



Handling Transition – Peter Jacob

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The ongoing protests in Hong Kong share the same time space with the dharnas and protest rallies in Pakistan but the former have more in common with the Arab spring.

The Arab uprising for democracy lacked central leadership, strong democratic traditions and clarity about their political options. Sectarian and ethnic power fights also destabilised it. The pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong lacks central leadership too but it has more focused demands whereas the Azadi and Inquilab protests have strong leadership, a lengthy wish list and well-resourced political organisations.

All three movements have used social media (methodology) and young urban emotional political awakening (cadre). The protests in Hong Kong, distinctively Chinese, are more practical than ideological and primarily non-violent. The ongoing protests there reflect a stronger aura of civil liberties as compared to the pro-democracy movement silenced in Tiananmen Square (1989).

The Inquilab and Azadi protesters in Pakistan, besides other aggressive expressions, brandished stick and clubs; the Hong Kong protesters carried umbrellas in contrast as symbols of resistance besides protecting themselves from the harsh weather. No later had the international media begun to comment on the likeness between Hong Kong and the ‘Occupy Movement’ in the US in

2012 did the Hong Kong police pepper spray protesters on October 15 – much like the Los Angeles police treated occupy protesters there.

Hong Kong embarked on a well-planned political transition, starting with an agreement between the United Kingdom and China in 1984, culminating in handing over Hong Kong in 1997 and characterised by a ‘one country two systems’ approach. The chief executives of this Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong were to be appointed by China till 2047.

While Hong Kong was allowed to maintain legislative, administrative and judicial autonomy, China kept foreign relations and defence under its control. The citizens of Hong Kong could become ‘British nationals living overseas’ under some conditions.

This arrangement built confidence among stakeholders, importantly traders and investors, to keep their businesses in Hong Kong. The legal framework of transition provided a cushion for civil liberties that people of Hong Kong had become used to in 155 years of British occupation. The transition was smooth until China wished to change the electoral laws.

While an outcome of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests is yet to be seen, the Arab spring stands withered as a bunch of failed revolutions, in spite of regime change in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. The spring damaged the ripples of human rights movements in the entire Arab region but left its worst outcome in Syria and Libya thousands dead, orphaned and diseased; about half a million displaced in foreign countries, a near complete breakdown of state apparatus and resolve out of sight.

South Africa in 1994 became a classic of smooth political transition that transformed the country from over 340 years of foreign occupation to a democracy with rule of law. Institution building was a key part of statecraft, reconciliation a cross-cutting policy and serving the country with humility an important value. Great icons such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu acted as moral strength for the transition rather than assuming political power.

The example of South Korea is worth looking at too. Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) assumed the presidency after 30 years of autocratic civilian and military rules, held trials of two former presidents on popular demand and introduced structural reforms. A severe financial crisis forced South Korea to knock at the IMF’s door in 1997. The next president, Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) consolidated the democratic system by repairing ties with North Korea and the international community as part of the country’s economic policy. South Korea today not only stands tall among democracies but is also a robust economy.

South Korean civil society and opposition had complaints. There was hardly a week without protests during this time, over the presence of US military bases and soaring relations with North Korea. South Korea even elected Park Geun-hye, the daughter of a former dictator as its first woman president in 2012.

The protests in Pakistan have transformed their strategies recently and several commentators have advised them to try and consolidate their success. Yet a triumphant attitude prevails after Javed Hashmi lost in the recent by-elections. The PTI and PAT will only make their socio-

political analysis more reasonable if they acknowledge earlier democratic struggles, the distinctive edge of Pakistani civil society over several such campaigns in the world over.

Each party having its own brand of democracy runs the risk of depriving us of necessary consensus on the basics. Gains made in democracy should not be wasted by illusive revolutions.

Lessons from failed revolutions, aborted transitions and successful transitions show that transitions need to be handled with utmost care and honesty. The process of reconstruction of political system involves establishing and respecting the truth(s) about the socio-political systems, investigating and punishing grave human rights violations and providing relief to the victims of those violations.

Successful political transitions not only transcended boundaries and biases but importantly modified political strategies as well. In order to make that happen, the political transition has to be principled, ethical and a continuation. Transitions come with requirements of informed political choices, inclusive administrative decision-making and winning the confidence of the people.

An important take-away for the government from these dharnas and protests is that democratic transition cannot be allowed to progress on a snail's pace. It should move at a faster pace to deliver governance.

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