

THE PHARAOHS OF INDIA

## Redefining Democracy

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When will the Indian public rise up by the millions against its corrupt rulers *a la* Egypt or Tunisia? When will the Indian sub-continent witness a mass upsurge against exploitation of the majority by a decadent minority elite? How long will the Indian people continue to put up with rising prices, grinding poverty, rampant disease and loot of the country by its leaders?

These are some of the questions being repeatedly asked by thousands of Indians clued into international news, in universities, colleges on internet chat sessions ever since the inspiring winds of change started blowing in the Arab world early this year.

The questions are quite natural, given the great discontent that has been swelling up among the people of India for many years now. Problem is, they may be way off the mark in their hopes about what is happening in the Arab world as also their understanding of what India is really all about.

To begin with, though there is no doubt the ouster of dictators from both Egypt and Tunisia are historical events; it is too early to say whether they are really revolutions that will transform the lives of their ordinary folk. The devil as they say lies in the details and doubts remain as to what the current upheaval will mean in specific terms of social welfare or democratic and political rights.

In both countries for example the transition to new regimes have been quite carefully orchestrated by the military, the same institution holding power behind the previous one. The history of betrayal of revolutions by clever generals spouting populist rhetoric, while forging a new dictatorship, is too long in the region for anyone to forget.

Secondly, the United States has welcomed the changes in both countries, another bad sign, given the evil role it has played in propping up one dictator after the other in the region. US politicians championing 'Liberty and Freedom', have as much credibility as say MacDonald's promoting a healthy and balanced diet. The truth is that Uncle Sam does not mind - as Henry Kissinger's colourfully put it once—any bastard in power as long as it is ensured he is 'our bastard'.

Thirdly, even if Egypt and Tunisia transform into liberal democracies with regular elections, separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary at best they will start looking like the many democracies in the developing world. As long as the rules governing accumulation and inheritance of wealth are not radically changed to ensure more equitable distribution of resources, power too will always remain concentrated in a few hands.

If the protestors in Arab world are not careful and persistent enough the danger is they could in fact become like India, the world's 'biggest democracy'!

India's own big, united national movement against concentrated despotism happened during the time of their fight against British colonial rule. The presence of a single, identifiable enemy helped to mobilise a diverse range of forces around the sub-continent,

even though the tragic Partition of India and creation of Pakistan underscored its great weaknesses too.

The momentum of that grand struggle spawned the trappings of Indian democracy capped by a liberal and progressive Constitution, something that the Egyptians and Tunisians are demanding now. There can be no doubt about the importance and achievements of the Indian anti-colonial movement but all that is well and truly over now.

In the past six decades since Independence, slowly but steadily, every modern democratic institution in the country has now been shorn of its original intent or values, degraded and even destroyed by a deadly marriage between unprincipled politics and ill-gotten wealth. A marriage brokered by the vast state machinery of the Indian bureaucracy and police and guaranteed by the third largest standing army in the world.

The educated Indian middle-classes, who could be the guardians of liberal democracy, are too busy feasting at this Big Fat Wedding reception of business and power to take notice. It is an unscrupulous gluttony paid for through the looting of ordinary Indian people, who don't get even the leftovers of this orgy and suffer endlessly, often living inhuman lives or simply curl up and die.

Many are protesting too and what is paradoxical is that while the Indian masses may not be together in one big national movement, everywhere one sees people also continuously protesting against such despotism. Whether it is movements against land grab by corporations, dysfunctional governments, regional discrimination or oppression of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities the Indian public is in permanent but scattered revolt.

They have no single target to vent their ire upon because the targets are too many in a vast and diverse country like India, which is the size of many Egypt and Tunisia put together. There are not one but hundreds of Pharaohs like Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali strewn all around the nation, each running his or her own despotic fiefdom of business or politics or feudal control.

The surface competition among these various Pharaohs as they fight over the loot gives ordinary citizens some space between the legs of the dinosaurs and the illusion that there is still some democracy left in the country. There are multiple cartels of politicians, businessmen, feudal lords and state officials scratching each other's backs.

This is what Indian democracy has become, a coalition of homegrown colonialists fighting over an inherited Empire but carefully ensuring complete impunity to each other. Not a single important politician or businessman or bureaucrat in modern India has ever gone to prison for corruption or cheating the public of their resources or for that matter organizing murderous riots repeatedly.

At the same time India's 1356 prisons are bursting at their seams, overcrowded beyond capacity with over 384,753 prisoners, as per 2008 figures of the National Bureau of Crime. Of these a whopping two thirds are undertrials, the highest proportion of such prisoners anywhere in the world, indicating a complete collapse of the criminal justice system.

Most of these are from the Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities underscoring the racist and discriminatory nature of the current Indian Empire. As Dr Binayak Sen, the well-known health and human rights activist, has pointed out Dalits and Adivasis are also the biggest sufferers of the millions of deaths due to malnutrition that take place in the country every year.

So on top of everything else Indian rulers are also guilty of nothing less than a silent, ongoing genocide, which the world has turned a blind eye to. That Dr Sen is right now in prison, 'convicted' by a Raipur sessions court for 'sedition' and denied bail by the Chhattisgarh High Court is testimony to the hazards that dissidents in India face today for speaking truth to power.

The political trial and conviction of Dr Sen itself, condemned globally, also underscores the rot in the Indian judiciary, which forms the very core of Indian democracy. With a few honorable exceptions the country's judiciary has been reduced to a bunch of folks who have neither head, nor heart, nor conscience, as they slavishly turn the creaking wheels of a colonial legal apparatus for the benefit of their business and political patrons.

So how and when will India change and what does it mean to be inspired by the mass revolts in Egypt, Tunisia or elsewhere against despotism? The answers are not easy as the sheer size and diversity of the Indian subcontinent means the list of grievances and demands is also bound to be long and varied.

But it is possible and indeed imperative to find common grounds for coming together in a nationwide movement also. The themes of this united front have to be economic and social justice, respect for the demands of India's diverse nationalities, an end to the unholy alliance of business and political power and an insistence on turning the Indian state into servants of the people instead of the masters they have become now.

To begin with, a good demand would be for immediate implementation, in both letter and spirit, of the Indian Constitution. As the only widely agreed set of rules to emerge from the Indian freedom movement, safeguarding the Constitution is the key to both achieving and deepening Indian democracy.

Successive Indian government and agencies of the state have been the biggest violators of the Constitution and failed to uphold its principles as evidenced by the widespread poverty, corruption and abuse of fundamental rights in the country. India can indeed be both inspired by Egypt or Tunisia and also become a model for their future only when Indians end the impunity of their own Pharaohs and establish a genuinely democratic Republic NOW.  
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*[source : countercurrents.org]*