

# Some experiences from India on governance

## Rajmohan Gandhi

I pay tribute to the amazing impact of the bravery of young Tunisians and young Egyptians on the world, including on India.

I will speak partly as a historian, partly as one who fought for democratic rights during a phase of dictatorial rule in India, 1975-77, and finally as one who has made his own effort in India for inclusiveness and partnership among different groups.

As a historian, let me speak of Gandhi's example. His secret was to establish credibility in the eyes of virtually everyone in India. One way he did this was by speaking truth to his own side. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, he spoke difficult truth to his own people.

He built a team and was happy for power to go to his team. His lack of interest in personal power; his refusal to remote control. Be ready to die for your dignity, he said, but be willing to puncture your egos. He taught of the difference between dignity and the ego.

Timid and cowardly in his boyhood, he inspired the Indian people to say goodbye to fear, so that they welcomed prison, beatings and were ready to be killed. Not that no one felt fear, but they acted in spite of their fears. As we saw in Tunisia and Egypt.

He said, 'Fear not.' He also said something else that was important, 'Frighten not.' This was his call to dominant Indian groups, to the Hindu high castes for instance. Many Indians heeded his call. He said a white skin was not necessary for one to become an imperialist in his mind, or despot in his acts.

In 1975-77, when India endured a kind of dictatorship, I had the privilege to invite imprisonment and penalties for the sake of the freedom of expression. I had the privilege also to work for unity and trust among individuals fighting for democracy who came from different streams, who had their egos, and were ready to believe stories about colleagues in the battle that so and so had been bought, or had surrendered. I managed to help several people not to believe negative stories about allies, to help defeat the rumour mill.

The democratic or Janata experiment 1977-79, and again 1989-91: egos and the break-up of democratic parties and alliances. The gains that are quickly lost, the disillusionment quickly felt. The returning enthusiasm for the discipline of the army.

I have worked for inclusiveness, for building trust across the Hindu/Muslim and the Indian/Pakistan divides.

Why do people act the way they do? Because they are of this or that religion or race or country? How do we see people? We want a simple one-word or two-word description. But above all they are human beings with fears and hopes. We can play on their fears and memories and prejudices, or we can appeal to the better angels of their nature, to their human hopes of a better life for themselves and their communities and their children. Isn't their humanity their most important thing? Aren't they like us rather than unlike us?