

# When citizens bite back: Civics education as a foundation for social change.

(Edited version of Part 1 of paper delivered at the 2012 Pacific Circle Consortium Conference, Seoul, South Korea by John Gore. Part 2 will appear in the October edition))

**Note:** The country examples given in this paper were correct as at the 24 June 2012. Subsequent events may have changed them.

2011 and 2012 have seen unprecedented citizen revolts against their governments with leaders and governments being ousted in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt and other nations like Syria, Yemen and Myanmar under pressure. However, even in western countries, there was evidence of rebellion when Occupy Wall Street protests unsettled western leaders in a range of countries. And during all of this, many African nations continue to face civil war and insurrection as citizens align themselves with anti-government forces.

Are inept governments the Achilles' heel which is destroying democracy in many of these countries? Why are citizens rebelling and what can civics education in schools contribute to providing a better foundation for social change? As Christians, what is our perspective on these events?

The reasons why citizens rebel:

1. **over compliance** (government becomes oppressive to the people) State determined laws, rules, regulation and goals ignoring the aspirations of the poor, the young and the socially disenfranchised. Is this a part picture of the Russia and a developing picture of Iran and some other Islamic countries?
2. **spin** (government no longer believed) Pretending to work at the problems without any real passion to solve them. Making reasons for mistakes sound plausible and not the fault of government. Putting a good light on every error and not admitting or addressing the problem. This matter certainly applies to Australia, especially its state governments, and I suspect many other western countries.
3. **bribery and corruption** are endemic and overwhelm law enforcement (government unable/unwilling to change cultural practice) direct bribing of politicians, public servants and the police make bribery part of the culture of a society where a bribe is needed to get something done. Countries include among others India, Pakistan and Cambodia
4. **the rule of law is not enforced** (government has dysfunctional relationship with police (army) and judiciary). Laws are selectively enforced according to political ambition leading to uncertainty amongst the law enforcement agencies about their work and political support for it. This matter has been a real concern in post revolution Egypt and an ongoing problem in India.
5. **unequal impacts of macro economic conditions** (government no longer seen to have solutions) recession, unemployment, loss of welfare nets, youth training opportunities, minimum wages, homelessness, inflation, national debt. This matter is a major concern in the United States and for most European countries at this present time.
6. **increased inequality of income distribution** (government acts against the poor and disenfranchised.) government actions reward the rich and make the poor poorer including, increased regressive taxes, relief to the highly taxed including lower marginal rates, reduction or freezing the social benefits payments, high food prices. Many of these features were behind the civil rebellion in Tunisia, apply to some extent in almost every country and were key drivers of the Occupy Wall Street movement which spread to other countries.
7. **social justice denied** (government is not impartial) government prescribes harsh punishments on the rebellious poor and disenfranchised and allows white collar crime and fats cats to get away with illegal activity and light punishments. The favoured treatment of tribes around the Libyan capital was a primary reason for the Libyan rebellion. The

raids over recent weeks ordered by Putin against dissenting Russians also illustrate this point.

8. **embedded racial, religious and cultural discrimination** (government is overcome by inertia) Deeply embedded and historical religious, racial and cultural discrimination overwhelm the Government's desire for justice and equality This reason is a continuing problem in countries Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan and India.

Of course we can identify to a greater or lesser extent these characteristics in many countries. While no single factor might lead to revolution, combinations can lead countries down the revolution path with citizens biting back at effective governments in which they have lost trust.

Having identified why citizens rebel, the question remains as to what a civil society might look like if Governments are to have a vision of the society citizens want.

What does a civil society look like? One characteristic comes from the insight of Martin Krygier, Professor of Law at University of NSW Australia who has developed the concept of social relationships being intimate and non-intimate and examined the quality of non-intimate relations as an indicator of a civil society. He says: *in civil societies, routine non-predatory social relations can occur amongst non-intimates which neither depend upon love or deep connection nor - as is common in uncivil conditions - are fractured by their absence and replaced by suspicion, hostility, hatred or simply fear. Civil relationships are not especially close, and they are not like love and hatred. They are ones in which the opposite of my friend is not my enemy but say, my acquaintance or colleague or neighbour, I can do business with him, and do not necessarily betray anyone by doing so.* (Paper: Interpersonal violence, the rule of law and its enforcement. Martin Krygier and Whit Mason

[http://depot.gdnet.org/cms/conference/papers/Krygier\\_Mason\\_Paper\\_Plenary4\(1\).pdf](http://depot.gdnet.org/cms/conference/papers/Krygier_Mason_Paper_Plenary4(1).pdf)

In a civil society it is safe to travel on public transport, to expect that a taxi driver will take you where you want to go, to expect that your credit card details will not be compromised by the shop assistant or Internet site and to participate in the community by belonging to a local group. In a civil society you get the best available answer when you ask a citizen for directions, people acknowledge each other through appropriate social gestures, and where people's right to be different, within the rule of law, is accepted, even if some find those differences repulsive. In this regard family, ethnic, religious and linguistic attachments may matter, but citizens don't kill for them or impose them on others. A civil society is characterised by trust between non-intimates in everyday contacts.

In societies where this trust is less evident, there is the hatred, suspicion and social dysfunction that can cause economic ruin as well as flashpoints of violence as one group opposes another. How civil a society is Iraq, Zimbabwe, Libya, Sudan, Pakistan or even China. Will the economic problems of Greece reduce civil behaviours between citizens and cause rebellion? Will other western countries, where the government fails to deal appropriately with social change, experience greater distrust between non-intimates and thus slide away from a civil society? All these scenarios are possible.

As Christians we acknowledge that it is God's world and he is in control. The Bible encourages us to obey our authorities, not just those that meet strict democratic criteria. But as individuals we are to uphold justice and care for the poor, widows and orphans. These matters will involve Christians in politics even if they chose not to be involved, for that too is a political statement.

If Christians are to be the *light and salt* they will need to be involved in the broader community and this means involved in the politics of the day. A civil society relies on Christians acting as salt to preserve what is good and right, but they are not the only contributors to such a civil society. A wider more general acceptance of the Christian foundations of our society is needed even if secular citizens and people of other faiths have forgotten or fail to recognise such foundations. On this basis, "civil" relationships between non-intimates may give us the society

most want and one in which Christians can not only worship freely, but declare their faith to others.

(In the next issue, the second instalment I will look specifically at how school education can contribute to this civil society.)