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Egypt & Augustine

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 31, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Maybe it is because he was from North Africa, but the unrest in Egypt and Tunisia should bring out the Augustinian in all of us. Sometimes in life, it is not only the spiritual life for which the gate is small and the path narrow. There are dozens of ways disaster could emerge from the streets of Cairo and Tunis but only one, and a difficult to discern one at that, by which a better future can emerge.

If we learned anything from the Iraq War, it is that the collapse of a repressive regime in a country with no traditions of civil society leads to chaos. Electricity is still hard to come by in Baghdad. Iraq?s political landscape is still littered with ethnic and religious landmines, ready to explode and generate further chaos. The economy has been beset first by war, then by the emigration of some of that country?s most educated citizens, finally by social instability and violence. Christians are murdered at Mass. Muslims are murdered on pilgrimage. The aspirations of the Bush administration, which thought it could bring Jeffersonian democracy to Iraq as easily as it could bring the 101st Airborne have been exposed as a horrible fantasy and the people of Iraq have paid the price.

There is no denying the sense of exhilaration created by the scenes of demonstrators in the streets of Cairo calling for the end of Mubarak?s rule. It is bracing to see people risk their lives on behalf of freedom. But, as Augustine taught us, politics must secure its citizens? safety first. Looters, too, have taken to the streets of Cairo and every smashed window, every stolen television or cell phone, every torched building, turns the people?s thoughts not to political change but to the need for political stability. Mubarak is no fool to allow the looters to make the case for his continued rule.

American foreign policy, conducted by both parties, has failed to help Arab societies develop those institutions that characterize a civil society and which might permit the emergence of a less repressive regime capable of both channeling the people?s aspirations and guaranteeing their security. As much as we Americans like to bemoan the press, or get frustrated with the cumbersome, often inane, political debates we have, or express revulsion at the instances of corruption committed by our political leaders, there are worse things than a sometimes biased press corps, and a sloppy political dialogue, and occasional corruption. Systemic corruption is worse than occasional corruption. Messy political debates are better than the absence of debates. An independent press, even when it spends more time discussing the death of Michael Jackson than the rise of poverty rates nationwide, is better than a government-run press devoted first and foremost to restricting the flow of information rather than furthering it.

Egypt today bears almost no resemblance to the situation of the American colonies when our forebears took their political future into their own hands. Perhaps, we can hope that someone like a Boris Yeltsin will emerge, a transitional figure who succeeds in dismantling the architecture of repression even though he was incapable of replacing that architecture with a solid foundation for democracy. It is difficult to imagine that Mohammed ElBaradei, who has spent more time in Geneva than in Cairo in recent years, can take the helm and usher in a better future for he Egyptian nation. And, reading the 2001-2002 encomiums for Hamid Karzai when we helped install him in Afghanistan make for some chilling reading. Recalling the exultation that greeted the removal of

the Shah of Iran is frightening.

It is time likes these that I am profoundly grateful not to bear the burdens of decision-making. Who would want to change places with President Obama now? Or with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton? One misstep, one ill-chosen word, can ignite the kind of anti-American backlash that could bring great and evil changes to this strategic part of the world. Bad enough that our nation?s support for Mubarak, again undertaken by both parties, has resulted in the fact that the canisters of tear gas being hurled at the Egyptian people are stamped ?Made in USA.? That certainly plays into the hands of Islamicist radicals who wish to direct the unrest towards their own objectives.

Egypt has a gross national product that is about that of the state of Connecticut. But, Connecticut does not sit astride the Suez Canal, nor does it share a border with Israel, nor does it have a history of nurturing pan-Arab militaristic fantasies, nor does it have a large and well organized cadre devoted to the Muslim Brotherhood.

We must hope that the unrest does not erupt into further violence. We must hope that somehow, Mubarak can be nudged into retirement and exile and political leaders can emerge who will direct the revolution on the streets towards peaceful ends. We must hope that the other Arab nations see the need to avoid further repression and embrace political and economic reforms now. But, these are slim hopes. Let us hope, but let us, with a clear-eyed Augustinian awareness of the limits of politics, understand the dangers of this moment.

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