREET"

THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION OF 2011: A HARBINGER OF ARAB SPRING

Steven Alan SAMSON*

In a column posted on the day of Ronald Reagan's centenary and Super Bowl Sunday, February 6, 2011, Barry Rubin delivered a punishing half-time assessment of the Obama Administration's Middle East policy. His chief point was simple: Do any of the chief actors in the region believe that the United States will protect them during the gathering storm?

"Unintentionally, the mistakes of the Obama Administration [have] become a factor spreading the power of radical Islamist movements. People aren't going to like that sentence but it is objectively true. Israelis know it; Arabs know it; Iran's leadership knows it."

Rubin concluded his column with a partial quotation from the great Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun, but it is worth quoting at greater length.

"Nomads are rough, savage and uncultured, and their presence is always inimical to civilization; however, they are hardy, frugal, uncorrupt in morals, freedom-loving and self-reliant, and so make excellent fighters. In addition, they have a strong sense of 'asabiya, which can be translated as 'group cohesion' or 'social solidarity'. This greatly enhances their military potential. Towns, by contrast, are the seats of the crafts, the sciences, the arts and culture. Yet luxury corrupts them, and as a result they become a liability to the state, like women and children who need to be protected. Solidarity is completely relaxed and the arts of defending oneself and of attacking the enemy are forgotten, so they are no match for conquering nomads."

America began with and was founded by its own nomads, many of whom, such as the Puritan leaders, were cultured. Thankfully, the children of America's founders still number among its defenders, but in ever-diminishing numbers. Here we should pause to reflect on history's lessons, as Niccolo Machiavelli did in his Discourses on Livy. For decades Americans have had a Ruling Class that arrogates itself above what Angelo Codevilla calls the Country Party. The Ruling Class draws its sustenance from the web of dependency it uses to break down traditional social structures while amassing a constituency of social-service clients and interest groups that pursue what the late Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn called "identitarianism." What ordinary citizens are witnessing is a domestic form of colonialism with all of the attendant social and psychological stresses that plagued relations between colonizers and the host population. The political scientist James Chowning Davies provides an abundance of illustrations in *When Men Revolt and Why*.

To illustrate the global character of the problem, it may be observed that most of America's federal health, education, and welfare bureaucracies have developed their own elaborate agendas. They were created by first lifting or transferring activities that had once belonged elsewhere. At the time, during the early New Deal of the 1930s, it was alleged that many of these functions had been abandoned or were poorly done. This, at best, was a dubious claim. It is now past time to restore what the constitutional historian Edward Corwin called the Constitution of Limitations by beginning to restore the functions of local governments and civil society generally before taxpayers are rendered indigent for the sake of supporting the improvident.

Ronald Reagan, a political entrepreneur of a very high order, recognized where all this led by the time he delivered his break-out political speech at the 1964 Republican Party Convention at the Cow Palace. A quarter century after political Progressives began to build a political power base through what Sidney Milkis calls the Third New Deal, Reagan declared in "A Time for Choosing:"

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"This is the issue of this election: whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that little intellectual elite in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves."

This is still the issue all over the world in 2011. Intrusive government regulation is the bane of market economies even where they are able to subsist and take root. It remains an age-old challenge. The Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto has shown how difficult it is to establish and legally operate a business in so much of the developing world. Confiscation takes so many different forms but always to one purpose: to suppress populations and make them dependent upon the state. The dynamic tension between the harsh realities of living close to the land versus the refinements of urban life described by Ibn Khaldun in the *Muqaddimah* has fueled literature and even political philosophy from time immemorial.

In *The Republic* Plato contrasted Glaucon's "city of pigs" with the luxurious or "feverish city." In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli discussed the severe, even tyrannical, discipline it would take to bring back to health a city that had sunk into corruption. This is a condition that has become all-too-familiar not only in the West but among the ruling classes in so much of the world today.

A few days before Rubin posted his column, the term "Arab Spring" had already been coined and circulated by optimistic journalists with the BBC. But the "awakening" actually began in winter. The spark that lit a series of fuses was the self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid of a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, on December 17, 2010. This young man, who had lost his father at the age of three, had helped support his family through a series of jobs since the age of ten, repeatedly had his wheelbarrow of produce and other goods stolen by local police authorities. In this latest incident, Bouazizi was reportedly slapped and humiliated by a female municipal official. He went to the governor's office to ask for the return of the scales that had been confiscated. Being turned away instead, he went to a nearby gasoline station, returned with a can of gasoline, and the doused and immolated himself in the street in front of the governor's office. The rest is, shall we say, history.

It is no wonder that Thrasymachus could taunt Socrates in *The Republic*, by suggesting that real rulers do not differ in their attitude toward the people they govern than shepherds do toward their sheep. Are their subjects not so often regarded as fit only to be sheared or slaughter? Or, to modify the metaphor, harassed and harried into the wilderness like scapegoats, as René Girard might observe?

A popular saying is that "a fish rots from the head down." Is life not hard enough without the abuse inflicted upon them by officious bureaucrats and corrupt officers? People may be as "patient as Job" and even resilient in the face of the heedlessness of their neighbors. But as so often happens, a line is crossed and the persecuted reach a limit where they determinedly set their face against all opposition. The literature of resistance against tyranny dates back to the earliest records of western civilization. *Antigone* is a classic of the genre. So is the story of Jotham in the Book of Judges, chapter 9. An entire theology of resistance developed during the High Middle Ages and continued through the Protestant Reformation down through the seventeenth century English revolutions. It reached a pinnacle of expression in the American Declaration of Independence:

"Prudence... will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security."

As Crane Brinton observed in his classic analysis, *Anatomy of Revolution*: "The years just preceding the actual outbreak of revolution witness a crescendo of protests against the tyranny of the government, a hail of pamphlets, plays, addresses, an outburst of activity on the part of interested pressure groups. Facing all this, the government certainly does not live up to the reputation its opponents seek to make for it. Its tyrannous attempts at suppressing the rebellious

opposition may perhaps fail because the opposition is too strong, resourceful, and virtuous; or its attempts may fail because they are carried out half-heartedly and inefficiently by governmental agents more than half won over to the opposition. The fact remains that they fail."

Governments sometimes collapse like a house of cards because they have become like the proverbial fish: They rot from the head down.

In the heady days of Iran's February Revolution, Western acclaim was showered upon Ayatollah Khomeini by the academic *bien pensants* of that day. But in this case, as in so many others, high hopes were soon enough dashed and events quickly began passing through the stages of Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution*.

By contrast, the American colonies were successful in their War for Independence in part because they already had a viable civil society and a tradition of institutional liberties that furnished what Edmund Burke called the "wardrobe of a moral imagination."

As with so many others, Iran's revolution of 1979 was premature. Its seeds fell on rocky soil, failed to sink deep roots, and a despotic regime was replaced by a far worse tyranny. The mass of the protestors failed to heed the iron law of despotism: "Things are never so bad that they cannot get worse."

It appears that James Chowning Davies's J-Curve model of political violence applies very well today to the economic causes of the Egyptian unrest. Jack Kelly has noted the rapid rise in food prices in a brief analysis that resembles Andrew Dickson White's analysis of what triggered the French Revolution, *Fiat Money Inflation in France*. In an article entitled "Are We Letting the Fox into the Henhouse?" he wrote:

"The proximate causes of the spike in wheat prices were a drought in Russia and flooding in Australia. Two other factors foreshadow a grim future for poor countries like Egypt. Wheat and other commodities are priced in dollars. The easy money policy of the Federal Reserve has flooded the world with them, driving prices up. Mandates and massive subsidies for ethanol are causing an alarming proportion of U.S. food production to be burned up in our gas tanks. In 2001, 7 percent of U.S. corn went to ethanol. Last year, the figure was 39 percent."

Whether the reasons behind the conversion of grain into ethanol are well-intentioned, cynical, or corrupt is of little consequence. A growing scarcity of food supplies and an attendant increase in prices harms those who are least able to find affordable alternatives.

The theories of Robert Michels and Vilfredo Pareto, two of James Burnham's *Machiavellians*, could very well provide insight into the Egyptian Revolution. The immediate question is whether this revolution will be a revolution prevented, as in the case of Peter F. Drucker's American counter-revolution, or whether it will be an all-out social revolution of the French, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian varieties. As Pareto noted:

"In the beginning, military, religious, and commercial aristocracies and plutocracies . . . must have constituted parts of the governing elite and sometimes made up the whole of it. The victorious warrior, the prosperous merchant, the opulent plutocrat, was men of such parts, each in his own field, as to be superior to the average individual. Under those circumstances the label corresponded to an actual capacity. But as time goes by, considerable, sometimes very considerable, differences arise between the capacity and the label. . . . Aristocracies do not last. . . . History is a graveyard of aristocracies. . . . They decay not in numbers only. They decay also in quality, in the sense that they lose their vigor, that there is a decline in the proportions of the residues which enabled them to win their power and hold it. The governing class is restored not only in numbers, but . . . in quality, by families rising from the lower classes and bringing with them the vigor and the proportions of residues necessary for keeping themselves in power. . . . Potent cause of disturbance in the equilibrium is the accumulation of superior elements in the lower classes and, conversely, of inferior elements in the higher classes."

Thus the "circulation of elites." In his commentary on Pareto, Lewis Coser adds the following: "When governing or nongoverning elites attempt to close themselves to the influx of newer and more capable elements from the underlying population, when the circulation of elites is impeded, social equilibrium is upset and the social order will decay. Pareto argued that if

the governing elite does not 'find ways to assimilate the exceptional individuals who come to the front in the subject classes,' an imbalance is created in the body politic and the body social until this condition is rectified, either through a new opening of channels of mobility or through violent overthrow of an old ineffectual governing elite by a new one that is capable of governing."

Behold Arab Spring! Nature abhors political vacuums. Machiavelli himself recognized the brutal nature of what is apt to fill such a vacuum. Abraham Lincoln anticipated this problem even in America in his early *Lyceum Address* by envisioning the rise of an American Napoleon. It is times such as these that bring out both the best and the worst of human nature. The question is whether the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of a cause measures up to or falls far short of the worthiness of the cause itself. As another revolutionary, Thomas Paine, put it: "These are the times that try men's souls."