

After the Arab Spring: will leaders lead leaders?

In the wake of revolution, world governments face new challenges in helping to establish fairer power structures and protecting the human rights of all

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In 2011, when G8 and G20 leaders met in France, the events in North Africa dubbed an ‘Arab Spring’ captured imaginations. The question then was how the leaders of the world’s largest economies could help to foster stable, democratic transitions from authoritarianism. The mood was one of genuine sympathy with the people of Tunisia and Egypt, and of grave concern for the fate of those who took to the streets to demand change in Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen.

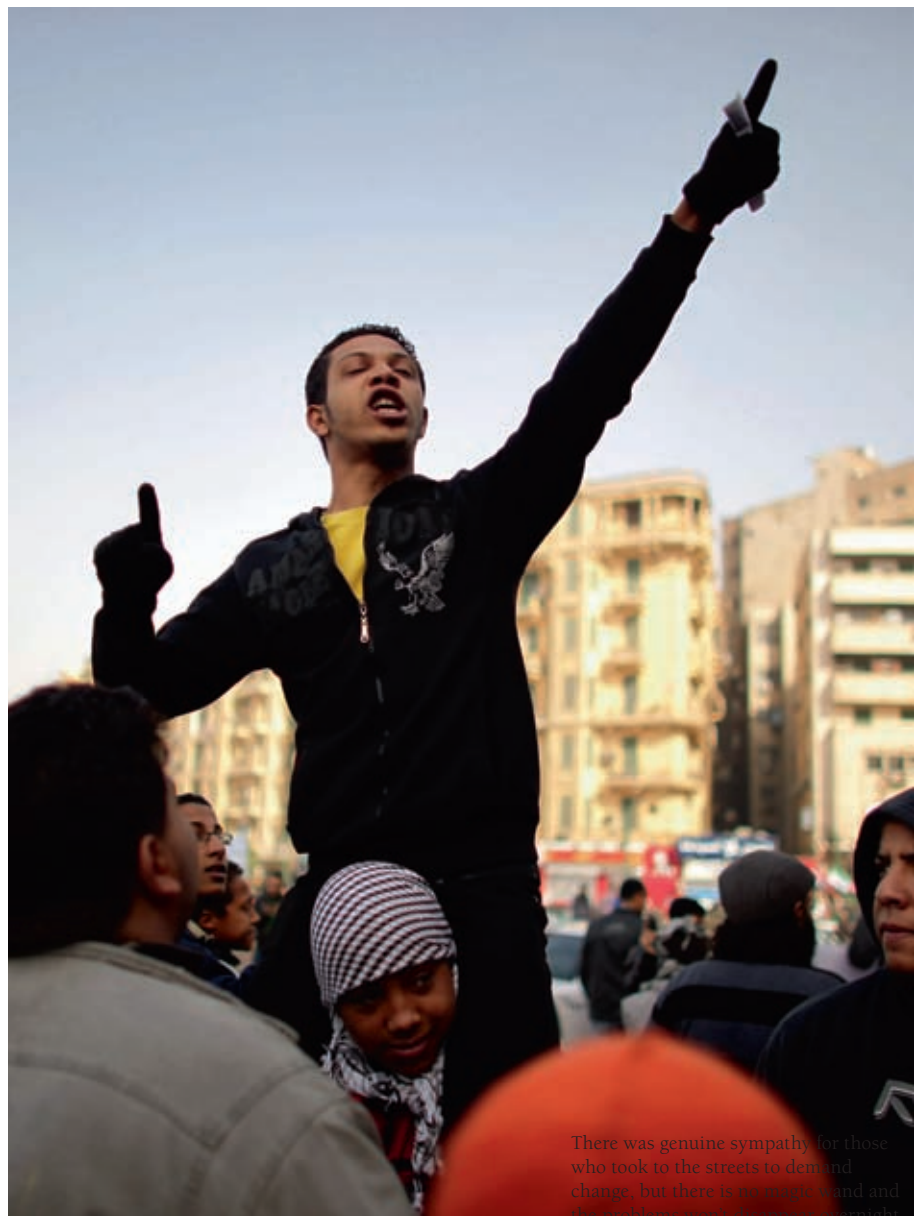
A year later, as the G8 meets in the United States and Mexico hosts the G20, the sympathy remains, but the concerns are mounting. In the wake of political upheaval in the region, human freedom and basic rights of free expression and assembly, conscience and confession have yet to be secured. The violent persecution of religious and ethnic minorities has been met with silence from those best positioned to come to power.

Continued violence

In Egypt, where protestors in Tahrir Square in 2011 captured the hearts of people around the world, the outbreak of violence against Coptic Christians has been shocking. Few among the victors in parliamentary elections have spoken out against this, even as the country prepares for the presidential elections in May.

Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron persuaded Barack Obama to support an

If economic prosperity is to return to the countries of the Arab Spring, the world’s leading economies must not stand idly by until economic sanctions are the only option



There was genuine sympathy for those who took to the streets to demand change, but there is no magic wand and the problems won't disappear overnight.

intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Libya, to which Canada, Italy and Turkey contributed.

The Gaddafi regime fell, but the country is now dominated by regional militias that threaten to undermine attempts to hold elections this year.

Many of the G8 and G20 leaders have condemned the violence in Syria as Bashar Assad unleashed the armed forces against protestors and civilian populations. The recent mission of United Nations special envoy (and former UN secretary-general) Kofi Annan had wide support among the G20 members, but made little progress.

A healthy and open civil society

For a gathering of the world's largest economies, the denouement of the Arab Spring may seem to be a strange concern. After all, the combined economies of Libya, Egypt and Syria amounted to just three-tenths of one per cent of the global economy in 2010, according to World Bank figures.

Yet this is precisely why, at last year's meetings, G8 and G20 leaders took such an interest in the Arab Spring: decades of authoritarian misrule has stunted

economic growth and development in these once-rich countries. The hope of 2011 was that, with better governments that respected human rights and freedoms,

economic reform and growth would be possible, beginning the slow process of lifting millions out of poverty.

This hope was not misplaced. In Central and Eastern Europe, in Latin America, in Africa and in Asia the transition to democratic pluralism supported by a healthy and open civil society helped to boost the economic fortunes of households across those regions. According to the International Monetary Fund, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita rose in Korea from \$4,570, in current prices, when democracy was restored in 1988 to \$22,777 in 2011.

In Poland, GDP per capita rose from \$1,675 in 1990 to \$13,539 in 2011. And the economic growth prospects of many G20 members rely on the dynamism of people liberated by the rule of law and respect for basic economic freedoms.

How can the leaders of the G8 and G20 foster this kind of positive economic outcome in the Arab world? By speaking out for human rights and economic freedom during the post-authoritarian transitions where turmoil can cloud perspectives and even democratic activists can lose their way. Current leaders must lead new leaders forward.

The evidence for this prescription can be found in the testimony of the dissidents and democratic activists who were eyewitnesses to past transitions, and know their pitfalls.

After leaving the White House, former US president George W Bush began an effort to capture the testimony of those activists in the Freedom Collection at his presidential library in Dallas, Texas. This growing repository of video, audio and text records illustrates how important the voices of leaders inside and outside government speaking to principle can be to those grappling with the hard issues of establishing new governments.

In her interview for the Freedom Collection, Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf discussed the challenges that she faced when assuming office as Africa's first democratically elected female head of state: "We inherited a devastated country, dysfunctional institutions, destroyed infrastructure – a debt overhang, a debt-distressed country. Everything was a priority. People think that their lives are going to change immediately, and that there's going to be a magic wand."

There are similar expectations today in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, where the initial hopes for miraculous economic transitions are being replaced with rather more sombre perspectives.

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political struggles of the region. The old power structures of the past do not disappear overnight.

Sihem Bensedrine, a longtime democracy and human rights activist from Tunisia, notes, "But we have the right to do mistakes, and to change, and to correct our mistakes. We are learning from people from abroad. We are learning from other experiences – from Poles, from Hungarians, from South Africans, from Latin Americans. We are trying to learn how they did this transition. Because it's not easy at all, the old regime is still there.

"Because the people against this revolution are still in the administration. And we also need [to know] how to do it."

Revolutions are, of course, a messy business. This is part of the darker side of human nature, and common to past transitions as participants contributing their stories to the Freedom Collection admit.

Yet if economic prosperity is to return to the countries of the Arab Spring, the world's leading economies must not stand idly by until conditions worsen and economic sanctions are the only option.

Speaking out for human freedom is less costly in the short and medium terms, as well as the long run. As a contribution from the G8 and G20 leaders to the future leaders of the Arab world, it is also priceless. ■



Thousands of Tunisians rallied in celebration of the first anniversary of the popular uprising that toppled their long-standing dictator

