

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

PsySR Calls on U.S. to Support Democratic Change in the Middle East

The rapidly unfolding events in Egypt and Tunisia have stunned and engaged the world. The governments of these countries have long been criticized for their widespread human rights violations, including restrictions on freedom of expression and association, the abuse of state of emergency powers, the imprisonment of dissidents, the use of torture, and the persecution of journalists and human rights defenders. But today we are witnesses to the extraordinary power manifest when ordinary people join together and challenge undemocratic rulers, expressing the seemingly timeless human aspiration to be free of tyranny, oppression, and exploitation.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) is an international organization dedicated to bringing psychology to the service of peace and social justice. We are keenly aware of the importance that people place on the right to speak up for the safety and well-being of their families and themselves, and we recognize the importance of the images they hold about the fairness of their governments. From psychological studies of mass violence, we also know that bystanders who do not protest brutality serve, in effect, to legitimize it and to empower the aggressors. In this light, the mass protests, military tanks, and clashes between civilians and government forces are a potent reminder that calls for law and order do not always drown out a people's cry for justice – and for change. The loss of life in these situations is tragic, as is the perpetuation of corrupt regimes that rely daily on violence and intimidation to maintain control.

From events like these – driven by the collective power and pent up frustrations of a long-suffering citizenry – emerge outcomes that are often tenuous and unexpected. Sudden change brings with it both opportunities and dangers. Popular revolts can lead to more just and democratic societies. However, history shows that the dethroning of tyrants does not guarantee a quick transformation to democratic rule, and sometimes instead sets the stage for new autocracies. Lasting democratic progress depends upon continued broad participation, and the relationships and structures that encourage it.

Therefore, amid the turmoil and uncertainties, PsySR affirms its unwavering support for movements and leaders that fully embrace a commitment to the key principles reflected in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We recognize that peace and stability are far more valuable when accompanied by individual rights and freedoms, and by justice for all segments of society.

Speaking in Cairo in June 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama explained:

“I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.”

At this critical time, PsySR calls upon the United States government to carefully consider the effects of any contradiction between word and deed. The Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and Egypt under Mubarak are two of several repressive governments that have received U.S. financial and military support for decades – support that has enabled them to suppress their own people. Current events offer the U.S. an opportunity to alter its image as a too frequent defender of authoritarian tyrants. In the days and weeks ahead, the actions of the United States will influence the consciousness, the perceptions and the hopes of people throughout the world. We therefore encourage support for the democratic aspirations of people in the Middle East to challenge undemocratic governments and to choose their own leaders.

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