

COMMENTARY

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Bridging the Gulf between Reality and Scholarship in the Middle East

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It was Ken Booth who eloquently noted, “*Our work is words, but our words do not work anymore*”, when discussing the impact of academic scholarship on the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. I believe that with the Jasmine Revolution, we have arrived at a similar Berlin moment. Which Middle East expert predicted the advent of people power just four months ago? The answer is none. Towards the end of last year, I contributed to an edited volume on democratization in the Middle East. Not one of us predicted the tsunami of popular resistance which was to follow a few months later. Indeed, the common theme running through the book was one of evolutionary change.

However, the revolutionary rise of the Arab Street has demonstrated serious deficiencies in our scholarship on the region. This is especially true in South Africa. Despite the varied and intense contacts we have had with the Middle East since 1994, there is not a single academic Middle East Studies Centre in the country. To be frank, Area Studies has largely been ignored by South African universities, resulting in the proliferation of generalists with little area expertise.

We scholars were so concerned with the Israel-Palestinian question that we lost sight of the political disenfranchisement and economic impoverishment of ordinary Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans. We were so concerned with the Islamist bogey that we missed the technological revolution sweeping throughout the Middle East with an increasingly-alienated, educated, unemployed and secular Arab youth who were creating cyber communities of dissent through Facebook, Twitter and the general ‘blogosphere’. As autocrats across the region belatedly woke

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up to the threat posed by these new technologies and tried to curb their penetration in their societies, they found it an impossible task to do in a globalizing world.

Attempts to shut down Al Jazeera resulted in the Doha-based satellite television station simply switching to other frequencies and continuing its broadcasts. Similarly, an attempt to shut down Twitter resulted in this social networking site partnering with Google and resulting in people in Tahrir Square, Green Square and Pearl Square using mobile phones and landlines to phone in their “Tweets”. Recognizing the hopelessness of attempting to shut down these sites, the Egyptian military has now chosen to launch its own Facebook and Twitter accounts to engage with citizens. Despite the hugely significant impact of these new technologies on the polity, there is not a single module on Technology and Politics in Political Science courses in South Africa! To put it differently then, scholarship lagged behind the unfolding realities on the ground.

As we watched Tunisia’s Zein Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak make their ungraceful exits from the centre stage in their respective countries, we are currently witnessing the spectacle of a defiant Muammar Gaddafi vowing that he will fight to the end and die a martyr on Libyan soil. In a rambling interview with the media, Gaddafi insisted that his people loved him and that the popular revolution taking place was the work of youth on drugs—narcotics supplied by Al Qaeda! What makes someone adopt such an attitude? This goes to the heart of political psychology—the fastest growing sub-discipline of Political Science in the United States. Yet in South Africa, there is no dedicated module on Political Psychology. At best, passing mention is made of this within existing modules.

The Jasmine Revolution has challenged scholarship in other ways too. Scholars who study international organizations focus a great deal on the formal structures and functioning of these bodies. Yet an interesting article in the *Sunday Times*¹ pointed out that one reason for the much delayed and weak response from the African Union to the unfolding crisis in the Arab world could be the money received by top officials in this body from the Brother Leader in Tripoli. For scholars studying international organizations, then, the challenge must be to understand the informal networks contributing to an organization’s functioning.

For those studying democratization, we need to reconsider what we view as civil society as families, clans, tribes, and cyber-communities inter-connected in their fight against authoritarian rule. The Jasmine Revolution also raises deeper theoretical questions as to whether the much-maligned Francis Fukuyama would have the last laugh after all. At the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama penned his *End of History and the Last Man*. This proposed that we have entered an era which has witnessed the triumph of liberal democracy where no other ideology would be able to challenge it for supremacy. Despite the persistence of Neo-Nazi and fascist fringe groups in Europe and the existence of radical leftists in parts of South America and Asia, recent

¹ *Sunday Times*, 27 February 2011.

developments would suggest that these too are weakening organizationally as well as losing their ideological appeal. Maoists in Nepal are increasingly part of formal political structures as opposed to challenging those structures from without. Similarly in the Middle East, the Green Movement challenges the Islamism of the Ayatollahs on the streets of Tehran, whilst the Arab youth, through these popular uprisings, are challenging both the authoritarian discourses of the incumbents and the totalitarian discourses of the Islamists. In the process, the people of the Middle East are proving that liberal democracy is a universal value, not a Western one. Fukuyama might well be proven right!

If we are to bridge the divide between scholarship and empirical reality, what is needed are dedicated area studies programmes on the Middle East as well as the introduction of new modules like Technology and Politics and Political Psychology within existing degree programmes. There is also a pressing need for a greater emphasis on informal power structures as opposed to the focus only being on formal, visible structures and processes. Crucially, the issue of language competence—Arabic, Hebrew and Farsi— would also be need to be included if we are to understand an already-complex region.

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