Revolution on an Empty Stomach

The American science fiction writer Jerry Pournelle once observed that “civilization is only 24 hours and two missed meals deep”. Despite this it remains a historical fact that starving people do not launch revolutions, but people who are afraid of starving certainly do.

Revolutions always have at least three triggers that all must be pulled before citizens hit the streets to build or storm barricades. The first is the long term institutional grievance that leads to widespread discontent. The second is the presence of a revolutionary organization – a group of people committed to preparing to act against the authorities. The final trigger is the specific spark that turns a potential rising into a substantial one. As often as not, food is involved.

Political instability often goes hand in glove with poor crops and high grain prices. Ancient Rome’s leaders feared the results when the capital city’s grain stores ran low. In France, poor harvests in 1788 and a dismal outlook for 1789 caused bread to go from eight sous per loaf to 12; and this led directly to the storming of the Bastille and the Women’s March of 1789. France remained unstable until good harvests returned in 1794.

The blight that triggered the Irish Potato Famine hit the rest of Europe in 1846 and 1847. The complete failure of the crop triggered catastrophe in Ireland, where the spud constituted the main portion of the diet of rural Catholic Irish. In most of continental Europe, potatoes represented 15-20% of the working man’s diet; and the crop failure triggered a rise in food prices. This was the trigger for 1848’s Year of Revolutions. The Irish who were starving did not revolt (although their grandchildren eventually did); Europeans who were afraid of starving rose from Paris to Budapest.

Hunger during the First World War helped launch the Russian Revolution in 1917 – “Peace, Land, Bread!” was the cry because all three were in short supply. The unrest that ushered in Germany’s collapse in the fall of 1918 was related to the prospect of another year of tight rationing and bread loaves eked out with beans and sawdust.

If you’re trying to make sense of the sudden upheavals in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and elsewhere forget Twitter and Facebook—food shortages and rising prices have always been the handmaidens of revolution. The current Middle East uprisings are no exception.

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John Thompson, the head of the Mackenzie Institute,
writes occasionally for MLI on national security and foreign affairs issues.
Agronomists and other specialists have tried to warn that global food shortages are drawing near. In 2007 and 2008, food riots occurred in 30 countries because of rapid increases in food prices. Even before this, the world’s growing population had been nibbling into collective stockpiles of wheat, rice and corn for some years.

From 1998 to 2006, annual consumption outstripped annual production throughout the world for six years out of eight. Global stockpiles dwindled – the United States had the lowest amount of stored wheat since 1930, the European Union’s stored inventory shrank from 14 million tons of grain to less than one million, and the world’s total reserves which covered 115 days average consumption in 1990 had shrunk to 50.

Demand for food, especially for grains, is growing beyond what might be expected merely because of population growth. Prosperity, particularly in China, is resulting in an increased demand for all manner of food stuffs, including grain for animal feed.

The market reacted to this new demand, and prices immediately increased. These price increases made food too expensive for many people around the world. The trend reversed in 2008 when the United States and Europe pumped money into the UN World Food Program (WFP), but as the WFP executive director warned a UK parliamentary committee on 9 March 2009, this soothed the problem, but would not solve the fundamental weakness of production and food stocks.

Food costs are also extremely sensitive to the price of oil, and to commodities speculation, both of which have increased since the 2009 economic slump.

Rising prices passed the 2008 mark in December 2010, and are still climbing. In the developed world, a household’s annual grocery budget might constitute 5-10 percent of the annual income. A fifty percent increase in food prices is an inconvenience but not a hardship. In less prosperous countries where the grocery bill is half or more of your income, the current increase in food prices is a dire threat – especially when coupled to higher fuel prices.

The average man on the Arab street has held long term grievances about the inefficiency and corruption of his ruling elites; and he just might be partial to the message of the Islamic Fundamentalists. What makes 2011 different is that the man on the street is now very apprehensive about his near-term well-being; and this is going to make him angry.

As of the end of February the unrest in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is also stirring in Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, and elsewhere. Pundits might credit Facebook and Twitter; but these weren’t necessary to kindle and sustain any of the hundreds of revolutions in history. Some ascribe the Tunisian revolt to Wikileaks’ indiscretions about the corruption of President Ben Ali; not so… Tunisians already knew he was corrupt.

Only one factor truly explains why so many countries are facing revolution and revolt right now, and why so many more will join them in the coming months. The fear of hunger – rather than hunger itself – has always played a role in provoking unrest. That means until we can bring food prices down much of the world is going to be restless.
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The notion that a new think-tank in Ottawa is unnecessary because it would duplicate existing institutions is completely mistaken. The truth is there is a deep dearth of independent think-tanks in our nation’s capital.

Allan Gotlieb, former Deputy Minister of External Affairs and Ambassador to Washington

To surmount the enormous challenges of getting Canada’s place in the world right and taking advantage of changing opportunities, we need more ideas, input, discussion and debate in Ottawa—that is where the crucial decisions about our future are made. That’s why MLI is so vital to Canada today.

Hon. James S. Peterson, former Minister of International Trade and Member of Parliament for 23 years

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It is not often that Canadians talk about moving out of America’s shadow—for far too long we have simply assumed that being in that shadow was the natural order of things. Crowley, Clemens and Veldhuis remind us that Sir Wilfrid Laurier thought that all things were possible for us, and they show, with an impressive array of facts to support their argument, that Laurier’s plan for Canada can still carry us through to that Canadian century we have all been eagerly awaiting for over a hundred years.

-Allan Gotlieb, from the foreword