

Hubris syndrome and the Arab spring: shared ideology or *folie partagée*?

Sir: In his paper 'Psychiatry and politicians', Russell (2011) provided an excellent review of the 'hubris syndrome', as expounded by Owen & Davidson (2009). Diagnostic criteria for the syndrome are included in Lord Owen's eponymous book (2012). In this letter, we propose that developments in the Arab Spring demonstrate how the syndrome may be exhibited not only by a person in power, but also by his or her followers.

The hubris syndrome is characterised by exaggerated pride, overwhelming self-confidence and contempt for others. It often involves an overestimation of one's own competence and capabilities, which results in the leader's misinterpretation of reality. This can result in the leader making swift, unwise and risk-laden decisions, decisions which are to the detriment of the people whom the leader is meant to serve. Hubristic behaviour may be a product of the environment in which the leader operates. However, the self-generating element of the behaviour cannot be underestimated; it means that the leader is gripped by something which is no longer driven by outside factors but comes from within that individual.

Owen & Davidson (2009) suggest that the hubris arises from a personality change which is associated with the individual's possession of power. The condition postdates the acquisition of power and remits after the power is lost. The longer political leaders are in power, the more likely it is that they develop the condition.

The Arab Spring is the media term for the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests (both non-violent and violent), riots and civil wars in the Arab world that began in Tunisia in December 2010. To date, rulers have been forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen; civil uprisings have erupted in Bahrain and civil war has engulfed Syria for the past 2 years. In all these countries, a common feature appears to exist: all the deposed rulers in the Arab Spring appear to fulfil the proposed diagnostic criteria for hubris syndrome as described by Lord Owen. They have been replaced by 'democratically' elected leaders

with strong religious ideology. However, within a few weeks in office, the symptoms of hubris syndrome were in evidence in all of the newly elected leaders, perhaps even sooner than Lord Owen (2012) postulated.

These elected leaders appear to have crossed the dividing line between decisive leadership on the one hand and hubristic leadership on the other, with the accompanying loss of trust of the people who elected them. Moreover, the syndrome appears to have rapidly spread beyond the leaders themselves, and to have infected the ruling parties, the wider governments and their supporters. These groups now also appear to exhibit identical hubristic behaviour.

The prevailing collective hubristic behaviour in each of these countries has led to deep social divisions, civil unrest, mindless violence and loss of lives and liberty. Political opponents, liberals, intellectuals and minorities have been regarded as the enemy (*nemesis*) (Owen, 2012). The leaders and their followers appear to have developed an extraordinary mindset that fits the classic dynamic of hubris opposing *nemesis* with a vengeful desire to confront, defeat, humiliate and punish an adversary who may be accused of hubris (Owen, 2012).

It may therefore be plausible that the hubristic behaviour of a leader – based on beliefs or intoxication of power, and induced or acquired in circumstances of religious fanaticism and political power – may expand into a collective form affecting the leader's supporters in a manner not dissimilar to *folie partagée*, where followers share and act on such beliefs, albeit not of equal strength (Enoch & Ball, 2001).

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