

AN INTERVENTION BY MILLIONS OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

FOUR OVERLAPPING factors are driving the New Arab Revolution which began this year in Tunisia with the toppling of the dictator Ben Ali, which has reached its most advanced form in Egypt and which is now affecting all of the Arab world, though at varying levels of intensity.

The first and most obvious factor is the widespread demand for democracy. The second is the revulsion at the extreme gaps between rich and poor, provoking fury at what is seen as the unashamed looting by Arab dictators of the peoples' wealth. The third factor is a revival of Pan Arabism, a sense that the Arab world shares a common destiny thwarted by Western domination in the last century. This is exacerbated by what is perceived as the imposition of an aggressively expansionist racist European Jewish colony in Palestine, at the heart of the Arab world.

The final factor is, in many ways, the most important: the intervention by millions of ordinary people changing and creating events from below. It is this factor which justifies the description "revolution", and which may be compared to the great revolutions and revolutionary periods of the 1640s, 1790s, 1848, 1917 and 1968.

But why now? Interestingly, so extreme were the conditions, that the revolt in Egypt – and for the sake of simplicity and brevity, but also

because of its centrality and importance, this article will focus exclusively on Egypt – was predicted with astonishing accuracy in essays in *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (Zed Books 2009) written by Egyptian activists (and their UK supporters) – all of whom would take part in the Tahrir Square demonstrations. But there is in addition what we might call in Marxist parlance "a detonating contradiction" – the particular spark of the global economic crisis of 2008 that set alight the rotting economic and political infrastructure.

Many mainstream commentators are noting the impact of the failed Western economic model of neo-liberalism. Thus *The New York Times*: "On paper, the changes transformed an almost entirely state-controlled economic system to a predominantly free-market one. In practice, though, a form of crony capitalism emerged, according to Egyptian and foreign experts. State-controlled banks acted as kingmakers, extending loans to families who supported the government but denying credit to viable business people who lacked the right political pedigree."

Or as the Arab writer Larbi Sadiki has put it: "It is not the Quran or Sayyid Qutb [the Muslim Brotherhood leader who is in absentia charged with perpetrating 9/11 despite being dead since 1966] Western security experts should worry about. They should perhaps purchase *Das Kapital* and bond with Karl Marx to get a reality check, a rethink, a dose of sobriety in a post-9/11 world afflicted by over-securitisation."

From Tunisia and Algeria in the Maghreb to Jordan and Egypt in the Arab east, the real terror that eats at self-worth, sabotages community and communal rites of passage, including marriage, is the terror of socio-economic marginalisation.

The armies of "khobzistes" (the unemployed of the Maghreb) now marching for bread in the streets and slums of Algiers and Kasserine and who tomorrow may be in Amman, Rabat, San'aa, Ramallah, Cairo and southern Beirut, are not fighting the terror of unemployment with ideology. They do not need one. Unemployment is their ideology. The periphery is their geography. And for now, spontaneous peaceful protest and self-harm is their weaponry. They are "les misérables" of the modern world.

Western security experts worry about the centrality of Egypt in the fast evolving drama, not least because of Egypt's role in propping up the US-Israel strategic alliance in the region. Thus George Friedman, founder of the American "strategic intelligence" website Stratfor: "Egypt is one of those countries whose internal politics matter to more than its own citizens."

This remark echoes a key theme in *Egypt: The Moment for Change* (edited by Rabab el Mahdi and Philip Marfleet) which showed how Egypt under Sadat and Mubarak became, along with Israel and Saudi Arabia, the basis of the system of alliances through which the



US has maintained its hegemony over the Middle East. The Mubarak regime proved its value to Washington in many ways: helping to orchestrate the alliance against Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War; intelligence co-operation against the Islamists (Wikileaks cables reveal how highly the US embassy in Cairo valued Omar Suleiman, Mubarak's intelligence chief and short-lived vice-president); renditions for torture in Egypt's prisons; and maintaining the blockade on Gaza. In exchange, the Egyptian armed forces that remained the basis of the regime received their annual "strategic rent" of \$1.3 billion in US military aid.

We might agree that this is a revolution, but what kind of revolution? Can the great Marxist revolutionaries of the past help us here? In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky wrote: "History has known... not only social revolutions, which substituted the bourgeois for the feudal regime, but also political revolutions which, without destroying the economic foundations of society, swept out an old ruling upper crust" (1830 and 1848 in France, February 1917 in Russia).

What we have seen so far in the Arab world are political, not social, revolutions which have so far succeeded in removing rulers rather than their regimes.

But Trotsky also noted: "The masses go into a revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old regime... The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension by a class of the problems arising from the social crisis – the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations."

Trotsky here highlights a key feature of revolutions: that while they revolve around decisive episodes where control over state power is settled, they are *processes* that unfold in time. The great French revolution lasted over five years. The failed German revolution, its failure symbolised by the assassination of the great revolutionary leader, Rosa Luxembourg, nevertheless lasted five years from 1918 to 1923.

The different phases of these processes, with their advances and retreats, victories and defeats for the forces of revolution and counter-revolution, and for left and right within the revolutionary camp, represent a learning process for the masses. The "successive approximations" onto which they latch in pursuit of a solution to their problems can lead to the progressive radicalisation of the masses and a decisive transfer of political power that

inaugurates a social revolution.

But there is nothing inevitable about this outcome. The closest equivalent to such a process in the Arab world, the Iraqi Revolution of 1958-63, started with the overthrow of the monarchy by nationalist army officers led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim, but, very differently from Egypt in 1952, gave rise to a massive popular radicalisation that mainly benefited the Communist Party, which won considerable support within the army itself.

But in May 1959 the party leadership backed away from making a bid for power, in part because of pressure

But it's the mediating structures which are going to be decisive. Most obviously the way in which a version of parliamentary democracy will be installed to protect the existing economic power structure – albeit with some cosmetic changes. As this aspect of the process develops the role of the Muslim Brotherhood is going to be crucial.

Despite being the object of so much Islamophobic speculation in the West, the Brotherhood is in fact a highly ambiguous and heterogeneous formation that has taken a number of different forms: the mass anti-colonial movement of the 1940s and 1950s was crushed by Nasser,

undoubtedly many workers have supported it in recent years as the most powerful opposition force.

In fact the Brotherhood's support for the regime trying to crack down on strikes, which, incidentally, precipitated the final overthrow of Mubarak, has limited its influence in the new and fast-developing independent trade union movement. It is here that the potential leadership and organising centre for renewed social revolution will be found. But it is far too early to speculate about the future of the Democratic Workers Party, founded by revolutionary socialists and one of several leftist parties now organising openly, rooted amongst the new rank and file worker activists.

However if they help Egyptian workers develop a clear political voice of their own, then dramatically greater revolutionary possibilities open up. Democracy may be the main slogan of the revolution, but equality is the implicit demand of the strike movement with a potentially massive audience across Egyptian society – and indeed the rest of the Arab world.

That desperately impoverished Tunisian street trader who set himself alight was both spark *and* symbol of a revolution disgusted at the avarice and greed of the corrupt Western-backed wealthy elites. The Egyptian workers' insistence on trying to evict the "little Mubarak" bullying managers and bosses and their demands for a maximum as well as a minimum wage cannot be dismissed so easily as the narrow interests of a particular segment of society. Such demands clearly have universal appeal.

The politics of demands for equality in the Arab revolutionary movement has yet to translate as demands for a socialist alternative to capitalism. That is understandable given the deadweight of memory of the failure of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist dictatorship that replaced it. But providing the mass mobilisation intensifies, sooner or later that debate will surface.

This article is based on an adaptation of an essay by Alex Callinicos, Professor of European Studies at Kings College, University of London, "The Return of the Arab Revolution" in International Socialism Journal 130, Spring 2011. <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=717&issue=130>

UNEMPLOYMENT IS THEIR IDEOLOGY. THE PERIPHERY IS THEIR GEOGRAPHY.

from Moscow, which regarded Qasim, like Nasser, as an ally in the Cold War. The resulting demobilisation and fragmentation gave the initiative to the Ba'ath, which staged a coup with CIA support in February 1963 that toppled Qasim and subjected the Communists themselves to bloody repression and inaugurated the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The interim military government in Egypt, and indeed their would-be duplicitous US backers as they struggle to keep up with the pace of events, is desperate to avoid a continuing social revolution. We have already witnessed their willingness to employ the same repressive methods of Mubarak but alongside a much greater determination to develop what we might call "mediating structures".

Since Mubarak fell, the army has continued quietly arresting and torturing activists, some of whom have been given five-year prison sentences by military courts. Attacks by gangs of thugs on women demonstrators on International Women's Day (8 March) and simultaneously on members of the Coptic Christian minority in Muqattan, north Cairo, were interpreted by some activists as pro-Mubarak forces in the military hitting back.

but the Brotherhood has revived since the 1980s as what Sameh Naguib in *Egypt: The Moment of Change* describes as a "populist political force", building up the strong base in the universities and professional syndicates and in poor neighbourhoods that allowed it to win nearly 20% of the seats in the relatively open parliamentary election of 2005. The Brotherhood's revival took place, incidentally, at the same time as the regime's murderously successful campaign to crush the armed jihadist groups, elements of which went on to help form al-Qaeda.

The Brotherhood's solidly pro-business leadership has been divided between advocates of the alliances with more secular opposition forces that saw it cooperate with Nasserites and revolutionary socialists in the Cairo conferences against occupation and imperialism and support the *Kifaya* democracy movement in the middle of the last decade and political quietists favouring an accommodation with the regime. The latter were in the ascendant before the 25 January Revolution, but this did not prevent Brotherhood activists joining the rising. That pro business character of the Brotherhood meant that it has taken an ambivalent attitude towards the strike wave. But



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