Sectarianism and the Arab revolutions – On the present roots of the Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East

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What explains sectarian divisions such as the Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East?

Lebanese socialist Bassem Chit rejects claims that sectarianism is a "pre-modern" force and argues it is rooted in the pattern of capitalist development and crisis in the region.

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There is a growing debate over the role of religious sectarianism in the Middle East since the outbreak of the Arab Revolutions. Most writing on the issue deals with the question from a cultural perspective. One of the most striking examples of such an approach is the debate surrounding the supposedly Shia-Sunni divide, which many authors treat as an extension of a conflict over who should have assumed power following the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 CE.

In such analyses history becomes an independent force by itself, transcending all the social developments and the changes that have taken place since the original schism. Sectarianism is a modern phenomenon. It is the present that is making these connections to the past, not as an act of revenge for old battles, but to win those of today.

This employment of history in the service of the present is not unique. As Karl Marx put it in 1852 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, it is a symptom of a modern crisis: "Precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis [the bourgeoisie] anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language."

Sectarianism is the child of the present-day contradictions of modern Arab and Middle Eastern societies.

Its most vulgar outbursts always surface in times of crisis - the Maronite-Druze conflict in Mount Lebanon in the 1860s was a reflection of the contradictions arising from the introduction of capitalism. Similarly the 1975-1990 civil war saw the rise of sectarianism as a defining character of the political conflict, as a both a sign of the crisis of the newly established Lebanese state, and a strategy to destroy the mass popular movement at the time.

The US war on Iraq provided the context for the outburst of sectarian conflict, galvanising a long history of sectarian policies introduced by Saddam Hussein's regime. The most recent examples of

its appearance in Syria, Bahrain and occasionally Egypt, can only be understood in the context of the developing revolutionary struggles taking place across the region.

Sectarianism's role in the political and ideological arena has always been centred on redefining a crisis in a new ideological form - an attempt to reproduce a "new" hegemony to conceal the crisis of bourgeois society. And although it is usually held up as an antidote to Arab nationalism, or lack of national unity, in reality it is a reflection of nationalism.

Nationalism

Both Arab nationalism and sectarianism were the products of the colonial era. They functioned as the premise for anti-colonial politics, and at the same time the justification of colonial rule. Although Arab nationalism masked itself in a secularist guise, in reality this was a myth, as it constantly adopted, used and co-opted religion to protect its rule.

Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser initiated reforms of the al-Azhar Mosque, which serves as the leading authority in Sunni Islam, to ensure its prominence over the Muslim Brotherhood and the more conservative Wahhabism promoted by Saudi Arabia.

In the 1970s Syrian dictator Hafiz al-Assad adopted sectarian and kinship-based favouritism to consolidate his rule. His Baathist regime built mosques and funded Islamic schools, raised the pay of the country's Sunni religious establishment, propagated Islam in the mass media and encouraged a conservative Islamic establishment to legitimise his regime. In 1973 Assad introduced an amendment to the secular constitution which declared that "the religion of the president is Islam".

On the other side of the same spectrum we have witnessed the development of a form of sectarian-nationalism, such as Shia-nationalism in Iran, and Wahhabi Sunni nationalism in Saudi Arabia. Lebanon reflected a more unsettled version of this fusion, where Ta'ayush (common-living and national unity) defined its national identity, but sectarianism its practice.

The reason why many consider sectarianism as a "counter-nationalist" and a "pre-modern expression" is due to the fact that most dominant interpretations of the historical developments of modern Arab and Middle Eastern societies are crude and Eurocentric - in which the development of capitalism (and thus modernity) is understood to follow the European model. In this case the understanding of modernity is that of an ideological break with religious establishments and ideas.

However, history and capitalism do not develop in a uniform fashion, but by a process of "combined and uneven development" as Leon Trotsky describes it. So "modernity" as the ideological expression, and the interpretation of the accomplished transition from feudalism to capitalism, cannot be uniform itself, but reflects historical trajectories that differ between one region and another.

The reason why religion still plays an important role in defining political expression in Arab and Middle Eastern societies is because this transition did not happen as a product of slow and long revolutionary transformations, but by Western colonial rule. Capitalism created both nationalism and sectarianism defined as a reaction, and a by-product, of the crude social transformations it generated.

Before colonial occupation religious institutions in the Middle East did not rise to the commanding heights as those in the West. Instead they played a servile role to the existing autocracies. Under the Ottoman Empire the Qanun (the secular legal system) coexisted with religious law (Sharia).

During the period of deteriorating feudal power religious institutions shifted their allegiance to the new bourgeois classes, and in some cases these institutions expanded their power base through the acquisition of land or by encouraging capitalist investments in land under their control.

The newly formed bourgeois states rose not as a revolutionary break with religion (as it happened in many places in Europe), but rather by legitimising its authority. This can be widely observed across the region in the personal-status laws, for example, among others.

Revolution

In that sense there is not one type of sectarianism, but different versions, each following the historically specific conditions of development of bourgeois politics, and how it formulates its language of competition and hegemony in relation to religion.

In Egypt the Coptic Christian community has become a battleground between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Military Council, in which the military presented itself as protector (although many attacks on the Coptic churches were conducted or facilitated by the military), against the sectarian "terrorism" of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Syria the Assad regime portrays itself as the protector of religious minorities in the face of the "dark forces" of the "Sunni-Takfiri" groups, while Lebanon's Hezbollah, a Shia political force, justifies its military intervention in support of the regime both as a battle against the "US-Israeli-Takfiri Plot", and to protect the legacy of Zainab, the daughter of Imam Ali (cousin of the prophet), who was captured in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, by adopting the slogan, "Zainab shall not be captured twice". This expresses both the nationalist and sectarian dimension of its intervention.

The Al Qaida affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS) and its rivals in Jabhat al-Nusra are both examples of newly formed sectarian organisations in Syria. They arose as a reaction to the weak structures of the Free Syrian Army and to the brutal onslaught of the Syrian regime on the popular uprising. Many people who did not agree with their deeply sectarian ideology found in them the discipline lacking in other fighting organisations in Syria.

Both sectarianism and nationalism provide the opportunity in which the ruling classes can discipline and divide the working class (being the major threat to their rule) in order to maintain its dominance, and to reproduce their hegemony in a fabricated "heroic battle", to contain their crisis. Again, as Marx wrote in the Eighteenth Brumaire:

"But unheroic though bourgeois society is, it nevertheless needed heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war, and national wars to bring it into being. And in the austere classical traditions of the Roman Republic the bourgeois gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions, that they needed to conceal from themselves the bourgeois-limited content of their struggles and to keep their passion on the high plane of great historic tragedy."

Within the fear and terror produced by the established order, sectarian and nationalist politics find their potential, and in that sense workers can adopt sectarian ideas if left uncontested - as they are portrayed as the "only immediate" solution for either protection (Shia workers in Lebanon abiding to Hezbollah's politics and Sunni workers abiding to the different Sunni political parties); or for victory (Syrians who subscribe to sectarian groups as they are better funded and more organised); or Egyptian workers who identify with the Military Council or the Muslim Brotherhood as an immediate solution for the lack of a viable revolutionary alternative.

For such reasons revolutionary socialists should not dismiss sectarianism as simply a crude tactic of divide and rule. We must also address the historical conditions for its existence and its prevalence by questioning the very nature of modern Arab and Middle Eastern societies and the role of religion in them.

We need to develop the revolutionary counter-ideology, in which not only are the conditions of exploitation uncovered, but also the means of ideological hegemony are constantly contested, and where revolutionary secularism does not reflect either “secular-nationalism” or “secular-liberalism”, but rather to build on the global struggle for socialism.

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P.S.

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