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What direction our own democracy?

Will the Arab states cascade into the splendid embrace of democracy the way the Soviet states did two decades ago?

The tumult in Tunisia and Egypt brings to mind two things. One is those Soviet years when I was stationed in Moscow for this newspaper. Another is the weakened state of Canadian democracy and whether we're prepared to do anything about it.

When Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the politics of glasnost in 1985, everyone thought it was a ruse, just another blast of Soviet propaganda. But that policy was what set the stage for freedom's rise and the Cold War's close.

For the Arab states of North Africa and the Middle East, there's no grand political overseer who can loosen the strings as Mr. Gorbachev did. What was remarkable was that he had the entire Soviet police state apparatus at his disposal, as well as the military. Despite deteriorating economic conditions, he could have maintained a totalitarian lock on power. But he was enlightened enough about the West to know how his system compared.

By coincidence, the current upheavals take place a year after Canadians took to the streets to stage, by comparison, their own trifling protests against, by comparison, smallish abuses of their democratic system by their government. Specifically, it was Stephen Harper's government's decision to suspend Parliament in the wake of the Afghan detainees controversy that sparked the protest. But that suspension was only one in a long line of affronts in recent times.

There's been so many that Democracy Watch is calling for a grassroots Coffee Party movement. Democracy Watch is a small group but, since its inception in 1993, it's been one of the most persistent in trying to hold Liberal and Conservative governments to account. It isn't government-funded, and it isn't easily intimidated.

Most everywhere it turns, it can see which way our democracy is headed. On the question of openness and access to information – our very own glasnost – Canada finished last in a recent survey of five parliamentary democracies. On the question of political morality, the governing Conservatives have made personal attack ads, as Green Party Leader Elizabeth May lamented Monday, the new normal.

The Conservatives had a plan – a good one – to replace our rancid system of patronage appointments with a public appointments commission. But it was scuttled. They had hopes our Senate could be democratized. A good idea, too. But instead, it's been filled with Conservative cronies.

Owing to brutal partisanship, Parliament's committee system has become increasingly dysfunctional. Watchdog groups such as the Integrity Commissioner's Office have been turned into lapdogs. The public service's policy development function, once significant, has been blunted. An unprecedented government-wide vetting system instituted by the Tories has stifled free speech.

In our democracy, those who dare speak out – think diplomat Richard Colvin and the Afghan detainees' controversy – risk paying a big price. In the House of Commons, attempts to reform Question Period get nowhere. At elections, voter turnout tumbles. Our supposedly independent boards and tribunals are stuffed with partisans. Agency heads who don't fall into line are fired or intimidated.

A system of total control by the Prime Minister's Office, long in the making by both main parties, has come to be accepted. At the party level, an antiquated system of backroom bossism rules the Conservatives. Members either fall into line or risk going the way of Helena Guergis.

These are only some of the ways in which our system is getting worse instead of better. There are more. So while we watch the events in North Africa and the Middle East and hope democracy takes hold there as it did in the Warsaw Pact countries, we should also give a thought to the functioning of our own democratic system.

Source: The Globe and Mail