

Arab region: Revolutions are not over

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Farooq Sulehria - The outcome of elections in Tunisia and Egypt went in favour of Islamist parties even if the revolutions in these countries had a secular character. They are also an integral part, if not the dominant force, in the revolutions in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. Is the Arab Spring in fact a victory for the Islamist movements?

Adam Hanieh - No, I think this is the wrong way to read the Arab Spring. It is true of course that the Islamist parties were the major victors in the Egyptian and Tunisian elections and have been prominent actors in the other uprisings across the region. But we need to take a more circumspect view of the Islamist movements and the difficulties they will likely face in the coming period. First, we should remember that the initial phases of the revolutions (certainly in Egypt and Tunisia) arose largely outside the orbit of established movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In general, the Islamist movements have played - and continue to play - a conservative role. During the protests in Egypt in December, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood took a clear stance against the popular forces. Likewise with the important Egyptian strike wave in September. These examples (and many others) indicate that while Islamist parties may have received significant electoral support, their relationship with the popular movement is fraught with tension and has the potential to quickly shift. This has also generated schisms and debates within the MB itself.

The election results in Tunisia and Egypt are not particularly surprising. In Egypt, the strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood is partially indicative of their deeper implantation throughout the society and greater access to resources. Under Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood was, in effect, a semi-legal opposition and they have a long history of organizing across the country. Many other parties (including some of the parties of the Left) have only recently formed or begun organizing openly, and it is impossible to expect them to have the reach of the Brotherhood at this stage. The Islamist parties were also very well-funded (particularly from the Gulf states) - and this makes a big difference in their capacity to run campaigns across the country. Furthermore, in the rural areas, the other parties have a much weaker presence than the MB, which has built established patronage and support networks over many years.

Despite the symbolic significance of elections the real questions in front of the revolutions remain unaddressed. The revolutions have raised enormous expectations for a real change in the daily lives

of people. After decades of neoliberal 'reform', Egyptian society has seen an extreme polarization of wealth and deterioration in living conditions for the vast majority. Millions of people have been marginalized and are struggling to eke out survival in the informal sector. There is also the question of the long-standing servility of the Egyptian government and military towards US power in the Middle East, expressed most clearly in the decades-long process of normalization with Israel. These political and economic issues are intertwined and it is not possible to solve the question of 'democracy' without pushing the revolution forward and addressing all of these issues. Indeed, the position of the military is very much linked to the country's political economy and the relationship with the US and Israel. For these reasons, Egyptian capitalism has a strong tendency towards an autocratic form – whether through the rule of a single individual (like Mubarak) or a veneer of liberal democracy in which the military retains ultimate power behind the scenes.

In this context, I think it is clear that the Islamist forces are not up to solving these problems. They have explicitly stated that they do not intend to break in any significant fashion with the economic programme of the old regime. This means continued privatization, increased exposure to global financial markets, further deregulation of labour markets and more reliance on loans from international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. The impact of this neoliberal programme over the last two decades was a key factor in the uprising that overthrew Mubarak. For this reason, I think we can expect a widening gap between the expectations of the Egyptian people for jobs, food, health and other social rights – and the actual policies likely to be implemented by the MB and their allies once in power. While they hold the reins of government, it is much more difficult for these movements to hide behind an oppositional rhetoric. The contradictions will be posed much more sharply: between their claims around social justice and their support for neoliberal economic policies, or their 'anti-imperialist' language but simultaneous willingness to work with the US and Israel. There are many indications that this is already happening and, for these reasons, I think it is way too early to characterize 2011 as an 'Islamist victory'.

The victories of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and En-Nehda in Tunisia, the possible demise of the Assad regime, and the crushing of the revolt in Bahrain all appear to favour the regional interests of the Saudi monarchy. Is Saudi Arabia the ultimate beneficiary of the Arab Spring?

Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf states such as Qatar, have been key protagonists in the counter-revolutionary wave unleashed against the uprisings. Indeed, 2011 has clearly demonstrated that imperialism in the region is articulated with – and largely works through – the Gulf Arab states. The example of the NATO-led attack on Libya is a clear example of this, with Qatar and the UAE, in particular, playing a very important role in this invasion. There are many other examples – we can see it in the billions of dollars that are being promised by the Gulf states to the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia; the military intervention of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE in Bahrain; the offer made to Jordan and Morocco to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (thereby bringing together all the monarchies in the region within a single bloc); and the centrality of the Gulf states attempting to mediate and steer the uprisings in Syria and Yemen. And, perhaps most significantly, the escalating threats that are being made against Iran.

In one sense, the role of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries is a political reflection of how central these states are within the regional economic system. Over the last decade, Gulf capital (both privately-owned and state-run) was a prime beneficiary of neoliberalism in the region. Across Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere, liberalization saw massive flows of Gulf capital into newly privatized sectors (particularly real estate, finance and telecommunications). For this reason, the autocratic social structures that characterized political rule in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere are themselves part of how the Gulf established its place atop the hierarchies of the regional market. The struggles against dictatorship that the uprisings represent are, simultaneously, intertwined with

the way that capitalism has developed across the region and, in this sense, are also struggles against the Gulf. This fact – coupled of course with the centrality of the region's oil supplies and financial surpluses to the US and other imperialist countries – is a key reason why the counter-revolutionary response has essentially been conducted through the tripartite alliance of the Gulf states, the United States and the European Union.

Understanding this fact, however, is very different from saying that Saudi Arabia is the 'ultimate beneficiary' of the Arab uprisings. The revolutions are by no means over and – for some of the reasons I outlined in the last question – the demands of the revolution have not been fulfilled. The level of mobilization remains high in both Egypt and Tunisia, and it will be very difficult for the new governments to continue business as usual. It is an unstable situation. Yes, there are very many difficulties facing the Left and the popular movements. But we shouldn't underestimate the problems that the other side also faces, or overestimate their ability to reimpose their rule in a global context of multiple, systemic crises and a very limited legitimacy for patterns of governance associated with the old regime.

What implications will a failed uprising in Bahrain and a possible overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria have for Iran?

Obviously, over recent weeks, there has been a ratcheting up of rhetoric against the Iranian regime. But there remain many factors that militate against an attack and I don't think that a strike by Washington or Tel Aviv is categorically determined. In the case of Syria, it is clear that the Western states, Israel, and the Gulf countries want to see a more pliant regime and this is partially motivated by a desire to undermine Iran's regional influence (connected of course to Hizbullah in Lebanon). I don't believe, however, that the toppling of Assad will necessarily lead to a regime that is more closely aligned with Western interests. The overall anti-imperialist sentiment remains strong among the Syrian population and the attempts by parts of the Left to smear the entire uprising as a stand-in for imperialism belies a Manichean worldview that badly misunderstands the country's history. I don't see any contradiction in opposing intervention and simultaneously being against the Assad regime – which, we need to remember, has embraced neoliberalism and consistently used a rhetoric of 'anti-imperialism' to obfuscate a practice of accommodation with both the US and Israel. But we need to remember that there is a correspondence between the brutality of the regime and internal support for intervention. In this sense, the violence of the Assad regime further serves the broader interests of imperialism in the region (as this violence has long done).

In the case of Bahrain, I think it is mistaken to see the uprising as some form of Iranian 'plot'. Certainly that is the way it has been portrayed by the Bahraini monarchy and some of the other Gulf Arab states. But the 2011 Bahraini intifada was the latest in a decades-long line of uprisings against sectarian discrimination that is reinforced by the unevenness of capitalist development in that country. One indication of this is the very high unemployment levels, with unofficial estimates ranging from 15-30% among Bahraini nationals, which disproportionately impacts Shi'a citizens. In 2004, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights estimated that over half of Bahraini citizens were living in poverty and yet, simultaneously, the richest 5200 Bahrainis had a combined wealth greater than \$20 billion. These – and other issues such as inequalities in landownership, widespread use of torture against political opponents, a lack of democracy, political exclusion of the Shi'a population, and the regime's close alliance with the US – are much more convincing explanations for the uprising than any interference by Iran. These issues have not been addressed in any fundamental way by the Bahraini regime, and for this reason we certainly haven't seen the last of the uprisings in the country.

Washington appears to have taken a contradictory position towards the uprisings – lending support to those in Syria and Libya and undermining or ignoring those in other countries.

Is it accurate to say that the US welcomes the Arab Spring, and that the mass movements of 2011 have lacked an anti-imperialist character?

No, I think that is a completely false characterization. The question of imperialism is intractably linked to the issues innervating these uprisings. The nature of the Mubarak regime, for example, was not just a question of domestic repression. US imperialism relied upon this regime to build a major pillar of support for its wider hegemony over the Middle East. This was expressed most clearly in the decades-long process of normalization with Israel, as well as the billions of dollars in US support for the Egyptian military. As I noted above, the political and economic issues are intertwined and inseparable – if the mass movement is going to win social and economic justice it will necessarily have to take up the question of imperialism. Moreover, I don't think Washington's position has been contradictory – rather, it has been entirely consistent with its policies over the last few decades. The overall strategic 'line of march' of the US (and that of the EU) has been to find a way to defuse, weaken and deflect the uprisings. The way this has been attempted differs in each context.

What implications does the Arab Spring hold for Israel?

I think the Egyptian revolution, in particular, is potentially the most important development to have occurred in the Palestinian struggle at any time over the last two decades. Egypt is strategically central to the Palestinian question. This is clearly understood by imperialism – witness the absolute priority placed by the US and Israel on normalizing relationships with Egypt from the time of Sadat up through the Mubarak period. I think a revolutionary government in Egypt that refuses to enter into economic or political relationships with Israel, open the borders with Gaza, and supports the Palestinian struggle in meaningful ways, would see a rapid and qualitative change in the regional balance of forces.

Now obviously we are very far from seeing this scenario occur in the current circumstances. But, as I pointed out above, the autocratic and repressive nature of the Egyptian state cannot be separated from its linkages with imperialism in the region (seen primarily in its support for the state of Israel). Any effective challenge to this autocratic nature means confronting the linkages with US power. There is a dialect between these two sides of the Egyptian state – and this means that solidarity with the Palestinian struggle is not an optional extra of the revolution, but central to it moving forward.

What should now be the left attitude towards Arab Spring?

Overall, it is important for the Left to support the ongoing struggles in the revolutions as the contradictions of the new regimes continue to sharpen. Concretely this means offering solidarity to labour strikes and popular mobilizations; publicizing the ongoing abuses of the military; agitating against foreign military and political intervention in the region; exposing the role of the Gulf Arab states and their linkages with Western powers; finding ways to support campaigns to cancel the multilateral and bilateral debt of these countries to Western financial institutions; and preventing new financial actors (such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) from entering these areas. Most importantly, however, there is a need to learn from the revolutionary experiences themselves. We need much more humility, and to realize that the movements of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa have a great deal to teach the Left in the Western world.

P.S.

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