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A Revolution without Pretense

He came from Farab
He made us laugh
He made us cry
Then passed away
Kamal Nasser

How is it possible to write history while trying to outrun it? Two months ago, the Arab world started on a journey to rebuild itself, a journey that began in city squares and at capital gates. None of the events taking place today are familiar to us. The Arab revolution did not break out in Cairo like many times before, but rather in an unknown Tunisian town. The revolution was not announced from the barracks; it was launched by a vegetable merchant, a poor, sad and hungry man, but an honorable man. The revolution was not led by veterans or political leaders, but rather by unknown young people heading towards the future, detached from the past. The signs were not written in the same lingo or with the same boring words; the slogans were written on cardboard and paper in the handwriting of amateurs and truthful, honest individuals.

Everything was different from the usual professional calls of revolution, the declarations of disaster and the provocations towards cruelty. Amin Maalouf said, “Young people were getting killed and not killing” (1). There were no explosive belts or suicide vests. No speakers drowning the listeners with words borrowed from the era of disappointment, domination and failure. Our dear leader tried to invent a fitting enemy for the journey, and so, he tried to convince the people of az-Zawiyah that Bin Laden was leading the revolution and distributing hallucinogenic pills, but they just laughed as they went on with bravery to face the bullets and take over the abandoned tanks. He seemed so distant in time and place while Libya pushed forward for life, freedom and humanity. Our dear leader did not realize that it was time to take a bow because the play was over and the fans were tired of clapping and preferred unemployment to forced labor.

I was one of the millions of Arabs sadly watching the ruler trying to cling to the degradation of power and the shame of persistence. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was oppressive as he begged for few additional years. Hosni Mubarak was weak as he begged for few months. The great curtains of the Greek Shakespearean theater remained wide open for the Colonel to display his colors and give his speeches, with no one there to cheer him on but his son and successor Saif al-Islam. The Colonel referred to his domestic enemies as dogs; as for his foreign enemies, the Colonel’s son said, “They used to come here and lick our shoes”.

This language was not only used by the Libyan regime towards its dramatic end painted with the color of blood; it has been its official language from the start. This was the line of conduct adopted: a mixture between violence and clowning, between the original, innovative persona wrapped with bright-colored garments and the violent rude person, playing a theatrical role, which he ended up believing and is now unable to give up so that he can go back to living a normal life among his people, a life where he can be kind, compassionate and honest, and reconnecting with his land. The three went into a hole and could not see but the dim lights inside

this hole. As in stories of ancient sultans, Hosni Mubarak became a prisoner trapped within the family walls. His only friend and true companion was his grandson, whose death led him to devastation and desolation. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali became the prisoner of his wife's family and their level of intellect. Muammar Gaddafi stepped into the other side of the mirror from the first moment and is still lurking there, waiting for the final moment to come.

People are naturally inclined towards evil. Mubarak could have stepped back at the right moment and could have kept his title and wealth, without having to face degradation and witness the confiscation of all his properties and funds. Ben Ali could have paved the way for his successor and remained a respected leader in Tunis, where he could have lived close to his family. But Muammar Gaddafi could not have gone about things in any other way: sending his tanks to hunt down the citizens of his country and speaking about germs, while the Libyan people were escorting their deceased to their final resting place, those victims who died at the hands of a "pill popper".

Poor Libya, a story of a country with a sad beginning and a sad ending, but it is on the way of return: return to awareness and consciousness, return as part of the Arab world and return as a member of the family of normal States. The Libyans are finally awake and aware and have nothing to associate their country with Africa but Gaddafi's clothes and the arms of the mercenaries. Among the major advantages of the Arab revolution may be the return of Egypt and Tunis as well: the first is returning from a life of alienation and the second from a life of seclusion; the first has returned after regaining its dignity, and the second has returned with an acquired sense of freedom and salvation from the culture of the municipal police.

This nation has lost so many years under the vicious control of an individual, who demanded to be worshiped but who inflicted slavery. The people have been deprived of their freedom of choice and have always been told that awareness, freedom and progress were nothing but hallucinogenic pills being distributed on the streets. They have always been told that democracy was a "Zionist invention". When they said that Muammar Gaddafi was going to address the people, I said to myself, he has awoken, or has been awakened, and he will finally see the faces of the Libyans and their lost years and will ask their forgiveness for 40 years of deceit, abuse, violations, immorality and distaste.

I thought it would be a reenactment of Mussolini's last speech in Milano Square, or Nicolae Ceausescu's last speech in Timisoara, but unfortunately for the Libyans, he will continue to appear before them and give speeches, but this time as his true self, without even using his vain acting skills, adopting the character of Pol Pot who wanted to destroy Cambodia in order to rebuild it, not for the purpose of bringing it into the modern world but to take it back to the time of rice fields and alligator swamps.

The Arabs discovered something that their fathers did not know during the years of colonialism or the years of independence: freedom! Libya's income from the oil industry is one billion dollars per day while the salary of employees is 250 dinars per month. A Libyan colleague of mine contacted me and I asked him if we could meet in Cairo; he said: "How am I going to get to Cairo? My salary has been the same for 20 years". The World Health Organization says that the people of Libya suffer from anemia (2) while the Colonel is using funds to compensate those

whom Libya took part in killing around the world. Four million Egyptians are living in cemeteries in Cairo (the official number is one and a half million) and forty Egyptians working for Mubarak have money to burn. The Tunisian police are not violating the law by giving Mohammad Al Bou Azizi a permit to sell vegetables; meanwhile, Leila Trabelsi is hiding USD 34 million in the library of Ben Ali – as a first payment. In the human world, the law is used to protect human rights, and in this nation, Al Bou Azizi could not think of another way to confront the ruthlessness of the law but to set himself on fire.

Muammar Gaddafi started out as a lieutenant, presenting himself as a simple Bedouin who was born in the desert, the son of a shepherd, Minyar Gaddafi. And now, he never fails to remind the Libyan people of the oil industry and the artificial river in Libya as if he is behind their existence and development. Democracies have specified the term of a regime so as to prevent the detachment of rulers from reality. Haile Selassie’s treasurer distributed donations to the people at the emperor’s castle every week in his presence; Muammar Gaddafi decided to offer each Libyan citizen USD 400 while it had been announced that he had USD 30 billion in banks in the USA and Euro 20 billion in London.

Where does the road take us from here? Nobody knows. Stability is yet to be established. From Tunis to Yemen: a nation that definitely knows what it does not want and what it wants but still does not know what it can accept. The cards are in the hands of the army in Egypt and Tunis, but the probabilities in Libya and Yemen are scary. The revolutionaries are afraid to go back home in fear of losing what they have gained, but staying in the squares will also prevent them from keeping or achieving anything. The media is bringing the images of change to the world minute by minute. Even Oman has launched its own demonstrations. We used to think that Sultan Qaboos had built a State that had no demands or claims and a working community free of demonstrators, and suddenly, we see the citizens in Sohar demanding raises. The definition of revolution in brief: claiming the right to live. Unsophisticated signs in front of my house read: Leave already, my arms hurt!

- (1) At a seminar for the “Arab Center for the Development of the Rule of Law and Integrity”
- (2) See Randa Haidar “An-Nahar”, Monday 28 February 2011.

Samir Atallah

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