

The Arab Spring: what price?

INTRODUCTION

This morning as I drank my first coffee I turned on the radio to the news that the world is rejoicing that the Libyan dictator Qaddafi has been killed. Many are saying that another domino has fallen, following first Tunisia and then Egypt. Now its Syria's and Yemen's turn. All dictators in the Arab world are on notice. Or are they?

Next, after my bowl of porridge, I checked my email and read from friends in Syria that yesterday in Aleppo, the nation's biggest city and commercial hub, a million people turned out for a pro-government rally.

WHY I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SPEAK TO THIS FORUM

I have access to two different news sources about Syria. One is the international media which we all have access to. But I am privileged to have another which is personal experience of living in Syria up until two months ago. I am neither a political scientist nor a journalist. However I lived, worked and travelled in Syria for twenty months. Circumstances meant that I was able to meet and in some cases have friendships with a variety of Syrians, including Protestant pastors, Catholic nuns; Iraqi, Sudanese and Iranian refugees and Muslim local government authorities, business-people, shopkeepers and street-sweepers. Among the foreign community I had close relationships with members of my church which included foreign diplomats, NGO workers, teachers, scientists and domestic workers from every continent of the world.

It was particularly interesting from March this year onwards when the "Arab Spring" spread to Syria to hear reports about Syria on al-Jazeera, CNN and BBC television filed by reporters in neighbouring countries. This is because reporters had been banned from Syria. It was also interesting to compare the reports and opinions I read on the news websites with what I witnessed on the streets and heard from local people. Of course what Syrians said to foreigners like me depended on the level of trust established. This is because political dissent is heavily monitored by the State security officers - 'the secret police'.

SO IS THE ARAB SPRING A GOOD THING...PARTICULARLY FOCUSSED ON SYRIA??

Let's take one step back from the Arab Spring and examine some of our culturally based assumptions:

WHO SAID THIS? "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, etc. Etc."

ANSWER: the General Assembly of the UN affirmed this in 1948. It is the preamble to the UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS which it described as "**a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations...**"

But is it?

Take Article 1. "**All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.**"

(Even someone as radical and idealistic as Jesus Christ did not preach the spirit of universal brotherhood. He only went as far as saying that all people are "neighbours" and we should love them. He saved the designation of brother for those who consciously followed him." Brothers" implies shared values and interests. The Brotherhood of all men or "Fraternité" was one of the catch-cries of the French revolution, and woe betide anyone who wasn't a "brother"...they had a one way trip to the guillotine.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was pushed through the United Nations as a

conscious reaction to the horrors of the Second World War. It was created by countries and individuals who have subscribed to the principles of human rights which evolved in Western Europe and passed on to Anglo countries like USA and Australia over the last two hundred years. It Among others, the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia were not pleased with it. Subsequently separate gatherings of Muslim countries and East Asian countries have met and expressed reservations about it and proposed modifications.

Currently the Arab regimes have been judged by the West and the Western Press on the basis of the UDHR. But there are three weaknesses in this approach.

First, unlike Western civilisations like ours, other civilisations do not make the rights of the individual the bedrock of values and law. Chinese civilisations put harmony and prosperity first. Look at the way Singapore and China crush dissent. Arab civilisations put family honour first. Look at the leniency with which perpetrators of honour killings of family members are treated right across the Arab world.

Second, there is a nauseating inconsistency in the way Western countries and the Western Press deal with human rights issues. For instance the Saudi Arabian regime, which has easily the worst human rights record in the Middle East in terms of treatment of women and religious minorities, has avoided condemnation and punitive measures by the Western countries. (We all know why..it's "the elephant in the room", or the West's "dirty little secret") By contrast the Syrian government, which has an excellent track record in protecting religious minorities, such as Christians, and empowering women, is vilified because they do not tolerate dissent. Yet the religious minorities and many women's groups know that if regimes like Assad's Syria fall then they may be replaced by regimes which seek to implement aspects of Sharia law which will discriminate against them. The Iraq experience and recent developments in Egypt suggest these misgivings are perfectly understandable.

Third, no Arab country has a track record of democracy. It is premature and naive to expect that Libya, Egypt and Tunisia now they have been liberated from dictators will become real democracies. The one common feature of all Arab countries is that they have strongman leaders, whether kings or presidents, who use strong arm tactics to maintain law and order - a bit like Tudor England, Franco's Spain, the Roman Empire and modern-day China. In such regimes ethnic minorities have been oppressed for the sake of national unity, whether it was the Cornish in England, the Basques in Spain, the Jews in the Roman Empire, the Uyghurs in China or the Kurds in Iraq. This is a trade-off for stability which allows economic progress.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FOR SYRIANS?

1. Syrians have had a different political history to Australia and the West. They don't expect a welfare state or see the rights of the individual as the overriding right. To quote a Syrian blogger 'The principle job of the ruler is to protect religion, lives, honour and people's property.'
2. Syrians are afraid of Israel. Syria is still at war with Israel and this will not be resolved until the occupied Golan Heights is returned to Syria. Compulsory military service means that every mother is afraid of her son being killed in a war against Israel.
3. The Syrian economy is weak. There is high unemployment, a crippling drought in the east, the inefficiencies and overregulation of a centrally planned economy, the effect of EU and US sanctions, the recent collapse of the tourist industry.
4. Syrians do not want to end up like Iraq, with sectarian violence and foreign occupation. (When western countries overthrew Saddam Hussein the country deteriorated into civil war. Since Saddam's overthrow in 2003, 30,000 civilians have been injured through suicide bombs and over 12,000 killed by suicide bombs. Overall more than 120,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed since 2003. When Saddam Hussein ruled, people lived in fear of the secret police. Now they live in fear of terrorist attacks. Perhaps the most alarming comparison is that there are

thought to be around only 500,000 Christians remaining in Iraq, down from 1 million when Saddam Hussein was ousted.)

5. Syrians are proud of their secular pluralistic society that includes the participation of women and religious and ethnic minorities

6. Syrians are pan-Arab. Millions of refugees from the Arab world: Palestinians, Sudanese, Iraqis and Somalis have been welcomed and looked after. They see themselves as a lynch-pin of the Arab world and have never forgotten that once in the eighth century and again for a brief time after the First World War century Damascus was the Arab capital.

7. Syrians are confused about the reporting of the unrest in their country. No foreign journalists are allowed in the country. The government monopolises the local media but allows broadcasting by Al Jazeera, CNN and other outlets which are highly critical of the government.

8. Many Syrians still hope and believe that the President is committed to reforms but faces obstacles from inside and outside the regime. It appears that the security agencies (secret police) are not always acting according to his expressed wishes.

9. Syrians are resilient. They have suffered from the consequences of the conflicts with Israel, the failed revolt of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 80s, the Lebanon Civil War, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the first and second Iraq war. Their resilience draws on the two great bedrocks of religion and family.

MY HOPE AND PRAYER FOR SYRIA IS

- that the regime stays and reforms itself so that the Syrian people have a greater sense of ownership of government,
- that Israel returns the occupied Golan heights to Syria, which will be a major step to peace in the Middle East
- that there is no more violent crushing of protests
- that the Muslim brotherhood do not get a hold in Syria
- that Syria prospers so that all young people can have access to higher education
- Finally, that Christians and other minorities continue to be treated with equality under the law and valued as important participants in Syrian society