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A world without borders

Worried that they have not been able to contain the threat of nuclear radiation from the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant, Japan's Atomic Energy Agency recently re-classified the situation to a level 5 nuclear event. This means that the risks it poses are no longer just local; they are likely to spill beyond Japan's borders. The wind and the sea could carry radioactive material to distant parts. Japan's nuclear crisis has thus become the world's own.

In another part of the world, a different kind of wind is sweeping across societies that have been ruled by domestic tyrannies. What it brings is a notion as invisible as nuclear radiation – democracy. In January this year, it knocked down the one-party dictatorship of Ben Ali in Tunisia, and in February, the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The 41-year rule of Libya's strongman Moammar Gadhafi would have fallen in March if he had not taken the most coercive means available to crush the protests. Then the same wind moved from North Africa to the Middle East, fuelling spontaneous people power uprisings against the absolutist governments of the Gulf's oil-rich fiefdoms. These protest movements have now become the world's own.

From Tunisia to Egypt, from Libya to Bahrain, from Yemen to Syria, from Saudi Arabia to Iran – monarchs and dictators who have grown accustomed to rule without being challenged are quaking in their robes. The growing resistance to their tyranny has reached all four corners of the world -- thanks to Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter -- sparking pocket demonstrations of open defiance among peoples that previously had only been known for their docility, isolation, and ignorance. We Filipinos, who regard ourselves as among the early recipients of this Promethean fire,

cannot be indifferent to the ideals that drive this world-wide movement. We have known what it means to live under the boot of a dictatorship that softens its tyranny by calculative acts of benevolence.

We are not a world power, but we have a voice in world affairs. We cannot be oblivious of the democratic struggles of other peoples without betraying the meaning of our own past struggles. Today we are being challenged by world opinion to stand on the side of those who are fighting to have a voice in the governance of their own societies. We cannot smugly invoke the principle of national self-determination and sovereignty to justify a quietist stance while a tyrant in another part of the world slaughters his own people. In our commitment to democracy, we have become Libyans, Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis and Bahrainis.

Of course, the world is a complex place. It would be naïve to think that imperial ambitions are going to be shelved as small nations try to settle their own problems. We know that oil is uppermost in the minds of the big powers. But, let us not forget that world opinion is equally against powerful nations that can think of nothing more important than their own selfish interests. That is the reason why the United States refused to lift a finger on Libya without a clear United Nations resolution and active participation by Arab nations. That is also why, after jump-starting the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya, America is in a hurry to give up her role as leader of the international coalition for Libya. There is a strong anti-war sentiment among Americans, and US President Obama knows that he is accountable to his own people.

In our case, our fear of being taken for a ride once again by imperialism, of being drawn as pawns in another big-power adventure launched in the name of freedom, naturally inclines us towards a prudent position. That is understandable. For, we cannot brush aside the fact that millions of our overseas workers are employed in those countries now being ripped apart by political strife.

Still, we cannot say we are staying neutral because we don't want to

endanger their lives or their jobs. Their lives and their jobs are already threatened. We are already evacuating the remaining Filipinos in Libya, and it is uncertain when or if they can go back in the near future. A neutral stance may appeal to our sense of pragmatism if we want to make sure there will be jobs in Libya for Filipinos in the future, whoever wins the war. But, in this, we would be no different from the big powers that wish to be first in line in the world's oil supply. This is how tyrants are able to stay in power indefinitely, and how they manage to keep their seats among the world's heads of states.

Non-interference in the affairs of sovereign nations remains a cornerstone of international relations. This explains why the UN Resolution 1973 is so strictly worded. It authorizes a global intervention in Libya on humanitarian grounds. But it excludes an invading force on the ground, offers no support to the rebelling citizens, and makes no provision for regime change. This balancing act reconciles two basic principles – non-interference and the protection of the vulnerable from genocide. Historically, the first has trumped the other. But this is changing: the post-colonial world of sovereign nations is giving way to a global community linked by common ideals and aspirations.

Today, the same process that spawned a world economy, a global labor market, a borderless communication system, an international science and academic community, etc. is giving birth to a world opinion that recognizes no sovereign territories. This development foretells the end of the world's political segmentation into nation-states, the last surviving feature of an archaic system.

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