

THE VOICE OF EGYPT AND THE (MISSING) VOICES OF THE WORLD

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The world was mesmerized for 18 days as crowds ebbed and flowed in the historic centers of Cairo and Alexandria. We were reminded over and over that this represented the first break from the millennia of autocracy starting with the pharaohs. The voices bridged social classes, gender and religion. Despite the absence of a Mandela, Ghandi or Martin Luther King the massive crowds sensed the power and in the fact the necessity of non-violence and demonstrated a maturity and self-discipline that was awe-inspiring.

The voices of global leaders and in fact much of the media was less inspiring. Over and over commentators would comment on the lack of democratic traditions and questioned whether this (rather well-dressed, educated and articulate) rabble really could deal with the sophistication and responsibility of freedom and democratic traditions. (One could ask the same question with greater validity about other dominant societies). Leaders of the free world equivocated about whether freedom for Egyptians was really a good thing as they lamented about the impact this might have on their own global priorities, on access to the Suez Canal, on the ability of Israel to act with impunity, on the impact of access to and the price of oil and any number of other self-serving concerns. Leaders of the 'less-than-free-world' in the neighborhood and beyond were for the most part silent as some desperately shuffled deck chairs and most hoped Egypt would again recede to a world of sand-covered memories.

The UN and its principal deliberative organs were rendered mute as its Secretary General discovered just enough voice to come out in favour of less violence. The Security Council, General Assembly and the agencies that are the official guardians of Human Rights were all AWOL. The price of their silence to this point has fortuitously exacted a smaller cost than the silence or ineptitude around Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur and a regrettably longer list. As a former UN official I remind myself and others that the UN is the collective 'we' and as we apportion blame we are really addressing the 'self'.

We need to remind ourselves that the news reports of the moment and of recent years and months were dominated by the pécadillos of the Italian Prime Minister, the collapse of the Irish as well as the golfing tiger, the dark musings of tea-leaf readers, Teflon bankers with seasonally-adjusted memories, the Wiki-leaks soap opera and more. The richest society on earth debates whether it can afford health care for its weakest members, Europe is at the edge of financial disaster and Japan shambles toward terminal old age. We wonder and worry about the 'democratic model' that the Egyptian crowd has in mind – possibly they can demonstrate something new – the world can use it!

President Obama struggled to find his voice as he balanced the presumed need to retain a significantly controlling relationship with Egypt and by extension much of the conservative Arab world with the need to defend Israel and to defend himself at home from the defenders of Israel. His body language at times spoke of the desire to be unequivocally in favour of the voice for freedom that emerged from Tahrir Square but the presumed political realities resulted in a presidential and United States voice that contained too much of the hypocrisy of realpolitik. The only major world leader that carried some principle in her words was Angela Merkel – possibly the memories of her East German and Communist past allowed her to rise somewhat above the self-serving and un-inspiring rest of the pack.

Canada has unfortunately decided to be absent from issues of principle. Prime Minister Harper found time for a belated request that he hoped Egypt could manage the crisis without violence. Coming from a Prime Minister of Canada who has deliberately and publicly criticized the historic role of Canada as a middle and mediating power known for its innovation and contribution to Peacekeeping – this rang more than a little hollow. Canada has opted for an unbalanced role on the Israel-Palestinian question and chosen the more robust and violent involvement in Afghanistan rather than the more nuanced and mediating and historically more effective response appropriate to the size and history of Canada. This has made Canada or at least it's Government an irrelevant sideshow in the current transition in the Arab world.

The news media was not a great deal better. We had 24-hour coverage from CNN but it seemed more designed to create publicity and profile for its news anchors such as Anderson Cooper than to help us understand the evolving situation and role of the key players. A great surprise to all was the aggressive but professional and informative role played by English Al-Jazeera. Since most Americans cannot find this rather interesting channel among the hundreds on their remote (US cable does not offer this choice to its subscribers representing a lack of confidence in the public protestation of the vibrancy of its democracy) - many were advised through email and social media that it was very effective on the internet. Fox chose to find fault with Obama at every turn rather than dissect the 'deal with the devil' after World War I that laid the foundation for a century of dictatorship.

The voices from Tahrir Square emerged above the clutter with a clarity, sophistication and purpose that was as remarkable as the response of the world's media and leadership was disappointing. The events in Tunisia and Egypt are Act I of a play that is yet to be written. The courage and maturity of the youth in the streets is a greater basis for hope than the shrill voices of the media and the silence and sometimes hypocrisy of our global leaders. Stay tuned.

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