

Commentary

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Women are at the vanguard of nonviolence

[Chibli Mallat](#) | The Daily Star

In the Middle East, elections in troubled times have confirmed the rising tide of nationalist and religious extremism.

In Egypt, Amnesty International warned two weeks before the massacre committed last August at Rabaa al-Adawiyya square by the security forces that such action would constitute a grave breach of human rights law. Brutality continues in the shape of a series of show trials that will tarnish the Egyptian judiciary for decades.

This atmosphere of fear paved the way for Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's presidential bid, with the military having hijacked the popular, nonviolent revolution which removed the increasingly authoritarian President Mohammad Morsi from power. The July 2013 removal of Morsi by crowds more numerous than those during the removal of President Hosni Mubarak in January 2011 was again hijacked by military officers. They took over the revolutionary movement which was strongly rooted in the call for a civil state, not a military or religious state.

In Iraq, the results from the parliamentary elections are not reassuring. It will take an inordinate amount of work for the opposition to prevent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki from becoming prime minister for a third time. The opposition has coalesced into opposition to Maliki, and has rightly tagged him as a dictator. I have met Maliki briefly, and am afraid he has turned into a minor replica of Saddam Hussein. Against a promise made publically in 2009 that he would not seek a second term, he is now fighting tooth and nail for a third one. If Maliki remains at the helm in Iraq we will see a continuation of the Sunni-Shiite civil war in the country, which will only further fan the flames of a tragic, medieval rift across the region.

A recent article by Dexter Filkins in The New Yorker very effectively described Iraq's dramatic descent into cronyism, sectarianism and violence under Maliki. Even Maliki's close adviser and the

head of his Cabinet, Tarek Najm, appears to have abandoned him because of his nepotism and violence.

Nor are Egypt and Iraq anomalies in the region. In both Algeria and in Syria, presidential elections have been used to sustain contested autocratic leaderships. It is important to identify the significance of this tide, in which dictators, using brutal methods, are reinforcing their hold on Arab societies.

There is little hope offered by the established democracies to reverse this. In the United States the isolationist mood under President Barack Obama will likely not recede for the remainder of his tenure, and may endure even after he leaves office in 2016. Obama's recent speech at West Point was both defensive and hollow. In American history, isolationist and internationalist cycles tend to follow each other for long stretches.

American imperialism has not been benign, especially for Palestine since the 1960s, and Latin America in the 1970s, but the U.S. government was the focus of a worldwide promise of Wilsonian values after the nonviolent collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites in 1989. This was a missed occasion to try to fulfill the perpetual peace of which Immanuel Kant wrote in 1795. Yet massacres remained unpunished, as in Rwanda in 1994, and more recently Obama has been perceived as someone either outfoxed or ignored by the Russian and Syrian dictators.

Nor is the European Union, with another isolationist engine at its helm in the shape of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's government, about to step in to help advance democratic values beyond paltry, poorly-defined "soft power." The victory of isolationist right-wing groups in the recent European elections will not bolster such values either, whether in Europe or abroad.

Still, there is a tide that we saw clearly at work in the Middle East beginning in 2011: Nonviolent revolution. Societies struggled to protect their daily life from the violence of religious and nationalist extremists pushed by opportunistic leaders. Extremists have a way of setting the agenda, but the revolutionary tide of nonviolence will win in the medium to long term. The question is whether we can make this happen more quickly, and the example of Tunisia gives us hope. Yet for the tide of nonviolent revolution to prevail, two things must happen.

The first is that the opposition to dictators and would-be dictators must remain unified for as long as possible. In Egypt, the collapse of revolutionary unity in 2011 had much to do with the elections. The positive tide that removed Mubarak was sidetracked by the opposition's inability to remain united.

In Iraq, I am confident that Maliki will be unable to complete his third term, even if he secures one. In Syria and Algeria the countries' presidents have zero legitimacy, and would be living on borrowed time if their oppositions were more united.

Second, and most importantly, there is an undercurrent of nonviolence which we have failed to discern, constituted by the women of the Middle East. It is in Syria where female dissidents are an extraordinary reservoir of hope. They are a key factor which democrats and human rights militants in the world need to support.

Women are far more efficient than men, and, like the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who opposed the Argentinean dictatorship, it was the women of Marja who organized the first demonstration against Assad rule on March 16, 2011. Women have sustained the infrastructure of civil society that feeds and protects the weakest in Syria. The moment women no longer demonstrate bodes ill for revolutions. The restoration and recognition of their leadership will help the nonviolent tide to rise again. Their role in Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia has been a novelty both tangible and substantial.

Thugs thrive on violence. They mostly fear people who stand against them peacefully. Women are increasingly becoming the vanguard of such resistance, and their leadership needs to be recognized as the future of our societies, starting with Syria.

Chibli Mallat is a lawyer and law professor. His book, "Philosophy of Nonviolence: Revolution, Constitution and Justice Beyond the Middle East," is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.

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