

10 Questions with Gilbert Achcar

Revolutionary Hope and Change Across the 'Arab World'

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Gilbert Achcar is a Lebanese writer, socialist, and antiwar activist. He is also a professor of Development Studies and International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and author most recently of *The Arabs and the Holocaust: the Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*. In this interview, he discusses the significance of the ongoing revolutionary wave of mass protests occurring across the Middle East with one of the New Socialist webzine editors Ali Mustafa.

Ali Mustafa: The Middle East has long been considered among the least likely places to see anything like a popular revolution. Arabs in particular have been traditionally understood as politically weak, apathetic, and now “not ready” for democracy. What do you believe these characterizations suggest about our basic understanding of the region and its people?

Gilbert Achcar: I think that the answer has now become obvious. The ongoing events shattered all theories claiming that democracy is not part of the 'cultural values' of Arabs or Muslims, and that the latter are instead culturally addicted to despotic regimes, and all such stupidities--there has been a lot of them indeed. Most of the time they are plainly racist, Orientalist, or Islamophobic; they may also be expressed by Western rulers as pretexts for catering to despotic regimes, their best friends. The uprisings, however, are no surprise for anybody who did not subscribe to these 'culturalist' views and knew that the longing for democracy and freedom is universal. People all over the world are willing to pay a high price in their fight for democracy when circumstances reach a point when they feel it is the right time to act.

AM: The uprisings that have occurred all across the 'Arab World' in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and beyond have largely been popular, secular, and cut across all sectors of society. Are we potentially witnessing the rise of a new type of Pan-Arabism, or just the same underlying causes at play? If so, how does this new Pan-Arabism break with the previous incarnation of the Nasser era?

GA: No, I don't think this is anything resembling the kind of Arab nationalism that existed in the 1950s and 60s. These are very different times. Of course, the Arab national feeling has been 'reloaded,' if one could say so, by the way in which this wave has spread over the whole region; it strengthened tremendously the sense of belonging to the same geopolitical and cultural area. In that sense, the consciousness of belonging to an Arab cultural-national sphere has been very much increased by the ongoing events, but it's not comparable to the aspirations to Arab unity that existed

in the 50s and 60s when the belief in the possibility of unifying the Arab peoples into a single state was quite strong, behind Nasser in particular.

Now, what we have is again a sense of belonging to the same geopolitical and cultural area, but the movement is coming from below, and if ever people are to contemplate the perspective of unity, it would be closer to the European kind of unification than to that of the 50s and 60s; this would take, first of all, changing Arab regimes into democratic ones, and then having a democratic process between different Arab countries forming gradually a united federative or confederative political entity. Of course, this is something to contemplate for the future. For the time being, what people are concerned with is democratic change, and what we are seeing is only the beginning; it's far from being completed yet.

AM: There has been so much speculation to date about the Egyptian revolution's long-term implications for Egypt/Israel diplomatic relations, but what do you believe these events will mean for the Palestinians specifically?

GA: They can only mean good things for the Palestinian cause. Since you said 'Palestinians' in the plural, we have to specify which Palestinians we mean: are we speaking of the Palestinian Authority (PA) of Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad, or Hamas, or the Palestinian people as a whole? These are quite different perspectives. For the Palestinian people and the Palestinian cause in general, like for any Arab people, what is happening all over the region is the best that could happen. The surge of the mass movement in Egypt makes conditions potentially much better for the Palestinian people. The Egyptian regime--which was colluding with Israel in the oppression of the Palestinian people, especially in Gaza-- has been very much weakened by the mass protests, and there's no doubt that the Egyptian popular movement feels a strong affinity and solidarity with the Palestinian people, especially the people in Gaza who have many ties with Egypt; this can only benefit them in the long run.

AM: What does this revolutionary wave in the Arab world ultimately mean for American foreign policy in the Middle East? Are we potentially seeing the end of a long legacy of US hegemony in the region?

GA: Results will be contrasted: Washington's clients will be more than ever dependent on US protection, and that goes especially for the Gulf Cooperation Council states - that is, the oil monarchies in the Gulf area. They are scared to death now with this wave of struggles, which has even reached two of them, Bahrain and Oman, and started affecting the Saudi kingdom. These regimes will rely on US protection, even more so than before. Among the other countries where the movement has been proceeding--and that includes Egypt, the second largest recipient of US foreign aid in the world after the Israeli state--everything will depend on the outcome of the ongoing struggle between the military regime on the one hand, and the mass movement on the other. The military are very much dependent on Washington, of course, whereas the mass movement is very hostile to this dependency and to US foreign policy in the region. At any rate, the ongoing events represent a severe blow to US strategic interests in the Middle East in the very fact that they destabilize Washington's protégés and clients in a most vital region of the world; that much is absolutely clear.

AM: Egypt has operated as a de facto military dictatorship since 1952 and its army is now acting as a caretaker government until free and fair elections can take place in September. What role is the military playing right now, and can they be trusted to ultimately cede power or have they merely sacrificed the dictator to save the dictatorship?

GA: They have indeed a certain number of fuses that they can replace in trying to defuse the mass

movement. It started with Mubarak himself dismissing the government and designating another Prime Minister who formed a new cabinet; then, the leadership of the ruling party was made to resign; then, Mubarak himself had to leave the scene under the pressure of the mass movement; and now the military have reshuffled the cabinet. But all this is not convincing enough for the mass movement, which is demanding much more: they want a complete change of government with no figures from the previous regime involved.

Beyond that, they are demanding that a presidential committee oversee the transitional period, a committee composed of a majority of civilians, with only one representative of the military. They were also demanding the election of a constituent assembly, whereas the military short-circuited this demand by creating a committee to draw up some revisions to the constitution that will be submitted to a referendum--a completely different scheme, even though they promise that the next parliament will draft a new constitution. An important issue is the date of the next parliamentary elections: the military backed by the Muslim Brotherhood want to hold them in June, whereas the young leaders of the uprising want them to be postponed for a few more months until the new political forces manage to organize and get ready. Very obviously what the military are trying to implement is what in Washington they call an 'orderly transition,' with the military remaining firmly in control. Since the young leaders do not subscribe to this perspective, we are witnessing a tug-of-war between the military junta and the popular movement.

AM: The Egyptian revolution's early mass protests were orchestrated largely by the youth it now seems clear, but what has been the role of the workers and working-class to date, and what do you see as its role looking forward?

GA: If you are referring to the way in which the mass protest started on the 25th of January, the key role there was played indeed by liberal and left-wing opposition groups like the April 6 Youth Movement, which is related to the National Association for Change formed around Mohamed ElBaradei. All these people played a decisive role in organizing the movement this time. But the April 6 Youth Movement itself was born in solidarity with the workers' strikes that unfolded from the year 2006 onward. The movement is named after the day in 2008 when they tried to organize a general national strike in support of the workers' movement.

Now the reverse transmission is taking place: April 6 and other political forces were instrumental in launching the protests on the 25th of January, but then after a few days of protest, a little before Mubarak left the scene, workers started joining the movement not only as demonstrators as they did from day one, but as strikers. The wave of strikes actually reached very large proportions before Mubarak resigned, and it is plausible that this played a role in precipitating his final gesture of leaving the scene and handing power to the military. The strikes--along with the formulation of demands by various categories of workers, the process of forming independent unions, and the central demand that the state-controlled unions be dissolved--are continuing despite threats by the military, or calls to their cessation by parts of the opposition like the Muslim Brotherhood. All of this is still going on and shows that the workers are a very powerful part of the movement.

AM: With so much emphasis on Mubarak's ouster, what is the fear that now that he's gone and calls for 'stability' and 'order' grow louder, the Egyptian revolution may lose its early momentum and only solidify the status quo?

GA: One could have feared that it might lose its momentum when Mubarak left the scene, but what we have seen until now doesn't point in that direction at all. The Friday mobilizations are still very large and the movement is not willing to stop the fight. Further mobilizations are planned, and we will see, I'm sure, a lot more in the coming period. This confirms basically what I was saying: that this revolutionary process is not a completed revolution in any sense of the term; it is still going on

and different outcomes are still possible.

Either the military manage to control the situation and impose their own and Washington's kind of 'orderly transition,' or the mass movement succeeds in imposing more radical change. We will see, but for the time being, in light of what we have seen until now, there are more reasons for optimism than for pessimism.

AM: We have seen a lot of cross-sector unity in the early stages of the Egyptian revolution - young/old, men/women, Muslim/Christian, for example. What are the prospects for this type of dynamic holding up in the post-Mubarak era, and what challenges will it face going forward?

GA: I can't see any split along lines of young/old, men/women, or even Muslim/Christian in the near future. I am not saying that nothing of that can happen in the future, but based on what we have seen until now there seems to be little risk. The only real threat among those you mentioned would be a revival of Muslim/Christian tensions because these existed before the beginning of the events. But on that score, the mobilization proved a wonderful healer of division. We have seen expressions of fraternity among people of Muslim and Christian backgrounds, and even a fundamentalist force like the Muslim Brotherhood was quite clear in repealing sectarianism within the movement.

At this stage, the key point of unity or disunity is not along such 'identity' lines but political lines, as well as class lines; it is the unity of the opposition forces that is threatened, in political terms. The military are trying to buy part of the opposition into collaborating with them; they have already brought into the government a few representatives of the legal opposition, and they are seeking to secure the Muslim Brotherhood's support and get them involved in the 'orderly transition.'

The military are trying to break the opposition's unity, and, of course, we can't bet on this unity going on indefinitely. For the time being the radical democratic and left-wing forces in the movement are still able to lead the way and mobilize for more radical change.

AM: We have seen the revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East grow far beyond what we all imagined possible, spreading rapidly now to Libya, Algeria, and Morocco. Do you see any exceptions where such mass protests are not likely to occur, including Lebanon, Syria, or Saudi Arabia?

GA: The mass protests are strongest where you have despotic regimes. Lebanon is a country where you have regular, relatively fair elections, and where the political majority is presently dominated by Hezbollah, so this creates very different conditions. Nevertheless, a demonstration has been organized recently in Beirut against sectarianism and in favor of secularism. When you look at the other despotic regimes in the Arab region, two of them are countries where popular protest is simmering but is being held back by fiercely repressive regimes: the Saudi kingdom on the one hand, and Syria on the other. In my talk in Toronto on 13 February, I said that in countries like Syria and Libya the likelihood of the explosion was less than in other countries of the region, due to the particularly ruthless character of the regimes; I added, however, that if an uprising were to happen, events would turn much bloodier than in Tunisia and Egypt, and that's exactly what is happening now in Libya.

The same can be said about Syria and the Saudi kingdom. In such countries, mass protests may start unfolding, especially if the Libyan uprising proves successful--a fact that will certainly embolden the protest movement. Regimes there and elsewhere in the Arab world are making all sorts of preventative concessions now, raising wages and promising other social policies, because they are scared to death that the wave of democratic uprisings might reach their own countries. No one in

the Arab world can feel immune—even in countries like Lebanon and Iraq where you have some possible alternation in power through elections. Iraq has seen a mass protest unfolding, not about free elections but for social and economic demands.

AM: We have some indication about what the Egyptian revolution and all the other uprisings across the 'Arab World' may mean for those respective countries, and to some extent US hegemony in the region, but what do you see as the wider global implications, if any? Do these events in any way present a challenge to the prevailing neoliberal order overall?

GA: The ongoing uprisings are a result of the social and economic changes brought in by neoliberalism, to be sure, but they are not yet posing a major challenge to the global and even local neoliberal order. Although we are seeing within the protests—like in Egypt with the workers' mobilization—dynamics that go right against the neoliberal prescriptions, it is the democratic dimension of the struggle that has been prevailing until now. The global dimension of this shockwave is at present, therefore, more related to democracy than to social demands; its impact is even now reaching China. It is wherever the demand for democracy is still to be satisfied that the impact of what we are seeing is proving strongest at this stage. For the future, we will have to wait and see.

The powers that be in the Arab countries are trying to keep the movement within the limits of political democracy and prevent it from developing beyond that into a social and economic stage. There is an important potential here, however, and, to repeat my point, we are still in the midst of the process and the fight continues to go on; it may well turn eventually into a big challenge to the neoliberal economic order, especially in Tunisia and Egypt where the working class is a major factor in the process.

P.S.

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