

Tomorrow's Tunis and Egypt: Reform or Revolution?

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Arab uprisings are taking place with the historical speed of light. I began writing this piece following the downfall of Tunisian dictator Ben Ali and closed with the imminent downfall of the Egyptian one Hosni Mubarak. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings are not, as some armchair pundits called the Tunisian one, Jasmine Revolutions. They are ones of bread, bullets, blood, democracy and dignity. State security forces have killed hundreds of people in both countries and wounded thousands. Many more have been arrested. But the fire of revolt sparked by Muhammad Bouzizi's self-immolation in Tunis last December has now turned into a conflagration of popular upheaval across the Arab world largely led by workers, students, and the unemployed (men and women). Current protests in Egypt have reached a new crescendo. Other demonstrations in Yemen, Algeria and Jordan are far from turning the tables on their regimes but continue to exert pressure against the status quo. Large disaffected sections of an emaciated middle-class of professionals, public servants, and petit-bourgeois have also jumped on the revolutionary bandwagon.

As street actions press on in the two major arenas of revolt, Tunis and Egypt, important questions about the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of these momentous transformations acquire a sense of urgency. Immediate and tangible gains have already been won in Egypt and more so in Tunis, but the long-term outcomes are far from certain. Will they lead to revolutionary transformation of the political system or are they going to turn into reformist ones that simply curb the excesses of the neoliberal world order and imperial designs that largely produced them? And is there room for the resurgence of yet another dictatorship? The answers to these questions depend on a multiplicity of factors, including the resiliency of the ancien regimes beyond the longevity of their immediate and tottering symbols, the severity of the objective socio-economic conditions fuelling the mass movement, the perseverance of the rebelling forces and the type of leadership - or lack thereof - emerging in its midst, as well as the role of the military and the various political factions that were operating within varying constraints including leftist, liberal, and Islamist forces.

21st Century Revolts

Many commentators were quick to frame these events within the general global and specific local Arab orders. There is little doubt that the unfolding events have an umbilical link to the global economic crisis. But the line of causality is not one directional. These transformations will in turn have grave implications on the global U.S.-led imperial order. There is also no question that the

common linguistic, political, cultural, and social links within the Arab world have played and continues to play a key role in creating what is looking like a domino effect. But to treat all these movements as some single major event is to treat the Arab world as one cogent social unit in isolation of global forces and without differentiation of local ones. The cunningly similar uprisings in form of Tunisia and Egypt might exhibit cunningly similar patterns and trends, but they may end up with different results. Lastly, under the current unpredictable conditions, any attempt to fit these upheavals into the straight-jacket of classical revolutionary theory is very likely to obscure the potential new ways of thinking about 21st century revolts that the current events have furnished for us. Pending a fuller understanding of what happened and is happening, some general remarks about the causes, mechanisms and fates of the revolts and the emergent discourse surrounding them are in order.

The Unions, the Left, and the Leaderless Paradigm

A defining feature of both uprisings is their apparent spontaneity. This is true in terms of the absence of a revolutionary vanguard in the classical Marxist-Leninist sense of the word. Rallies have been largely sustained by the iron will of ordinary people with nothing more to lose. But this “spontaneity” has both a history and a future.

In Tunis, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) had historically – since the day of the first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba – played an active role in popular protests – less so under Ben Ali, but remained short of antagonizing the regime. The union leadership, however, eventually succumbed to pressure from its membership bases and took on a pivotal role in mobilizing people and providing an organizational framework for them in their one-month successful push to ouster Ben Ali. Three ministers in the interim government set up by Ben Ali’s successor Muhammad al-Ghanouchi hailed from the UGTT but they resigned the day after amid indications that there is a consensus of total boycott of any interim governing body that includes members or symbols of the ruling parties.

Mahalla demonstrations on 6-7 April 2008.

Egypt, and contrary to what the current sequence of revolts (Tunis then Egypt) might suggest, has been witnessing an even more sustained series of popular movements including rallies, demonstrations, and most significantly wide-spread strikes by the working-class. In the past three years, around 3000 acts of protests took place across the country. Following the 2005 rigged presidential elections, a judges’ uprising over the lack of judiciary independence galvanized middle-class professionals against the regime. The workers’ movement occupied centre stage two years ago with strikes turning into outright mutiny against the regime in the Delta town of Mahalla, home to the largest contingent of workers in the Middle East (an estimated 28,000). The workers’ uprising of 2008 gave birth to the first two independent unions in Egypt in over four decades, the unions of property tax collectors and of health technicians (a total of about 70,000 workers). The workers movement was soon joined by large swathes of civil society who were emboldened to escalate public forms of protest and transport them from mere rallies and small-scale sit-ins near association headquarters to a broader movement spilling into open public space. This was symbolized by the leading role of the 6th of April Youth Movement that called for civil disobedience actions in 2008 and for the 25th of January “Day of Rage” this past week.

What we are witnessing then (at least in Egypt) is not a spontaneous movement. Rather, we are witnessing the spontaneous transition from a grassroots protest movement into a populist mass one,

a transition unmediated by elites (liberal, leftist, or Islamist) but by another mass uprising, that of Tunis. And this is where the new social media can be situated as an agent rather than a producer of revolt. Egyptians watching the Tunisian uprising unfold became convinced that their unmediated grassroots protests were the right path to freedom. Social media sights disseminated this convictions across internet and other new media (like SMS or Twitter) users. All that was missing was the stamina to outwear the repressive state apparatus that had managed to stifle their earlier mini-uprisings in the past.

Security Regimes and Securing the Revolution

The outwearing of the state security apparatus was no easy feat in both countries. Ben Ali and Mubarak had constructed an elaborate repressive state apparatus of mammoth proportions. In Tunis, the number of police was close to 150,000 in a country of 10 million (that is almost 1 soldier per 67 citizens). In Egypt, police members often outnumbered any protestors (prior to current upheaval) and there are over 10,000 political prisoners languishing in Egyptian prisons. The state also constantly resorted to regiments of plainclothes paramilitary forces (baltagiyyah) to instigate violence, sow fear, and surreptitiously arrest protest leaders. Both police forces have been equipped with U.S.-made anti-riot weapons, including lethal ones. The full force of these killing machines were unleashed on people in both countries but failed to turn the tide of anger and defiance facing them. Protestors were highly aware of the role of police in the regime's survival. Attempts to create an atmosphere of chaos by security forces were met by the formation of popular safety committees to protect the neighbourhoods from looting and vandalism in both countries albeit to varying degrees of success. Police stations were torched or abandoned. In Tunis, several high-ranking security officials were either killed or captured before fleeing the country while one such incident was reported in Egypt. But outwearing police is not equivalent to crushing the repressive state apparatus to a point of no return. There are signs that the regimes and some unwitting social commentators, in both countries, are slowly trying to reintroduce the police force as an arbiter of the peace by claiming it can be put to good use such as traffic control etc. All these attempts must be rejected wholesale and any display of authority or force must remain in the hands of organized popular committees if a redeployment of these troops in the face of the revolutionary mass movement is to be avoided.

In Tunis, the mass movement has managed to take control of several key institutions (such as the state TV and other pro-regime media outlets). Not so in Egypt - at least for the time being. The state has imposed a total media blackout on the country. The army played and continues to play a decisive role in this matter. The army leadership in Tunis refused to engage with the protestors and had apparently defied Ben Ali's orders to take on security functions and only did so in a serious manner only after his departure. Not so in Egypt. The army is increasingly becoming the mediator between the regime and the people. Mubarak foolishly sent jet fighters to roam the skies over the heads of protestors squatting in Tahrir Sqaure.

Historically, the Egyptian army has maintained a non-tarnished reputation among Egyptian people and continues to enjoy their trust. Its credibility is being tested as it now takes on a more frontline role. Unlike Tunis, the army's bureaucracy in Egypt is also more intimately linked to the executive arm of the state due to the strategic role Egypt plays in sustaining the U.S. imperial order in the Middle East. (The other two state pillars of this order being Israel and Saudi Arabia). The U.S. is unlikely to treat Egypt with the same quasi non-chalant attitude it adopted in Tunis. Losing Egypt as a key ally will have long-term and profound repercussions on the entire America enterprise in the Middle East including that of supporting Israeli apartheid. This means that if the Americans fail to prevent an anti-U.S. government to take power in Egypt, this was inspite of, not because, of their

effort, and the implications of such imperial senility against indigenous populist movements who have no counter super power to turn to will not go unnoticed around the Arab and entire world. So far, the army has been sending conflicting signals in relation to its position, largely refraining from any lethal engagement with protestors but not submitting entirely to their will. Differences among the hierarchy of leadership (especially between high-ranking and low-ranking officers) are probably behind these mixed messages.

But the euphoria of victory must not cloud the fact that U.S. failure to stop the tide of revolution now does not preclude it later from conspiring to abort the revolution at a more opportune time and with other means when the public will is more factionalized once the regime does indeed depart from Egypt. If a fuel crisis or food shortage surface in the coming days - possibly precipitated by the country's own size and crumbling infrastructure and facilitated by international actors unhappy with the revolt's outcome - a backlash against the movement might take place. The world's shifting of gaze away from Tunis might also have similar effects and encourage counter-revolutionary forces to emerge over there. This is why long-term success is contingent on the recognition and tackling of two major features of the societies in question. The first is the deep-rooted neoliberal policies that have created the economic malaise underlying it. The second is the failings of the two waves of nationalist movements in the 20th centuries against the Ottoman Imperial order and the European colonial one from producing democratic and socially just political regimes by and for the people.

Unequal Development and Unproductive Capital

On the economic front, reported high-rates of growth and prosperity by World Bank and other so-called world bodies in both countries masked the ugly truth of unequal development and unproductive capital. In Tunis, unemployment soared at an 18 per cent (reaching a whopping 32 per cent in Sidi Buzid, the site of the first protests in Tunis). Uneven investment in tourism and other global market oriented industries along the narrow coastal strip captured over 80 per cent of total investment. In Egypt, close to 40 per cent of Egyptians are estimated to live under the poverty line. Uneven urban sprawl has left close to 9 million living in the slums of Cairo alone. In the city of Suez, an epicentre of the current revolt, the canal's trade traffic (\$90-million in 2009) did not stop the gap between rich and poor from widening as the import of foreign labour and export of some industry due to rampant corruption in the bureaucracy fuelled local anger to a boiling point.

All of this coupled with rising world food prices and the decreasing ability of global south countries to produce their needs (Egypt, home to the great Nile basin, is a net importer of food), exposed the vulnerability of these states to global economic turmoil. The hinterland seemed to be more hardly hit but also more actively organized in the face of these realities. In Tunis, the revolt was sparked in central town of Sidi Buzid and mass protests in the cities of Tatawin and Sfakis among others were flagships of union and popular committee organizing. The active and even vanguard participation of the country's hinterland in both instances is another important feature of these revolutions and a possibly distinctive one in relation to the traditional divide of urban versus rural. In Egypt this is more so with the presence of a high concentration of urban centres in the Nile delta and the Red Sea coast (Dumyat, Mansurah, Suez, Ismailiyah) that connect the capital to the rural hinterland and thus act as nodes of unequal distribution of neoliberal goods (like education without employment.) They are also a testament to the degree of centralization of power in the capital that this neoliberal order claimed to undermine but reinforced in the global south.

The linking of these economic hardships to the corrupt and comprador class of indigenous business elites has become part and parcel of the revolutionary message. Several families of this ruling cabal have already got the message and have fled the two countries. In other words, the neoliberal malaise

was rightly situated in the political sphere of dictatorship, censorship, corruption, and repression and not simply in a contemporary “malfunction” of market dynamics as neoliberal theory would have us believe. This is why both movements are vehemently opposed to any compromise with the regime despite the desperate attempts of the elites to create such a compromise. Both regime and elites have failed. The slogans of the demonstrations clearly expressed this reality with their theme of bread, freedom, and justice. Their demands are centered on the end to emergency laws, the dissolution of existing ruling bodies like parliament, and the redrafting of a new constitution.

Commentators were quick to point out that there were no Islamist slogans and thus that the revolution is a secular one. This is true to an extent. But Islamists may eventually take a larger role in the political process, more so in Egypt rather than Tunis where the Muslim Brotherhood has lost credibility on the street but has preserved its vast organizational and leadership structures that can eventually fill the power vacuum on the ground. Hundreds of their members have been released from prison and are reportedly taking on more active roles among the popular committees for health, safety, and welfare. But the secular-Islamist divide is an old-dated formula that creates a binary highly absent among many of the youth that hail from a new generation with a much more nuanced understanding of the religious and the secular. Yet this fluidity of revolutionary visions doesn't mean it is a post-ideological one befitting our post-modern era. These claims simply confirm that its emergent ideology doesn't fit neatly into existing categories and is in the process of coalescing. It is in the slogans and demands of the demonstrators the nucleus of an ideological creed lie and where revolutionary tendencies within the masses might seek guidance. Yet, slogans will not be enough in the long run and remain far from delineating a clear program or paradigm that addresses the profound agricultural, financial, and political transformations necessary to protect the revolution from being co-opted by calls for reform or repeating the mistakes of the nationalist state-led reforms of the mid 20th century. Until such a paradigm emerges, every effort should be made to prevent any attempts by the regime, the co-opted elites, or external forces from sabotaging a happy ending for a shining tale of two - and maybe more - peoples' revolutions.

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P.S.

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