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Lessons from Libya

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What appears to be the victory of rebel forces in Libya is welcome news for the oppressed people of that nation. Consolidating that victory will be as difficult as, if not more than, overthrowing Qaddafi.

There is no history or traditions in self-rule much less in democracy in that country. Nevertheless, what is inspiring is the strength of the people in wanting to take control over their lives and to achieve their liberation.

This is one more example of what is now being called the "Arab Spring" or the liberation movements starting with Tunisia, then Egypt, now Libya, and still in progress in Syria and, hopefully, in other despotic Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia.

I take from these events, including the events in Libya, two lessons.

One is that these revolutions counter the indictment since 9/11 that the central political force in the Middle East is fanatical and extremist Islam. The U. S., in particular, unfairly and unjustly portrayed the people of that region as being blindly driven by Islamic extremists set on a holy war against the West and, especially, against the U. S.

This was never true and is even less true given what we have witnessed this year in the Middle East and North Africa. These revolutions are not the result of Islamic crusades but of the aspirations of the people for liberties and democracy rooted in the West.

For the most part, the leadership of these movements is secular or moderately religious. Key leaders represent more educated and technocratic individuals, many of them educated in the West including the U. S. We should take inspiration from the direction of these revolutionary movements in that they are closer to our ideals than separate from them.

The other lesson for me is something that I stress to my students in my Chicano history classes and that is what I call historical agency. By this I mean that people, such as Chicanos and the people of the Middle East, make history. The people are an engine of change and not a ruling elite.

History is a bottom-to-top process rather than the reverse. All progressive social change in the U.S., I remind my students, has come from grass-roots movements whether in labor rights, civil rights, women's rights, etc.

The same seems to be the case in the Arab Spring. Yes, of course, leadership is important, but that leadership is driven by the rising expectations of the masses. The historic events we are witnessing in Libya and the other uprisings in that region should inspire those of us who recognize that progressive social change is still needed in our own society to eliminate undemocratic gaps in economic, political, and social opportunities that creates a profound distance between the "haves" and the "have nots" as witnessed by the continued gulf between the very wealthy and the decline in the middle- and working-class incomes.

But this can only be addressed by people at the grass roots, organizing to change this and to mount the pressures on the political and economic ruling elites to promote progressive change or be changed.

"S' se puede!" (It can be done) César Chávez often said. But it can only be done by the people themselves. Let's hope that the Arab Spring will influence a U.S. equivalent of peaceful social change.

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