

Après moi, le déluge

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The pathetic demise of Muammar Qadhafi, the lunatic of Libya, may embolden the incorrigible optimist to dream of a domino effect: Can this be a harbinger of comeuppance-to-come? Will dictatorships finally be held to account for decades of pillage and murder, as long-suffering masses rise to slay their evil tyrants with all the ardor of democratic self-righteousness? Is this the time to bring out the champagne?

Not so fast. The vast majority of ruthless princes throughout history did not have to pay for their sins—at least not in their lifetimes. Moreover, of those who did, seldom did the victor supersede them in virtue; they merely excelled in ruthlessness. Does this imply that Qadhafi's murder is an aberration and that we should not anticipate a tyrant-purging epidemic?

Perhaps, or perhaps not; but surely the question that needs to be asked first is: what constitutes a tyrant? Just as one man's terrorist is another man's liberation-fighter, so too is one man's tyrant another man's savior. Also, what about justice? In a reasonably objective sense, it means punishment for violating others' rights—an outcome that is now, and has always been, sporadic bordering on the utopian. Most people think justice is when "your guy loses to my guy." Power trumps justice every time.

The word "tyrant" has a fascinating etymology. The ancient Greeks defined *tyranos* as a leader who did not obtain his position by constitutional or legally sanctioned means. Contrary to modern usage, in ancient times, a tyrant was not necessarily a dictator. The celebrated Peisistratos, for example, who ruled Athens in the second half of the sixth century BCE, was praised even by Aristotle as an enlightened, humane leader. Rome adopted Greek ideas but it too fell, leaving Europe at the mercy of nobles and clerics who for centuries engaged in factional, often fratricidal, warfare.

At last, at the dawn of modernity, in the seventeenth century, the English philosopher John Locke declared a sovereign who uses his office for personal gain a “usurper.” The usurper was essentially a thief, who used his office contrary to its mandate in order to benefit himself at the expense of his subjects, and accordingly could be legitimately deposed and replaced. Although Locke may have provided the rationale for the Glorious Revolution that eliminated James II, he made no reference to any gruesome deposition tactics. Indeed, the monarchy as an institution survived.

It was the volatile French, living up to their romantic reputation, who took the extra step and eliminated not only their sovereign but their whole system of governance. Their revolution invoked the ethereal ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality to legitimize the barbaric murder of Louis XVI and the bulk of the French aristocracy. “*Après moi, le déluge*” turned out to have been more than an expression of royal megalomania: It was an accurate prediction. The revolutionary bloodbath was immediately followed by a devastating Reign of Terror, which soon culminated in the meteoric rise of the quintessential post-royal tyrant, the diminutive but brilliant Napoleon Bonaparte. And how can anyone forget the murder, two centuries later, of the sinister Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena at the hands of anonymous comrades whose motives likely included a desire to gain access to the dictators’ Swiss bank accounts, not to mention preventing their own crimes from being revealed? *Plus ça change....*

Different cultures and traditions define legitimate sovereignty in various ways, and often it is not the cruelest and most corrupt who suffer the worst fate but the most unlucky. Louis XVI, for example, was considerably more liberal-minded than any of his predecessors. In many cases, the fiercest princes are lionized by their people, even when the record of their atrocities is demonstrably monstrous. Napoleon himself, though exiled before his death, is entombed at Les Invalides in a setting fit for a god, under a cupola reminiscent of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Even after the collapse of Communism, the victims of which number in the millions, the embalmed Lenin is still entombed in the Kremlin. Mao Zedong, whose corpse was preserved intact using the Soviet technique, also reposes in a grandiose mausoleum. No one seems to care that his crimes, now well known, could earn him a place on a short list of the most prolific murderers of all time. In the end, dictators thrive on pomp, whatever the circumstance. No matter how grotesque the spectacle might look to a morally fastidious westerner, all those crocodile tears shed after the death of Mao’s sinister little North Korean kin, Kim Jong Il, amply satisfy the craving for ceremony: applause seems to be its own reward.

The list of tyrants, mind you, spans every age and civilization. Heading the list is, surely, the twelfth-century nomad Genghis Khan, who specialized in large-

scale slaughter of innocents from Eurasia to the heart of Europe. Yet not only do present-day Mongolians consider him their founding father, the Chinese revere him as well. In 1939, to protect it from the Japanese, the Chinese Nationalist soldiers solicitously moved his mausoleum to a Buddhist and then a Tibetan monastery inside China. Though the Communists later returned most of the relics to Mongolia, and those remaining were wantonly destroyed by the Cultural Revolutionaries, the “King of Kings” was rehabilitated: An enormous marble statue of Genghis was completed, with many relics “restored,” in the fateful year 1989—just in time for his spirit to reassert itself in Tiananmen Square.

Aside from suggesting that tyranny is a good career choice, especially in zero-sum environments (notably in Africa) where the alternative to terrorizing is being terrorized, one may conclude that nothing succeeds like success—and power succeeds. Force is faster than persuasion. But in the modern world, winning is almost as important as seeming to win. Leaders need to worry not only about promoting their subjects’ interest but seeming to do so. More to the point, what matters is that leaders be seen as promoting the interests of those who might have the power to replace them. Who those constituencies are varies from country to country.

How far we have come from the ancient Greeks, who expected procedural purity as a condition of legitimacy, and the classical liberals, who expected contractual purity so that leaders would serve their people’s interests as promised. First came the pseudo-democratic ideologies of Fascism and Communism, which claimed to represent the vanguard of the workers. Then came the Islamist wannabe caliphs who presume to speak for God, to say nothing of the demagogues in Western democracies who promise whatever the opinion polls indicate the people want (however contradictory that may be), while special interest groups stealthily manage to get hefty subsidies neatly camouflaged by politically correct euphemisms like “green power.”

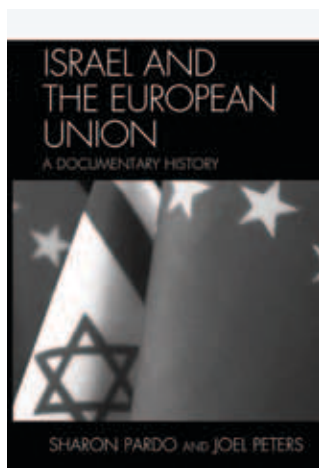
But let us return to tyrannicide: Will it happen, say, in Syria? Iran? Yemen? I propose to answer (like my grandmother would have done) a question with a question: who cares how they get rid of the scum? What does matter is whether the fear of potential assassination or exile will lead thugs less delusional than Qadhafi (which obviously rules out Ahmadinejad) to become more receptive to popular demands, or in the event that they are replaced—by whatever means—whether their replacements are themselves any improvement.

Those of us who still hold out some hope for humanity and who believe, somewhat counterfactually, that justice, defined as respect for each individual, can still prevail, will ask another question: How can a civil society learn the habits of self-

government while still subjected to authoritarian rule? How can individuals and groups gain the support of others in their community in establishing a political system that permits the greatest degree of freedom and tolerance for diversity? How can the West assist in the process of sharing lessons learned from their own struggles, their trials and errors, in the interest of peace?

The answers range from the relatively easy—indeed, a large number of groups, including faith-based, NGOs, and others, have engaged in such assistance and training for a long time—to the virtually intractable. It would help if the restless elements of society who demand change, whether we call them revolutionaries, rebels, or just angry mobs, could get past the traditional tribal conception of justice as punishment for old wrongs and start contemplating the far more useful idea of respect for all men—and women—created equal before their Author to pursue their lives in peace. That respect must include the right to private property and freedom of expression and manner of worship. Securing such rights takes serious discipline, painstaking institution-building, and much patience, a commodity our species possesses in spectacularly short supply.

Hardest of all is to stop worrying about retribution for past wrongs. Going down that route could mean global suicide—certainly if the Jews ever decide to settle scores. What is more, remember that we all have some family connection not only to Abel but also to Cain. So let us take God at His word and try to keep the Golden Rule: It has stood the test of time.



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