

Zimbabwe should be shaken by the North African revolutions

By Imraan Buccus

The time for revolutions in Africa has come. It is clear that the political earthquake that began in Tunisia, exploded into Egypt and then rippled out to Libya is set to leave lasting changes in its wake. But one thing is for sure – this is the greatest moment in the global struggle for human freedom since 1989 when the Soviet Union and its satellite states across Eastern Europe fell.

The protests have all begun as a carnival of freedom. Men and women, Muslims, Christians and secular people, old and young and rich and poor are all united in their excited opposition to dictatorships. Irrespective of the ultimate fate of the Libyan Revolution a loud and clear message has been sent to dictators around the world, that while it is possible to oppress a people for a long time, even generations, the people will reach a point at which they decide to rise. In our own neighbourhood Mugabe must be taking stock of the situation there and the uprisings in North Africa could certainly influence the future of Zimbabwe.

Robert Mugabe successfully stole elections in Zimbabwe in 2000, 2002 and 2005.

Each time he was assisted by the complicity of various forces. It seems clear that the tyrant is losing support. In South Africa, from the time of Mbeki, trade unions and other civil society formations have completely rejected Mugabe. And the rejection of Mugabe goes far beyond just civil society. In South Africa, when we think of Zimbabwe, in the context of the North African revolutions, we are confronted by three urgent questions.

The first is how we offer solidarity to the Zimbabwean refugees in our country. The periodic attacks on Zimbabweans by ordinary people and the reaction by our police need to be urgently opposed. We need to recall the solidarity shown to South African exiles in other African countries and demonstrate basic human decency. Change can come to Zimbabwe soon, and in the potentially uneasy days, SA will need to offer immense support to Zimbabwean refugees.

The second question that we need to consider is the nature of the flaw in some of our leaders that has allowed them to become complicit with tyranny.

The struggle against apartheid was supported by governments and civil society around the world. One would have thought that we should have taken a similarly activist position towards tyranny in other countries. But instead some in SA have taken the same position towards tyranny in Zimbabwe that Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher took towards apartheid - "constructive engagement" or, in Mbeki's outdated spin, "quiet diplomacy".

The third question we must ponder is the question about what went wrong in Zimbabwe. The argument that Mugabe was a good leader who went rotten holds no water. Revisionist Zimbabwean historians have pointed to ruthless abuses during the liberation struggle. And of course Operation Gukurahundi, the ethnic cleansing of the Ndebele in Matabeleland in the early 1980s which cost more than 20 000 lives. This crime against humanity is enough, on its own, to ensure that Mugabe should be called to account for his crimes before the International Criminal Court in The Hague. It is clear that the political culture of Zanu-PF was authoritarian and rapacious long before the fiasco of recent years. Zimbabwe has been governed by a ruthless and predatory elite from the beginning. The seeds of the later crimes, the plunder of the Congo and the ruthless suppression of internal opposition, were planted early on.

What this means is that it is essential to think holistically. Just because a man and a movement opposed one form of tyranny does not mean that they are opposed to tyranny. There is a tremendous difference between using democracy to come to power and being democratic. A democrat is not defined as a person who came to power by democracy.

A democrat is defined as a person who, when in power, welcomes debate and dissent. By this definition it is clear that Zimbabwe has never been a democracy.

We should be proud that our government welcomes dissent and in a democracy we need to always protect this. Any signs of Zanufication in any society are a challenge we must all take up.

Again, the lessons from North Africa teach us that a people cannot be oppressed forever. So, as South Africans, when we think of Zimbabwe in the context of what is happening in North Africa, we need to also reflect on the important role that South Africa needs to play in promoting transformation in Zimbabwe. We are, no doubt, appropriately reminded by Zimbabwean media entrepreneur, Trevor Ngube that Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have restored the collective faith in people power and there are signs that Zanu PF is shaken by the North African revolutions but is in denial mode.

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