

From Cairo to Dakar to Durban, Another World Actually Is Possible!

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Last week's [World Social Forum \(WSF\) in Dakar](#), Senegal, ended up riotously happy thanks to the eviction of a universally-hated Egyptian Pharaoh, after near-debilitating logistical disasters at the event's outset. Each year, in order to oppose the corporate agenda of the [World Economic Forum](#) in the Swiss town of Davos, tens of thousands of social activists gather to define why "Another World is Possible!" But it's impossibly good luck to combine this plea with an actual case of democratic revolution.

This year our hosts were Senegalese NGOs, though the WSF is usually held at the university complex and dockyards of Porto Alegre in southern Brazil. At some point within the next decade, Durbanites should get up the nerve and offer to host it, but probably not until a certain ruling party ends its hegemonising ways, a test of which will come during state-society conflicts at November's global climate summit.

Signs of Hope

To be sure, tough times lie ahead in that other portentous world constructed by civil society (not political parties or religious institutions) in Cairo's Tahrir Square over the past few weeks, in the wake of the Tunisian citizenry's red card against Ben Ali from Tunis. Algeria, Yemen and Palestine are also rumbling with hopeful bottom-up democratic instincts, as their pro-Western tyrannies shiver in fear.

But the revolutions are not yet consolidated, and on Sunday, ominous reports from Cairo's Higher Military Council – the new rulers – suggest a ban on worker meetings and prohibition of strikes is imminent. More of the protesting we saw 11 days ago by local trade unionists and Middle East solidarity activists at the Egyptian embassy in Pretoria will likely be needed.

And reversing disastrous macroeconomic policies made in Washington is another looming challenge which cannot be shirked. Though he could also have meant Egypt (or for that matter South Africa), Cairo-born, Dakar-based political economist Samir Amin [remarked of Tunisia](#), "Economic and social factors were also influential in the uprising of the people. The country experiences rapidly escalating unemployment, particularly of youth, including educated young people. The standard of living of the majority of the population is decreasing."

Still, with the booting of the Ali and Mubarak dictatorships, it does seem that the hardest part is over for millions who demonstrated so courageously, at the cost of hundreds of lives

and thousands of injuries, especially when paramilitaries failed to evict Tahrir Square occupiers, confounding the regime's dogmatic supporters in Tel Aviv and Washington.

How foolish poor Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton must feel now, that their respective 2009 speeches about democracy (in Cairo!) and the need for internet freedoms are being taken so seriously by the masses. The backtracking by both – Obama vainly hoping Mubarak would stay until September to assure a pro-Israeli transition, and Clinton fruitlessly trying to clamp down on WikiLeaks (which assisted both uprisings) – are another useful pedagogical example of the USA's talk-left (democracy), walk-right (imperialism).

Our colleagues at the Arab-African Research Centre have been watching dissent brew for years, studying 1200 distinct Egyptian protest actions since 2009 alone. The centre's vice president Helmi Sharawy calls it a "popular youth revolution" whose legacy traces back three decades. What's new, he reported from Tahrir Square last week, are Facebook, Twitter and the internet as the "youth's last machinery of contact, as we are all suffering under Emergency Law since 1981." Even though Mubarak pulled the internet plug, the social-networking ties were tight enough.

And not just in Cairo, says Sharawy: "Millions came out in Alexandria, Suez, Mansoura, Fayoum, Damietta. A big percentage of women and children among demonstrators, poor women are more than others. Middle-class youth were in the majority at the beginning but the poor came to it for protest, and then as revolution. The traditional political parties are in a critical position because they were conservative in the beginning."

Dakar – Logistical Problems

Back in Dakar, though, the WSF suffered debilitating logistical messes, which must be recognized so they don't re-emerge in other such summits. Those who came long distances to hold specific panel discussions and learn from allies, present information, debate and take work forward in a formal setting were furious on the first two days at Diop University, the region's largest. The well-networked middle-class NGO professionals regrouped quickly but lowest-income African women didn't have cell phones and were most victimized.

The problem was that WSF organizers simply had not achieved political power sufficient to hold university officials accountable to earlier oral promises of adequate space. An invitation for participation by Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade – another pro-Western free-marketeer – was a non-sequitur given his hostility to WSF constituencies, especially thousands of angry local human rights and democracy activists.

Not having the leading institutions' political support meant the mass cancellation of the first round of panels and the time-consuming construction of alternative tent venues, as students descended into the scheduled classrooms during what should have been a holiday week in the university calendar. But a student strike against Wade's new cost-recovery policy pushed classes forward, into last week.

As an activist rightly demanded to WSF delegates just before the main environmental plenary on Thursday, "We are the youth of the country, we do not have the resources to enter. This is a public university. You are the international community. You have means to pressure. Until there is a solution we will continue to strike."

The WSF's leading star this year was, ironically, a political head of state, Bolivian President

Evo Morales. In addition to very powerful language about halting climate change, he raised an issue many South Africans appreciated: "We are going to go to the UN to declare that water is a basic public need that must not be managed by private interests, but should be for all people, including people of rural areas."

The next question is how to add and link up all the other struggles to have needs met, including jobs, the environment and liberation from patriarchy, homophobia, racism and so many other backward systems. If any gathering can attempt a broad-based ideological revival that takes democracy as a foundation and adds socio-economic justice, it is the WSF. But reticence to tackle this ambitious challenge remains.

A slightly smaller version of this agenda will appear here in November, as an alternative summit to the UN Conference of Polluters (COP17) hosts visiting climate justice activists. City Hall's reported widespread corruption and financial mismanagement, controversies over UKZN's hush-hush university review, and student protest against inadequate financial aid at the Durban University of Technology will have ebbed. But memories of masses of people arising under conditions previously considered highly unlikely, as in North Africa, will remain.

From the North African revolutions to the West African WSF, other region's civil societies might learn not only the pleasurable, drunken rhetoric of emancipation, but the patience not to get drunk on that rhetoric too fast, at least not before certain preconditions are achieved: democracy and the logistics that democracy demands. •

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