

What happens when democracy fails

Lebanon, Chile, Iraq: desperate times call for desperate measures

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

WITH mass protests breaking out across a number of world capitals, it would seem the last few months have been unkind to the world. People in Sudan, Algeria, Hong Kong, Egypt and more recently in Iraq, Chile and Lebanon, have been forced to take to the streets seeking justice

and equality, and respite from corrupt governing systems.

Yet, rocked by messy and violent protests of desperate people resorting to desperate measures to raise their collective voices against disparity and inequality, the world is fast waking up to an unpleasant fact—although we are seeing its manifestation now, the actual unkindness has been going on since long. In fact, it has been enshrined in an insidious, self-perpetuating system that underpins much of modern society.

Almost all of the protests have economic motives—the one in Chile sparked by hiked subway fare, in Lebanon due to tax on WhatsApp calls, scandalous revelation of corruption against Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt by a former government contractor, and increasing disparity and corruption in Iraq. And from there these protests have snowballed into cries for bigger demands: dismantling of corrupt political systems and reforms.

In Chile despite the president reversing his decision to increase subway fare and apologising to the people, the protests did not stop. In Lebanon, Saad Hariri's resignation as prime minister could not quell the protestors; they are demanding bigger reforms and have vowed to remain on the streets till their demands are met, reminding one of the resilient protestors of Sudan who left the streets only after the Transitional Military Council gave in to their demands for a civilian transitional government and transparent elections. In Iraq the people are still protesting asking for their rights and reforms despite brutal government crackdowns that have left hundreds dead and thousands injured.

These protests reveal the decay in the political institutions of these countries, where democracies have turned into corrupt systems that feed on the people and national resources.

Chile, despite being one of the wealthiest countries in Latin America, has the one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, where according to a 2014 data by *Forbes*, the combined wealth of its billionaires is equivalent to 25 percent of the country's GDP. According to a report by *The Guardian*, the country has an incredible unemployment rate of 55 percent. Of the people who are employed, only 50 percent can barely save up enough to fund a pension. Since more Chileans live in debt, they have to pay more

dollars, which has forced its government to find new financial instruments and trade mechanisms to import essentials: staples, medicine and fuel. And amidst these economic hardships, the embarrassing revelation that the prime minister in 2013 had presented gifts worth USD 16 million to a swimsuit model in Seychelles, has only made matters worse for the government. Despite support from the powerful Hezbollah, Saad Hariri had to resign from office in the face of unrelenting protest on October 29.

potential risks to social stability emanating from the decline in living standards among a large proportion of Egyptians in recent years, combined with widely reported allegations of corruption in the ruling political and military elite." It was soon contained though by the coercive might of the Sisi administration.

In Iraq the living condition of the common people is so dire that education of children is hampered due to economic disparity. According to a report by *France 24*, in Iraq graduation from secondary schools is highly dependent on socio-economic factors, as a result 72 percent of the graduates come from the wealthiest section of the country, while only 23 percent of the poorest students can manage to complete secondary school.

Political theorist Francis Fukuyama tells us how three elements are essential for a well-ordered society and good governance: a strong state, the rule of law and democratic accountability.

Often when the centre becomes too strong it suppresses accountability and rule of law, especially in democracies where balancing factors like the opposition, free media and civil society are repressed. And with diminished rule of law and accountability, often these governments become corrupt institutions that allocate the country's resources to feed their own insatiable needs.

This leads to economic disparity where the elites, including the government cronies, enjoy public assets and wealth, and the rich become richer, while the poor become poorer. And this goes on for a while, until things reach a boiling point when the sufferers rise up and take to the streets in their quest for economic and political equality.

For a nation to flourish and prosper, a healthy democracy is required where strong centres are complemented by accountability and rule of law, a strong opposition, freedom of media and free discourses of the civil society; where allocation of national resources are made wisely and for the betterment of the citizens. Otherwise these protests will keep taking place, from one country to another, calling for the fall of one corrupt governing institution after another.

This is not the way of the silent majority, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

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Demonstrators march with flags and placards during a protest against Chile's state economic model in Santiago, Chile.

PHOTO: REUTERS/IVAN ALVARADO

for the same services than the rich, because the rich can pay in cash, while the commoners have to depend on credit.

The situation is similar in Lebanon where income inequality is stark. According to a 2017 UNDP report, the Gini coefficient puts Lebanon at 129 in income inequality among 141 countries. World Bank estimates suggest that the country's budget deficit stands at 11.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), while its government debt stands at a staggering 151 percent of GDP. Lebanon is suffering from a severe shortage of US

In Egypt, a revelation by a government contractor that the president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was involved in corruption in commissioning palaces across the country, led to street protests by helpless people. At a time when the country was reeling from austerity measures under an IMF loan programme amounting to USD 12 billion, such news came as a trigger for the people who had had enough of austerity, while the government high-ups were indulging in mass corruption. According to Goldman economist Farouk Soussa, the protests in Egypt "serve as a reminder of the

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Vive la Canada! Three cheers for our northern neighbour



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

IT is fair to say that given the political mess, leading Anglophone countries are drawing a mixture of horror and derision from the rest of the world. Both are richly deserved. While you're at it, throw into the mix a queasy, disquieting feeling

about a disaster waiting to happen.

Yes, I'm looking at you Uncle Sam, where I have made my home, and good Old Blighty, with which we South Asians have long bittersweet ties. Both are looking at a political denouement that is scaring the living daylights out of political analysts. The US is going through an explosive impeachment battle with its populist, bomb-throwing president, and nobody is quite sure what will happen. The United Kingdom is facing one of the most unpredictable elections in recent history after it tying itself in knots trying to figure out how to leave the European Union.

Between daily breaking scandalous revelations about US President Donald J Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's fruitless, desperate attempts to extricate himself through yet another attempt at mendacious bluster, an election has come and gone in our northern neighbor, Canada.

What a refreshing difference!

Oh, the Canadian elections also had its share of drama. It's boyish Prime Minister Justin Trudeau faced the political battle of his lifetime. Scandals, alas, deeply tarnished his golden boy image. But he survived through the skin of his teeth. While his centre-left Liberal Party lost its majority in parliament, it won a plurality, edging the arch-rival Conservatives.



Liberal leader and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a rally in Milton, Ontario, Canada, during the election campaign.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STEPHANE MAHE

What I found remarkable was the sensible approach the Canadians have to nationwide polls.

If time is money, the Canadian elections save both.

In the US, Democratic presidential hopefuls began testing the waters in early 2019 for presidential elections slated for November 2020.

The Canadian campaign? Six weeks. That's it.

In other words, the Canadian campaign started around the time the third debate of

Democratic candidates took place, and ended around the fourth debate. Heck, in the US we are just getting warmed up. There is the inestimable pleasure of eight more debates to look forward to, and the real fun scrum of statewide primaries is over 100 days away.

In monetary terms, the difference is mind-boggling. (To be fair, the US is vastly larger.) In 2016 the Hillary Clinton campaign spent over a billion dollars. That money has to come from somewhere, and you can bet there are strings attached. (The new trend of grassroots fundraising, perfected into an art by the

Democratic activist organisation ActBlue, is a salutary corrective.) In the 2015 Canadian election, the combined spending of all parties was limited by Canadian government to around 300 million Canadian dollars (worth less in US dollars.) The total combined amount actually spent was around 72 million Canadian dollars, a pittance in the US.

Is that the reason why Canada's policies seem so eminently sensible? While the US struggles to provide health care coverage, Canadians have—and overwhelmingly support—a publicly funded single-payer health care system with health insurance for all. They've had it for decades.

My few trips to Canada left me impressed. Toronto is wondrously diverse, and what struck me was the widespread use of public transport that cuts through socio-economic classes.

The contrast could not be greater in Atlanta, where I live. When I rode on Atlanta's subway trains and buses, I discovered a clear divide. Mostly working-class folks use it. If you ask suburbanites about bus routes, you'll be greeted by blank stares.

Canada seemed safe. One night in Montreal, it was really late. It was wonderful to see young people hanging out in streets with an infectious *joie de vivre*. I was a little surprised. Hey, I asked the manager, an Arab immigrant, how come everybody's hanging out this late? Is it safe?

The manager gave me a searching look. "You from the US, right?" Rather sheepishly, I pleaded guilty.

Canadian policies towards climate change, multiculturalism and inclusivity are not only more robust, they appear to have a broader consensus across the political spectrum.

In 2016, when US President Donald Trump was on a crusade to ban immigrants from Muslim countries, thousands of

ordinary Canadians responded to the Syrian refugee crisis in a touching, deeply humane way. *The New York Times* reported, "Across Canada, ordinary citizens, distressed by news reports of drowning children and the shunning of desperate migrants, are intervening in one of the world's most pressing problems. Their country allows them a rare power and responsibility: They can band together in small groups and personally resettle—essentially adopt—a refugee family. In Toronto alone, hockey moms, dog-walking friends, book club members, poker buddies and lawyers have formed circles to take in Syrian families. The Canadian government says sponsors officially number in the thousands."

Now, I don't want to give the impression that it is heaven on earth up north. Countries, after all, are run by fallible human beings. The recent election campaign has been one of its most bitter and ugly, and while Canada's parliamentary system avoids the paralysing gridlock, in the US when the president is at loggerheads with Congress, it has its own share of problems when the public mandate is fractured, as it was in this election.

Canada is also facing sharp political and geographical polarisation of its own. The centre-left Liberals did well in Atlantic Canada (Quebec backed the regional Bloc Québécois), and was virtually shut out west of Ontario.

Canada also has its own history of racism, including towards South Asians, that goes back centuries.

Nonetheless, there is no gainsaying the fact that today's Canada, despite its imperfections, has important lessons for the 800-pound gorilla that is its southern neighbour.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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- 6 Machu Picchu
- 11 Cove
- 12 Baby grand, for one
- 13 Cutlery piece
- 14 Wise saying
- 15 Castor, for one
- 17 Dir. opposite SSW
- 18 Enhance, as a recording
- 22 October birthstone
- 23 Forge workers
- 27 Farm towers
- 29 Concur
- 30 Act parts
- 32 Employ
- 33 President pickers
- 35 Sit-up targets
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- 4 Didn't bother
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- 7 Veto
- 8 Abel's brother
- 9 Shortly, in poems
- 10 One or more
- 16 "-- Now or Never"
- 18 Flag creator
- 19 Sweeping tale
- 20 Like stallions
- 21 Immediately
- 24 Half of a sextet
- 25 Munich mister
- 26 Beholds
- 28 Fizzy drink
- 31 Poseidon's place
- 34 Auto mishap
- 35 Physics particle
- 36 Tedious sort
- 37 Petty argument
- 40 Had dinner
- 42 Broad st.
- 43 Harry's friend
- 44 Historic stretch

10-21

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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POLED TONGS
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