

The Arab Revolutions and Us: Start Quaking in Your Boots!

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In his latest debate on the France 2 TV channel, discussion show anchor Yves Calvi expressed alarm about the possible rise of Islamism in Egypt and Tunisia. However, here we will consider how, if we leave the emotionally-charged media coverage to one side and attempt to analyse the contradictions between the West and the Arab world rationally, these revolutions are less of a threat than an example for us Westerners to follow. We have the opportunity to create a fairer world. Why be afraid?

Astonishing. On Monday 7th February, the title of the discussion programme Mots croisés, ('Cross words'), presented by Yves Calvi on France 2, was "The Arab revolutions and us". While no-one dared challenge the legitimacy of the popular moments setting Tunisia, Egypt and other countries in the region alight, the presenter and some of his guests nevertheless raised the Islamist spectre, a sure-fire way to send a shiver down viewers' spines. There was talk of "fears of an Iranian scenario", "enthusiasm for freedom but also a sense of anxiety" or indeed "prudent rather than unconditional support". With great subtlety, Calvi also asked whether democracy was "playing into the hands of the fundamentalists". Special praise also goes to prominent 'intellectual' Alain Finkielkraut who, true to form, managed to slip in his view of "a phenomenon heading more towards a clash of civilisations than the establishment of a democracy looking to provide its people with a dignified and decent life."

Should Westerners be afraid then of the Arab revolutions ? Is the Near and Middle East, indeed the whole world, at risk of plunging into chaos ? Are we about to be overrun by bearded burqa-wielding fanatics, in an assault on civilised Europe ? To answer these questions, we need first to analyse the profound contradictions between the West and the Arab world. As we shall see, the differences have very little to do with a heated clash of civilisations, and are very much linked to a system based on the quest for maximum profit which has led the West to pillage and oppress the Arab peoples. Naturally, Calvi and his guests refrained from analysing these systems, preferring rather to base their discussions on irrational fears — so much better for viewing ratings. It also means we can seek to subjugate the savages and the fundamentalists without once calling ourselves into question.

The Iranian scenario

The possibility of an Iranian scenario was mentioned several times during the programme, the constant subtext being that this would be the worst possible outcome for the Egyptian revolution. Such is the magic of televised democratic debate : no need to spell out the fact that Iran is evil incarnate — everyone is already well aware of this. The debate can therefore take place within an accepted framework based on tacit consensus.

But why exactly would an Iranian scenario be the worst of all possible worlds ? Is Iran a dangerous country ? Has it attacked any country anywhere in the world ? Never. In fact, Calvi could just as easily have asked if the United States were a dangerous country. The response would have been yes and no. Yes, for Uncle Sam has carried out more military offensives than any other country on the planet.

Statistically, there is therefore far more risk of being attacked one day by the US than by Iran. Having said that, Uncle Sam is not really that dangerous, as since World War II, it has emerged victorious from precisely none of its armed conflicts apart from the invasion of Grenada in 1983.

So how to explain this demonisation of Iran ? Perhaps because it's an Islamic dictatorship and its President Ahmedinejad is a ferocious anti-Semite. The only snag with these arguments is that they are false.

First of all, is Iran a dictatorship ? Clearly, within the consensual framework of televised debate, it is common knowledge that Ahmedinejad fixed the last elections. But any mildly serious analysis of the situation in Iran, or indeed the opinion polls carried out by the Rockefeller family think tank (who can hardly be accused of unconditional support for Ahmadinejad) undermine this received truth. While the Islamic state is no haven of civil liberties, it is hardly the terrible dictatorship one would have us believe.

Is Iran not nevertheless a bastion of anti-Semitism ? Feel free to travel to this Middle Eastern country and discuss the issue with the sizeable Jewish community there, in order to see how false this assertion is. The Jewish community even has parliamentary representatives. As anti-Semitic dictatorships go, it could be worse. The trick is to avoid confusing opposition to the Israeli government with hatred of Jews.

Granted, Iran is an Islamic state. But is this really a problem for Westerners ? The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is also an Islamic state, but this has never bothered us too much. Quite the contrary — just a few months ago the United States announced it was about to sign a record arms deal with the country, totalling some \$60 billion. If Islamism represented a real danger for the West, would the administration of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Barack Obama be seeking to sell the Saudis F-15 jets and combat helicopters with a price tag capable of eradicating hunger world-wide ?

Note also that on the dictatorship and anti-Semitism fronts, Iran need take no lessons from Saudi Arabia — a feudal, anachronistic kingdom reigned by an absolute monarchy — where ; the royal family monopolises the country's wealth, political demonstrations are strictly forbidden and Jews have no right to practise their faith.

If he really wanted to frighten us, Yves Calvi could evoke the Saudi scenario. But the fact is that questions of democracy, anti-Semitism and Islamism are not really the heart of the matter. The reason Iran is the devil incarnate is because it conducts its policy independent of the Western powers. And if we never hear talk of Saudi Arabia, it is because this country is one of Washington's special partners.

Explaining the anger

Now we are getting to the core issues. If democratic governments were to emerge in the

Arab world, truly representing the aspirations of their peoples, we Westerners might have reason to fear that these governments would feel a certain resentment towards us. Not because we would come face to face with religious fanatics but rather with lucid people who might just resent the fact that we have imposed corrupt and violent dictators on them for many years.

If Westerners therefore want to build equitable and peaceful relationships with the Arab world, we should not expect its peoples to go on accepting the dictators we choose for them. We have to attack the root of the problem, here in the West, by asking : why must we impose dictatorships on the Third World to defend our interests ?

In fact, the answer is found in our economic system, based as it is on the headlong pursuit of maximum profits. In neo-liberal capitalism, companies are subject to merciless competition. A pitiless world, in which you have to make maximum profit to avoid being eliminated or swallowed up by your competitors. Such is the fate of the weakest, who disappear, leaving monopolies or oligopolies to pick up the pieces. These economic behemoths hold the real power in our societies and are engaged in a no-holds-barred competition on a global scale. In the context of this struggle, the great capitalist powers need their multinationals to guarantee easy access to raw materials, exploit cheap labour, find outlets for the capital they accumulate and finally to control strategic zones for the development of trade.

Dominating Third World countries has always allowed Western powers to attain these objectives. It also explains why they set off in centuries past to colonise the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. And why they continue today to subjugate these countries in a less crude but equally despicable manner, thanks mostly to the shadowy principles of the neo-liberal Holy Trinity : the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. Amen. The West reigns supreme.

But the problem is that the savages and fundamentalists are not always inclined to give us free access to their petrol, minerals, gas and anything else we can use to make money. Some are even reluctant to work in execrable conditions for \$2 a day and have the audacity to grumble when they find the products we sell them too expensive.

Which is where dictators come in. Logically speaking, a democratic government, which represented the interests of its population, would not accept multinationals pillaging its country and subjugating its citizens. It has thus been necessary to place corrupt leaders at the head of these Third World countries, ready to give our multinationals free rein, as long as their palms are greased. To maintain this system in place and pre-empt any form of opposition, Western powers have been happy to finance the repressive apparatus of the dictators, making it easier to understand why Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered her support to Ben Ali as his forces were shooting at protesters.

If you find this difficult to believe, look around at what has happened these past few years. The US and Europe have replaced Lumumba with Mobuto in Africa, Allende with Pinochet in Latin America, Mossadegh with Shah Mohamed Reza in the Middle East. The list is long, but that's not all.

Economic wars

Occasionally, Western powers fail to calmly install a puppet leader at the head of a country. Or the horse they bet on decides no longer to play by the rules. In such cases, the West immediately starts beating the war drums — a field in which the US specialises. Their economy depends largely on the military-industrial complex. War is a very lucrative pursuit.

Washington thus attacked Iraq in 2003 to lay hands on its oil. Clearly, such a *casus belli* could hardly be proclaimed aloud. Colin Powell thus began by waving his little phial in a press conference, claiming irrefutable proof that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Then, when this was exposed, Washington claimed that the Iraqi president was linked to the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Those with even a little knowledge of the Arab world soon drew the US authorities' attention to the fact that this pretext held little more water than the first. Finally, George W. Bush took a big breath, looked out at the horizon and declared that the US was attacking Iraq to bring democracy to the Iraqi people. Such was the irrefutable argument Bush used to send large numbers of young people to be killed on the front. The truth is that all wars are economic.

In fact, if Bush had really been concerned about world democracy, there would have been no need for him to go running as far as Iraq. He could just as easily paid a little attention to the Colombian paramilitaries murdering union members and human rights activists just a hop away. Or if that was too much, he could at least have refrained from supporting a coup d'état against Manuel Zelaya, the democratically elected president of Honduras.

The fact is that democracy has nothing to do with any of this and that for US multinationals, it was more lucrative to attack Iraq than a country such as Colombia — already economically submissive. That's just too bad for the victims of white phosphorus bombs outlawed by international conventions. It's too bad for those deprived of water and electricity, It's too bad for the 5 million orphans counted in Iraq in 2008. The multinationals have to make a profit and don't take kindly to resistance.

Or take another economic war : Afghanistan. Officially, the United States set out to overthrow the regime of the Taliban as they were supporting Bin Laden. In reality, the Afghan government offered to have this Public Enemy No 1 tried by an Islamic court immediately following September 11, based on evidence the Bush administration would provide. Clearly this approach would have torpedoed the true US objective : to get rid of a regime they themselves had brought to power a few years earlier but which refused to allow Texan company Unocal to develop a pipeline project in the country. When the puppets no longer obey, the missiles begin to fly.

Our revolution

If we take a historical look at the coups d'état we have fomented, the dictators we have imposed and the bombs we have dropped, we can therefore begin to understand why the citizens of the Arab world might not be too well disposed towards us.

Nevertheless we should have no fears about the emergence of democracy in Tunisia, Egypt or other countries in the region. First of all because the Islamist spectre being conjured up by Yves Calvi is itself a product of the dictatorship and oppression Muslim populations have endured. Second, because the profound contradictions which seem to divide the West and the Arab world are based essentially on a system of exploitation which we Westerners have instituted to monopolise the riches of the Third World. This bone of contention is of our own

making, so it's up to us to attack the root of the problem.

The Arab revolutions should not be seen as a threat to our Western values but rather as an opportunity to form more equitable relationships, based on mutual respect. Far from worrying us, the Arab revolutions should inspire us. Only when we decide to do battle with this system based on the headlong pursuit of maximum profits will we be able to establish fair and equitable relations.

Hubert Védrine, former Foreign Minister and guest on Mots Croisés that day, kept a low profile on the subject of the fierce determination of the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt to get rid of dictatorship once and for all. No wonder — it was this same spirited defender of human rights who declared five years ago that the peoples of the South were not yet mature enough for democracy. This is simply false, as the Arab people have amply proved these past few days, risking their lives to overthrow the dictatorship. In reality, it is the West and its multinationals who are not ready to accept democracy in the Arab world. And the West will never be ready as long as it has not undergone its own democratic revolution, as long as it has not overturned this system which digs a wider gap between rich and poor with each passing day, oppresses its people and destroys the planet. Until that time, you can rely on Yves Calvi to send shivers up your spine late at night.

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