AN INQUEST INTO THE EFFICACY OF EDMUND BURKE’S POLITICAL IDEAS IN AFRICA: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ARAB REGION

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ABSTRACT

The paper tested whether the events of the Arab spring could be explained in Edmund Burke’s philosophy. The aim of the study was to establish his prescriptions’ efficacy in contemporary politics. This was established through documentary reviews, interviews and focus group discussions. The findings uphold most of his ideas as relevant to contemporary politics; they help to explain the negative impacts of revolutions. From studying the ‘Arab Spring’ the paper established that the character of these revolts was consistent with Edmund Burke’s ideas. An eruption of revolts in one country is likely to have spillover effects in other countries. Another key finding is that revolutions do not always deliver. However, strict adherence to these ideas can lead to irrational refusal of improvement. The paper concludes that the ideas need to be rationally applied depending on the situation.

Keywords: Edmund Burke, Revolution, Arab Region

1. INTRODUCTION

Conservatism as an idea has made marked contributions in rejecting revolutions. However, in Africa, revolutions aided in the decolonisation of indigenous people. This ushered in a wave of self determination and change to the existing institutions and the status quo. Therefore, the efficacy of the ideas going against revolutions warrants investigation. In Reflections on the Revolution in France Edmund Burke wrote against revolutions with a preference for gradual change. This fascinates a serious evaluation into his ideas as there have been, of late, a lot of revolutions in Africa especially in the Arab region. This article foremost reviews literature, drawing cases of revolutions as analysed by earlier authors. The second and third parts validate and invalidate Burke’s ideas respectively, based on the case of the Arab region. The fourth gives an evaluation as a follow up to the ideas discussed in the preceding sections of the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a review of Edmund Burke’s ideas and some radical changes in governments that have occurred in history, the main goal being to establish the pros and cons of changing governments through radical means. Works by Hinnebusch (2001), Ruane (1998), Cook (2012) and Woodfin and Zarate (2004) give invaluable insights into the nature and itinerary of revolutions whilst Fidler and Welsh (1999), Jones (1947), Wright (2001) and Tshitereke (2001) provide a comprehensive outline of Edmund Burke’s ideas. Edmund Burke,

born in 1729, was an opposition member of parliament. Surprisingly, he was against radical change. His writings on the French revolution brought to the fore his ideas against revolutions. He was cynical towards the younger generation’s ability to take over pointing out that it “hardly had the strength of character owned by the Whigs of Lord Somer’s day” (Jones, 1947:330). This means he had confidence in the leadership of established and mature leaders. Change is a difficult issue (Bacik, 2008).

In the Arab region’s history, the Baath party’s record offers quick understanding into the impacts of revolutions. Hinnebusch (2001) analysed the Baath revolution of 1963 in Syria and revealed how the party spread across the Arab region but failed to establish a foothold. In Syria it lost power to the Assad regime in 1970. In Iran the leaders of all political tendencies and the population in general viewed the Baath regime with loathing (Byman et al, 2001). In Iraq, the American politicians increasingly took the view that nothing less than the removal of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party from power was required (Guelke, 2006; Bacevich in Bacevich, 2007). McDonnell (2010) established that this happened despite the fact that the United States helped to install the Baath party in Iraq, having sponsored a bloody coup to overthrow the then Soviet leaning military government in 1963. These findings show how a revolutionary spirit can easily spread across countries, but also fail to achieve its goals. Baath sought to radically change the systems, but as soon as it got into power in Syria it lost popularity.

Ideas on how an established government can face attacks from the populace have been explored in the tale of Hosni Mubarak’s reign in Egypt. This offers other interesting insights into the consequences of attacking an established system. The regime faced pressures from several spheres that sought to remove it from power. According to Darraj (2007) the Mubarak government was constantly under threat from militants. This is because his government established its authority and drove the Jihadists underground (Cooper, 2004). They used several strategies to damage the Mubarak government’s power and reputation. This included such atrocious acts as attacks on tourists with the most prominent being the Hatshepsut temple massacre of November 17, 1997 in Luxor. Such constant attacks on the regime weakened its legitimacy and international recognition. Hosni Mubarak escaped at least six assassination attempts (Jo-Ansie van Wyk, 2007; Dokken, 2008). The Egyptian literature also shows how a government can use unorthodox means to ensure continued stay in power and effectively ensure stability in the system. Teti in Salmon and Imber (2008) instituted that to ensure his grip on power Mubarak declared a state of emergency that has been continually renewed. This shows how established leaders and systems can suffer the wrath of those who seek to remove them from power.

Another interesting review is that of Hugo Chavez’s time in power which also gives an indication into understanding revolutions and Edmund Burke’s ideas. Hugo Chavez’s reign shows how change can even lead to the worsening of the situation. Nelson (2009) traced the ascendancy of Hugo Chavez to power in Venezuela. He conspired to overthrow Carlos Perez in 1992. Many people applauded his bravery towards changing Venezuela. When he got power he gained unprecedented control over three branches of government, but soon ran into trouble. His reign was marred by clashes with the church, media and labour groups. His approval rating fell from 80 percent to 30 percent. The situation militated into increased discontent culminating in strikes and calls for reform. There were two attempts to remove him from power. Crooker (2006) recognized that In 2001 Hugo Chavez passed 49 laws by decree. This scenario shows how a new government can end up worse than its predecessor. People initially thought Chavez would deliver better than Carlos Pevez, his forerunner.

In the Iraq scenario the debate by Fisher and Bigger (2011) gives another glimpse into how the regime was radically overthrown and the consequences. The military operations in Iraq were undertaken to enforce the obligations imposed on Saddam Hussein’s regime by the United Nations. Saddam behaved as if he had weapons. United States intended to end the tyrannical
rule of Saddam Hussein (Heinze in Heinze and Steele, 2009). Tipton (2007) ascertained that the church was of the opinion that whatever the cruelty Saddam Hussein had, this would bring death and destruction to cities filled with innocent civilians and takes the lives of too many young Americans. This is consistent with Burke, who predicted that revolutions would end badly (Roskin et al, 2006).

3. METHODOLOGY

The methods employed in this research are essentially ideographic. The initial step was a review of literature on cases reflecting revolutionary tendencies in the change of government. The researcher also reviewed literature on Edmund Burke’s political ideas. The group case study method was employed to answer questions on the efficacy of Edmund Burke’s political ideologies in contemporary politics. The Arab region was chosen as it represents most of the facts of the discussion. The researcher employed focus group discussions with fellow academics to get views on the ‘Arab Spring’ and establish whether it can fit into the ideas propounded by Edmund Burke. Materials used include textbooks, newspapers and several online documents.

4. DISCUSSIONS

4.1 SALIENT IDEAS ABOUT EDMUND BURKE’S VIEWS ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

This section presents some of Edmund Burke’s ideas as drawn from his writings on the French Revolution. Edmund Burke’s ideas are widely available in the literature with marked contributions from Fidler and Welsh (1999), Jones (1947), Wright (2001) and Tshitereke (2001). Wright (2001:87) explains how Burke was against frequent elections. “Edmund Burke proposed the value of tradition or culture as protecting the organic continuity of human societies in opposition to the revolutionary enlightenment ideals of Tom Paine and others who supported the universal validity of natural rights and freedoms for all individuals as individuals”. To Burke more frequent elections and abolition of the King’s extensive patronage were almost as fatal as the disease, they intended to cure (Jones, 1947). He appreciated that the king might have problems, but trying to solve this through elections was not an option. Also removing the King’s influence along party lines would not yield results, but instead worsen the problem. Jones (1947) established that this is because Burke “believed that the Government should exist for the whole people, but did not agree to put the final power in the people’s hands to achieve this.”

Accordingly, this explains his disapproval of constitutional reforms involving the general populace. Burke maintained that the people’s representatives in Parliament must do, not what the people want, but what from their superior wisdom and experience think is best (Jones, 1947). In this vein Tshitereke, (2001:189) asserts that, “Edmund Burke declared that it is in the power of the state to prevent much evil; it can do very little positive good.” This is a top-down approach where the demands do not come from the people, but emanate as within inputs in the ‘black box’. The top, according to Burke, had the prerogative to use its power to avoid problems in the system.

Jones (1947) asserts that Burke viewed the revolution in France with deepest suspicion. To him, if the French chose to destroy themselves, that was doubtless their own affair. Unfortunately, this could not be achieved without serious repercussions in every country in Europe. He thought the spirit would be contagious and have spillover effects in other countries. This is because Burke saw that “there were not lacking in his country admires and would be emulators of the events occurring across the channel” (ibid). The revolutionaries had no capability to deliver real liberation. The liberty aimed at by the revolutionaries, and so enticing to some Englishmen, seemed to Burke only a caricature of real freedom (ibid). Burke did not
foresee the ability of revolutionaries to deliver because they would be lacking in wisdom and experience. He considered the French Revolution the greatest evil he had confronted (Fidler and Welsh, 1999). It was Burke who also emphasized respecting institutions, arguing they were products of generations. Roskin et al. (2006:96) posits that:

“Institutions and traditions that currently exist cannot be all bad, Burke reasoned, for they are products of hundreds of years of trial and error. People have become used to them. The best should be preserved or ‘conserved’. They are not perfect, but they work. This is not to say things should never change. Of course they should change, says Burke, but only gradually, giving people time to adjust.”

Accordingly Burke thought a revolution was “only license, a kind of anarchy which would degenerate into the vilest of tyrannies”, (Jones, 1947). In fact, both in its violent course and in its lawless outcome, the revolution seemed to Burke an antithesis of everything important in the sphere of politics. Burke was against the means to attaining change as well as pessimistic in the end. To him, the means was wrong and so would be the end. Thus Burke did not disapprove of people seeking liberty, but “the attempt to achieve liberty without considering either the condition of the institutions through which it is to be attained, or the various other ends (e.g. Security, peace, prosperity) which is also desirable” (Ibid). There is more to liberty, Burke thought, than liberty. As such, people must not only be enticed with creating a new system, but various other facets that contribute to the whole. It was impossible for the end of the revolution to be good.

4.2 THE ARAB SPRING: MANIFESTATION OF EDMUND BURKE’S IDEAS

The revolts that started on 18 December 2010 spread across the Arab region like veld fire. Almost all the twenty two countries in the region, save for United Arab Emirates, witnessed some unrest with the worst hard hit being Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Hounshell (2011) posits that with as much as 60% of the population in the region as youths, the revolution had nearly endless recruits. “Events spread from Morocco to Bahrain, fanned by satellite television and social network sites like Facebook and Twitter,” (Ibid). Youths in the Arab countries saw prospects of revolutions through following events as they were happening in other countries. It became imminent that they would quickly identify the same problems as also manifesting in their countries. This is because, according to Jones (1947) Burke wrote, the errors of the old establishments are visible and palpable. The governments that have overstayed in power, as were most regimes in the Arab region, would have mistaken that people can quickly identify and use as raison d’être for mutiny against the government.

Burke’s cynicism that revolutions will not deliver came to the fore in Egypt. Jones (1947) postulates that Burke’s real thesis against the revolution is that, however noble their aims, disaster can be the only outcome of a sudden and violent overthrow of existing institutions and of age old traditions by a group of visionary and impractical idealists without any political experience. Soon after the deposing of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptians elected Mahomed Morsi. However, hardly months after Morsi’s election revolts were brewing. According to Hounshell (2011) there were widespread labour strikes, including, incredibly, police officers seeking higher wages. Morsi was removed from office by coup d’état shortly after his election. The situation worsened in Egypt with the Egyptian Armed Force launching serious operations to try and bring sanity into the country. This corroborates Edmund Burke’s predictions that after a revolution the country will degenerate into chaos.
Another Arab country that was thumped by the uprisings is Libya. In this country the revolts culminated in the death of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi. However, Edmund Burke’s ideas were soon to assume prophetic levels as living standards fell drastically. During Muammar Gaddafi’s reign Libya’s economic performance had experienced a marked improvement. Before Gaddafi’s ascendance to power, Libya was a very poor agricultural country (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 2012). The country saw significant improvement from 1961-1981, (ibid). In the 1990’s it posted the highest gross domestic product (GDP) in Africa. However, after the conflicts of 2011, the economy shrunk by more than 60% (The World Bank, 2013). The same report posits that strong oil driven recovery in 2012 stalled in 2013 following severe disruptions in the oil sector. This substantiates the negative effects of a revolution as put across by Burke, “liberty is a noble ideal; but so are other things as well; security and property for instance”, (Jones 1947). The National Transitional Council (NTC) that took control after the revolution also received a fair share of revolts. Stephen (2011) asserts that the people from the city’s Maidan al-Shagara joined those from Benghazi and Tripoli demanding transparency.

4.3 THE ARAB SPRING: A CONTEST OF EDMUND BURKE’S IDEAS

The events surrounding the Arab spring on the other hand prove Edmund Burke’s ideas futile. Edmund Burke saw no good coming out of revolutions, but the Arab revolutions ushered a new political culture in the region. The Arab world has a record of leaders who cling on to power. Most of them died in power, were deposed off through a coup de etat or were relieved of their duties on medical grounds. However the announcements by Omar al Basher and Iran Prime Minister, Nouri al Maliki reflect a new culture. The two announced that they will not be seeking reelection once their terms in office lapse. They are due to leave offices in 2015 and 2014 respectively. In Jordan, King Abdullah the 2nd vowed reform. This culture was unheard of in a region marred with repressive and oppressive regimes. In Egypt, Mubarak, and his undemocratic constitution are gone, (ibid). The country is in the early days of momentous transition, still under military rule yet experimenting with new found freedoms. The emergence of civic society groups also signifies a shift in the politics of the region. Cook (2012) posits that April 6 Youth Movement, a group which emerged in 2008, gained momentum in Egypt calling for reforms.

Edmund Burke’s perception that the government electives must do what is in their perception right will not find place in contemporary politics. This has been proved to the Arab world that in as much as the governments had the political and national apparatus at their disposal, the people were forced to reckon. There is power in numbers. The sheer force of demonstrators that turned up on the Tahrir Square in Egypt could not be displaced even by the heavy police apparatus. In Libya the NTC fell under serious scrutiny from protestors who called for transparency. The NTC could not, even if it had wished, violate the rule of law. People were baying for its overthrow in the event that it attempted to impose its stay beyond the predetermined transitional period. The people actually became the most effective ‘checks’ to the government’s operations. Stephen (2011) posits that the NTC peacefully handed power to the elected council on 8 August 2012. This was after the stipulated ten months of its mandate as a transitional government.

In Syria, the country’s history is marred with consistency in instability that to perceive time as a key factor to justify the maturity of an institution becomes unsound. According to Jones (1947) Burke is a defender ‘of what is old, what is conventional, what is long established.’ Burke thought institutions would get better with time and experience. However, according to Rubin (2007), Syria under the Assad regime has been no different from the 1950s through the 1980s up to date. From 1949 to 1970 Syria was the world’s most unstable country, (Ibid). This Syrian example shows some deficits in Burke’s perceptions. With time, at least after consolidating power, the Assad regime must have improved. However, they continued on an
authoritarian course banishing any prospects of improvement. This means it will be incorrect to think, as Burke did, that an institution that has stood the test of time will have been perfected along the way through trial and error.

Another aspect that Edmund Burke disapproved of being frequent elections. However, frequent elections might not be as disruptive as he thought. This takes the paper to a country outside the Arab region, South Africa, since no example can be drawn from the Arab world. South Africa gained its freedom from Apartheid rule in 1994. Since then it has had a string of presidents: Nelson Mandela (1994-1999), Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008), Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe (2008-2009) and Jacob Zuma (2009 to date). This means in less than two decades South Africa has had four presidents. What is contradicting Edmund Burke’s ideas is that the country has witnessed marked growth and achievements in the period. The 2013 Index of Economic Freedom indicates that South Africa is Sub-Saharan Africa’s largest economy. Its mining, services, manufacturing and agriculture rival similar sectors in the developed world (ibid). There are times when the whole system has been disbanded to the good of the society.

Burke thought there are always good parts in a system that ought to be retained. Jones (1947) asserts: When the useful parts of an old establishment are kept, and what is superadded is to be fitted to what is retained, a vigorous mind, steady, preserving attention, the various powers of comparison and combination and the resources of an understanding fruitful in expedients are to be exercised. However the moment some parts of an old system are retained the same problems are likely to recur. This is like trying to make a new garment with parts of an old garment. Parts of the old garment will not only reduce the value of the new garment, but will wear out earlier than the rest of the garment.

4.4 THE IMPLICATIONS OF BURKE’S WORK TO THE ARAB SPRING

The way the revolts spread from one country to another in the ‘Arab Spring’ affirms Burke’s opinion that ‘revolutions will not be without admirers. In all the Arab countries discussed above the youths were quick to get wind of the happenings in neighbouring countries through social network platforms. The momentum gained by the revolutionaries in the Arab region matches the spread of Baathism across the Arab region. However the same problem that transpired to the Baath party also affected the youths of the Arab world. They failed to establish a foothold despite having gained presence in most of the countries. In as much as they managed to depose some of the leaders, the revolutionaries, just like Baathists, lost grip of the situation with the region degenerating into chaos affirming Burke’s pessimism about revolutions.

The situation in Egypt left most wondering whether it was wise to overthrow Hosni Mubarak in the first place. The moment state security apparatus like the police join in strikes, as what happened in Egypt, may signify complications in the democratic consolidation process. This agrees with Teti in Salmon and Imber (2008)’s findings that it might have been necessary to use unorthodox means like rule by decree that Hosni did. This would have gone a long way in maintaining stability in the country. This is consistent with what Edmund Burke was advocating for when he emphasized on maintaining what is old giving room for gradual change. This also agrees with Tipton (2007) who foresaw the dangers of bringing down Saddam Hussein in Iraq. For him the consequences of removing a bad leader might be worse than maintaining the status quo. This can be true considering the loss of human life that occurred in the Arab Spring.

In as much as Gaddafi had overstayed, having been in power for 42 solid years, he had managed to consolidate the country’s economy. He nationalized industries in the 1970’s, empowering the Libyan people (The World Bank 2013). This affirms Burke’s assertion that prejudice can contain evil as well as good. Therefore, this research established that change is not always desirable. In line with Crooker (2006)’s arguments on the performance of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, this paper established that someone who will replace a presumed bad leader may not, after all, be better than the predecessor. When the Libyan deposed of Gaddafi they hoped
for better, but the country’s economy started to deteriorate. In the Venezuelan case, Chavez performance was worse than Perez’s in some areas as highlighted earlier.

This paper, however established that due to the Arab Spring, there has been a change of culture in the Arab region. Reforms and resignations which were unheard of in the region are sprouting. This shows that Edmund Burke’s pessimism over revolutions might have blinded him from seeing some good things that they could bring along. These findings must be taken into cognizance by policy makers in formulating policies that regulate change. There must be deliberate planning to ensure that change happens as it brings desirable improvements into the world. There is also need to seriously consider consequences, especially to the sanctity of life when choosing means to achieve change.

Trying to force an unwanted leader out of the system violently may worsen the plight of the general populace and also lead to loss of innocent life. It should be noted that Edmund Burke’s ideas are not limited to the ones contained in this paper. He also wrote on the Ireland, America, India and Europe’s events among other several ideas. Nevertheless, this paper concentrated on the writings about the French Revolution. It would be commendable, if other researchers explore the other writings in order to contribute towards establishing the efficacy of all his ideas in the contemporary politics.

4.4.1 EDMUND BURKE: AN EVALUATION

Edmund Burke pointed out that his ideas are not to be applied where immediate results are desired. Jones (1947) quotes Burke as saying a process of this kind is slow. It is not fit for an assembly which glories in performing in a few months the work of ages. Such a mode of reforming, possibly, might take up many years. It is early to celebrate the changes in the Arab region as it also takes longer for new authority to deliver. Hounsell (2011) argues that there is no guarantee that “Mubarakism without Mubarak” will not make a comeback.

The views that Burke had on the negative effects of a revolution seem to be a sign that he had a sympathetic passion for the good of humanity. As Jones (1947) asserts, “When the subjects of our demolition and construction is not brick and timber, but sentient beings, multitudes may be rendered miserable.” People are bound to face a problem of resistance to change if Burke’s ideas are to be taken as they are. Veneration for the past may induce hatred of even the slightest change, (ibid).

Edmund Burke’s ideas have been criticised for their lack of depth and grasp of reality especially by advocates of revolutions. Harris (2012) argued over Edmund Burke’s ideas saying “on the whole they have lacked the persistence of historical insight and the strength of conceptual grasp required to do justice to him.” The author meant there are some things that Edmund Burke did not really give time to put to paper that would have helped in understanding and putting to practice his ideas. His ideas have also been rubbished, attacked and dismissed as representing the English model of gradual parliamentarianism (Steger, 2008). This model was seen as unfit for France by Colonel Tracy who in fact blamed royal despotism for his nation’s violent upheavals, (ibid). As such the French saw little wisdom in taking “lessons from foreigners” with little direct knowledge of the “marvels of French citizenship” (ibid). This attack on Edmund Burke’s ideas may be leveled even to this present analysis of the Arab Spring as those in the affected countries will be better positioned to understand their countries’ political courses.

5. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper was to validate Edmund Burke’s ideas in contemporary politics. This paper has argued that indeed, to a greater extent, the ideas are still relevant. This was established after studying literature from other scholars in general and the ‘Arab Spring’ in particular. The ideas help in understanding and interpreting events. Through an understanding of
Burke’s ideas against revolutions politicians can make predictions and plan accordingly. Instead of waiting for the dangers that Burke identified as associated with revolutions, policy makers must work to circumvent them.

The inquest of Edmund Burke’s ideas in this paper was based on the revolutions dubbed the ‘Arab Spring’ that occurred since 2010. This is against the background that Edmund Burke’s ideas were also addressed on explaining his sentiments over the French Revolution in Reflections on the Revolution in France. By its nature a revolution is radical. It seeks to dethrone a system that embodies its oppression.

In Libya the Libyans had been under Muammar Gaddafi’s rule for 42 years. In Syria the Assad family has been in power since 1970 to date. Such regimes are bound to be viewed as embodiments of oppression by sections of people in these countries. However, according to Edmund Burke’s propositions radically changing such systems will be detrimental both to the concerned country and to the region. These systems will have established a lot of apparatus to ensure their continued stay in power. Therefore, it is impossible to try and radically change such systems over night as it entails changing a lot of things that will overwhelm even the revolutionaries’ energy. Taking a gradual route towards changing such systems can yield better results as both sides will be looking forward to emerging victors out of the arrangement. Edmund Burke also put emphasis on looking at the broader effect of revolutions as there is more to liberty than what people ordinarily think.

Countries should be wary of events in their regions as these have proved to be contagious. The spread of the revolutionary spirit in the Arab region must be a learning point. This is not a new phenomenon as even during the liberation movements towards the decolonisation of Africa the same occurred. Neighbouring countries have since time immemorial harbored would be attackers to a system. Once the spirit of change is detected in any country measures must be taken to avert disasters in other countries. This, however, does not entail stifling the people’s desire for change, but seeking amicable ways to resolve grievances. This is because, as Edmund Burke correctly pointed out, once uprisings happen in one country ‘there would be admirers’ in the region.

This paper also concludes that there is need to appreciate the good side of revolutions. Revolutions have an ability to deliver instantly. A lot of institutions that have stayed for long, do not show any signs of maturing. As shown in the Arab region and other examples drawn from literature, most of the regimes had been in power for decades. They had enough time, if they desired, to improve, but obviously chose not to. To continue giving time to such institutions will be tantamount to sacrificing generations’ chance to enjoy liberty. The selfish nature of humans also eliminates any chance to amicable means of correcting problems. Therefore, in the course of politics, there is need to consider the situation at hand, in depth before concluding that revolution will degenerate into chaos. There are both good and bad sides to revolutions and accordingly to Edmund Burke’s theory.

REFERENCES


