

Sunday July 7, 2013

Protest movements fueled by oil?

By Jim Taylor

It's hard to keep up with the news out of Egypt. Huge crowds gather in Tahrir Square, demanding the resignation of the president they democratically elected just a year ago. The army steps in and deposes him. The crowds celebrate.

News reports, in general, seem to praise these and other uprisings as a reaction against autocratic rule, a struggle for democratic reform. They portray the protests in Egypt particularly as a rejection of ideology based on religion.

Something makes me skeptical. I can't help wondering why all these popular uprisings seem to happen in countries crucial to the flow of oil to the industrial western world.

The so-called "Arab Spring" started in Tunisia, spread through Libya and Egypt, turned into civil war in Syria. Add the invasions of Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan, and the recurring threats against Iran.

Then mark those areas on a map or globe. They form a vast swath spreading from North Africa to the central Asian steppes. Which coincides nicely with the bulk of the world's petroleum reserves, excluding Venezuela and Alberta.

And right in the middle of that swath sits Iran.

Iran does not have nuclear weapons, yet. North Korea does. North Korea also has a far more repressive government than any Middle Eastern or North African nation, including Iran. And far greater human misery. But North Korea has no popular protest movement for western media to gush over.

Could it be because North Korea has no oil?

Of reserves and pipelines

Granted, some countries within that swath of Middle Eastern nations don't have oil either.

By some cruel irony, the Jews chose as their divinely destined homeland one of the few places in the Middle East that doesn't float on a subterranean sea of oil. A cynic might call this Moses' ultimate revenge against what the biblical book of Exodus called "a stiff-necked people."

But tiny, overpopulated Gaza, the perpetual burr under Jerusalem's backside, apparently has huge natural gas reserves just offshore. Might that influence Israel's blockade of Gaza?

Another tiny nation in that oil-bearing region, Georgia, has no oil either. But it happens to be a key route for a potential pipeline from the enormous reserves around the Caspian Sea to a Mediterranean port, and thus to the industrial western world.

Rebellious Chechnya, a neighbor of Georgia's, forms a similar bottleneck for getting oil and gas to Russia.

Syria doesn't rank high in world reserves either. But Syria once had a functioning oil pipeline, from Kirkuk in northern Iraq to Baniyas on the Mediterranean coast – until U.S. forces mistakenly blew it up while deposing Saddam Hussein. There's talk of restoring it, or even of building a newer, bigger pipeline.

Control of Syria, then, becomes key to feeding our oil addiction.

Ditto for Afghanistan, that fiercely independent black hole that humiliated the British Empire, Russia, and now the U.S. It's the only possible route for a pipeline from the oilfields east of the Caspian Sea to Pakistan's tanker ports on the Indian Ocean.

Which is where Egypt enters the equation. Egypt does have proven reserves of oil and gas -- much of it out under the Mediterranean, like Gaza – but not much more than Syria. But Egypt controls the Suez Canal – effectively

the world's biggest oil transmission route. The oil that comes out of Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia – in short, the oil that keeps most of the world running – travels by supertanker through the Suez Canal.

Sink one supertanker in the Canal, and that seagoing pipeline has to detour around Africa.

In all of this, Iran is the wild card. Iran's backing for Bashar Al-Assad precludes building a new pipeline out of Iraq through Syria. At the same time, Iran's ability to close the Strait of Hormuz – through which all tankers leaving the Persian Gulf must pass – makes such a pipeline all the more urgent.

Collaborating for mutual benefit

Now it seems clearer why Syria and Egypt get attention, and North Korea does not. For the oil addicted world, Kim Chung-Il is irrelevant. He has nuclear warheads and a hair-trigger mouth. But no oil.

As Noam Chomsky's famous 2008 headline stated, "It's the oil, stupid!"

I'm tempted to call Western oil interests a vast conspiracy. Not an authoritarian body, with a shadowy Godfather issuing orders, but a collection of independent entities, from national governments to petro-corporations, all motivated by their common need to control the flow of liquid gold for their own purposes.

Or maybe there's more than one conspiracy. Pro-western and anti-western, each manipulating popular passions in the hope of gaining control over a destabilized region.

Okay, that's off-the-wall hypothesis. But it seems to me a more rational explanation for the uprisings around the Mediterranean than a naïve belief that the Middle East and North Africa are suddenly awash in a desire to establish democracy.

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YOUR TURN

On the subject of last week's column, Isabel Gibson mused about reporters who babbled happily about flood relief from provincial funds, or federal funds, "apparently forgetting that it's all taxpayer money. We're all paying to rescue people who built on floodplains with our collective permission. Maybe it's time to do a bunch of things -- among them, the points you make about restoring grass and forest cover, and encouraging slower-moving streams -- and also to get people off floodplains. Expensive? You bet. This isn't?"

Robert Caughell picked up the same theme: "It is time that

(1) we seriously re-evaluate all structures built over [or near] rivers; they need to be built stronger and higher, and
(2) existing flood plain maps need to be redrawn and people should be encouraged not to live/build on them if possible. Calgary may have to build a diversion channel like Winnipeg's."

Two people who attended the same school I did in Northern India got in touch with me. Lynn Watson Vining would have graduated a couple of years before. Sally Stoddard, slightly younger than me, noted, "I am struck by the breadth and depth of the forum you have created by publishing your columns. I share them with many friends and we have held our own discussions on issues you have raised. Thank you. This is education at its best."

And while I'm patting myself on the back, James Russell forwarded my column to his own mailing list, with this comment: "The message is simple, the evidence your own eyes and ears: If god is making the floods in Alberta, in Australia, in India, ... he is doing it through the medium of human hands. And praying it will all go away is not the appropriate solution.

"Jim sends out similar well-reasoned and interesting columns regularly ..."

Judyth Mermelstein took issue with Steve Roney's letter, last week: "At no point did Martin Luther King demand that black children be taken by force from their parents and boarded from their home communities, forbidden contact with their families and prevented from speaking to their friends in the only language they knew. That ***was*** done to First Nations children.

"Desegregation in the southern US was often traumatic for black children, given the level of hatred directed at them, but they still had the support of family, church, and community, and were allowed to speak their mother-tongue." Native children, Judyth noted, were not allowed those privileges.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
