

Re:Focus

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by Simon Sinek

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The importance of a declaration

The uprising we saw in Egypt was nothing short of remarkable. Thousands of people of all ages, of all classes, of various religions and sects came together in pursuit of a common cause: to see the ouster of dictator Hosni Mubarak in favor of democracy.

Those who took part did not do so on religious grounds. They were not chanting slogans denouncing the West or Israel. They spoke up for themselves. They wanted jobs. They wanted freedom of speech. They wanted the opportunity to hope for a brighter future. Even Mubarak's attempt to introduce violence and agitate the potential for outright civil war was not enough to stop the movement. Egyptians demanded an end to a government that suppressed the human spirit in favor of one that inspired it, and they seem to have achieved what they set out for. But they forgot one vital detail that may make the difference between their ultimate success and continued struggle -- if not failure.

What happened in Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia inspired other people across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa to rise up against their dictators. And though the movements and direct confrontations in Libya, Bahrain and other states across the region have met with less immediate success and more bloodshed than in Egypt, the movements are limping along. But like Egypt, these uprisings all lack the same essential component to a successful move to democracy -- a declaration. A statement of purpose. A clear, concise and specific written statement of what they want to build.

The "Representatives" of the "united States of America" (as they referred to themselves in 1776) assembled in General Congress to author and declare the reasons they wanted to separate from the dictatorial ways of the British monarchy. This seminal document, the Declaration of Independence, laid out, in clear and certain terms, the reason they wanted an end to the repressive regime under which they lived. They wrote down the ideals of their vision of a nation. This was their cause. This was the purpose of their revolution. This was why they wanted to dissolve the political bands they had with Great Britain.

They stated a reason for their country to exist based on human ideals, and in so doing, gave themselves something to build beyond the results of a regime change. If you read the Declaration of Independence, only after they state why

they are doing what they are doing do they go on to list the grievances they had with the king. Each grievance they list demonstrates how the king's actions and policies directly interfered with their equal standing and God-given right to "life, liberty and the freedom to pursue happiness" for themselves and their families. What we are hearing expressed in the Middle East is a list of legitimate grievances. Their chants often call for the resignation of rulers. They do not, however, often tell a story of an ideal they aim to pursue -- an ideal that all those inspired by the revolution may utter to unite in common cause for something more, not just against someone.

The reason this is a problem comes down to what happens after the dictator is out. Yes, the removal of the despot is important. Yes, all the people's grievances are accurate and worthwhile. Yes, their hearts are in the right place. But what country would they have instead? To say "democracy" is insufficient. Democracy is simply a form of government; it is not a foundation for the existence of a nation. French democracy is different from American democracy. And Japanese democracy is different again. Inspired by the American Revolution, the French articulated an ideological basis for their desire to revolutionize. "Liberté, égalité, fraternité," they said -- freedom, equality and brotherhood. These three ideals were the foundation of the French constitution that came many years after.

The people of the Middle East are demanding reform, democracy and constitutions. But a constitution is not an ideological platform. It is a document that describes the structure of the institutions and protections that aid in the building and preservation of the founding ideology. A constitution is to make permanent the reasons for wanting independence in the first place. Without an ideological foundation -- without a reason to exist -- a constitution offers a route without a destination. Even in the United States, the Constitution was only ratified 11 years after the Declaration of Independence was written.

It was the Declaration that inspired a nation. The Constitution was created to protect and grow what they fought for -- the equality of all men and the preservation and protection of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. So, too, did the French constitution come along only years after the French declared their ideals.

Small companies need a clear and specific vision of why they need to exist before they develop the processes and build the structure to grow. Add some scale, and you get corporations -- organizations filled with process and structure that often lose sight of their founding visions, the very reason their companies were started in the first place. Add some more scale and you get nation states. Groups of people with a common identity, a shared history, shared ideals. The protection of these common ideals is what engenders trust, feelings of security and, ultimately, progress.

Nationalism is a feeling. A feeling of pride that can inspire people to act. But acting against something can never outlast what is produced by actions in favor something. Working to pull something down may achieve the stated objectives, but what inspires great nations is when people join forces to work to build something up.

Great leaders do not rally people against a despot; they rally people to pursue a cause, an ideal and a vision of the future that is more noble and more permanent. The ousting of a regime is simply one of the steps necessary to building that vision of the future. The establishment of democracy as the preferred form of government is simply another step chosen to build that founding vision -- to breathe life and stability into the declaration.

I admire and support the courage of the people of the Middle East. And though they all suffer in similar ways at the hands of megalomaniacal dictators, their ideals, the vision they have for themselves and for their nations are different. It is amazing to watch them inspire each other to rise up. But it will be more inspiring when we see them chant, in loud choruses, the foundation upon which they hope to rebuild their nations -- for each nation to declare its independence based on its own vision of a peaceful and just future.

To the people of the Middle East -- to all those who believe in equality and our human rights -- tell us what you stand for in terms that will define you for generations. Tell everyone in clear and specific terms what you imagine, not just what you aim to do, and your ability to get what you imagine will last much longer and be more stable than any single act of deposing a dictator and drafting a constitution.

Before you build your nations, declare your independence.