History Repeats Itself: Egypt’s Revolution Parallels U.S. Civil Rights Movement

“Those who cannot remember the past are bound to repeat it” - George Santayana.

There have been few quotes as true as Mr. Santayana’s. History has a tendency to repeat itself especially when men are willing to do anything to gain and maintain power. The recent struggle in Egypt is an example of what happens when people refuse to be marginalized. The case of citizens lashing out against an oppressor or restrictive form of government is nothing new, not to the world or to people of the African Diaspora.

The Egyptian Revolution is a story that we have heard many times over. The people, disenfranchised, use their ingenuity to respond to societal injustices. Inspired by Tunisia, a North African country whose people defeated a monarchial government, the young people of Egypt, using social networking sites to organize civil rallies, successfully overthrew the thirty year reign of President Hosni Mubarak. Economic instability and a general poor quality of life inspired the youth, many of whom are college graduates unable to find jobs. A college degree no longer guarantees a job in Egypt and much of this is due to the economic imbalance created by the business monopolies and corrupt politics allowed to run rampant under the Mubarak regime. The economic disparity between rich and poor has widened tremendously during Mubarak’s reign (sound familiar?). Members of Mubarak’s cabinet have had their net worth estimated at between two to two point five billion dollars. The Mubarak family fortune has been estimated to be between fifty and seventy billion dollars. The family has not been conservative in their displays of wealth as evidenced by their penchant for employing renowned acts such as Usher and Beyoncé to entertain at lavish private parties. While the Mubarak’s were partying and enjoying their incredible wealth, the population was growing exponentially and so was unemployment.

The young people of Egypt, armed with fiery rhetoric, refused to remain complacent in the status quo. A Huffington Post article quotes 24-year-old Ismail Syed, a hotel worker who struggles to live on a salary of $50 a month, as saying: “This is the first time I am protesting, but we have been a cowardly nation. We have to finally say no,” This is the kind of determination necessary to defeat an oppressive force. The people did not turn into cowards when the government shut down their tool of communication, the internet, and they fought back when the military government began to attack them with force. They remained true to their convictions and stayed the course until they got what they wanted, Mubarak’s resignation. The Egyptian uprising not only continues a history of revolution it serves as an example of the human will to overcome insurmountable odds.

Looking back at the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s we see a similar situation of an oppressive system being overturned by people who would not tolerate it any longer. The Civil Rights movement was the African-American response to the discriminatory Jim Crow system of the dangerously racist American South. The same fearlessness that allowed the Civil Rights leaders to organize against a seemingly insurmountable force is the same energy that fueled the Egyptian people. An additional similarity between Egypt’s revolt and the Civil Rights Movement is the significant role played by young people. When Kwame Toure (formerly
Stokely Carmicheal) of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) called for “Black Power” the Civil Rights Movement evolved into a broader struggle for Black liberation; and The Black Panther Party, another organization led by young people, was born out of the political struggles of the Civil Rights Movement to further demand control of the socio-economic and political institutions controlling the oppressed Black communities throughout the United States.

Like-wise it was the young people of Egypt who really got the ball rolling. In a New York Times article entitled “Protest’s Old Guard Falls Behind the Young” the importance of youthful activism is made known: “Most of us are under 30,” said Amr Ezz, a 27-year-old lawyer who was one of the group as part of the April 6 Youth Movement, which organized an earlier day of protests last week via Facebook. They were surprised and delighted to see that more than 90,000 people signed up online to participate, emboldening others to turn out and bringing tens of thousands of mostly young people into the streets.”

History has a way of repeating itself, and as long as man continues to be individualistic, striving for power and dominance over others, it always will. Because subjugated people are often, a strong resilient people, who will rise up against their oppressor and persevere in overcoming injustice.