

Our Era of Mass Uprisings : lessons from the struggles in Sudan, Syria, and Palestine

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We are in an era of global revolt and mass uprisings. Ever since the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, we have seen an incredible uptick in revolts and revolutions globally. According to Mark Beissinger's research, cited in Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal Age, between 1900 and 2014 there were at least 345 "revolutionary episodes." From 1900 to 1950 there were an average of 2.4 per year, then 2.8 per year from 1950 to 1984, and over 4 per year from 1985 to 2014. But the number of revolts exploded after 2008 (p. 14). As Jamie Allinson writes in The Age of Counter-Revolution, "The 2010s witnessed a wave of protest greater than any since that sparked by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Across the world, anti-government protests increased by 11.5 percent year on year throughout the 2010s," (p.3).

Sommaire

- [The Middle East and North \(...\)](#)
- [The Especially Relevant \(...\)](#)

This massive uptick should be understood largely as a response to decades of neoliberal austerity, which drastically increased pressures on the global working class, removing social provisioning, privatizing and putting more of a burden on individuals to take on the tasks of social reproduction, transferring wealth to an ever-smaller, richer elite, while also increasing authoritarian and undemocratic measures to enforce this heightened level of inequity. The increasing level of hardship, plus the lack of alternatives present in the level of high politics, pushed masses of people into the streets in revolt.

But it has become clearer and clearer that we are also in a period of reaction. We have witnessed a pattern of explosive revolts and uprisings followed by massive repression and backlash. We should not only expect uprisings and revolts to continue to emerge, but to also have more intense back-and-forths between revolts holding the seeds of liberatory futures, and brutal counter-revolution and repression, coupled with imperialist interventions working together to crush progressive uprisings.

The coming years and decades will continue to see harsher and more intense cycles like these, until our uprisings are able to break through the impasse by building up leadership in our movements, building up solidarity networks that can pressure states against counter-revolutionary military interventions, and learning the lessons of previous revolts in the latest period in order to avoid their mistakes. This starts with paying much closer attention to the revolts of the past decade.

This includes other cases, including in the US, where the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprising, the largest multi-racial mass protests in the country's history, has been followed by a backlash : a hardening right wing, attacks on trans people, the overthrow of Roe v. Wade, and so forth. But this

pattern can be seen even more acutely in the Middle East and North Africa region, which is in the midst of a drawn-out revolutionary struggle that began in 2011.

The Middle East and North Africa : The Regional Hotbed of Revolt

Since this cyclical pattern of revolt and reaction is most acute in the Middle East and North Africa, where the revolts of the 2010s started with the “Arab Spring” revolutions and continue in a protracted revolutionary process, and where imperialist interventions assist in the counterrevolutionary process, I focus here on that region. In December 2010, a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire in protest of police harassment and the difficulties in selling his wares. His action lit the spark for Tunisia’s revolution, which then spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, followed by waves of mass protest throughout the region and echoes of it around the world. These revolts were catalyzed by the unlivable reality of neoliberalism, the harshness of authoritarian rule, and a regional system shaped by imperialism — including (but no limited to) US imperialism.

The revolutions that began in 2011 in the region saw two years of advancement, with millions of working-class people taking the streets and squares and overthrowing imperialist-backed dictators like Ben Ali and Mubarak, and in Syria creating a near dual-power situation of rebel-controlled areas. But these revolutions did not manage to — or even aim to — capture state power. This has been a common problem globally over the past few decades — not just in the MENA region, where horizontalism and leaderlessness are prioritized, which actually puts uprisings at greater risk of defeat. This of course can be explained in large part by neoliberalism itself having disintegrated working-class power, consciousness, and ideas of how to take power.

Importantly, this does not mean that the uprisings are not worthy of support, solidarity, clear study, and comradeship with the progressive forces within them. These political lessons are necessary. Political leadership, the capture of state power, and international solidarity are essential because, without them, by 2013, the region’s regimes had regrouped and responded with harsh counter-revolutionary repression. Through massacres and coups, mass imprisonment and divide-and-conquer sectarianism, and military interventions by regional and international regimes assisting the ruling classes, the forces of reaction were able to crush the progressive uprisings.

This was only the first cycle of explosive revolt followed by repression and reaction. But even the horrific level of repression only temporarily stopped the long-term revolutions. The political and economic factors behind the first wave were not resolved, so, perhaps inevitably, a second wave erupted in late 2018, first in Sudan and Algeria, then Lebanon and Iraq. Each brought back some of the hope from 2011. In Sudan and Algeria, the uprisings toppled dictators for the first time since 2011. In Iraq, the uprising demanded a civil rather than sectarian state system and an end to Iran’s interference in the country, alongside demands for electricity, water, and employment. In Lebanon, the uprising also demanded an end to the sectarian system, and put the blame on the ruling class for the economic crisis. This time, the key slogan across these uprisings was “All of them means all of them,” refusing to stop with just the overthrow of a regime figurehead. They had learned the lesson of the 2011 revolutions, which showed that change at the very top alone was not enough. At the same time, outside of the region, we saw revolts in Chile, India, Hong Kong, Iran, France, the Black Lives Matter rebellion in the US, and more recently, Iran.

The Especially Relevant Cases of Sudan, Syria, and Palestine

The revolt in Sudan paints a clear example of an explosive liberatory struggle on the one hand, and a

horrific reaction and counter-revolution on the other — the latter exhibited acutely over the past few months. Sudan's revolution initially managed to move beyond the limitations of the 2011 revolutions, as millions of Sudanese refused to return to their homes after the regime removed the figurehead of the dictatorship.

Sudan's movement has had a strong revolutionary character due to Sudan's history of revolutions and its preservation of leftist and communist history. This relative political maturity is what made it possible for the leadership of the revolution to shift from the Sudanese Professionals Association, a middle-class grouping of unions, to more radical neighborhood resistance committees. With the slogan "No negotiation, no partnership, no compromise," they maintained clarity on the role of the military, and have refused to accept concessions from it. Crucially, they have also refused to allow outside forces to intervene.

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Nonetheless, after a brutal massacre by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2019, the initial revolutionary phase in Sudan was brought to an end, and counter-revolutionary negotiations — denounced by the resistance committees but not liberal and middle class forces — led to a power-sharing agreement, a mixed civilian and military government, which almost inevitably led to the military coup of 2021. And just over two months ago, tensions between two militias, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF, burst out into all-out war, with the SAF bombing RSF bases in Khartoum and the RSF taking over homes, each backed by regional and international states eager to intervene for their own gain, from the Gulf states to Egypt to the EU.

The neighborhood resistance committees were in the process of cohering a national charter when war broke out and suddenly hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, hundreds killed, and the revolution was drastically pushed back. This shows that a protracted situation of dual power cannot be sustained, as it will open up the door for counter-revolution and brutal repression. It is a reminder that militaries and militias must be removed from power and dismantled, and an alternate left-wing force must take power. Although easier said than done, the lesson is clear : without that, counterrevolution is inevitable. Nonetheless, in Sudan there has been far more experimentation with revolutionary form and tactics that should be studied more closely. Unfortunately, the western left has all but ignored Sudan's revolutionary movement, which thus far has been the strongest and most advanced of the revolutionary struggles, and which is now suffering one of the most brutal defeats.

Syria, too, is a key example. The struggle there went perhaps the farthest of the 2011 revolutions, and then faced a crushing and brutal defeat. In 2011, Syrians joined the revolutions that were emerging, and when met with harsh repression, deepened their revolution, eventually liberating entire areas and attempting to reorganize society independent of the regime. But while Sudan has been largely ignored by the western left, Syria stumped them altogether, as it did not fit the outdated bipolar framework of imperialism.

Similar to Ukraine today, Syria should be a reminder that we cannot rely on outdated analyses of imperialism that assume the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It indicates that inter-imperial rivalry is increasing, not decreasing. To crush the Syrian uprising, Russia and Iran intervened on the side of the regime, and Turkey and the Gulf states intervened ostensibly in opposition, but worked to sideline the progressive elements and transform the struggle into an ugly, drawn-out, sectarian war. Resistance to the Assad regime and to Russia and Iran's military interventions remained widespread until around 2018 when the brutality of siege and bombardment far eclipsed the possibilities for continued organizing.

Another weakness on the Syrian revolution's side was that after decades under a harsh police state, organizing levels were low, and localized, anarchist-model organizing was prioritized over a larger scale model, leaving rebellious towns and cities even more vulnerable to decimation. Syria is one of the tragedies of the 21st century and a dangerous warning that until the left learns to provide solidarity to those resisting imperialism, even if it is not primarily the imperialism of the US, there will continue to be other mini-Syrias, while the Left remains divorced from the movements it must relate to.

Although not technically part of the 2011 MENA revolutions, Palestine is central to the region due to its 75-plus-year struggle against colonialism and imperialism, making it a symbol of the oppression, as well as a spark historically for revolts across the region. More recent dynamics of volatility, polarization, revolt, and reaction are present here as well.

Two summers ago, Palestinian youth mobilizing against Israel's ethnic cleansing in Jerusalem, in particular defending the Al-Aqsa mosque, transformed their mobilizations into a revolt that became known as the Unity Intifada. For the first time in decades, Palestinians united in uprising against Israeli fragmentation from the West Bank to Gaza to Palestinians inside Israel proper, and generalized a new liberatory framework, vocabulary, and consciousness against Israel's settler-colonialism. The Unity Intifada was a refusal of Israel's regime that has fragmented and divided Palestinians, and it was largely propelled by youth organizing, not by the Palestinian political factions.

In fact, within this struggle against Israeli ethnic cleansing emerged a struggle against the Palestinian Authority, a body created under the guise of state-building to carry out the role of policing Palestinians while upholding neoliberalism in the West Bank in particular. Through this larger struggle, Palestinian political consciousness and activity sharpened, even as the attacks of the colonizer and its right-wing settler-colonial population became harsher.

But the Unity Intifada has been followed by increasing brutality by Israel, in the form of bombing Gaza, assassination of journalists, mass arrests, curfews, and targeted killings in Palestinian towns, attacks across the West Bank amounting to a slow-motion war, and the rightward march of Israeli politics now bringing on board extreme far-right leaders like Ben Gvir. Meanwhile in the UK, the US, and elsewhere, the liberal left — whether the Labour Party in the UK or the Democratic Socialists of America in the US — have made clear that solidarity with Palestine is not only no longer a priority but will be actively repressed.

What the general dynamic and the particular cases all point towards is the need for a left that takes seriously the revolts that emerge globally, even as the majority of them will not be as sophisticated as Sudan's due to the legacy of neoliberalism and decades of defeat. A left that can study, learn from, and help guide revolts with lessons from prior waves is sorely needed — especially as we are entering an age of increased economic volatility, climate change, inter-imperial and regional rivalry. Neither existing regimes nor reactions to uprisings have the political ability to fundamentally alter the underlying dynamics that lead to these increasingly radical opportunities.

This is why surface-level frameworks on the left that fail to analyze the dynamics on the ground or ignore the role of intervening states just won't cut it anymore. We instead need dynamic movements that can engage with activists and revolutionaries in struggle around the globe, call mass protests and forums on their behalf at home, and provide solidarity and attention even if these rebellions do not espouse perfect politics or fit our preconceived notions. The failure to do so, as we have seen, leaves the door increasingly open to the forces of reaction.

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- Spectre. June 20, 2023 :
<https://spectrejournal.com/revolt-and-reaction/>