



Swimming in Flood Waters: An Examination of the Syrian Spring

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Abstract

In the process of allocating scarce resources and political spaces available in society conflicts and disagreements often occur. In many instances the dissatisfied resorts to rebellion and revolution, and if successful, displaces the old order and institutes a new one. This approach has been used several times in human history and by different people at different times; including the American declaration of independence, the English and French revolutions, the Bolsheviks revolution in the Soviet Union, the Iranian and Cuban revolutions, amongst several others. The revolt of Arab people against their political leaders ousted bad leaders from power in several Arab states. Syria also rose up in arms against its longtime leader, President Assad, but the revolt has thus far failed to unseat him. Rather it has led to widespread destruction of lives and property, destruction of family and economic life, and making the country a battle ground for the contest of supremacy between Russia and the United States. In the light of the foregoing this study looks at the relevance of revolutions as means of displacing discredited leaders and replacing them with democratic leadership. The goal of the study is to explain the inability of the Syrian Spring to achieve the objectives of the revolution. The study contends that revolutions are akin to swimming in flood waters: a swim is capable of giving the human body a lot of benefits; but swimming in flood waters is capable of doing the body more harm than good. Revolutions are capable of producing political transformation, but this can only happen under certain conditions. Absence of such conditions makes revolutions to produce very harmful outcomes. Revolution was adopted as a theoretical framework. Data came from secondary sources and was anchored on the works of classical political philosophers. It was observed that revolutions are unpredictable, and could be easily distorted and hijacked by opportunistic groups. They are equally capable of causing serious pains to the common man beyond what could be imagined. Therefore the study recommends continuous dialogue at all levels of society; as well as making national political institutions strong.

Keyword: Swimming, Flood Waters, Revolution, Syrian Spring, Arab, America.

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INTRODUCTION

The American Declaration of Independence states that governments are instituted in order to safeguard the self-evident rights of man bestowed on him by his Creator. Principal among the self-evident rights, which are also considered inalienable, are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. They assert further that a collective of individuals have the right to topple and replace any government that impedes the realization of these rights. It was on this premise they jettisoned the yoke of British colonial administration. Countless revolutions and revolts across the world, over time, have drawn inspiration from the American experience, and more often than not, with salutary effects.

The Arab world, until recently, was considered an island of internal political peace in a turbulent ocean of internal political strifes that characterize other developing regions of the world. However the peace and tranquil the region was known for vanished into thin air as the hitherto docile citizens of the region took up arms against long established regimes. Though unrehearsed, people in one country after another demanded for the exit of their leaders; and overnight, Arab States such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen acquired new political leaderships. Ousted leaders were made to give account of their stewardship, and in some instances, such as Libya, discredited leaders paid with their lives. The people of Syria also demanded that President Assad, a long time ruler of their country, should step down. A standoff ensued between the people and their leader, a standoff that culminated into a civil war. The conflict has claimed hundreds of thousands in human lives, destroyed the once beautiful country, and turned the land into a reservoir of refugees. The Assad regime, in a desperate bid to hold on to power, has deployed conventional and non-conventional weapons, including repeated use of chemical weapons on its citizens.

It is obvious that Syrians did not anticipate such outcomes when they, like other Arabs, embarked on a revolt against their government. Given the foregoing, this study attempts to examine the utility of revolutions in the displacement of discredited leaders and the enthronement of enduring responsible leadership in modern polities. The aim is to seek explanation for the failure of the Syrian revolution. Specifically, it will attempt to seek explanations for the inability of that revolution to thus far unseat President Assad, and the internationalization of the conflict. In undertaking its tasks, the study adopts secondary data, especially the works of Thomas Hobbes, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, John Locke, and so on, on the subject matter. Revolution was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study.

THE CONCEPT OF REVOLUTION

Chaturvedi (2006, p. 267) defines revolution as “a fundamental and irreversible change. Often implies a brief but dramatic period of upheaval, as in the case of a political revolution, the overthrow and replacement of one system of government by another”. This definition locates some features of a revolution: its objective is to introduce irreversible changes; a short period of violence is expected; and it seeks to displace one system of government with another. Thus though it is usually an event involving a great number of people, it is a goal orientated enterprise. Kimmel (1990, p. 6) cited in Thompson and Hickey (1996) sees revolution as something undertaken by members of dominated classes in order to change their conditions of existence; “attempts by subordinate groups to transform the social foundations of political power.” This

means that it is the exploited who carry out revolutions, hoping by so doing they can throw away the yoke of oppression.

Though various strands of revolutionary thought exist, the Marxian strand clearly stands out, so much so, for many people, this is the best, if not the only known theory of revolution. Marx locates the logic and rationale for revolution in the economic relations identifiable in human societies. For him, every revolution is economic driven, it does not matter if such revolutions occur in the political, social, or religious sphere; and revolution is a never ending reality of social existence. Thus, Marx and Engels (1973, pp. 32-33) explain that “oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden or open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” The lengthy citation here is intended to highlight an element of Marxian theory of revolution often ignored. There is a realization by Karl Marx and his intellectual co-travelers that revolutions are capable of effecting mutual ruin of the groups involved in them. Even where one ultimately gains a decisive victory, the socio-political outcome may be a far cry from what was intended at the beginning of the venture. This element of Marxist thought is very crucial to an understanding of outcome of revolutions, including a Nigerian experience which would help to a reasonable period of time. Immediately after the Syrian revolution, Marx (1978) elucidates another fundamental component of revolutions. He showed that every revolution has a tendency to refer people to former glorious times, or to some other successful revolution in the past. The aim here is to give legitimacy and followership to an ongoing revolution. The Arabs, in going against their leaders, recalled the exploits of Arab civilization in the past. The aim is to provide a platform for rallying the masses.

Revolutions are usually internal, carried out within national boundaries in order to change the conditions of existence of the local people. However some aspects of revolution theory concern themselves with how to defend the revolution once it takes off. Goldstein and Pevehouse (2011) show that post revolution societies are usually torn between two options: self-reliance; and internationalization of the revolution. Using the 1917 Russian revolution as an example, and referring to the conflicting positions of Leon Trotsky and Stalin, they show that Trotsky favoured spreading the revolution to other countries in order to have countries of like minds who will help each other. On the other hand, Stalin felt Russians should concentrate their efforts at building socialism in Russia alone. What the foregoing stresses is that revolutionaries do not only concern themselves with igniting a revolution, they also think about completing and consolidating the revolution.

Revolutions therefore hold a strong attraction for under-classes as a means of transcending the trap of exploitation, dearth of human rights, poor political leadership, high-handedness in public administration, and poverty. However, there are many bumps on the road to the garden of roses promised by revolution.

BETWEEN THE PROMISE AND THE PAIN, WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Thomas Hobbes is one of the political theorists usually associated with social contract origin of the state. In his most famous work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes examines the rationale for political revolutions and opines that revolutions are too unpredictable to produce positive changes. Hobbes (1968) condemns rebellions on the grounds that the people are not to desire any government other than the one they have. In addition, people who seek violent change are only going against the natural order of things that dictate an unquestionable obedience to the leader.

He contends that the prosperity of a people “commeth ...but from the Obedience, and Concord of the Subjects...Take away in any kind of State, the Obedience, (and consequently the Concord of the People) and they shall not only not flourish, but in short time be dissolved” (sic). Men, as long as Hobbes was concerned, lived in a state of nature where they were engaged in a war of all against all, a situation that made man to exist at the level of wild animals. Men entered into a social contract to form government as a means of escaping the dangers of the state of nature. Revolutions send men back to that original state they fled in the first instance. It however needs to be stated that man can disobey an irresponsible government without suffering the woes stated by Thomas Hobbes.

Another social contract theorist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, starts his work with what looks like a natural basis for revolutions. Rousseau (1968, p. 49) asserts that “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.” After taking his readers through the basis and rationale for individual rights and freedoms, he anchored the enjoyment of these natural gifts on the maintenance of a strong state and an unwavering support for that state. He feels withdrawing support from a state will produce undesirable outcomes. Though man was born free, and yet lives everywhere in fetters put on him by society, man is better off being submissive to rules imposed by the state, no matter how unpleasant such laws might be. Rousseau’s position is illogical on several fronts: if a man that was born free ends up in chains, one expects that the best thing to do would be for him to take bold and decisive steps to free himself from such socially imposed restrictions. Perhaps he was primarily committed to avoiding the disruptions and uncertainty associated with sudden and violent change in political dispensations.

Edmund Burke also presented a political doctrine opposed to revolution and sudden change in government. He reflected on the French revolution and observes that revolutions could degenerate into terrorism, arguing that they are utopian in conception. Burke (1790, cited in Pojman, 2002) stands against sudden change in government because such act of rebellion disregards and destroys “the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity.” Retention of traditions, regard for time tested and proven laws, and ensuring continuation of economic prosperity, were sufficient grounds for citizens to keep a bad government in power. As long as Burke was concerned, therefore, revolutions should have no place in the political life of any nation. Burke was not merely a conservatist, he was an out rightly anti-revolutionist; he gave no grounds for it. The Syrian revolution has destroyed ancient artifacts and cultural sites traceable to thousands of years; perhaps this vindicates the position of Edmund Burke. Regardless of an individual’s position on the political divide, the need to preserve such rich cultural sites is not contestable.

Though Burke was no fan of Hobbes, indeed he was critical of Hobbes, the two scholars are here grouped together. Both of them were opposed to revolutionary change. Both arrived at their conclusions after detailed examinations of social upheavals: Hobbes looked at the civil war in England; while Burke studied the French revolution. Further, both saw that the anticipated dreams that propelled the rebellions were scarcely met; however in both instances the ordinary citizen was subjected to untold hardships. It was against this background that they reached their conclusions. Perhaps these same concerns led Rousseau to also take a largely anti-revolution stance. The events in Syria and other failed revolutions seem to prove the veracity of their theories.

Some modern scholars however embrace revolutions with both hands, believing that popular revolt holds the key to social transformation. Thomas Paine, in his work, Rights of Man,

took on Edmund Burke and his reflections on the French Revolution, and faulted the latter. Paine contends that preservation of accumulated social values and experiences cannot be used as justification for the retention of irresponsible governments. For him, the so called wisdom of the ages entered society at a particular point in time; and they did so by displacing an already existing system. If realities of life dictated a displacement of the older system, then there is nothing wrong in changing current values if present realities so demand. Paine (1996, p. 25) argues that the dangers of revolution people like Burke claimed to have seen are actually not the making of the revolution. "These outrages were not the effect of the principles of the revolution, but of the degraded mind that existed before the Revolution, and which the revolution is calculated to reform." The point Paine is making here is that people have a wrong perception of revolutions. Most of the upheavals, disruptions, crises, violence, and pains usually associated with revolutions are not caused by the revolutions. They are actually the reasons why revolutions are carried out in the first place, they constitute the justifications for revolutions. Paine's position is not in agreement with the review of revolution undertaken above.

John Locke, like Thomas Hobbes, started his political philosophy by discussing a state of nature. Locke argues that there are natural laws, and they produce corresponding natural rights of the individuals. Natural rights are conferred on a person by nature; and these rights are different and separate from the rights conferred by the state on a person. The natural rights are therefore inalienable. He states further that the ruler and the ruled entered into a social contract: the people accept the authority of the ruler only as long as he respects and represents their interests; the ruler only remains in office for as long as he discharges his duties and obligations under the terms of the contract. Vaughn (1980, p. 78), reviewing the political theory of John Locke, states that, "in return, the ruler had to agree to protect their interests or suffer the consequences of his failure to uphold his part of the contract – removal from office and replacement with a more congenial ruler." Locke's position is very attractive to revolutionaries. Among his earliest converts are the original American colonies. Fed up with the policies of Britain, the colonial power, they decided to free themselves, and in doing that the theory of John Locke became very handy; the American Declaration of Independence was anchored on the political principles enunciated by him.

The authors of the Declaration, like Locke before them, began their declaration by alluding to the fact that God created all men equal; and that God their Creator endowed them with some inalienable rights. The rights include: life; liberty; and the pursuit of happiness. They go ahead to assert that human beings instituted government in order to protect and defend these rights. Failure of government to uphold these rights confers on the people a legitimate responsibility to "alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness" (American Declaration of Independence). The success of that revolution taught many people that liberty and happiness are usually acquired by force because people do not willingly give up positions of power. Many modern revolutions are obviously premised on the Lockean doctrine outlined above, consciously or unconsciously; and these include the Syrian revolution. If the American revolution and others like it, succeeded, why is the Syrian revolution not succeeding? This is the question the remainder of this study will attempt to answer.

SWIMMING IN FLOOD WATERS

Swimming is often considered the one form of physical activity that stimulates all body organs. It also refreshes the body, especially on a hot day; and helps to free the body from germs. However these benefits of swimming should not lure an individual to take a plunge into a body of flood water. Though it is capable of giving him the benefits adumbrated above, it is equally capable of giving him diseases, expose him to reptile attacks and even sweep him downstream. Revolutions are similar to taking a swim in flood waters. Though revolutions are capable of unseating bad regimes, they are equally capable of creating more problems than they are able to tackle. If revolutions are to meet the expectations of revolutionaries then certain preconditions have to be met. Embarking on a rebellion when these conditions are not met tantamounts to committing suicide on a large scale. The first precondition for success is that the leaders of the revolt should make an objective analysis of their strength relative to the extant leadership. This assessment has to be devoid of sentiments and emotions. The leaders of a revolution should call off a revolt if the strength of the current system is stronger than the force coming against it. Leaders of a revolution need to have a sense of responsibility. Leading the ordinary people to the streets against an existing government from a position of weakness ab initio does not make any political sense.

Secondly, revolutionaries need to identify the moral code of a current government before undertaking a revolt. Some governments have a strong moral code, while some others have a very weak moral code. Those who display a positive moral code can easily be toppled because such governments would step aside the moment they see or perceive that peaceful street protests would become violent with the attendant loss of lives and property. Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, easily fits the bill here: once the protests gathered momentum, the government stepped aside, reducing the human toll. At the other end of the spectrum are countries such as Libya, Egypt and Syria. These governments, with a weak moral content, felt self-perpetuation in office takes precedence over respect for human lives and human dignity. Thus they called their citizens who were asking for improvements in existential conditions names, and went ahead to deploy the full might of the coercive apparatus of the state against their defenseless citizens. In such settings the human toll would naturally be high. The point needs to be made that confronting a state with a weak moral code could be suicidal, as Syria currently demonstrates.

In Libya and Egypt which had regimes with a weak moral fibre, the Arab Spring succeeded because the people went after the extant political leadership. The revolutionaries felt the success of their enterprise depended on launching a calculated attack on the leadership. The approach soon caught the extant leadership off guard, especially given the fact that such opposition to its authority was hitherto non-existent. The extant leadership, seeing the seriousness of the situation, began a process of retreating from power: first they left the comfort of their presidential mansions and went into hiding, eventually cut off from their political and military high command. In the circumstances, it was only a matter of time before they were smoked out of power. This approach, though successful, is not an acceptable one, because it is incapable of avoiding bloodbath. In Libya the President and some members of his immediate family lost their lives, in addition to several other citizens. This is not an acceptable outcome, especially since there are no guarantees that the incoming would be better than the ousted. Indeed conditions in Libya are worse than they were before the ouster of Gaddafi. This was one of the reasons why Hobbes rejected revolutions in his time, and it is clear that this reason is still valid today.

There is also the requirement that revolutionaries ensure that their efforts would not be exploited by other groups and individuals with sinister motives. The revolts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, for instance, have provided terrorist groups such as ISIS a fertile ground to operate and propagate their evil agenda. The rise of these groups do not only distort and truncate the revolution, but also increases the human toll of the rebellion. Besides, the entrance of such groups into the political equations of the affected countries will produce long lasting negative implications. The goal of any revolution is to better the lot of the bulk of the citizenry, and not to increase their suffering. Unfortunately, the Arab Spring is already producing the opposite effect even in places where it has recorded successes. The case of Somalia is worth citing here: the ouster of Siad Barr has made that African nation a hell on earth, with all sorts of terrorist groups in operation. It is clear that the days of the ousted dictator are better than the present.

In addition, potential revolutionaries should ensure that their undertaking does not become the subject of international politics. Undue internationalization of revolutions may lead to the balkanization of the country. The problem with the Syrian conflict is that the revolutionaries have allowed their work to be hijacked by Russia and the United States of America. Revolutionaries think involvement of a super power enhances their chances of success, as it would not only confer legitimacy on the undertaking, but would also provide arms and technical assistance. This expectation is hardly met. Receiving such assistance depends on a number of conditionalities: the super power has to be convinced that it stands to enjoy some economic, strategic or other tangible advantages; human rights issues might be raised, in the case of the United States and the recipient group needs to demonstrate a capacity to use whatever technology given to them. Besides, foreign involvement might lead to ideological polarization, or the country becoming a stage for a super powers' proxy war. This scenario played out several times during the cold war era: the Chadian civil war, for example, was in effect a proxy war between the United States and the defunct Soviet Union. The Syrian revolution has degenerated into a supremacy war between the United States and Russia. The goals of the revolution can hardly be met under such circumstances.

Finally a revolution needs to be very brief. This condition ensures that human suffering is minimal; the destruction of the economy is minimal thereby reducing recovery time; and effects prevention, or at least minimizing, the destruction of infrastructure, especially ancient landmarks. The Syrian revolution has failed to meet this condition, and this explains the huge human toll of the crisis. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children have lost their lives; social services, including schools and hospitals have shut down; many Syrians have been forced out of their homeland; and the Syrian economy has gone into a state of comatose. The destruction of the economy and the attendant human suffering was one of the reasons why Hobbes felt uncomfortable with revolutions. The Syrian conflict serves as a vindication for Thomas Hobbes

CONCLUSION

Revolutions are as old as the human race; and they have enabled man to significantly transform his social, economic, ideological, and political existence. In the political sphere there are several revolutions worthy of mention; including the pro-democracy revolts in England and France; the Bolsheviks revolution in the Soviet Union; the Cuban and Iranian revolutions; the anti-socialism revolts in Eastern Europe, and the Arab Spring. Many revolutions fail to achieve the original intentions of those who carried them out; the most notable accomplishment of many revolutions is the ouster of the extant leadership, without the anticipated transformation. This equates a coup

de tar, but with a heavier human toll. People have been called out to the streets to topple regimes by opposition leaders who are ill-prepared for such tasks. The result has been wanton destruction of lives and property, disruption of family, economic and social life, as the Syrian Spring clearly shows. Opposition leaders who call out fellow citizens to such suffering without first preparing themselves for such revolts ought to be held accountable for crimes against humanity.

Revolutions are similar to swimming in flood waters. They hold a lot of promise for political and socio-economic transformation of a polity. However, they come at a very high cost, and may not even achieve their original intentions at the end of the day. Revolutions are so unpredictable, with uncertain outcomes, and therefore need to be an option that should not come near the political table. The preconditions for a successful revolution outlined in this study can hardly be met, as Syria eloquently demonstrates. Society should explore peaceful, less painful avenues to political change; and there are several of these. Dialogue needs to be pursued with religious fervor, dialogue needs to be taught as a doctrine (perhaps indoctrination is required) at all levels of society, including schools. After all, all conflicts end up at the “round table”, however it is better to go to that table before the bloodbath and the collateral damage. In addition, each national political institution should be independent from every other one. Independence of national political institutions serves as an insulator to bad government. Finally, national political life has to transcend racial, ethnic, religious, and other parochial sentiments. This appears to be a tall ask in the contemporary third world. However those who would ordinarily go for revolution should constitute themselves into a vanguard for the evolution of these conditions

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