

Asinus Muses

Days of rage

The message has rung out across the Middle East: you can imprison and torture us, ban our opposition parties, and fail to provide economic opportunities. But woe betide the dictator that violates the right to sell fruit and veg in the street.

For so it all began: a young Tunisian man, whose grocery stall was confiscated after he was refused a permit to sell in the street, set himself on fire on the 17th December in desperate protest. (Asinus can't help wondering whether the vendors in his local Oxford farmers' market would be equally passionate under the circumstances.) This act of despair then inspired millions of acts of extraordinary bravery as citizens protested against their autocratic rulers across the Middle East. Tunisia's Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali fled after 23 years of rule; Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, with 30 years of dictating, was then shoved out after just 18 days of protests.

Crude conspiracies

Like crude in a cold snap, the plot in the ongoing lawsuit between Ecuador and Chevron thickens. A US judge ordered the maker of the documentary *Crude* to reveal all of his outtakes, some of which showed the Ecuadorean plaintiff's attorney describing the Ecuadorean court as corrupt – that is, the court that has just awarded his clients US\$17bn in damages – and describing environmental evidence he used in the case as 'smoke and mirrors'. Now Chevron is hitting back with a civil counter suit accusing them of 'leading a fraudulent investigation'. They are using the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, among others, which Asinus has heard of owing to its use in *The Sopranos* and

other US-Mafia-based TV shows and films. Ironic, really, since Asinus recalls one episode of the classic HBO series in which one of Tony Soprano's *capos* dumps toxic waste into a local lake. Now RICO is the tool, rather than the nemesis, of the alleged dumpers of toxic waste.

At the same time, BP is being excoriated by US Democratic congressman Edward Markey for suggesting that the cost of the cleanup required after its Gulf of Mexico spill is lower than has been estimated. The congressman remarked: 'BP made errors in judgment that led to this oil spill, and now they've made another error in judgment by going after the very people their spill harmed.' He did not, of course, direct the same criticism at Chevron for going after Ecuadorean victims. Asinus has always been fascinated by the natural law that says foreign firms should not defend themselves against US claims for damages, but US firms have every right to throw RICO at a group of Amazonian Indians suffering from cancers and polluted water.

Out of the ordinary

At the time of writing the King of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, appears to be looking to compromise with his own protestors, having sent his relatively liberal son the Crown Prince to negotiate. Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and family are in less conciliatory mood. Having murdered significant numbers of his protesting citizens, he also sent his son to manage negotiations: Seif al-Islam Gaddafi appeared on television threatening to 'fight to the last minute, until the last bullet'. Not to be outdone, Gaddafi senior then gave a televised address in which he announced that he would 'die a martyr'. He also declared that 'Gaddafi is not a president or an ordinary

person,' some of which most people would probably agree with.

Noblesse oblige

In Riyadh, rumours had been circulating that King Abdullah would offer a 'royal gift' to pacify his people. Lo and behold, on his return from surgery in Morocco he announced US\$36bn of extra expenditures, including a wage rise of 15% for public sector workers, financial aid for students and the unemployed, and reprieves for imprisoned debtors. (Yes, apparently they still imprison debtors there.) Asinus is curious to see how gratefully the Saudi people will receive a little more of the oil rents that, in most countries, would be considered theirs already.

Saudi has also just stated that it will supply extra oil, of the right quality, to replace any lost Libyan production. As so often, international markets are the recipients of perhaps the greatest largesse.

Crisis? What crisis?

Feelings are mixed for most of us observing: excitement at the prospect of democracy and a new hope for tens of millions of people, mixed with fear of the violence and instability that may continue. At the same time, oil companies with operations in Libya have been hastily extracting their employees from the country. But, as Asinus has noted in the past, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good: oil companies not directly invested in the region will be watching the ever-growing oil price and trying not to cheer too loudly. They will be recalling Baron Rothschild's unpleasant but profitable advice to buy when there's blood in the streets.

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