

Time has run out for the Arab strongman

The appeal of all-powerful leaders needs to change for a real revolution to take place, writes **Joseph Makim**.

Bil roush, bil dam, nayfalek ya za'em! This chant has echoed from the pro-government rallies across the Arab world, but never from the lips of the revolutionaries. The chant is akin to "Long live the King"; although the literal meaning is "with our soul, with our blood, we will sacrifice for you, oh leader."

It is indeed this (un)dying devotion to one saviour and this investment into one invincible demi-god that needs to be drummed out of the marching movement if a new chapter, and indeed new constitutions, are to be written in Arab history.

As the genres are freed from their bottles, the truth is also unbotled: the stronger the leader, the weaker the citizens. The revolutionaries are not about propping up a strongman, but reminding the world that strength of a society is judged by how it treats its weakest citizens.

The legacy of the "strongman" or *za'em* is not peculiar to Arab culture, or the 20th century. We have seen similar figures in Asia, Russia and Europe and they have earned entire chapters in history books as well as nouns named after them such as Stalinism, Reaganism, Thatcherism and Maoism.

The legacy of the Arab strongman was borne out of desperation, not wisdom. From Biblical stories such as the exodus from Egypt we know that a population who feels oppressed and deprived needs hope, which is too often vested in one man. When that strongman dies or disappoints, then another is quickly elevated and crowned. I have seen this *za'emism* throughout Lebanon and Syria, where banners bearing the faces of these local leaders take up a three-storey building. In

Australia, the election posters can be wrapped around a power pole. The *za'em* becomes literally larger than life. His every move is escorted by an entourage and sirens bringing both sides of traffic to a standstill, akin to Moses parting the Red Sea. By contrast, Australian MPs catch public transport and rub shoulders with their electorate.

It is ironic that some of the Arab strongmen who are now fending off a revolution were themselves originally revolutionaries or rebels. Muammar Gaddafi joined the Revolutionary Command Council in Libya, and in September 1969 he staged a bloodless coup against King Idris, thereby abolishing the monarchy. While Gaddafi may have conquered his foes, who were his friends? While he plotted the exit of a monarch, what plans did he have for his own eventual exit?

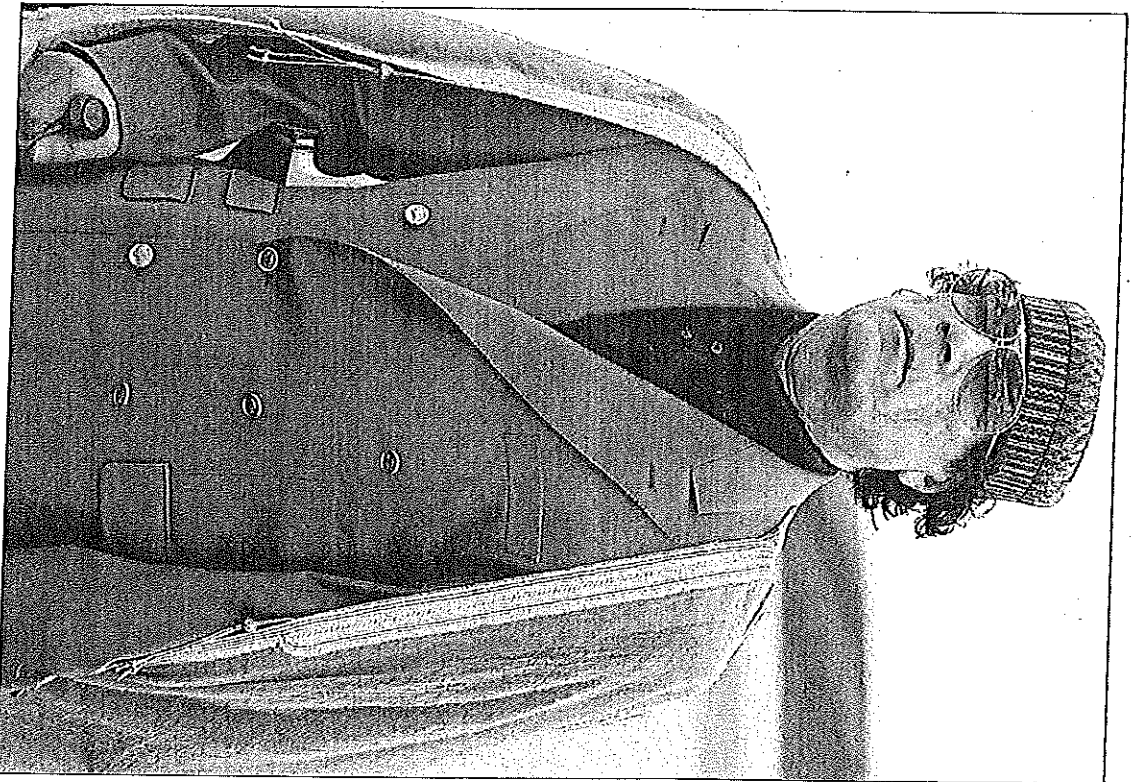
The eventual game plan became to hold on to power at all costs, and groom a son to inherit the throne. Thus, yesterday's hero becomes today's tyrant, and one strongman was merely replaced by another.

Herein lies the problem with this tribal tradition. The taste of power becomes so addictive that the status quo of emergency rule (such as in Algeria, Syria and Libya) is sustained across generations, and opposition voices are silenced by secret police (*mukhabarat*).

The strongman's fear of losing power actually renders him weak, and ironically creates a climate of mutual fear as his citizens dare not challenge the chief lest he invokes the martial law.

It takes a genuine strongman to have a succession plan in place and to understand that he is the humble servant of the people, not the reverse. It takes a genuine strongman to declare a successful mission accomplished. It takes a genuine strongman to read the seasonal winds and know when to hand over the baton.

This tradition of revering a life-long strongman was conventional



Muammar Gaddafi... a genuine strongman would know when to go. Photo: REUTERS

exploited by Western interests who helped carve up the map of the Middle East in the first place, after the collapse of the Ottoman empire a century ago.

The strongman created stability as he contained the tribal and sectarian diversity within his country. The

Western benefactors were happy to prop him up and pour money into his military machines if he was happy to pour oil into Western economies, as was the case with our strongman in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, and our strongman in Iraq, Saddam Hussein. As we could see in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the poverty of the people and human rights violations never distracted the Western friendships.

The reverting of a strongman has no place in the revolution or Arab contemporary culture. The young revolutionaries now seek ideals such as freedom, democracy, accountability and human rights, rather than a single-handed saviour. Indeed, strongmen such as Gaddafi and Mubarak hail from their grandfathers' generation. These citizens have seen how the concentrated power of the strongman ultimately causes powerlessness of the people.

This means regular elections that are free and fair, and where various political parties can flourish. These need to be promoted in way that transcends tribes, sects and clans, who may have traditionally voted for their own strongman. Among the political parties, it should be expected that there is a Muslim political party (Brotherhood) in a predominantly Muslim state, just as there is a Christian Democratic Party in Australia.

As martial law and emergency rule are systematically being dismantled, the new constitution needs to etch in provisions akin to a bill of rights.

The Arab League has its headquarters next to Tahrir Square in Cairo and marks the 60th anniversary of its charter this month. This is both the time and place for the architects of new constitutions to prohibit the strongman and ensure that the next chapter is a *za'em*-free zone.

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