

Courting the next generation

It has been painful to watch the anguished contortions of Western governments in their deliberations on whether and for how long to send armed forces to Libya and other countries that are currently on fire.

PUBLISHED: THU 21 APR 2011, 10:13 PM | UPDATED: TUE 7 APR 2015, 9:44 AM

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Modern-day Cassandras question the necessity, feasibility, affordability and political expediency of a military intervention. Of course, the fact that some of today's enemies were yesterday's friends – consider the CIA's close cooperation with Colonel Gaddafi's intelligence service to obtain information on Al Qaeda's North African operations – muddled the discussions, as did a Cold War-like friend and foe mindset that makes the distinction between action in Libya and inaction in Bahrain seem somewhat arbitrary and self-serving. While it is silly to expect the Western powers to ignore their Realpolitik imperatives, there is one insidious and particularly vexing argument that seems to find its way into every debate on whether to push for regime change when civilians are being massacred. It is the magical argument of a power vacuum that would follow the ouster of the current strongmen, usually embellished by dramatic references to some apocalyptic tribal Armageddon. This power vacuum myth is based on the perverse logic that it would be perilous to remove a tyrant who for decades suppressed the development of civil society and independent institutions, because the very lack of civil society and independent institutions would be awfully destabilising once the tyrant was gone.

Especially in countries with which the West has maintained diplomatic or even friendly relations, this line of reasoning is tremendously cynical. Not a week goes by without new initiatives sprouting in the halls of State Department and foreign ministries, which proclaim ambitious goals such as institution building, capacity development or the promotion of civil society. They all claim to nurture the next generation of leaders and viable political alternatives by championing a "stakeholder society." If even a fraction of these lofty initiatives had been successful, we would not be confronted with a dearth of leadership substitutes, conveniently mischaracterised as a power vacuum to justify nonintervention. For years, my Egyptian friend Ahmed, an economics professor and political agnostic, has

been telling me how he and his colleagues in academia are routinely shut out of reform initiatives of foreign development agencies: "They always come with grand announcements, but in the end it is always the same well-connected and usually unqualified cast of characters who gets to participate, especially if the initiatives involve fancy trips to Washington, London or Paris." Rather than create goodwill, these initiatives generate resentment and alienate those they were supposed to help, as Ahmed laments: "Foreign experts are given sweetheart contracts with public funds so that they can import their own flawed models, while ignoring local expertise and the diverse fabric of our society. It's insulting, and what's worse, it's stupid."

Instead of having real and genuine partners on the ground, we are now left to fantasize about a different screenplay in the erupting Arab states, if only these initiatives had focused more on real and effective empowerment and skills transfer to broader parts of society, and less on self-cannibalising conferences and symposia to which just the same privileged class has access. With all the brilliance and wisdom that reigns in foreign service and development agencies, surely it might be possible to incorporate programmes that reach a broader segment of society and its informal leaders. This "day-after generation," as Ahmed calls it, is craving real support and recognition, and it is in dire need of all forms of state governance tools to rebuild these ravaged countries.

One thing this next generation of leaders does not need is outside sympathy and sentimental encouragement to fight for freedom, as Ahmed notes acerbically: "The West loves to cheer us on, but instead of empowering us with the ability to contribute to our nations, everyone comes here with fancy rhetoric and hollow initiatives that accomplish nothing other than delivering more perks to those in power. At least don't patronize us by romanticising our uprisings." Ahmed bristles at the many initiatives still pouring in that keep recycling the same buzzwords such as capacity development and entrepreneurship, with fancy labels like excellence, good governance and leadership sprinkled in for good measure. "The problem is that these initiatives don't reach us," Ahmed adds, "and therefore they affect neither our lives nor the negative way we perceive the US and the West. When these regimes fall, as they all do sooner or later, we are suddenly everyone's darling, but it is too little too late, because the relationships were not established years ago, when it would have mattered. When I teach my students game theory, I use these initiatives to illustrate a zero-sum game." Quite an accolade, and how sad, really, given all the resources put into these efforts and all the noise they make.

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