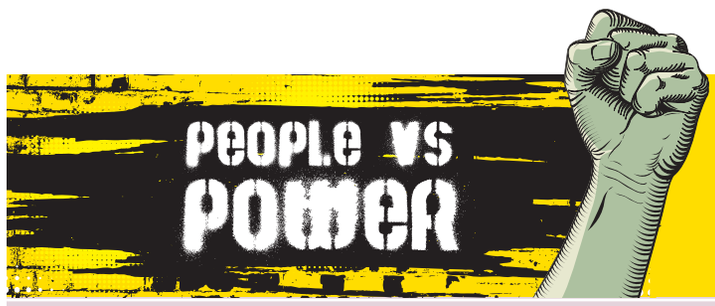

Russian Revolution

In 1905, Imperial Guards gunned down people participating in a peaceful rally petitioning Tsar Nicholas II. This event shook people's confidence in the Tsar. Years later, the Tsar's decision to enter World War I led to massive food shortages in cities. Trade routes were affected, leading to widespread discontent. In February 1917, members of the parliament or Duma assumed control of the country forcing the Tsar to abdicate. In October, Vladimir Lenin of the Bolshevik Party, set off another revolution in Petrograd.

CITIZENS UNITED AGAINST THE RULING ELITE

The protests that we see around the world – as varied in their composition as they are in their demands – all seem to address the issue of who controls whom, and at what cost, writes Omair Ahmad

Protesters march during an Occupy Toronto demonstration in Canada. On October 15, 2011, OWS portests spread to Canada, Europe Australia, Asia and Africa —Bloomberg

Omair Ahmed
Author

A friend of mine, Mandavi Mehta, who was also my supervisor at a thinktank in the US, once turned to me and remarked, "You know, this whole international relations stream is a bit bogus. The key discipline is history." Of course, she was overstating the case to make her point, but over time I have come to realise how right she was. Much of the analysis that we do in the disciplines of political science, conflict resolution, and the rest is based on our knowledge and assessment of historical antecedents.

I would like to emphasise this point because it allows us to ask two distinct questions about the spate of protests that currently seem to span the world. The first question is: what is the specific history, the specific conditions, in the country where these protests are taking place? In Tunisia, a vegetable seller protested his humiliation — a slap by a policewoman — by immolating himself. In the Tibetan majority areas of China, 12 monks and nuns have attempted self-immolation this year in protest against the repression they faced. Most of them died or were brutally treated by the security forces if they survived. The Tunisian government fell, and democratic elections just took place, while in China the Communist Party seems very firmly in control. Observing these differences in outcomes allows us to make a commonsensical observation: China is not Tunisia. No two countries, not even if the form of protest, and the reasons for it, seems very similar, are the same.

MISLEADING COMPARISONS

It is dangerous to treat all the current protestors as the same. By doing so, we do them an injustice, and also run the risk of thinking that they all needed to be treated the same. Even in countries with cultures as similar, and geographically as close, as Egypt and Bahrain, the differences were enormous. In Egypt, an embattled military dictator made a string of miscalculations which left not only him, but his second in command, out of a job. Neither the US, nor Israel nor Saudi Arabia could do much to control events. In Bahrain, though, a very different story unfolded. The small, and non-violent group of protestors were attacked by the security forces, accused of being tools of Iran, and then crushed through naked force as Saudi Arabia sent its tanks rolling in to support the regime. And the UK then invited Bahrain to its largest arms fair.

There is also the deeper question of what the protests are about. The groups in New York City protesting about the fact that the financial industry has destroyed the wealth of millions and gone unpunished cannot be compared to the Egyptians who faced tear gas and battled against heavily armed police in armoured vehicles. What happened in Tahrir Square was a fight against an authoritarian, violent, corrupt and repressive regime. We may consider other causes to also be noble — let's say the anti-corruption campaign in India — but to speak about "our own Tahrir Square" in such radically different situations is ridiculous. It may make for a good slogan, but like many other political slogans, it obscures more than it reveals.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

While the first lesson of history must be caution and a search for context, the second lesson is one of hope, even if it is cautious hope. There have been historical occurrences that spanned the globe, even if they affected different regions differently. The two most important ones in the recent past have been the process of decolonisation, and the end of the two hostile camps created during the Cold War. In both cases human freedom, the liberty of individuals to be treated at par with others, increased. Authoritarian regimes, supported from afar by people who were not responsible for the crimes they committed in the name of 'civilisation', crumbled before the empowerment of those that had been repressed. Within these changes were hidden smaller changes, such as the challenge against institutionalised racism in South Africa and the US, the victory for many women who had not been given the right to vote, to become equal in that respect with their male counterparts.

It is tempting to read this long history as a history of human freedom, and there is a precedent for it. The idea of Just War — the conditions in which a war can be justified, and how soldiers must behave in wartime — can be traced as a political idea as far back as the Greek philosopher Plato, 2,500 years ago. Over time, this idea was built on and refined by Christian theologians such as Augustine of Hippo (4th century) and Thomas Aquinas (13th century). Over time these ideas became globalised and refined until they congealed in the United Nations — conceived as the ultimate way to avoid any except the most unavoidable wars — and the Geneva Conventions which guarantee the conditions under which prisoners of war can be treated. Over two and half millennia, humanity has engaged in an extended conversation on what human rights are all about, and the fact that we have a Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a product of that long conversation. Even if these rules are violated, whether by the United States in Guantanamo Bay or by Muammar Gaddafi in his brutal and failed attempt to crush the Libyan uprising, the fact that they exist allows us to speak in terms of a global ethics of right and wrong.

Similarly it may be that we are in the midst of a long conversation about political and economic liberty. The protests that we see — as varied in their composition as they are in their demands — all address the issue of who controls whom, and at what cost? These are the basic questions of human liberty. Can an authoritarian dictatorship rig elections and manipulate the economy to benefit a small coterie of beneficiaries? The answer seems, "No," whether that is in the Middle East or — with the sudden protests we are seeing — in Russia. Can a small group of politically or economically important individuals be so vital to the nation that they are "too big to fail", above oversight, with their crimes and mistakes endlessly compensated by taxpayer money? Again the answer seems to be, "No", whether in Delhi, Tel Aviv or New York.

The deeper question to all of this is, "Who rules?" And the answer which had been, "We do", by a set of entrenched elite is being challenged by mobilised citizens, saying, "Not without our permission." In August this year I attended the installation ceremony of Dr Lobsang Sangay, the Head of the Tibetan exile administration. Afterward, speaking to a small group of us the Dalai Lama expressed his relief at being able to finally hand over all his political duties to an elected representative. Making the point that the time for kings and religious leaders to play political roles was long over, he went one step further, commenting that at times political parties — the entrenched elite — sometimes forgot that they do not own the country, the people do. Ultimately, all political leaders are answerable to the citizens of a country and to them alone.

In the faces, demands and slogans of the various protests that are taking place around the world, it seems that this very statement is being reiterated. We should listen.

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OVER TWO AND A HALF MILLENNIA, HUMANITY HAS ENGAGED IN AN EXTENDED DIALOGUE ON WHAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE ALL ABOUT

Too pre-Occupied to bring about change?

Jabeen Akhtar
Author

The Occupy movements in the US seem to be islands of passionately discontented people floating about on the open sea, with no direction, leadership or clear targets, writes Jabeen Akhtar

In his 1969 book *The Agony Of The American Left*, historian and social critic Christopher Lasch argued that to turn its vision of a new society into reality, the popular New Left of the 1960s would need to begin functioning "not as a protest movement or a third party but as an alternative political system."

Now, 42 years later, armed with our knowledge of the New Left's failure and having witnessed the rise of the global Occupy movement, it is worth reconsidering Lasch's claim. More specifically, any evaluation of the OWS movement's potential for catalysing "soft regime change" in the US should begin by considering whether it can function as an alternative political system. As Arundhati Roy has argued, those operating within the current political system — itself responsible for the crisis — "will not be the ones that come up with a solution." Does the solution truly lie with the OWS movement?

On this issue, the American public appears decidedly undecided. In late October, a CBS/*New York Times* poll reported that two-thirds of the public agreed with the statement that "wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed." Nearly one month later, however, a *USA Today*/Gallup poll reported that 53% of Americans consider themselves neither supporters nor opponents of the Occupy movement. These seemingly contradictory findings suggest that the movement has so far failed to make a convincing argument or to bring public opinion in line with its goals, whatever they may be.

As a proud participant in the animal rights movement, I am not surprised by OWS' inability to make a convincing case. The animal rights movement worked hard to make its goals both identifiable and achievable. We wanted to curtail the sale of fur, so we protested outside fur stores until their doors closed for good. We focused the public's attention on cruel cat labs at major universities until those labs switched to more sophisticated and humane non-animal alternatives. We worked with industry to ban holding crates for pigs on factory farms.

By contrast, it remains difficult to form a clear understanding of the OWS movement's goals. The impression is that they have none.

Bloomberg

Occupy movements seem to be islands of passionately discontented people floating about on the open sea, with no direction, leadership or clear targets. However, polls suggest public support for meaningful reform, and the Occupy movement — unlike the now defunct Tea Party — has some potential for instigating such reforms. An October *National Journal* poll reports that 60% of the public expresses agreement with the OWS sentiment that financial institutions should see greater government regulation. Similarly, numerous polls have demonstrated widespread public support for an effort to overturn the Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case because it allows for undue corporate influence on the political process. These findings demonstrate the widespread public opinion that political organisations have been sapped of their democratic potential as wealth inequality has increased and as the economic elite has come to dictate political outcomes. It is here, therefore, that we see the most fertile ground for Occupy-inspired reform.

It is also on this point — the need for renewed and reinvigorated democratic processes themselves — that Christopher Lasch's argument reemerges. One guiding principle of the OWS movement has been its commitment to a decision-making process in which action is taken only after unanimous vote. It is commendable that the movement puts into practice the change that it hopes to achieve by devoting itself to truly democratic principles.

At the same time, crises that emerge in the contemporary social and economic environment often require the prompt decisions of a small group of elected officials. Here, the movement's insistence on unanimity appears both nostalgic and unsuited for our era. In other words, it has offered an "alternative political system" but one that has no chance of winning widespread support from a public that seeks democratic renewal but still worries about a terrorist attack or a financial crisis. As long as the movement fails to come to terms with this reality, it has very little chance of garnering the public support necessary to inspire meaningful reform.

The political system in the US is famously and intentionally resistant to change and has frustrated the reform hopes of many popular movements. Yet the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis have laid bare certain facts about our current condition — most notably wealth and political income inequality — which strike large majorities as fundamentally un-American. As long as this remains true, and the OWS movement fails to spell out clear goals for uprooting the current political and economic system, OWS protesters will find themselves in a fair fight against the status quo bias of these institutions.

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