

The Arab revolutions: a year after

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Abstract

The article discusses the Arab revolution's development after a year of its inception, the causes for the success of political Islam in the elections, their alliance with the reactionary ruling comprador class and the American led capitalist system and the different possibilities for the future of different Arab countries, especially Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Syria.

Why the so-called "Arab spring"?

The uprising of Arab peoples as of early 2011 (Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrein and Yemen, later Syria) was not unexpected, at least by many Arab left activists, if not by the Western powers.

During the Bandung and Non-alignment period (1955-1970) the Arab countries were in the forefront of the struggles of the peoples, the nations and the States of the South for a better future and a less unequal global system. Algeria's FLN and Boumedienne, Nasser's Egypt, the Ba'ath regimes in Iraq and Syria, the South Yemen Republic, shared common characteristics. These were not "democratic" regimes according to the Western criteria (they were "one party" systems), nor even according to our criteria which implies positive empowerment of the peoples. But they were nevertheless legitimate in the eyes of their peoples, for their actual achievements: mass education, health and other public services, industrialization and guarantees for employment and upward social mobility, associated with independent initiatives and anti-imperialist postures. Therefore they were continuously fiercely fought by the western powers, in particular through repeated Israeli aggressions.

These regimes achieved whatever they could in that frame within a short period, say 20 years, and then after that went out of steam, as a result of their internal limits and contradictions. This, coinciding with the breakdown of the Soviet power, facilitated the imperialist "neoliberal" offensive. The ruling circles, in order to remain in office, have chosen to retreat and submit to the demands of neoliberal globalization. The result was a rapid degradation of the social conditions; all that had been achieved in the era of the National Popular State to the benefit of the popular and middle classes were lost in a few years, poverty and mass unemployment being the normal result of the neoliberal policies pursued. This created the objective conditions for the revolts. It is curious to note that some of the most vocal supporters of the "democratic revolutions" calling the West to their rescue are some of the former leaders who enthusiastically supported the neoliberal alignment!

The revolts were therefore not unexpected and many indicators suggested them, such as the Egyptian mass strikes of 2007/8, the growing resistance of small

peasants to the accelerated process of their expropriation by the rich peasants, the protest of new middle class organizations (such as "Kefaya") etc.

I have attempted to give a picture of the components of both "the movement" and of the reactionary "anti-revolutionary" bloc (the leadership of the Army and the Muslim Brotherhood) supported by Western powers operating in Egypt, in particular in Amin (2011a, b, forthcoming).

I also refer here to other similar processes in Bahrain, which was savagely crushed by the army of Saudi Arabia (without the least protest of the West), and in Yemen (where al Qaida was "introduced" in order to neutralize the "menace" coming from the progressive forces, particularly strong in the South).

This chapter was concluded by the elections in Tunisia and Egypt.

The triumph of political Islam in the Tunisian and Egyptian elections

The elections in Tunisia (October 2011) opened the way to the crystallization of the right-wing block which includes Al-Nahda-Renaissance Party (Brotherhood) and personalities who claim to be now "bourguibists" (followers of Bourguiba the first Tunisian president), after their support for the Ben Ali regime. This coalition relies on the majority of the council charged with producing the new constitution.

This new regime is likely to achieve some democratic improvements (respect for pluralism and freedom of opinion and a halt to the worst types of police repression) along with regression in key social issues (women's rights, secular education, and the state), in the context of ensuring the maintenance of the status quo in the area of economic development.

It is worth keeping in mind that the revolutionary movement in Tunisia has not challenged the dependent pattern of development of the era of Ben Ali, but considered it as "sound" in itself, and accepted the narrative of the World Bank! It was satisfied to direct its criticism at the repressive police state alone, and by the imposition of "royalties" on all economic activities which had been grabbed by members of the President's family. The general public (with the exception of an isolated left-wing) did not comprehend that this style of dependent development is the cause of the deterioration of social conditions which prepared the conditions for the uprising of the masses. The new ruling coalition will not modify the pattern of development created by the first Tunisian president, Bourguiba, but rather will infuse it with increased religious doses that will solidify the alleged Islamic particularism.

The President of the new regime in Tunisia, Marzouki, happens to be a former left activist who suffered real repression by Ben Ali, but who seems not to have understood the real meaning and consequences of economic "liberalism". Curiously this man has organized in Tunis in February 2012 a "conference" on Syria, which indirectly supported an eventual Western intervention in this country.

In Egypt, the results were followed by Islamist victory on a larger scale. What can be expected from the achievements of political Islam and its deep rootedness in the public and the rise of the echo of the slogan "Islamisation of society", hence its electoral victories? The answer requires a return to uncover the reasons for this success.

Anyway the success of the Islamist parties, in Egypt at least, is certainly not the end of the story. The "legitimacy" of the elected parliament, which the Western powers consider exclusive, is questioned and counter balanced by the no weaker legitimacy of the continuing struggles for social progress and authentic democratization of politics and social life.

Yet the obstacles for the radicalization of these struggles remain great, as long as the major components of the movement have not reached the required level of awareness with respect to the destructive effects of continuing along a liberal political economy, and the alignment with a US guided globalization. But progresses are to be noticed in the growing of that consciousness.

Success of political Islamic parties

I argued previously that the de-politicization of the society was due to the modus operandi of the Nasserist regime, which is behind these achievements. Note that Nasserism was not the only system that took this approach. Rather, most populist nationalist regimes of the first wave of awakening in the South had a similar approach to the management of politics. Note also that the actually existing socialist regimes also took this approach, at least after the revolutionary phase, which was democratic in nature, when they consolidated their rule.

So the common denominator is the abolition of democratic praxis. I do not mean here to equalize between democracy and multiparty elections management, but rather I mean the practice of democracy in the proper sense of the word, i.e. respect for the plurality of political views and political schemes and to respect its organizing. Because politicization assumes democracy and democracy does not exist merely because those who differ in opinion with the authority enjoy freedom of expression. The obliteration of the right to organize around different political views and projects eliminates politicization, which ultimately caused the subsequent rise of political Islam and disaster.

This disaster has manifested itself in the return to archaic views (religious or otherwise), and this was also reflected in the acceptance of the project of the "consumer society" based on solidification of the so-called trend of "individualism," a trend which spread not only among the middle class that benefits from such pattern of development, but also among the poor masses who call for participation in what appears a minimal welfare—even though with its maximum simplicity—in the absence of credible real alternatives. Therefore one must consider this as a legitimate demand from the popular classes.

De-politicization in Islamic societies took a prevailing form that was manifested in an apparent or superficial "return" to "Islam". Consequently, the discourse of the mosque along with the discourse of authority became the only permitted ones in Nasser's period, and more so during the periods of Sadat and Mubarak. This discourse was then used to prevent the emergence of an alternative based on the entrenching of a socialist aspiration. This "religious" discourse was then encouraged by Sadat and Mubarak to accompany and cope with the deteriorating living conditions resulting from Egypt's subjugation to the requirements of imperialist globalization prevailing style. This is why I argued that political Islam did not belong to the opposition block, as claimed by the Muslim Brotherhood, but was an organic part of the power structure.

The success of political Islam requires further clarification regarding the relationship between the success of imperialist globalization on the one hand, and the dominance of Muslim Brotherhood slogans/discourse on the other hand.

The deterioration that accompanied this globalization produced proliferation of the activities of the informal sector in economic and social life, which represents the most important sources of income for the majority of people in Egypt (statistics say 60%). The Brotherhood's organizations have real ability to work in these circumstances, so that the success of the Brotherhood in these areas in turn has produced an inflation of these activities and thus ensures its reproduction on a larger scale. The political culture offered by the Brotherhood is known for its great simplicity, as this culture is content with only conferring Islamic "legitimacy" to the principle of private property and the "free" market relations, without considering the nature of the activities concerned, which are rudimentary ("bazaar") activities that are unable to push forward the national economy and lead to its development.

Furthermore, the widespread provision of funds by the Gulf States has allowed for the boom of such activities as these states have been pumping in the required funds in the form of small loans or grants. This is in addition to charity work (clinics, etc.) that have accompanied this inflated sector, thanks to the support of the Gulf States. These states do not intend to contribute to the development of productive capacity in the Egyptian economy (building factories etc.), but only the development of this form of "lumpen development", since reviving Egypt as a developing state would end the domination of the Gulf States (that are based on the acceptance of the slogan of Islamization of the society), the dominance of the United States (which assumes Egypt as a comprador state infected with worsening poverty), and the domination of Israel (which assumes the impotence of Egypt in the face of Zionist expansion).

This combination of an authority that hides behind the "Islamic" slogans/discourse and at the same time succumbs to the prevailing imperialist capitalism and the consequent impoverishment of the people is not specific only to Egypt. It is a common feature of most Arabic and Islamic societies. This axis is at work in Iran, where Khomeinism insured the dominance of the "bazaar economy" from the beginning. It is also the cause of the catastrophe in Somalia,

which has been removed from the list of states of the modern contemporary world.

What then can we expect from the likelihood of political Islam's rule in Egypt (and other countries)?

There is a prevailing and extremely naïve media discourse that contends that "the victory of political Islam became inevitable because Islamic self-identity dominates the reality of our societies, and it is a reality that some had rejected or denied its social validity, and thus this reality imposed itself on them."

However, this argument completely ignores another reality, namely that the de-politicization process was deliberate, and without it no political Islam would have been able to impose itself on these societies. A second streak in this discourse argues further that "there is no risk from this victory of political Islam, because it is temporary, for the authority emerging from it is doomed to failure and thus public opinion will withdraw from it". This is as if the Brotherhoods would accept the implementation of the principles of democracy if they worked against their interests!

However, the regime in Washington apparently adopts this discourse, as well as public opinion there, which is manufactured by the media. And there is an ensemble of Egyptian and Arab intellectuals who also became apparently convinced by this discourse, perhaps opportunistically, or because of lack of clarity of thought.

But this is a mistake. Let it be known that political Islam, if it takes over government / rule, will continue to impose itself, if not "forever" then at least for a long time (50 years? let us look at the case of Iran for example). During this phase of "transition" other nations will continue their march of development, and so we will find ourselves eventually in the bottom of the list. So I don't see the Brotherhood as an "Islamic party" primarily, but it is firstly a reactionary party. If it manages to take power, this will represent the best security for the imperialist system.

A word about Salafism (salafiyya)

Salafism came to complement the obscurantist advocacy of Rashid Rida and the Brotherhood. It openly rejects the idea of "liberty" (and therefore democracy) as it contradicts, in their view, the nature of the human being, as he/she is created as a slave (note the word) to serve his Creator-Master, like a slave required to serve his/her master. Of course, this doctrine does not explain how we come to know the concrete demands of this Master-Creator in the modern world. Does he accept or reject an increase in wages for example? This opens the way for a "religious Iranian-style rule (*wilayat al-faqih*)," and for a dictatorship of the clerics who declared themselves "scientists/ulemah," who have a monopoly over this knowledge!

The Salafis are the enemies of modernity, as modernity is grounded on the right to human creativity in dealing with earthly matters, and questions concerning human society. And creativity requires freedom and free critical thought, which is rejected by the Salafis. What then about Salafi leaders who say that they "belong to the modern world" because they teach their students how to use the computer and "business management" (this by resorting to the sort of mediocre American pamphlets distributed by USAID)? These statements are not only a real farce, but the real Master here is the prevailing capitalist imperialism which is in need of "servants" who practice this "art" (obeying God and obeying religious authority) and nothing more. The famous Mr. Dunlop, "the expert" on education during the days of British occupation of Egypt, had realized this perfectly and made it a blueprint implemented in schools!

Modernity begins by overcoming these limitations and accepting the principle of freedom, which is a condition for developing the capacity of the nation to be able to belong to the modern world in an actual and active sense.

The Muslim Brotherhood and imperialism operate in conjunction, and with a division of tasks. The Muslim Brotherhood needed a "certificate" of democracy, which Obama gave them, and to that end they had to distance themselves from the "extremists", the Salafis.

Are there conditions that allow for a democratic reform in Algeria?

Egypt and Algeria are the two Arab countries which have occupied a prominent and leading position during the first wave of "awakening of the South" in the era of Bandung and the Non-aligned Movement. They achieved a successful progress in their building of a state/nation, an entity that deserves to be considered "post-colonial" accompanied by noticeable progressive economic and social achievements, despite its limitations, and which planted hopes for its continuation on the road to liberation. But this process was halted in the two countries, and both moved back to the status of countries and societies ruled by the current imperialism.

The Algerian pattern seems to have enjoyed a superior consistency to that of Egypt which was reflected in its ability to limit subsequent erosion, so that the Algerian ruling class is still divided between a patriotic wing and a comprador one. In some cases, these two contradictory characters are shared in the same one person that belongs to the ruling class. This is unlike the situation in Egypt where the ruling class, during Sadat and Mubarak rule, completely abandoned any nationalist inclination altogether.

There are two reasons that explain this difference.

The war of liberation in Algeria naturally bred a radical trend ideologically and socially, unlike Egypt, where Nasserism came after the liberation wave of the revolution that started in 1919, which went through periods of expansion and retreat, before the seeds of its radicalisation were rooted after World War II.

Then came the 1952 coup and its ambiguous character, which halted the development of the radicalisation of the liberation movement. This was followed by the Nasserist coup of 1954 which amended this right wing trend, but that amendment adopted an elitist approach that excluded the popular classes from actively being involved in contributing to it.

On the other hand, we must take into account the devastating effects that independent Algeria inherited from the pattern of French settler colonialism, where "traditional" Algerian society had disintegrated so that the new society of independent Algeria has become endowed with a pervasive plebeian nature. Thus the demand "for equality" became a distinguishing feature of the behavior and aptitudes of citizens, to a degree unparalleled in all other Arabic countries. This is also in contrast to the history of Egypt as the ruling classes, since the time of Muhammad Ali Pasha, had supported the evolution of society and the Egyptian project of revival. And the Egyptian project remained under aristocratic leadership calling for modernization, so that it gradually became a project of an "aristocratic bourgeoisie."

These two differences have created different conditions for the challenge posed by the rise of political Islam. As Hocine Bellaloufi explained (forthcoming), political Islam in Algeria revealed its ugly face early on, and came to failure and defeat. But this did not signify that political Islam has become something of the past and unable to recover. However there is a huge difference between Algeria and Egypt from this perspective so that political Islam in Egypt still enjoys "legitimacy" among the general public. And the alliance between the comprador bourgeoisie and political Islam remains representative of the main axis that will ensure a long-term rule of the dependent capitalist economic pattern in Egypt.

From this, we can imagine different developments in the face of contemporary challenges in both countries, at least in the short term, because we should not rule out the possibility of controlled reforms in Algeria. At least this possibility has a portion of realism, unlike the situation in Egypt, where it is impossible to imagine a development that avoids violent collision between the popular movement and the cluster of reactionary "Islamic/comprador" alliance.

Furthermore, while Egypt and Algeria are the two Arab countries who can be conceived as candidates for accession to the group of "emerging" states, they also can come to represent a sad model for failure to climb to that level. Although the responsibility of the ruling classes in this failure is crucial, it is not correct to ignore the responsibility of rest of the society and its intellectuals and activists in the political movements.

With regard to the Arab states in the Maghreb generally, it is claimed that the Kingdom of Morocco is another positive example of a change based on the achievement of gradual democratic reforms by peaceful means. Let the reader allow me to make my reservations on the likelihood of achieving such goal, as such evolution is conditioned by a Royal Decree that excludes from the start any questioning about the dependent capitalist pattern that frames it.

Furthermore, in addition to that, as long as the Moroccan people remain content with the principle of the rule of religious-monarchical regime (as the king is "Amir Al-Mu'minin"), these restricted and limited reforms won't open the way for the real democracy required.

Perhaps this is why it is impossible for Moroccans to understand the significance of the problem of Western Sahara - as the free people of Western Sahara are proud of another interpretation of Islam that does not allow them to kneel except before God, and not before any human being, even a king.

The Syrian disaster

The Syrian Ba'athist regime once belonged to the cluster of national popular experiences (though not democratic) in the style of Nasserism and other experiences in the era of Bandung. When the limits of possible real achievements in this framework became apparent, Hafez el-Assad turned to a project that sought to combine the preservation of nationalist patriotism opposed to colonialism on the one hand, and on the other hand, to benefit from the right-conservative concessions reflected in the "openness" (liberalization) similar to the route taken by Nasser following the defeat of 1967.

The subsequent history of this project became apparent. In Egypt, it led immediately after the death of Nasser in 1970 to surrender without reservation to the demands of the reactionary axis consisting of the United States, the Gulf and Israel.

In Syria, this "opening" (liberalization) led to the same results as happened in other countries, that is to serious rapid deterioration of social conditions for poorer classes, and which eroded the legitimacy of the regime.

In the current developments, the Syrian regime has faced protests with repression, and nothing else. The Muslim Brotherhood took advantage of the opportunity to appear as the "opposition". Thus a coherent plan crystallized under the leadership of imperialism and its allies that sought not to "rid the Syrian people of a dictator," but to destroy the Syrian state, modeled on the United States' work in Iraq and Libya.

Here also the profound relationship of the tripartite interests is apparent, as the goal

- 1) for the U.S. is the breaking of the Iran/Syria/Hezbollah alliance, which is an obstacle to the U.S. entrenching its control over the region,
- 2) for Israel to have Syria fragmented into sectarian mini-states, and
- 3) for the Gulf Arab states, it is the entrenching of a "Sunni" dictatorship in the Wahhabi style, although this dictatorship will be established on the massacres and criminal elimination of Alawis, Druze and Christians. In the face of this possible fate, the Assad regime remains unable to respond with the only needed and effective method, which is to exclude the use of violence and to engage in genuine reforms. The only acceptable

solution assumes the opening of the way to genuine negotiations, which is the precondition for the strengthening of a democratic front whose components are present on the ground, despite the effort to mute its voice. Simply opposing state terrorism to so-called "Islamic/Salafi" terrorism leads nowhere.

Some conclusions

1. Contemporary imperialism's strategy for the region (the "greater Middle East") does not aim at all at establishing some form of "democracy". It aims at destroying the countries and societies through the support of so-called Islamic regimes which guarantee the continuation of a "lumpen development" (to use the words of my late friend A G Frank), i.e. a process of continuous pauperization. Eventual "high rates of growth", praised by the World Bank, are meaningless, being based on the plunder of natural resources, associated with fast growing inequality in the distribution of income and pauperization for the majorities.

Iraq provides the "model" for the region. The dictatorship of Saddam Hussein has been replaced by no less than three terror regimes, in the name of "religion" (Sunni and Shi'a) and of ethnicity (the Kurds), associated with the systematic destruction of infrastructures and industries, and the planned assassination of tens of thousands of elite citizens, in particular engineers and scientists, as well as the destruction of the education system (which was not bad in the time of Saddam) to reduce it to the teaching of religion and business!

These are also the targets/goals for Syria.

Isn't it a curiosity that we see now the Emir of Qatar and the King of Saudi Arabia among the most vocal advocates of "democracy"? What a farce!

2. Turkey is playing an active role, along with the US (never forget that Turkey is a NATO member) in the implementation of this plan. It has established in the Hatay province camps for the recruitment and training of killers (so called "Muslims") who are infiltrating Syria. Refer here to the book of Bahar Kimyongur (2011).

3. The U.S. was "surprised" by the Tunisian and Egyptian popular revolts. They now plan to "preempt" possible similar movements by initiating armed revolts of small groups supported by them. This strategy was tested with success in Libya (now a disintegrated country), and now in Syria. The reader can refer here to my papers on Libya¹ and Somalia².

The next target is Iran, under the pretext of its nuclear development, using ofr this purpose Israel, who is unable to do the job without the active implication of US forces. Iran, whatever one may think of its regime (in fact associating

¹ "Libya could break up like Somalia", *Pambazuka*, 07/09/2011

² "Is there a solution to the problems of Somalia?" *Pambazuka*, 17/02/2011

"Islam's rule" and market economy!) does constitute an obstacle to the deployment of the U.S. military control over the region. This country must therefore be destroyed.

4. The final real target of contemporary imperialism is "containment and then after that the rolling back" by preemptive war of the most dangerous emerging countries (China first). Add here Russia which, if it succeeds in modernizing its army, can put an end to the exclusive military power of the U.S., if Russia chooses to, as can China.

Yet, if no bold opposition from China and more importantly Russia develops and the U.S. manages to achieve its goals, that implies the total subordination of all other countries of the South with a view to ensure the exclusive access to the natural resources of the whole planet to the benefit of the societies of the triad (US, Europe and Japan), their plunder and waste. It implies therefore more lumpen development, more pauperization and more terrorist regimes. Contemporary capitalism has nothing else to offer.

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