

# The Arab World's Agents of Change

By JEFFREY D. SACHS

**T**here can be no doubt about the core of the revolutions sweeping North Africa and the Middle East. As John F. Kennedy said in another context 50 years ago, the torch is being passed to a new generation. Much of Arab leadership was trapped in a time warp, sustained by U.S. power, a flood of oil earnings and brutal intelligence services.

Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi came to power in 1969; Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh in 1978; Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in 1981; and Tunisia's Ben Ali in 1987. These are countries where the median age is around 25 years. Half the population or more has lived under only one increasingly decrepit leader.

The contrast of youthful energy and idealism versus the deadly rule of antiquated despots clinging to power could not have been more vivid than during my visit last week as part of U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's trip to North Africa. He met with the interim governments and leaders of civil society to explore ways that the international community could support the fragile new democracies in Egypt and Tunisia.

My lasting impressions of the trip were not the meetings with senior officials grappling with timetables for approaching elections, though the seriousness of their work was reassuring. Nor was it the surrealistic contrast of pride and optimism in Egypt and Tunisia juxtaposed with death and destruction next door in Libya, where Qaddafi is fighting ruthlessly to prolong his despotic regime. The most overpowering impressions came in meetings with youth leaders,

the real agents of revolutionary change in the region.

In both Cairo and Tunis, groups of around two dozen young activists came for roundtable discussions with the secretary general and the U.N. delegation. Here were true heroes: young college and medical school students who had stood in Tahrir Square in Cairo and Kasbah Square in Tunis while friends and colleagues were shot, beaten and dragged away. Their numbers swelled by the day, as a population fed up with lies and injustice found the will to topple the regimes that had held them in thrall.

In our meetings, the young people exuded idealism and hardheaded skepticism. They were justly proud of their actions and still stunned that peaceful acts of resistance had prevailed. Yet they asked tough questions. Where was the world community as corrupt dictators pillaged their countries? Where was the world during the days when thousands of their brethren were beaten or killed? What will the community of nations do now to ensure the success of democracy throughout the region?

One could of course explain that the world is cynical; that acts of state too often trump acts of principle; that some of the U.N.'s 192 member governments utterly fail to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet such answers would miss the mark. The proper way to answer such concerns is to prove that universal values can still move the world community, by mobilizing global support for the democratic revolution that these young people have initiated.

Here are some of the things that the world can and should do. The first is to return the ill-gotten gains that the despots have stolen and placed in foreign accounts. The sums secreted away from Egypt and Tunisia amount to many billions of dollars. The money must be traced, frozen and repatriated.

The second is to stand with the people of these countries by returning quickly to the wondrous tourist sites that not only captivate the imagination but also bring employment and income.

The third is to respond to the economic hardship that has fueled discontent. Youth unemployment is disastrously high, perhaps 40 percent of those under 25 years of age. The systems of vocational education, on-the-job training and skill apprenticeships are in disarray. Both Egypt and Tunisia are natural hubs for youth employment — in information and communications technology, business processing operations, light manufacturing, construction trades, public health, education and many other fields. But the ramp from school to jobs must be made, along the lines perhaps of the successful models of Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Here is a natural area for public-private partnership. Leading businesses in the region, both domestic and foreign, can commit to train hundreds of thousands of young people in the next few years, setting standards and training models that can be followed for millions of other young people. Regional institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank, the European Union and the Mediterranean initiatives pioneered by France, Greece and Turkey can step forward to help set the goals and

share the costs. Most importantly, the young people themselves should play a leadership role. They've already proved their mastery of holding those in authority to account, and this can apply to economic programs as well as to politics.

I felt a bit curmudgeonly in telling the young people in front of me that their achievement, undoubtedly historic, was only a step. Democracy alone can't solve their country's problems. What can solve them, we all agreed, is their energy, idealism and commitment to working across religious and political borders.

The world should rush to offer support to these young people, not only to help Egypt and Tunisia, but also to rescue ourselves from the cynicism and drift that trap too many of our own societies.

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