

Activist Fatigue In The United States And The Arab World

By Seth Baum

Originally published 18 August 2011 at FutureChallenges.org

Are Western democracies a role model for the Arab world? That's a big question, with several points to consider. One obstacle that must be addressed is what I'll call activist fatigue. It's something that has become increasingly evident in the United States over the last few years, and it could be a fairly universal human trait. If it appears in the Arab world too – and my guess is it will – then that weakens the chances for democracy there.

Some recent US political history helps explain the activism fatigue concept. Beginning around 2003 and especially by 2005, opposition to the George W. Bush administration fueled progressive activism that swept Democrats into power during the 2006 and 2008 elections. But after the 2008 election, the activists seemed to feel that they had achieved their goals and wanted to return to their normal lives after several long years of activism. That's activism fatigue. It left a vacuum in US politics, which was filled in with the conservative activism that gave Republicans victories in the 2010 elections.

Likewise, watching the recent Arab world activism, I can't help but wonder: How long will it last? Will the citizens of these countries invest the ongoing effort needed to run a successful democracy in the long run? Or will they get tired and return to their normal lives, leaving a political vacuum to be filled by people with other, non-democratic agendas?

As an observer of US political activism, I have been wholeheartedly impressed by the pro-democracy activists in the Arab world. They are putting in incredible efforts and making large sacrifices – sometimes even their own lives. I imagine that the Arab world activists resemble America's legendary founding fathers (and mothers) who fought to establish democracy in the US over 200 years ago.

But recently in the US, activism seems most intense when it opposes the current government. First progressives mobilized against Bush, then conservatives mobilized against Obama. In contrast, activists seem much less motivated when their leaders of choice are in power. Even with the right leaders, it's still necessary to push for the right policies. Without activist support, good policies can become unpopular and fall out of favor among elected officials, who after all do need popularity to stay in power. By not pushing for good policies, activists stop short of achieving their core goals.

This “stopping at policy” makes sense: the activism needed to govern a country is not nearly as compelling as the activism needed to rise to power. The rise to power is a dramatic story that is easy to get caught up in – especially when the story qualifies as a revolution. In contrast, governing is mundane. It's much harder to get excited about bureaucratic details, as important as those details might be.

All this leaves me concerned for the aspiring Arab democracies. The biggest challenge might come not in the revolution itself, but in staying motivated after the revolution succeeds. The challenge could be even more difficult for these new democracies, since the activists there will also have to learn much more about how to govern. Nobody knows how to run a democracy perfectly, but at least in the US we have a lot of experience to draw on. The new democracies can learn something from the old ones, but this learning is limited because every country's circumstances are different. Will the citizens stay motivated when the going gets mundane, difficult, and unfamiliar?

I hope that the Arab world activists don't get fatigued. I hope that they build successful new democracies, improve their own living conditions, and emerge as positive contributors to the international system. I especially hope that they can use their experience to teach the rest of the world a thing or two about how to stand up to entrenched interests. International activism like that in today's Arab world could be of tremendous value to big global issues like climate change or biodiversity loss. But if the American experience is at all relevant, we should not get our hopes up too high. We should meanwhile seek out examples in which activists avoided fatigue and try to draw lessons from them. Activist fatigue is an obstacle, but perhaps with some effort it can be overcome.