



## Can Lack of Leadership Become Transformative?

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### Abstract

*Observers today assume that transformations in society are necessarily linked to leadership. However, anthropologists have dealt with human groups they labeled acephalous (from Greek, meaning headless), characterized by an absence of centralized or hierarchical leadership of any sort. In this 'idea' piece, the author observes that it is possible in some situations to delink societal transformations from leadership—centralized, hierarchical, charismatic or governing. Using two contemporary examples, the United States and Egypt, the author suggests that significant change and societal transformation might not always be directly guided by the charisma of a leader or the force of a governing entity, but rather would be growing over time and building as a response to collective discontent. The rising protests in the streets of Egypt in 2011 against former President Mubarak and his ruling elite raise these questions: who is their leader? Who is running these protests? The answer is: there is no leader—just the people. In other words, transformative processes are possible by a collective without specific central leaders, particularly in light of the public global social media popularly used to rapidly communicate today.*

Most observations about leadership focus on the transformative qualities of good leadership for a society or a nation. The effort would be for identifying qualities of good leadership. Two cases of governance, that of Egypt under the late former President Mubarak and that of the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, in which lack of (or bad) leadership to guide the nation through crises and into progress suggest that major, even revolutionary, actions led by the people can result in major transformative changes. In the case of Egypt, the 'passive' kind of leadership that Mubarak has shown while focusing on big business and capital for a small elite of people in the country left the country drifting along and getting deeper into a downward spiral. Egypt, which has a deep civilizational history and critical geopolitical position with implications for national security, survived only due to the sheer stamina of its people for several decades reaching a very low level of moral, societal, economic and developmental decay with deep consequences. In the meantime, the police force was encouraged to deal with the citizens using extreme brutality. Economic inequality grew and the divide between rich and poor became wider and wider. It was a boat without a rudder, drifting along the stream driven only by the sheer energy of its people's endurance and patience. Then one extreme case of police brutality was the straw that broke the camel's back. The people rose in anger and came out in exponential numbers to the streets, centering in the now iconic Midan al-Tahrir or Liberation Square.

The people of Egypt, Muslims, Copts and others, men, women and children would not leave the street despite police brutality until their demands were met. One clear demand was for the then President Mubarak to step down. This people's movement started on January 25, 2011. Former President Mubarak did step down. Chaos resulted from groups competing for power, which led the people to go out again in larger numbers on June 30, 2013, to complete their revolutionary process. A second President was removed. The people chose a new President and Egypt moved onto a road of transformative development which has been protecting Egypt's national security to this day.

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In the United States, the people had to choose between two candidates for President during the previous election in 2016, both of whom were despised by large elements in the nation. This political situation itself merits attention. What happened to the democratic system in which real choice is absent, but election has to move forward because of tradition or inertia? Has the political system, even when in decay, become an object of worship?

But there were many more signs of a decaying system. There were a few very rich people, corporate power overwhelmed the economic and political system, racism grew and poverty widened. The presence of homeless people in the streets of the major cities of the United States was alarming. Racism against nonwhites was festering below a thin layer of apparent normalcy. Violence increased in dangerous ways.

An undercurrent of a decaying society was coming to a boil. President Trump was seen as divisive and as demonstrated by the major crisis that brutally struck the nation in late-2019, the COVID-19 pandemic, people were hungry for centralized leadership. This pandemic crisis was coupled with the case of police brutality in which a white policeman asphyxiated a black man who was pinned under his knee. Floyd died. His image desperately saying "I can't breathe" filled screens around the world. The world is so connected by globalized communication that in seconds the whole world can exchange communication and react. A global movement against racism arose.

Business as usual and strong comments by the former President, which sometimes worked to pacify or agitate before, led to louder and stronger protests in a nation that has almost reached an economic standstill from the pandemic. Protests filled the streets. It was a moment in which people, otherwise divided, ended up uniting. This racism has been going on for decades. Now serious discussions of social justice and racial equality are shaping national dialogue. Floyd's six-year old daughter is reported to have said, "Daddy changed the world". The absence of leadership in a nation 'screaming' for unitary guidance both during the pandemic and for white police brutality against blacks, united the people not only across

the divide but across borders at a time when COVID-19 put barriers between borders. In both cases, people used the technology of social media to rapidly spread the word with passion, communicating and crossing borders without masks.

It is difficult to predict the future of the movement as events are still in progress. But I am suggesting that in these two cases, Egypt under the late former President Mubarak and the United States under the former President Trump, it was a lack of charismatic or centralized leadership that has led to a road of transformations that might be assessed in the future to be significant. The reference in the case of the US is not simply, as some might imagine, voting for different people. This would be the least of significant transformations. I am proposing a writing of a new declaration for the United States: A Declaration of Social Justice—a declaration that promises a fundamental change. The time is now ripe for such an act which would indeed illustrate that sometimes absence of leadership can lead to positive transformations.

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