

REVOLUTION: IS SOUTH AFRICA NEXT?

Post-revolutionary Egypt offers insights for the South African Church



1 Chronicles 12:32 "... from Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do..."

By Mike Burnard

Students of revolutions – men and women who understand the times – know that "a revolution comes like a thief in the night." But a keen student can see the signs long before the revolutionary outbreak happens. Those in power are always surprised by a revolution and feel betrayed by the people they govern, but for those who seek to interpret seasons and observe the signs, it never comes as a surprise.

During the past years, there were a number of incidents that led many political experts to believe that a South African 'Arab Spring' is on the cards. It started with the Marikana massacre in 2012 (lethal use of force by security personnel against striking miners), followed by the Lenasia apartheid-like demolition of houses, and then the historic farmworkers' strike in De Doorns. More recently, there were the Fees-Must-Fall campaigns, the anti-immigrant protests in February, massive anti-Zuma protests across the nation, and considerable disruption when Coligny residents started burning property in the North West province.

At *INcontext*, we are often asked whether we think these demonstrations and periods of unrest could lead to a nationwide uprising, with the discontent youth in South Africa trying to imitate the actions of their counterparts in the Arab world. **Could South Africa experience the equivalent of the 'Arab Spring'?**

Asking the right questions is often more important than getting the right answers. The 'answers' in South African society are obvious: yes, South Africans live in a discontent society, often driven by suspicion and fear; yes, South Africa is a nation that often displays the volatility to explode overnight and return to sanity with equal speed; yes, South Africa is a highly-divided nation, politically, racially and economically; yes, South Africans do live with suspicion and fear, which are breeding grounds for a revolution. However, the questions asked are often not that obvious. Would the situation in South Africa look different if the Church of today was more visible and involved, having a greater impact on the political dynamics of the country? To what extent will the gathering of one million believers bring about change in the hearts of those who do not share the same beliefs? What can we learn from those who have faced revolutions, and how can we prevent the same from happening here?

The answers to these questions are two-fold, if we really believe the God that we believe in and if we interpret the warning signs with a sense of urgency. It is either the "IF" of **2 Chronicles 7:14** ("IF My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land...") or it will be the "IF" of **Revelation 2:5** ("Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. IF you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place..."). Firstly, He promises pardoning mercy and healing mercy IF the Church humbles

herself and prays and seeks His face and turns from wicked ways. The second promise involves the rebuke and displeasure of God towards a lukewarm and apathetic Church **IF** believers do not repent and do the things they first did. Both promises are conditional and require that God's people endeavour to revive and recover their first zeal, tenderness and seriousness, praying as earnestly and watching as diligently as they did when they first set out in the ways of God.

But what are the practical indicators for the future of South Africa? The question for the Church in South Africa is far more consequential than a simple political solution for a discontent generation. It is not only a matter of pacifying political and social restlessness but also of addressing eternal issues and the consequences of spiritual disobedience. The question is therefore not whether South Africa might soon experience the equivalent of an 'Arab Spring', but rather, what indicators we should take note of that will assist the Church to respond obediently and effectively in times of unrest.



Political and religious indicators clearly show that South Africa is highly unlikely to turn into a Syria. The main religious role-players in Syria – Sunni and Shia Islam – do not exist in South Africa, and neither does the country draw the international interest of nations like Saudi Arabia, Iran, the US and Russia. But when comparing the conditions of South Africa with Egypt, it is clear that there are more similarities in these two nations than there are differences.



On one hand, South African youth are experiencing similar issues to those that helped set the stage for the Egyptian revolution (high levels of poverty and unemployment, an awareness of corruption, disillusionment with leaders who make promises but do not fulfil them, and high inequalities in economic distribution). On the other hand, the gap between state and religion is far wider in South Africa than it is in Egypt and the other nations of the Arab Spring, even though social life is often directed by a form of spirituality (Islam is the dominant religion in Egypt, while most South Africans [74%] relate to the Christian faith, even though this is often mixed with animism and ancestor worship).

In this regard, there are some valuable lessons to observe from a nation that went through three revolutions in as many years. The Church in South Africa should take these seriously if there is any hope of influencing a nation that may be at a political tipping point.

Egypt, six years later...

It was six years ago that nearly two million Egyptians gathered on Tahrir Square in Cairo and changed the face of the Arab world forever. Six years later, and even though nothing has changed, everything has changed. The country is once again ruled by a military leader, but this time the people voted for him. Islam is still the dominant force, but it has lost its political power. The Muslim Brotherhood is once again a banned organisation, but this time it has tasted power. Traffic is still chaotic, but now with more roadblocks around. The pyramids still stand as a national landmark, but now there are virtually no tourists to see them.

But there is one significant change that few could predict. Christian leaders estimate that more than four million Muslims have left Islam and have either turned to Christ or to atheism, disillusioned by their god and desperately disappointed by their religion. What started as a political revolution ended up as a spiritual evolution. The three revolutions in as many years have left the nation of Egypt politically unstable and religiously insecure.

For the South African Church, there are some valuable indicators to observe.

1. Radicalism destroys

Egypt and Ukraine have both endured violent, destructive revolutions in the last six years, despite their extremely high religious leanings (Egypt being nearly 90% Muslim and the Ukraine nearly 90% Christian). And it is clear that no religion, in any shape or form, is immune to radicalism. Taking root in the hearts of believers and non-believers alike, radicalism or fundamentalism is non-discriminating in its hatred for anything different to itself.

Fundamentalism in any expression (also possible in the heart of Christianity) is the act of not allowing others to think or act differently. **Fundamentalism is not about having a conviction – it is about not allowing someone else to have a conviction that differs from one's own.** In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was on the brink of destroying a nation that has stood the test of time. The mere thought of allowing anybody to think differently prompts radicals to destroy the very ideology that they defend.

Radicalism, whether political or spiritual, could be one of the downfalls of South Africa's 'rainbow nation'. For the Church in South Africa, the warning is clear: convictions must be rooted in love and humility. Radical attitudes that oppose people who think and live differently – culturally, morally, spiritually or politically – do not characterise true Christianity but rather a proud Church destined to alienate people who seek hope and understanding. Unlike Egypt's pious religious leaders, Christian leaders in South Africa may set an example that reflects Christ's compassion and love for all, especially those who think differently.

2. Opportunity has an expiry date



After decades of being classified as a 'terrorist organisation' in Egypt and banned under the rule of former President Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in 2012. The Brotherhood based their election campaign largely on the argument that all the rumours about them were lies: they proclaimed their genuine concern for Egypt, the people, democracy and freedom. And their electoral victory gave them a window of an opportunity to prove themselves and cement their foothold. However, this window closed permanently on 30 June 2013, when the nation staged massive protests throughout Egypt to express their discontent with promises not being fulfilled. Mr Morsi was ousted from the

presidency and the Muslim Brotherhood was once again forced underground as in the days before the revolution.

For the Muslim Brotherhood, the window of opportunity was lost. Their unfulfilled promises and self-interests were met with disgust in the hearts of ordinary people. For the Church in South Africa, the message is clear: the window of opportunity to impact a nation in need will not always be open. Unless the 'revival talk' and prayer meetings translate into the action of feeding the poor and clothing the naked, the masses in townships will look elsewhere for answers and hope. Much is already being done – there is no doubt about that. But those that do are few, and there are still not enough showing the compassion of Christ in a nation where more than half of the population lives below the breadline. This window has an expiry date, and if not utilised soon, the consequences could be severe.

3. Influence is earned

Influence is not commanded, it is earned. For the first time in Egypt's modern history, the Egyptian Church is acknowledged as an influential role player.

The first revolution saw Christians of all denominations participating in creating a new society. Then the counter-revolution saw the destruction of more than 50 churches, when members of the Muslim Brotherhood expressed their new-found power. These violent attacks, however, led to Christians earning the title of "People of Peace" and "People of Forgiveness" when the Coptic Pope declared the following on national television: *"If you burn down all our churches, we will come into your mosques and pray in the name of Jesus. But we will not do to you what you*

have done to us.” This was in stark contrast with the violent actions of the Muslim Brotherhood and earned an increased influence for the Egyptian Church.

For the Church in South Africa, opportunities are ever-present but influence will have to be earned. Gone are the days when Christians could demand the respect of the government simply because they were Christians. Gone are the days where Christians could demand the right of Christian education and other privileges simply because they were Christians. With new leaders and young rebels, the Church will have to earn the influence they desire in order to impact the nation.

4. Intentions do not satisfy

Good intentions are not good enough anymore. Only real, tangible, visible, on-site, practical involvement will satisfy the discontent and marginalised masses. The world is tired of a ‘talking religion’. In Egypt, much **talk** and little **do** is adding to Islam’s crumbling position. There are just too many alternatives available for a generation of young Muslims who are not scared of death anymore. Islam failed because it remained a theology of rules and regulations without impacting lives.

For the Church in South Africa, the challenge is simple: stop talking and start doing. The words of John are a clear guideline to stop revolutions of hatred and implement revolutions of peace: *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”* (1 John 3:16-18)

5. Check your prayers

Friday prayers in the mosques are currently the inspiration behind much of the violence taking place in Egypt today. Every Friday becomes a day of unrest after the Friday prayers. **It is clear that the spirit of people’s prayers will determine their actions.**

As Christians, there can be only one response when we pray to the Father of compassion: love. Love for God, love for His glory, and a saturating love for our neighbour – not the neighbour we agree and identify with but the cultural outcast as exemplified in Luke 10:30-37. The Lord ended the parable with these words: *“Now go and do likewise.”* No hatred or fear. No prejudice or pride. No suspicion or mistrust.

In South Africa, much prayer is happening, especially in the last few months. But what do our prayers centre on? Very often, prayers focus on the removal of leaders and not the redemption of leaders. Prayers are for a safer, more prosperous nation and not for a Kingdom-saturated community where justice and righteousness reign. If our prayers do not focus on reconciliation between people and God, we are not reflecting a Kingdom vision. When we asked a leader in Egypt whether we should pray for or against the Muslim Brotherhood, his simple response was *“we never pray **against** anything, we pray **for** everything.”* The Zumas, the Malemas, the Maimanes of South Africa – do we pray for them? And how do we pray for them?

How will the prayers of South African Christians change what they do and what they think? This is a matter of life and death, a matter of revolution or peace.

