

## IS HISTORY A BINDING PRECEDENT?

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It was George Santayana--Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás--who said "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it"; to which Karl Marx presciently appended "the first time as a tragedy, the second as a farce". During the late 1960s, many of us were convinced that our Vietnam misadventure was but a re-enactment of Thucydides' tragic account of the self-immolation of Athens in the Peloponnesian war. The analogy seemed compelling: Persia = Nazi Germany, Athens = USA, Sparta = Soviet Russia, Syracuse = Vietnam.

Our recent entanglement with Islam in South Asia and the Middle East has left me wondering whether it is a tragedy we are re-enacting or a farce. What is more, are the lessons we extract from history just a matter of unearthing *the* right analogy, or is there more? The unfolding "Jasmin Revolution" in Tunisia and its presumed domino-effect in Egypt and beyond suggest there is indeed more.

On the face of it, our national ethos of freedom, democracy and equality pegs our sympathies irrevocably on the side of the rebelling masses. But rebellious masses in the Middle East and South Asia have protracted histories, in the midst of which we have now inserted ourselves in three missionary expeditions--Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. What is more, recent history suggests two more links--Iran and Turkey. Can we learn anything from all these precedents? And if less-than-binding, are they still instructive?

●Iran: To those of us who supported the Iranian opposition's anti-Shah struggle in the 1960s, the Homeini revolution of 1979 was an eye-opener. The liberal democrats at the forefront were rudely booted out. What began as a fight for freedom and democracy bloomed into a repressive dictatorship of the Ayatollas, where the rights of women, minorities, religions--and indeed of the voting majority and of Islamic and non-Islamic neighbors alike--are trampled daily by regressive, exterminatory Shi'a Islam.

●Turkey: A benevolent military dictatorship overthrew of the Ottomans, with Gen. Mustapha Kamal Atatürk--Father-of-the-Turks, exterminator of the Armenians--laying the foundations for this most wonderful of oxymorons--secular Islam. Transparently anti-democratic, with the bulk of the Anatolian peasantry left out of the game, the government was dominated by the Western-inclined Istanbul elite, with the Generals pulling the strings and, periodically, the plug. By righteous instincts, we agitated for democracy in Turkey--till we got it; with an Islamist government that believes neither in the separation of church and state nor in the rights of women and minorities, and whose nostalgic foreign policy tends towards Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Alawi (Shiite) Syrian dictatorship.

●Iraq: We booted out Saddam and made the place safe for democracy. What we got for our pain--and our dead--is a Shiite-dominated regime closely linked to Iran's Ayatollahs, with scant commitment to our cherished values and not an ounce of gratitude.

●Afghanistan: Behold a county that has never been unified linguistically, ethnically or culturally--except under repressive thugs, into which we moved in all our innocence to settle scores with Al Qaeda. We wound up staying over for a delusional nation-building

mission. But what are the building blocks for an Afghani nationhood? Ten major tribes that never got along? The repressive past, endogenous or Imperial, with nary a trace of civil, pluralistic rule-of-law? A country whose sole unifying force remains, as it has been for over one millennium, Islam? In the present context, to which our anti-Soviet adventure in the 1980's contributed mightily, the common denominator of Afghanistan *are* the Taliban.

●Pakistan: An educated, colonially-trained Punjabi minority, our presumed allies, has been ruling the country since independence; a repressive, corrupt, thinly disguised military dictatorship. Now we are after them to democratize. But who will inherit the coming democracy? The Pashtun Taliban of North Vaziristan? Their Baluchi brethren in Quetta and Karachi?

This is, in part, the historical context that illuminates Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and the entire Arabian Peninsula. It is a context where electoral democracy has so far translated into Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In the name of our cherished ideals, shall we now lean harder on our faithful allies to rid their downtrodden masses of all the corrupt, repressive dynastic cliques--themselves? And then?

The sad truth about the oppressed masses in the Middle East and South Asia is that their rebellions are just as dynamic and unpredictable as any other social upheaval. The spark that ignited Egypt in Tahrir Square seems to have been supplied by a distinct minority--young, educated middle class who appear to share our commitment to civic, non-theocratic society, equality of gender and caste and the guaranteed rights of minorities. This is, substantially, the very same visionary minority that ignited both the French (1789) and Russian (1917) revolutions--and was summarily liquidated for its trouble. But the truly oppressed Moslem masses in South Asia and the Middle East live, largely, in a countryside that is profoundly infused with, and dominated by, the mullas and their Kur'an. And the mullas' searing vision of the future is of a repressive Medieval Islam, a vision that bears little resemblance to our civic, pluralistic, democratic ethos.

When democracy only means majority rule; when it is shorn of the redemptive power of constitutional guarantees and equality under the law; when it is devoid of our secular civic tradition that harkens back two and a half millennia to the crucibles of Greece and Rome and the European Enlightenment; what is the revolution likely to hatch in the current Islamic context? The truth is, we don't know. But the truth is also, we have seen some ugly recent precedents.

Are historical precedents binding? And if not, can we still learn from history? I suspect we can, in spite of our own checkered historical record. But if we are to finally extract some coherence, to our profit, from the dusty record of the past, we had better concede that history is a meandering, confusing, oft-contradictory account of how we all got to where we are today and of how deeply the present is rooted in the past.

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