

Celebrating people's uprisings in Algeria and Sudan



THE vigil of hundreds and thousands of peaceful protesters on the streets of Algeria and Sudan speaks of the same sense of collective disenfranchisement, juxtaposed with a desperate optimism, that lit the signal fires

of change in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011. It took 18 days for the dramatic fall of Hosni Mubarak to play out. The winds of the Arab Spring, freshly minted, were now free to usher in a new era of democracy and prosperity for Egypt, building a free, fair and equitable society. It was, of course, a false dawn. The new democratically elected government of Mohamed Morsi lasted a little more than a year.

While Morsi's short reign was marred by criticisms and failures, including economic mismanagement and his government's inability to address fuel shortages, what sealed Morsi's fate was his attempt to Islamise the constitution of Egypt and his government's pro-Palestine foreign policy guided by the ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood. The radical Sunni-Islamist Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Zionist ideology wasn't meant to have gone down well with the West, and no wonder America fell short of calling the military coup in Egypt, a coup.

The fall of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood to the hands of the military in 2014 resembles, to a large extent, the fall of another party in North Africa in the face of military coercion two decades ago. The 1992 military coup in Algeria, which decimated the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) after the party's victory in the initial legislative balloting, in the first multi-party national election since the country's independence in 1962, was not surprising either, given that FIS shared the religious and political ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood.



People carry national flags during a protest to push for the removal of the current political structure, in Algiers, Algeria, April 5, 2019.
PHOTO: REUTERS/RAMZI BOUDINA

The mighty United States only expressed "concern" about the military's action in Algeria, without condemning the coup—a similar tone the US had adopted after the military coup staged in Egypt to oust Morsi. And despite speculations of a slash in US aid to Egypt in the aftermath of the coup d'état, the aid flow from America remained constant at USD 1.45 billion in 2014 and USD 1.5 billion in 2015, with USD 1.3 billion going into Foreign Military Financing (FMF) on both years, and the rest to the Economic Support Fund (ESF).

And amidst Barack Obama's call "on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible through an inclusive

and transparent process," Egypt's former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, took the reins of the country in 2014, after a "landslide" victory in the presidential election. And now, an amendment referendum—passed with an incredible 89 percent yeas—has cleared the constitutional path for the incumbent to remain in power potentially till 2030, while concentrating even more state power in his person.

While consolidating his power base at home, Mr el-Sisi has not been neglecting his duty as the current Chair of the African Union. On April 23, the day Egyptian officials were busy declaring the results of the referendum, the victorious president Mr el-Sisi was hosting an emergency summit

of the African leaders to find solutions to the ongoing crises in neighbouring Libya and Sudan. Emerging from the summit, Sisi deadpanned the media: the African Union leaders have agreed to address the crisis in Sudan by working to "quickly restore the constitutional system through a political democratic process led and managed by the Sudanese themselves."

Thanks to the caution adopted by the Sudanese military, talks with the civilian protesters are still going on, regarding the formation of a civilian transition governing council. Happily, it seems the Sudanese military were more wont to pay heed to Mr Sisi's words, and not his actions.

The current military hierarchy and interim government in Algeria have been demonstrating similar caution, as peaceful demonstrations are ongoing in Algiers, calling for the removal of the ruling elites, including the current head of the interim ruling body, Abdelkader Bensalah. The military, unlike in similar situations in other countries, did not disperse the demonstrators, and if anything, the Algerian army chief Lieutenant-General Ahmed Gaed Salah promised to persecute the corrupt politicians and their allies, and followed through on his words with arrests of five business tycoons, including the wealthiest businessman in the country. Earlier in April, the incapacitated Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Algeria's president of 20 years, had stepped down following protests against his decision to run for a fifth term in office.

Of course, military intervention—beneficial, well-intentioned or otherwise—cannot be a prescription for the development of resilient democratic institutions for any nation. Yet the protests in Sudan and Algeria have as much to do with economic pragmatism as with political idealism.

The protests come at a time when both countries are reeling from the economic fallout from the oil crash of 2014. Both countries survive on their oil revenues, with oil and gas revenues accounting for 90

percent of Algeria's export earnings, and the oil bust of 2014 had hit both countries hard. In fact, Sudan had been hit earlier in 2011, when its oil revenues hit a rock bottom after the secession of its oil-rich south—its revenues falling down to a bare one percent equivalent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017 from an almost 16 percent in 2007. The protests in Sudan were initially sparked, in December last year, by the tripling of bread prices in the city of Atbara which soon spread to other parts of the country, including the capital Khartoum, where the protests took on a more revolutionary fervour.

Increased military expenditure in the face of economic meltdown—according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, military expenditure in Sudan and Algeria, as a share of total government expenditure, were among the highest in the world in 2017—and consequently falling public investments are perhaps the key points of discontent that have led to the silent majority of both nations finding their voice.

If there is anything the Arab Spring has shown us, it is perhaps this: it is not enough for the silent majority to find their voice to be able to affect meaningful change. The masses might be able to topple a government, but dismantling exploitative economic and political institutions, built and nurtured over decades by foreign powers, and replacing them with inclusive ones, is an entirely different kettle.

Building inclusive societies in these nations would require, among other things, goodwill and concerted efforts of all the stakeholders, both at home and around the globe. It would also require compromises, for all sides. Will the people of Sudan and Algeria, the ruling elites, and the leaders of the free world find the necessary conviction to accept painful short-term disruptions to build a more equitable future?

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Schooling without learning is a wasted opportunity



BANGLADESH has made a space for itself in the region. Over the last few decades, there has been stable economic growth underpinned by increased investments for human development, poverty alleviation, increased access to microcredit, improved service delivery of social sectors including education and health. Despite lifting a vast majority of people out of poverty, however, there are still millions of people, especially children, who lack access to basic amenities, clean drinking water, two nutritious meals a day and basic schooling. This points to a complex set of challenges which can be overcome with the right policies, actionable plans, proper resource allocation and a bold commitment to making a difference for those in need.

I have had the pleasure of working in the vibrant education sector of Bangladesh over the last three years. During the course of my time here, I visited over sixteen districts to take a close look at the conditions of schools, observe classrooms, talk to teachers, head teachers, upazila education officials and parents, especially mothers. During each field visit, I enjoyed interacting with children the most. Sitting at the end of a classroom while silently observing the teaching and learning processes, or asking children about their goals and ambitions in life, it was a unique, eye-opening experience. It made me realise how vastly different the reality is for a child born in an urban, educated, affluent family from that of one born into a poor household

with illiterate parents, in a remote, hard-to-reach village. The potential to learn and grow is the same in both cases but opportunities are strikingly different.

We all know that education plays a transformative role in life. There are tons of data, evidence and well-established research to show that education vastly improves economic opportunities not just for the individual alone, but also for the family, community, society and country at large. It leads to longer, healthier lives with enhanced well-being and quality of life. Education creates building blocks for inclusive institutions, re-enforce positive relations in society; therefore, people with higher education have stronger beliefs about democracy and have higher rates of political participation. While Bangladesh has made excellent progress in enrolling children in schools, it still has a long way to go to make its education system work for all children. Following are some of the key education issues that the country needs to tackle to give its children the best opportunities to fulfil their potential.

It is important to recognise that schooling is not the same as learning, and the schools today are failing the learners as minimal learning is taking place inside the four walls of classrooms. Schooling without learning is a wasted opportunity and contributes to the learning crisis. There are four immediate factors that stop learning from happening: i) unskilled and demotivated teachers, ii) unprepared learners, iii) weak school management, and iv) school inputs that don't affect teaching and learning. Reading proficiency is low in most countries and research from Bangladesh shows that children who cannot learn to read properly



PHOTO: ANDREW BIRAJ/REUTERS

by grade 2 struggle to catch up for the rest of their school days, often dropping out at some point. Poor children learn the least here which hurts them the most and further limits their prospects of socio-economic development.

The great schooling expansion in Bangladesh during the 90s provided many children with access to education, but it has also left behind far too many. Poverty, gender, ethnicity, disability, geography and income are factors that explain most schooling disparities. School completion is higher for rich and urban families whereas for the poor parents, schooling requires trade-offs. Girls from poorer households often have the lowest rates of educational

attainment which, in the context of this country, compounds the multi-faceted challenge of early marriages.

Bangladesh needs to focus on making its education system work for learning at school. Measures for improving learning need to guide action; tried and tested measures for learning need to illuminate all parts of the education system. Schools need to measure gaps in learning, track progress of learners, test students when corrective action is still possible, and balance the stakes to facilitate action and leverage public resources for learning. Bangladesh has a rich tradition of public libraries and a book-reading culture at home and in communities which need to be tapped into as a resource to promote learning

for all. Teachers need to be adequately trained in child-centred teaching approaches, have increased contact hours with students, and be motivated to do an honest job. Having met with dozens of teachers and head teachers across the country, I am very optimistic about the dedication of teachers. With the right support, they can play an instrumental role in ensuring a strong foundation of quality learning for all children.

Finally, the education system needs to be aligned with student learning and not remain an input-driven structure only. Community-led school management committees are already very active in most districts I have visited. The level of interest shown by community elders and mothers is particularly high as they really value education. They need to play a strategic role here. There needs to be school-based budgeting and leadership in the spirit of decentralisation and empowerment. Providing quality education and producing learning is complex but investments of time, resources and efforts to change what happens inside a classroom is worth it, for children are the future. They belong to the nation and they need to be prepared to take this great country to new heights in knowledge, economy, science and technology.

I would like to wish this amazing country all the best in its road ahead for ensuring quality education for all children with a quote by Emma Goldman, "No one has yet realised the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure."

Bushra Zulfiqar is Director of Education at Save the Children in Bangladesh.

QUOTABLE Quote

KARL MARX
(1818-1883)
German economist, journalist and socialist revolutionary.

Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

Across	39 Not obtuse	18 Shut with a bang
1 Really good time	41 Straighten	19 Sleuth played by Lorre
6 Eiffel Tower city	45 Unicycle part	20 Coll.'s kin
11 Third planet	46 Site	21 Trails
12 Hollywood deal maker	47 Fizzy drinks	24 Foyer
13 Houston player	48 Know-it-all's challenge	25 TV's Falco
14 Take care of		26 Decays
15 Foot or furlong	DOWN	28 Holiday sparklers
17 Near the ground	1 Arthur of "Maude"	31 Convent resident
18 Imports illegally	2 - Vegas	34 Tropical fruit
22 Drawn out	3 Museum focus	35 Hound's hands
23 Music's Vandross	4 Tries hard	36 Cave sound
27 Crooked	5 Skimpy swimwear	37 Regretted
29 Madrid museum	6 Old layout work	40 Pot brew
30 Occupy a new home	7 Grow older	42 Pen filler
32 Stepped down	8 Lively folk dance	43 Tooth surrounder
33 Gets cozy	9 Wild about	44 Maiden name
35 Apiece	10 Putting away	
38 Tight-fitting	16 Surfing	lead-in

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

R	O	A	D	S	B	E	A	D	S
A	R	R	O	W	R	A	V	E	L
C	A	I	N	E	A	R	E	N	A
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