



A warning from psychology

Western commentators currently see the political upheaval across North Africa and the Middle East as being both a rejection of autocratic rule and a demand for democracy. Both interpretations may be incorrect. Firstly, the former does not necessarily imply the latter. The rejection of a specific authoritarian male leader within a patriarchal society does not automatically re-orientate that society towards female rights and fraternal objectives. Secondly, we don't yet know what occurred prior to the protests actually erupting. A catalyst (such as occurred in Tunisia) is never the only cause, and a fire never spreads without combustible material. Thirdly, an explosion of mass instinctual energies should not be confused with the spread of a new philosophy. The main clue here is the absence of any obvious overall crowd leadership during the riots. A leaderless crowd that is orientated to overthrowing a ruler is the outer reflection of a very powerful internal process that Sigmund Freud called "killing the father".

The role of the father archetype in crowd behaviour was Freud's most important theoretical contribution to the understanding of non-rational group dynamics. Here, "killing the father" refers to an evolutionary process within the mass psyche that recapitulates the transition of a young male into personal independence. Freud's insights were supported by – among other things – his direct observation of the collapse of autocracies and the rise of dictatorships in Europe in the early 20th century. The process is metaphorical, rather than literal (although history confirms that autocratic leaders are often killed), and it involves the replacement of the actual father/leader with an internal representation of an idealised father/leader. This transfer of affiliation initially uses destructive *instinctual* energies, associated with what Freud called *Thanatos* (the death instinct). *Thanatos* is particularly powerful in the initial stages of change, and only later makes way to the power of *Eros* (the creative instinct), although both are always present during the process. The point is that instinctual energies are non-rational. Once released in a crowd, they operate without reference to rational considering. A crowd can therefore become involved in all sorts of horrors.

So, what happens when the crowd energies subside? What is the form of the new ideal leader? What sort of new order will the *Massenpsychologie* be marshalled to produce? It is most unlikely that the new political structure will devolve genuine power to the people (not least because it cannot yet devolve power away from religion). Furthermore, it is not certain that the emerging new order will naturally embrace the needs of the West – as is amply demonstrated by Iran's activity in the Suez Canal. The global economy is currently entering a socio-economic crisis cycle comparable to that of 1921-46, and what is happening in the Arab world already has parallels with the political upheaval that swept Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. The danger of an Arab-Israeli confrontation has accordingly increased; and there are obvious implications for the price of oil. This is particularly relevant because a new upswing in the powerful Kondratyev commodity price cycle is already well under way. Historically, such upswings have terminated in the throes of conflict.

The overthrow of an autocratic dictatorship is a massive evolutionary step forward; but it is only one step on a very, very, long journey.

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Commentary No 142: 20th February 2011

