

William Hague, British Foreign Secretary, speaking at a conference of African leaders and businessmen in London recently made a prophetic statement. He said that the uprisings in the in the Middle East "will not stop at the borders of the Arab world." The Middle East is a cauldron of unrest bursting out from the grassroots. In Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya, in Bahrain, in Syria and all over mass revolt has taken place against long-standing authoritarian rulers and their ruling families. Attempts by some to portray these varied mass uprisings as having

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rulers who still remain unequivocally loyal to them. Syria is a case in point where the US-led West is cautious about hurting. Saudi Arabia with its heavy lever over global oil prices is too sensitive to touch. Why the West is targeting Gaddafi is simply because they have long felt that this dictator could no longer be relied upon. There is also this consideration which West's floggers have not recognized: There is a gap between the ruling

evidence of the Elections Commissioner himself to support this statement. Through the same process, the Opposition's democratic space has been seriously diminished. The Police are known to seize and destroy pamphlets and posters distributed by the Opposition.

In a closed system information is severely restricted and many things done by the government become unknowable by the public.

This is a prevalent feature in Sri Lanka. Even hugely costing projects like the Hambantota

# Making Sense

to the constitution (so important) are brought in without allowance for broad discussion. India has a Freedom of Information Act but Sri Lanka avoids that kind of legislation.

Journalists and media are purveyors of information to the masses but there are serious charges of journalists critical of the government being obstructed, kidnapped or even murdered under government watch.

# ARE WE RUNNING AGAINST HISTORY?

been engineered by the West have failed to impress anyone but the paranoid. The simple test is that these popular rebellions have not had a recognizable local leader. They have been led by vague coalitions of spontaneous opposition forces made up mostly of long suffering angry young men and women. Gaddafi had tried to make a big issue of the presence of some British journalists in Libya but, then, it is the role of journalists to be present anywhere and everywhere where there is exciting news. The 21st century had hitherto been dominated by 9/11 and by the financial crisis of the year 2008. Mass revolts against repressive regimes will define the century in more long reaching ways as they will take time to spread from country to country. We are only in the early stages of what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East. However, the global historic shift is sure and inevitable- starting in the most unexpected lands and moving to South Asia and other regions. The latest at the time of writing is that the former President of the Ivory Coast, Laurent Gbagbo, refuses to quit 'for the

elite of the West and their popular electoral bases; the latter demand freedom and democratic values and want their leaders to work toward such causes.

The US-led West has to take a warning from these expressions of mass unrest and they will have to align their self-interest to accord with the growing and burgeoning popular demand for the new values of freedom by the peoples of the world today. People in today's civilization all over the world are being increasingly exposed to the joy and fulfillment that freedom brings and for the need to hold ruling regimes accountable to them. Globalizing processes, contemporary communications, and the freedom of movement and of trade have exposed the ways of the "free world" to a once secluded and deceived population.

Accordingly, governments that employ violence to stop democratic processes will not earn themselves respite for long. They will pay an increasingly high price for actions which can no longer be hidden from the world with ease. Such governments will find themselves on the wrong side of history.

The emerging political ethos and fashion is for open political systems with representative and accountable government. William Hague concluded his speech stating that "the foundations of good governance - the rule of law, free media and strong independent institutions - are not a luxury but a fundamental basis for economic long term development and security."

Only such a political ethos will be sustainable in the future. The criteria for good governance outlined above would provide the only sensible and justifiable basis for stable and efficient regimes.

Against such criteria it may be argued that Sri Lanka has, particularly since the war, been moving in the opposite side of the road and against history. With the 18th Amendment all powers have been effectively concentrated in the office of the President. The President is above the law and cannot be sued by a party aggrieved by his decision. In accountable democracies it is the law and not the President who is supreme and thus even the President has to be law abiding.

Thus a President above the law is having all key governance institutions under him. The separation of powers that alone can permit the growth of independent institutions that Hague speaks about is virtually liquidated. The President and his men rule the roost. Parliament is a rubber stamp and the old days of fearless Parliamentary Select Committees have disappeared. Whoever is left with any independence can be bought over by the patronage that absolute power generates.

The undiluted power of the President and, by extension, his executive arm has empowered the office to influence the electoral process making elections in Lanka no longer the impartial activity it had been for many decades after independence. We have the



Port, Hambantota Airport etc have not been subject to independent feasibility study and the public are not aware of the economic justification of such projects or even about the tender procedures followed in having such projects executed. Even amendments

The new wave of uprisings stem from the harshness of closed political systems. While new generations of protestors are clamouring for open and accountable government Sri Lanka is going in the opposite direction to close a once open system.



## Shyamon Jayasinghe

goted of the country' although he has been voted out by the people in no uncertain terms.

The societies of Middle Eastern countries have long been observed as being politically closed societies. They are run by Kings and princes and by naked dictators who have managed to oust the kings and assume King-hood themselves. The primary political base of these varied rulers is their families. Next, comes the greedy men and women who have flocked around the rulers under various pretexts unable to hide their self-interest in propping the regimes concerned. The religious clergy is an important component of this favoured base. Religious leaders take leave of their 'holy books' showing no qualms about condoning the highhandedness, the injustice, the murder, and the corruption that they see around them. They see no evil and hear no evil but continue to preach. The rulers rule by pandering to the greedy opportunists on the one hand and by frightening potential opponents on the other. The media is perhaps the first victim, and independent journalists who are lucky to be alive seek cover elsewhere for fear of their lives. These rulers have been quick to identify the new technology spewed by the IT revolution as they obstruct or close down the internet and employ hackers to shut up websites. Mr Hague stated that the West's response to the rebellions should be "generous, bold and ambitious." Historic lessons should teach us to suspect the noble intent of such utterances. Leaders of super powers initially boosted up most of these rulers now under siege by the people. Furthermore, it is clear that the West will protect any of the

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