

## It's an ill wind

**By Stuart White**  
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I am sure nearly everyone watched at least snippets of Col Gaddafi's rambling 75-minute speech broadcast on state television, saying amongst other things that he was vowing to crush the revolt by "rats and mercenaries" in his beloved Libya. In a style reminiscent of Mugabe he vowed: "I am not going to leave this land. I will die here as a martyr. I shall remain here defiant." How out of touch was he when he said "All of you who love Muammar Gaddafi, secure the streets, don't be afraid of them... Chase them, arrest them, hand them over", while in the eastern city of Benghazi, people reportedly threw shoes at television screens (an act of extreme disrespect in Arab countries) as a sign of their anger? It has all gone a little crazy in that part of the world. And it seems to have happened overnight.

Countries in the Arab World are ruled by dictators and monarchs - there is no democracy and the people (until now) have never had a say in their leadership. Corrupt rulers have siphoned off and stolen billions of the country's wealth - living in mansions and stashing fortunes in overseas bank accounts while most of their people live in poverty, maintaining power by running these countries as police and military states where individuals have no freedom of expression.

A colleague was telling me the other day that he visited Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia in 2002 and would never have foreseen what's happening now during his lifetime. The uniformed presence in these countries is exceedingly strong (he reported that in Tunisia and Morocco there were police and soldiers literally on every block). Every kind of group gathering is monitored; religious discussions in Mosques are not allowed. In ALL these countries, the Islamic leaders (Imams) in the mosques are given no freedom of speech at all. They are ALL employed by Government and their weekly sermons are written by Government.

It's easy to sow the seeds of discontent with this sort of background. So when protests saw Tunisia's president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali flee his country, it triggered similar scenes of dissent in Egypt and sent Mubarak also running for the hills. Suddenly it appears the whole leadership of the Arab world might be under similar threat as the people of the Middle East dare to hope their dictators can be toppled too, and there's a very real chance the whole lot may come down like a flimsy house of cards.

No-one could have precisely predicted any of that a few months back – But, and it's a but, could anyone have read the signs? Well yes if they had looked closely enough. We are often fooled into believing that things will never change and tomorrow will be pretty much the same as today. This shortsightedness, not only in politics but in business, can leave you vulnerable and even cause you to lose everything.

Things do change, and if we aren't monitoring and anticipating them, we will be left behind. Theodore Levitt in his classic 1960 HBR article 'Marketing Myopia' talked about the railway industry as being a prime example of this failure to read the writing on the wall. From the Victorian invention of the steam engine, the railway became the premier means of overland travel in many parts of the world. Yet within a relatively short time in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, its use became almost defunct. There were a number of factors which contributed to this but the principal one was stagnation of vision. The railway business did not stop growing because the need for passenger and freight transportation declined – on the contrary, those grew exponentially. Its decline was not even because that need was filled by other options (cars, trucks, airplanes, and even telephones), but because it was not filled by the railroads themselves. They let others take customers away from them because they assumed themselves to be in the railroad business rather than in the transportation business. They defined their industry incorrectly because they were railroad-oriented instead of transportation-oriented; product-oriented instead of customer-oriented. And its leaders failed to read the signs or move with the times.

And it's true now for the leaders in the Middle East. Their single focus of control and exploitation is no longer suitable for the times and is proving unsustainable. Suppression and absolute power is not in line with their world or the people in it. The conformist and subservient Arab peoples of yesterday have had their eyes opened with increased education, global connectivity to networked ideas, opinions and discussion forums, and like the Twisted Sister song have collectively decided "We're not gonna take it anymore!". But the leaders failed to recognise these risks or manage them. Like a Trojan horse, the concepts of intellectual freedom and democratic choice crept into the Arab world and its despotic potentates were caught unawares. Whilst they effectively policed and controlled physical meetings, they were powerless against virtual meetings. Now Facebook sites and radical blogs are blocked, but it's all too little too late!

The desire for universal franchise and freedom began as a light breeze but quickly turned into a gale-force wind of change, strong enough to blow down dictatorships. And meanwhile back in the world of business, European railways may have managed to rise Phoenix-like from the ashes of their funeral pyre, but they never needed to die in the first place. Change happens – embracing it is good, but being the one to effect it in the first place is so much better!

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