

# The Arab spring: what's next?

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## TRIGGER EVENTS

Whether the trigger event was the self-immolation of Mohamed Abouzizi in Tunisia December 17, 2010 or the earlier wikileaks cables describing Tunisia as run by a mafia-esque elite<sup>i</sup> or the rap music of Hamada Ben Amor – known as El Général, the Middle-East has irrevocably changed. Dictators in Tunisia and Egypt have been overthrown and the stage has been set for potentially deeper economic and cultural change. As of writing, Libya is now in a civil war, Bahrain's leadership survives through mercenary violence, renting the armed forces of Saudi Arabia, Yemen is in the midst of regime change, while Morocco, Jordan, and last of all Syria, remain uncertain. The start of this change was in Iran, a year back,<sup>ii</sup> when the rule of Ali Khamenei appeared to be ending. But by using surveillance technologies provided by European corporations, shutting down the internet, bullets and the fascism of the Revolutionary Guards, Khamenei prevailed. The Iranian spring, it appears will need to wait for many more winters. However, if macrohistorians Ibn Khaldun, Pitrim Sorokin and P.R. Sarkar<sup>iii</sup> are correct, the rot has already set in, and Khamenei's successor will find it far more difficult to keep the youth at bay. A pendulum shift is likely under way away from the religious right in Iran, most likely leading to an integrated modern and ideational society.

But before we can speculate on alternative trajectories, we need to ask: what types of revolutionary changes are these? Are they closer to the American, the Iranian, the Yugoslav, or the People's power of the Philippines? Using the approach articulated by macrohistorian, P. R. Sarkar, I analyse the nature of these revolutions and forecast possible futures.

## LIBERTY

Citizens have commented that the nature of the new leadership is not crucial as long as the government is democratically elected. Says, Egyptian student, Khaled Kamel, "I don't care who ends up running the country, as long as I have the ability to change them if I don't like them."<sup>iv</sup> The issue is not just electoral reform but the desire to influence the future, to recover personal agency.

What has been surprising is that the old narratives used by long time leaders such as imperialism, re-colonization and westernization have not stuck. While these were important to the post WW 11 generation, they are now considered tired excuses being used by aging tyrants to stay in power. Conspiracy theories – the ever powerful distant "foreign hand", in the land that created them - suddenly have no traction even though some leaders continue to spout them.

More swaying are the demands for liberty, freedom and autonomy – the American ideals. As a few decades ago, in Tiananmen Square, it was a replica of the Statue of Liberty that stood tall. The

sacrifice of young people has been made possible by the new social media. Facebook, assert many young people in the Arab world, has made peaceful protest possible. Al-Jazeera, the Arab cable station, has been instrumental in making daily Arab politics more transparent. Governments are far less able to control not just the litany of news events, but the meanings people give to them. Social media has allowed the revolution to not quickly die out since regimes can target leaders through assassination. As with the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic by, among others, the youth group Otpur, by having no clear leadership, no particular person could be targeted. Social media have made what took years of careful planning occur in weekends, accelerating the rate of change.

These have also been moral revolutions – fights against corruption and cronyism that have become entangled in Arab economies. Individuals have sought a better life. Globalization via the internet exposed young people in the Arab world to a world that is near but far. Possible, but not quite. This is the classic “revolution of rising expectations”. And while Syria, Bahrain and Iran engage in the torture of protesters, they are unable to hide their actions. The world’s eyes are on them.

Along with a new vision of the future, supportive technologies, dramatic individual sacrifice, there is demographic destiny. Writes social commentator, Fareed Zakaria: “The central, underlying feature of the Middle-East's crisis is a massive youth bulge. About 60% of the region's population is under 30. These millions of young people have aspirations that need to be fulfilled, and the regimes in place right now show little ability to do so.”<sup>v</sup>

The Youth quake has led to Iranian futurist Vahid Motlagh<sup>vi</sup> to argue that the dam has burst. No amount of buttressing the old dam can stop the flow of water. With young people jobless, climate change impacting food prices<sup>vii</sup>, the global financial crisis hurting the possibility of jobs overseas (and remittances sent home), and crony capitalism ensuring wealth is not spread, except through State handouts, something had to give.

The democratic impulse was not the only possibility. More cynical anticipations expected the young to migrate to Bin Ladenism, but the Arab spring was his worst nightmare. Instead of an attack on the West and western technologies, the West is admired for its transparency. Hidden politics has reached its dead end in the Arab world. Islamic extremism has not eventuated; instead, youth want what everyone wants – health, education, housing, clean air and water, and the possibility for meaningful employment or income generation – a better life for their children. And traditional closeted Arab governments have not been able to provide this future.

## WHAT’S NEXT

While tyrants have been overthrown, many Arab leaders have decided to use brutal force to quell the disturbances. A politics of fear has entered. The great game of nations conspiring against each other – Iran against Saudi Arabia; Europe against Islam - returns as an overarching reading of events, and potential future. Others see the democratic opening as not a movement toward a new renaissance but as a way to position their fundamentalist politics, to challenge the nation-state through narrow religious readings of history and future.

In Sarkar’s work, social reality consists of four classes and states in history. The worker/shudra (present oriented, dominated by the environment), the warrior/ksattriya (honour and past focused, seeks to dominate the environment), the intellectual/vipra (idea oriented, seeks to understand the

world through religion, philosophy and science, the study of space and time) and the accumulator of capital/vaeshyan (future focused, uses the other classes to create economic value). Each era organically leads to the next, until the capitalist era dominates, and all classes find the heightening inequity unbearable. A chaotic worker revolution or evolution results which is then followed by the discipline of the warrior-based state. However, the cycle can be changed, and the exploitation phases of the cycle can be shortened and the innovation phases enhanced through wise leadership that integrates all aspects of the social cycle: the service dimension of labour, the protective dimension of the warrior; the truth seeking dimensions of the intellectual and the economic value creating dimension of the trader/investor.

Using Sarkar theory of the social cycle, encapsulated in his broader theory titled PROUT, the Arab spring is a vipran – an intellectual idea-based - revolution. Instead of the vipran religious revolution, this has been the vipran “Magna Carta” revolution with a focus on more rights for more people. Youth are inspired by the European enlightenment for reducing the power of the monarch, to begin with. Warrior power has stayed far too long; instead of protecting the weak it has become carnivorous, eating its own children. While it was important in the initial decolonization process, it is now decrepit. The honour-clan warrior based culture in the Middle-East is nearing its end.

Over time, using Sarkar’s theory,<sup>viii</sup> the vipran will give way to the vaeshyan, to an economic revolution. However, given that these vipran revolutions are occurring in the global context of a world vaeshyan system, a world capitalist system, the social cycle will move rapidly. And then overtime, in an ideal best case situation-scenario, all the social classes will transform<sup>ix</sup> creating a global, simultaneous revolution of equity and aspiration, a better life for all – in a word, PROUT – prosperity that does not harm others: a world economy where basic needs are met and there are incentives to create innovation.<sup>x</sup>

In the meantime though, along with resistance from Arab rulers – the old men<sup>xi</sup> - we can expect a renaissance of art and culture, of music, particularly hybrid forms of art- east and west.<sup>xii</sup> Already, one of the inspiring figures of the Tunisian revolution has been the rapper, El Général. He challenged the old story. Listen to his lyrics: “Mr President, your people are dying/People are eating rubbish/Look at what is happening/Misereries everywhere, Mr. President/I talk with no fear/Although I know I will get only trouble/I see injustice everywhere.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Now is the time to create the new story, before the system congeals again and change becomes difficult.

#### NEOHUMANISM AS AN INTERVENTION

But taking a broader macro view, in the Proutist perspective positive change will come. Along with the social cycle, the natural evolutionary movement from worker (labour, chaotic power) to warrior (disciplined heroic power) to intellectual (ideational power, of religious and scientific types) to economic (innovation and accumulation) eras, Sarkar offers his theory of neohumanism.<sup>xiv</sup>

In this approach, a revolution can have a greater degree of longer lasting success, of meeting deeper and broader needs, if it moves from ego to family to religious to national to humanistic and then to neohumanistic sentiments. For the Arab revolutions to endure over the long run, they must not reverse from the nation-state to ethnic (clan based) and religious divisions (sunni versus shia) nor

even stay confined at the national level but move to a global and planetary level - not just a revolution **against** tyranny but a revolution for Gaia, for the planet. This is longer term and more subtle, a revolution of the spirit. Certainly the new social media technologies make it possible by globalizing the self, but more than technology is required- a broadening of the mind. Merely adding more information to one's data base is not enough, the RAM, the hard drive must be expanded so it can hold more. Old pathways in the brain need to be reconstructed and new paths that light up the parts of the brain related to compassion need to be opened up. This involves daily meditative practice, an inner revolution. Neohumanism thus, while modernist in that it challenges feudal social relations, has a distinct spiritual mystical dimension to it: evolutionary inner expansion goes hand in hand with social identity expansion.

If a neohumanistic approach does not develop, then we anticipate the current Iranian model – freedom dramatically curtailed and the use of foreign threats and the infamous fifth column to stay in power.

### ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Another future – and reading of the Arab spring - is the Filipino People's power revolution of 1986. While Ferdinand Marcos is long gone, the crony capitalism he engineered on the foundation of feudalism has not been dismantled. The person was removed but economic mismanagement and the deep culture ("bow down to the Great Man") remained. The next phases of the revolution must thus move from a desire to end tyranny to an inner and outer renaissance of culture. More so, new economic organizations need to be created.<sup>xv</sup> These can be agencies that lend money to Arab youth, that engage in regional infrastructure development, vocational education, microcredit loans, and that reduce the size of the defence forces and overtime move to regional economic cooperation. While external investment is welcome, the cooperative structure is the wisest. Traditional clan based society already excels at emotional intelligence, thus making cooperatives likely to succeed. Cooperatives would enhance wealth and ensure that wealth is shared, that money keeps on rolling instead of being stuck with the few unable to catalyse wealth creation. Cooperatives would also protect against the worst effects of external crisis. Without an economic revolution, political freedom may simply lead to underdevelopment as in some Eastern European countries, who threw off the chokehold of communism only to find themselves unable to economically survive. Prior to the entering the Vaeshyan era, if the Arab world can move to a neohumanistic approach or least soften the divisions of nations, ethnicities and religious fundamentalism, then it will have a major competitive advantage as social inclusion leads to higher productivity. In this potential ideational renaissance, the goal must be economic experimentation and institutional innovation, using the new technologies to create alternative models of wealth generation.

But none of this will be possible without gender equity. Women played a pivotal role in the Arab spring. Unfortunately, writes Carla Power, women have now been told to go home.<sup>xvi</sup> For Sarkar, a bird cannot fly without two wings, nor can a revolution. As gender cooperation and equity is enhanced – through culture and political opportunities – productivity will increase: more jobs, more wealth and more freedom of mobility. The pervasive tyranny that has been central to the Arab world has been patriarchy, while we are far away from ending that deep civilizational code, the next steps will not occur without women and men both playing major roles.<sup>xvii</sup>

### GALLOPING TIME, EXPONENTIAL INFLUENCE

Sarkar had commented that we have entered a time when time no longer moves like a slow cart but rather it gallops<sup>xviii</sup>, and each action does not lead to mere linear consequences but exponential impacts. History is being made. The Middle-East and North Africa, let us hope, will never be the same. Many of these nations already guarantee basic minimum necessities, but often only for their clan, their group. Regime change means a loss of income for some and a gain for others, thus the fight to death to remain in state power. As well, the treatment of foreign workers remains feudal. Over time, I hope that the youth quake that is occurring their will unleash energies that will spread neohumanism and lead to an eventual system where prosperity is not just for the few but for all.

#### FOUR ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Based on the above analysis, four alternative futures for the Arab Spring are possible.

First is the American model. This is a long term developmental process where modernization, individualism and market economy will develop. The first phase was freedom from external powers, now the second phase is freedom for internal dictators. We can anticipate in this future: more civil society, more positive market reforms, more electoral democracy. However, equity will likely remain an issue, and backsliding into the forces of totalitarianism is possible.

Second is the Filipino model and future. In this, the dictator is overthrown but as there is no change in economy or deep culture, a malaise sets in. Revolution leads to a destabilization of the polity. Crony capitalism continues and a long slow decline results. With peak-oil near, the Middle-East slides back to peripheral status.

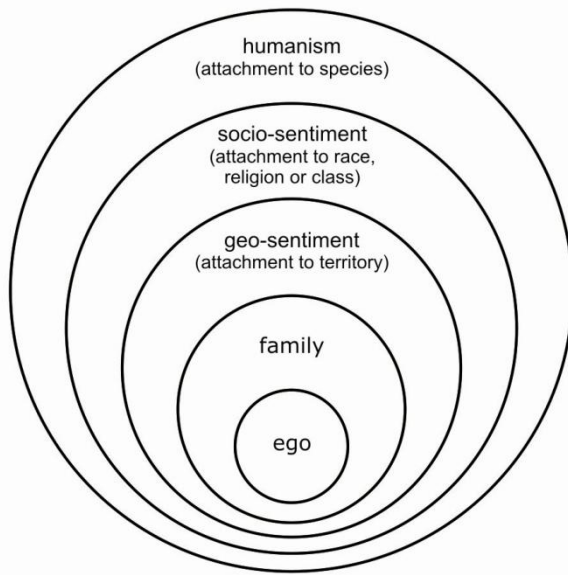
A third scenario is the Iran future. The liberators become the oppressors or seeing it in the context of the past few years, the revolution fails and surveillance, oppression becomes the norm. The priests use the warriors stay in power, not giving scope to the other classes.

The fourth scenario is the Proutist one. Certainly idealistic, this seeks political revolution followed by economic revolution (cooperatives, economic democracy) and then a cultural renaissance. Inner change – the syncretic mystical part of all religions – is as important as external change. But will real-politics – the great game (Iran versus Saudi Arabia, the role of Israel not to mention Turkey and the Great powers) – intervene making idealism a zero-sum position.

#### EXPANSION

Which future will result, we cannot know. However, the aspirations for greater freedom and expansion are there. As El Général says in his “ode to Arab revolution”: Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, all must be liberated/Long live Free Tunisia.<sup>xix</sup> For the idealistic Prout vision, it is: Long live a free planet.

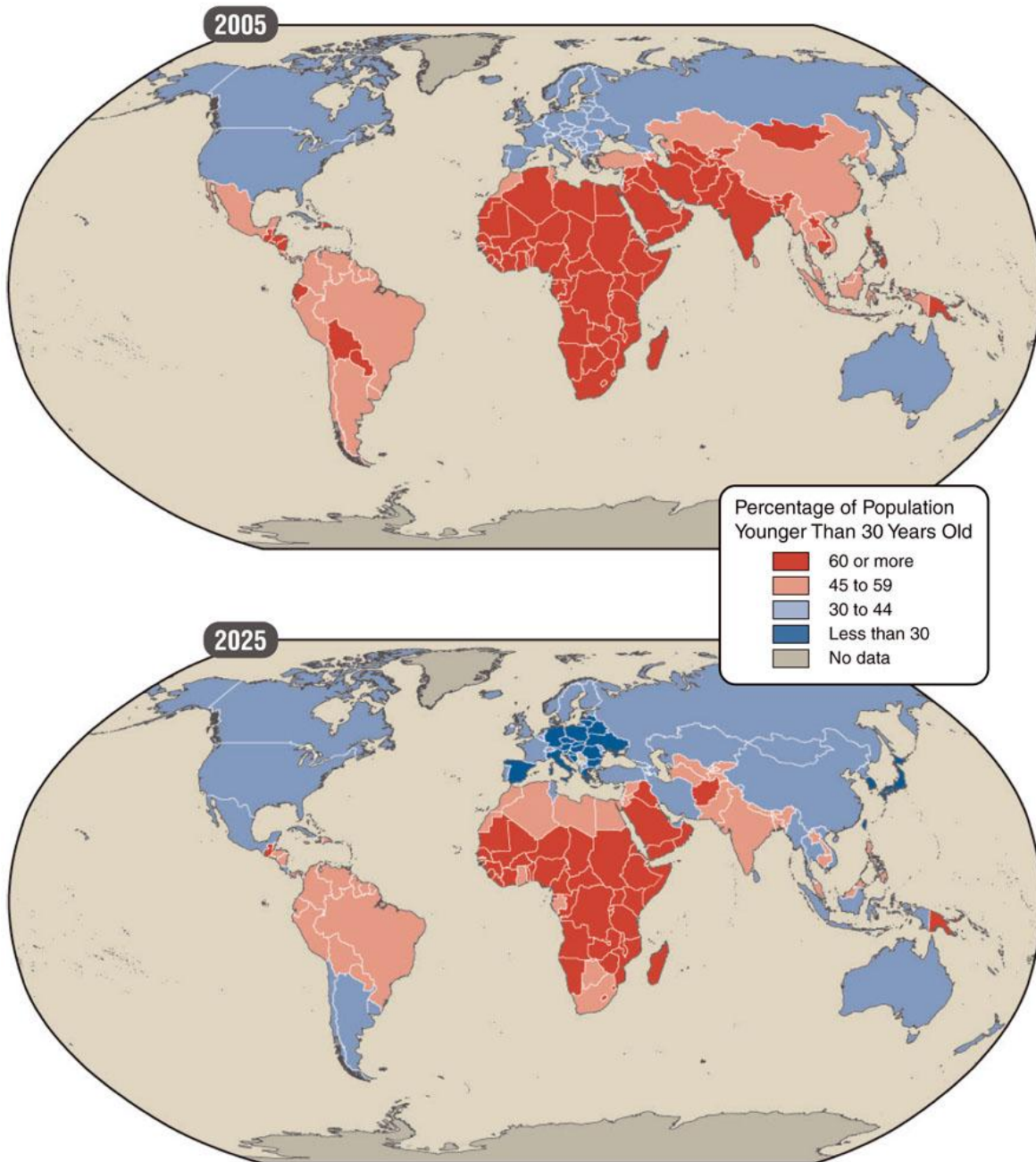
**Neohumanism**  
(love and respect for all beings,  
animate and inanimate, in the universe)



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**World Age Structure, 2005 and Projected 2025**



Source: US Census data.

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- <sup>i</sup> Elizabeth Dickinson, "the First WikiLeaks Revolution"  
[http://wikileaks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/13/wikileaks\\_and\\_the\\_tunisia\\_protests](http://wikileaks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/13/wikileaks_and_the_tunisia_protests) (Accessed 15 April 2011).
- <sup>ii</sup> Dada Krsnasevananda argues that the Arab spring began with the Cedar revolution in Lebanon in 2005. Email, 17 April 2011.
- <sup>iii</sup> Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*. Westport, Ct. Praeger, 1997.
- <sup>iv</sup> Bobby Ghosh, "Rage, rap and revolution," *Time* (28 February 2011), 23.
- <sup>v</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "Why it's different this time," *Time* (28 February 2011), 18.
- <sup>vi</sup> Personal communication on facebook. April 2011
- <sup>vii</sup> Sarah Johnstone and Jeffry Mazo, *Global Warming and the Arab Spring*. *Survival* (Vol 53, No 2, 2011), 11-17.
- <sup>viii</sup> See Sohail Inayatullah, *Understanding Sarkar*. Leiden, Brill, 2002.
- <sup>ix</sup> This for Sarkar is the sadvipra transformation: individuals enhancing their leadership qualities through the ability to serve others, protect others, innovate and create economic value. See Dada Maheshvarananda, *After Capitalism: Prout's vision of a new world*. Washington, DC. Proutist Universal Publications, 2003. Also see, Sohail Inayatullah, *Situating Sarkar: Tantra, Macrohistory and Alternative Futures*. Maleny, Gurukul, 1999. Both present visions of a post-capitalist future. See as well, Graeme Taylor, *Evolution's Edge: the coming collapse and transformation of our world*. Gabriola Island, Canada, New Society Publishers, 2008.
- <sup>x</sup> I am indebted to Dada Krsnasevananda for this term. Personal communication. March 9, 2011.
- <sup>xi</sup> And their younger clones, as in for example, Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria
- <sup>xii</sup> Sarkar placing the head of Renaissance University in Istanbul certainly seems, as ever, prescient.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ghosh, 20.
- <sup>xiv</sup> P.R. Sarkar, *Neohumanism: the liberation of intellect*. Tiljila, Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1982.
- <sup>xv</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, "The Arab World's Agents of Change," *New York Times* (28 March 2011).  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/opinion/29iht-edsachs29.html>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Carla Power, "Thanks for the Revolution: Now go home," *Time* (4 April 2011), 32.
- <sup>xvii</sup> For frameworks that are possible within the Islamic paradigm, see the works of Fatima Mernissi.
- <sup>xviii</sup> P.R. Sarkar, "The Coming Ice Age," in *Prout in a Nutshell*, Part 17. Tiljila, Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1987, 55.
- <sup>xix</sup> <http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2011/1/21/tunisia-music-video-el-generals-latest-song-egypt-algeria-li.html> (Accessed 16 April 2011).