

The Arab Revolt: 'If power is not seized, counter-revolution will rise'

Saturday 17 September 2011, by [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2011).

Contents

- [Part I](#)
- [PART II](#)

Part I

Pothik Ghosh (PG): In what sense can the recent events in the Arab World be called revolutions? How are they different from the colour revolutions of the past two decades?

Vijay Prashad (VP): All revolutions are not identical. The colour revolutions in Eastern Europe had a different tempo. They were also of a different class character. They were also along the grain of US imperialism, even though the people were acting not for US but for their own specific class and national interests. I have in mind the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. Otpor in the Ukraine, among others, was well lubricated by George Soros's Open Society and the US government's National Democratic Institute. Russian money also swept in on both sides of the ledger. These Eastern European revolutions were mainly political battles in regions of the world still unsettled by the traumatic transition from state socialism to predatory capitalism.

The Arab revolt that we now witness is something akin to a "1968" for the Arab World. Sixty per cent of the Arab population is under 30 (70 per cent in Egypt). Their slogans are about dignity and employment. The resource curse brought wealth to a small population of their societies, but little economic development. Social development came to some parts of the Arab world: Tunisia's literacy rate is 75 per cent, Egypt's is just over 70 per cent, Libya almost 90 per cent. The educated lower-middle-class and middle-class youth have not been able to find jobs. The concatenation of humiliations revolts these young people: no job, no respect from an authoritarian state, and then to top it off the general malaise of being a second-class citizen on the world stage - second to the US-Israel and so on - was overwhelming. The chants on the streets are about this combination of dignity, justice and jobs.

PG: Does the so-called Jasmine Revolution have in it to transform the preponderant character of the politico-ideological topography of oppositional politics - from Islamist identitarianism to an organic variant of working-class politics - in West Asia and the Maghreb? Under what circumstances can this series of general strikes, which seem to be spreading like a brushfire through the region, morph into a constellation of counter-power? Or, would that in your eyes merely be a vicarious desire of Leftists from outside the region?

VP: I fear that we are being vicarious. The youth, the working class, the middle class have opened up the tempo of struggle. The direction it will take is not clear. I am given over to analogies when I see

revolutions, largely because the events of change are so contingent.

It is in the melee that spontaneity and structure jostle. The organised working class is weaker than the organised theocratic bloc, at least in Egypt. Social change of a progressive type has come to the Arab lands largely through the Colonels. Workers' struggles have not reached fruition in any country. In Iraq, where the workers movement was advanced in the 1950s, it was preempted by the military - and then they made a tacit alliance.

One cannot say what is going to happen with certainty. The Mexican Revolution opened up in 1911, but didn't settle into the PRI regime till the writing of the 1917 constitution and the elevation of Carranza to the presidency in 1920 or perhaps Cardenas in 1934. I find many parallels between Mexico and Egypt. In both, the Left was not sufficiently developed. Perils of the Right always lingered. If the Pharonic state withers, as Porfirio Diaz's state did, the peasants and the working class might move beyond spontaneity and come forward with some more structure. Spontaneity is fine, but if power is not seized effectively, counter-revolution will rise forth effectively and securely.

PG: What are, in your opinion, the perils if such a transformation fails to occur? Will not such a failure lead to an inevitable consolidation of the global neoliberal conjuncture, which manifests itself in West Asia as fascistic Islamism on one hand and authoritarianism on the other?

VP: If such a transformation fails, which god willing it won't, then we are in for at least three options: (1) the military, under Egyptian ruling class and US pressure, will take control. This is off the cards in Tunisia for now, mainly because the second option presented itself; (2) elements of the ruling coalition are able to dissipate the crowds through a series of hasty concessions, notably the removal of the face of the autocracy (Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia). If Mubarak leaves and the reins of the Mubarakian state are handed over to the safe-keeping of one of his many bloodsoaked henchman such as Omar Suleiman.... Mubarak tried this with Ahmed Shafik, but he could as well have gone to Tantawi....all generals who are close to Mubarak and seen as safe by the ruling bloc. We shall wait to see who all among the elite will start to distance themselves from Mubarak, and try to reach out to the streets for credibility. As a last-ditch effort, the Shah of Iran put Shapour Bakhtiar as PM. That didn't work. Then the revolt spread further. If that does not work, then, (3) the US embassy will send a message to Mohamed El-Baradei, giving him their green light. El-Baradei is seen by the Muslim Brotherhood as a credible candidate. Speaking to the crowds on January 30 he said that in a few days the matter will be settled. Does this mean that he will be the new state leader, with the backing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and certainly with sections of Mubarak's clique? Will this be sufficient for the crowds? They might have to live with it. El-Baradei is a maverick, having irritated Washington at the IAEA over Iran. He will not be a pushover. On the other hand, he will probably carry on the economic policy of Mubarak. His entire agenda was for political reforms. This is along the grain of the IMF-World Bank Structural Adjustment part 2, viz., the same old privatisation agenda alongside "good governance". El-Baradei wanted good governance in Egypt. The streets want more. It will be a truce for the moment, or as Chavez said, "por ahora".

PG: The Radical Islamists, their near-complete domination of the oppositional/dissident politico-ideological space in the region notwithstanding, have failed to rise up to the occasion as an effective organisational force - one especially has the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt in mind. What do you think is the reason?

VP: The Muslim Brotherhood is on the streets. It has set its own ideology to mute. That is very clear. Its spokesperson Gamel Nasser has said that they are only a small part of the protests, and that the protest is about Egypt not Islam. This is very clever. It is similar to what the mullahs said in Iran during the protests of 1978 and 1979. They waited in the wings for the "multitude" to overthrow the

Shah, and then they descended. Would the MB do that? If one says this is simply the people's revolt and not that of any organised force, it's, of course, true. But it is inadequate. The 'people' can be mobilised, can act; but can the 'people' govern without mediation, without some structure. This is where the structured elements come into play. If there is no alternative that forms, then the Muslim Brotherhood will take power. That the Muslim Brotherhood wants to stand behind El-Baradei means they don't want to immediately antagonise the US. That will come later.

PG: What does the emergence of characters like El-Baradei signify? Are they really the "political face" of the resistance as the global media seems to be projecting?

VP: El-Baradei comes with credibility. He served in the Nasserite ministry of external affairs in the 1960s. He then served in the foreign ministry under Ismail Fahmi. One forgets how impressive Fahmi was. He resigned from Sadat's cabinet when the Egyptian leader went to Jerusalem. Fahmi was a Nasserite. For one year, El-Baradei served with Boutros Boutros Ghali at the foreign ministry. That was the start of this relationship. Both fled for the UN bureaucracy. Boutros Ghali was more pliant than Fahmi. I think El-Baradei is more along Fahmi's lines. At the IAEA he did not bend to the US pressure. Given that he spent the worst years of Mubarak's rule outside Cairo gives him credibility. A man of his class would have been coopted into the Mubarak rule. Only an outsider like him can be both of the ruling bloc (in terms of class position and instinct) and outside the ruling apparatus (i. e. of Mubarak's cabinet circle). It is a point of great privilege.

With the MB careful not to act in its own face, and the 'people' without easy ways to spot leaders, and with Ayman Nour not in the best of health, it is credible that El-Baradei takes on the mantle.

PG: Is the disappearance of working-class and other avowedly Left-democratic political organisations, which had a very strong presence in that part of the world till a few decades ago, merely the result of their brutal suppression by various authoritarian regimes (such as Saddam Hussein's in Iraq, Hafez Assad's in Syria and Nasser's and Mubarak's in Egypt) and/or their systematic physical decimation by Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood? Or, does it also have to do with certain inherent politico-theoretical weaknesses of those groups? Has not the fatal flaw of left/ communist/ socialist forces in the Islamic, particularly the Arab, world been their unwillingness, or inability, to grasp and pose the universal question of the "self-emancipation of the working class" in the determinateness of their specific culture and historicity?

VP: Don't underestimate the repression. In Egypt, the 2006 budget for internal security was \$1.5 billion. There are 1.5 million police officers, four times more than army personnel. I am told that there is now about 1 police officer per 37 people. This is extreme. The subvention that comes from the US of \$1.3 billion helps fund this monstrosity.

The high point of the Egyptian working class was in 1977. This was the bread uprising. It was trounced. Sadat then went to the IMF with a cat's smile. He inaugurated the infitah. He covered the books by three means: the infitah allowed for some export-oriented production, the religious cover (al-rai al-mou'min) allowed him to try and undercut the Brotherhood, and seek some funds from the Saudis, and the bursary from the US for the deal he cut with Israel. This provided the means to enhance the security apparatus and further crush the workers' movements.

Was there even space or time to think about creative ways to pose the self-emancipation question? Were there intellectuals who were doing this? Are we in Ajami's Dream Palace of the Arabs, worrying about the decline of the questions? Recall that in March 1954 the major Wafd and Communist unions made a pact with the Nasserite regime; for concessions it would support the new dispensation. That struck down its independence. The unions put themselves in the service of the

Nation over their Class. In the long run, this was a fatal error. But the organised working class was small (as Workers on the Nile shows, most workers were in the “informal” sector). The best that the CP and the Wafd could do in the new circumstances was to argue that the working class plays a central role in the national movement. Nasser and his Revolutionary Command Council, on the other hand, heard this but did not buy it. They saw the military as the agent of history. It was their prejudice.

PART II

Pothik Ghosh (PG): Why is it that most attempts in the Perso-Arabic world to conceptualise what Gramsci called the “national-popular” have come from radical left-nationalist intellectuals such as Edward Said rather than Marxists? How should or could the peculiarity of the Saidian theoretical enterprise of the national-popular inform and enrich working-class practice in West Asia?

Vijay Prashad (VP): Strictly speaking, Gramsci’s “national-popular” is the emergence of the mass through urban collective action, with the rural bursting through, and then being guided by the Jacobin (his word for an organised political force). The mass might drift into a-political action or passivity, Gramsci wrote, without the guidance of that Jacobin force. In today’s times, there is a tendency to hear about something like the Jacobin and shiver in fear that the energy of the “multitude” will be usurped by the Jacobin, that the authentic politics of the street will be taken over by the Organisation. It is in essence a misreading of anarchistic politics that this sort of fear has taken hold. I do not believe that anarchism is pure disorder; for those who believe this I propose a reading of Errico Malatesta’s “Anarchy and Organisation.” Of course, for those on the Marxist side of the ledger, Gramsci’s comments are our bread and butter. There is a need for the national-popular to be articulated through mass protest and the Jacobin canals. There is not so much that divides the Black and the Red.

It is not the case that only Edward Said has dealt with the national-popular in the Arab world. Take the case of Lebanon, where it is the Marxist historian (and eminent journalist) Fawaz Trabulsi who has written a remarkably informative account of the thwarted national-popular, with the emergence of Hezbollah. To my mind, Trabulsi’s is the best account of the Lebanese problem. It must be read widely to better understand the national dilemmas and the national-popular potentialities. My own interest in the Arab predicament was partly drawn by the work of people from an earlier generation like the writer and PFLP leader Ghassan Kanafani, who was assassinated in 1972. In the context of this new Arab Revolt, I recommend Kanafani’s pamphlet *The 1936-37 Revolt in Palestine*, a model for how to theorise the national-popular through the material of a revolt. These are role models for those who want to do detailed work on the Arab potential. The contingent is important, no doubt, but so too are the broad structures that need to be unearthed and developed.

PG: Lebanese-French Marxist Gilbert Achcar writes in his ‘Eleven Theses on the Current Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism’: “What is an elementary democratic task elsewhere - separation of religion and state - is so radical in Muslim countries, especially the Middle East, that even the “dictatorship of the proletariat” will find it a difficult task to complete. It is beyond the scope of other classes.” Does the ‘Jasmine’ Revolution portend a change for the better on that score? If not, how, in your view, should the working class forces in the region go about their business of shaping an effective ideological idiom that is rooted in local culture and yet articulates a question that is fundamentally global?

VP: We tend to exaggerate the authority of the clerics, or at least to treat it as natural, as eternal.

Certainly, since the 1970s, clericalism has had the upper hand in the domain of the national-popular. In the Arab world, this has everything to do with the calcification of the secular regimes of the 1950s (the new states formed out of the export of Nasserism: from Egypt to Iraq), the deterioration of the Third World Project (especially the fractures in OPEC that opened up in the summer of 1990 and led to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait), and the promotion and funding of the advance guard of the Islamism through the World Muslim League (by the Saudis. The WML's impact can be seen from Chechnya to Pakistan, and in parts of Indonesia).

If one goes back and looks at the period when the Third World Project and Nasserism were dominant, what you'd find is clerical intellectuals in the midst of an ideological battle against Marxism (mainly), at the same time as they borrowed from Bolshevik techniques of party building to amass their own organisational strength. I wrote about this in *New Left Review* ("Sadrist Stratagems," in 2008) where I catalogued the intellectual work of Baqir al-Sadr, with his *Iqtisaduna*, a critique of Capital Vol. 1. Baqir's *al Da'wah al-Islamiyah* was modeled on the Iraqi Communist Party, then dominant in the Shia slums of Baghdad. If you go farther East along this tendency, you will run into Haji Misbach, an Indonesian cleric, also known as Red Haji, who confronted the dynamic Indonesian Communist Party with his own brand of Islamic Communism. Like Baqir, Misbach was perplexed by the popularity of the CP in his society. He wanted to find a way to bring the spiritual to socialism. These are all precursors of Ali Shariati, the great Iranian thinker who was influenced by the Third World Project, and by Marxism, but once more wanted to bring the spiritual into it. For all these thinkers, the problem was quite the opposite to what it is today: the workers seemed ascendant, driven by the science of secular socialism. It terrified them, as much as we are assaulted by the rise of the clerics over the last few decades.

It is also not the case that the religious is more difficult to expunge in the Arab lands, or that Islam is more intractable than other faiths. If one turns toward India, or turns toward the United States, it is clear that the religious domain is often very reluctant to wither away. It was equally hard to push it away in the USSR. This is not just a question of religion, or Islam, but of cultural change in general. Cultural change from below is slow-moving, excruciating. Cultural change from above is much faster, the tempo clearer. It has to do with who controls the cultural institutions, but also with the depth of cultural resources. Religion emerges over the millenia as a shelter from the turmoil of life, and it enters so deeply into the social life of people that it cannot be so easy to remove its tentacles. Of course Islam might be harder to walk away from, given that it, unlike say Brahmanism or Catholicism, has a much finer edge to its egalitarianism. This is what propelled it from a minor Arabian religion to Andalusia and China within fifty years of its emergence.

I would say one more thing on this: since the Utopian horizon of socialism is in eclipse, why should someone risk their lives in struggle for it? The idea of the inevitability of socialism inspired generations to give themselves over to the creation of the Jacobin force. Religion has an unshakable eschatology, which secular politics absent Utopia lacks. No wonder that religion has inspired action, even if destructive rather than revolutionary, whereas secular politics is less inspirational these days.

The Arab Revolt of 2011 prefigures for the Arab people a new horizon. That is why it has moved from Tunisia to Jordan. Ben Ali's departure set the new horizon. It is what the youth hold onto. If he can be made to flee, why not Mubarak, why not Abdullah II, and if the remnants of the Saudi Voice of the Vanguard decide to blow off the cobwebs and get to the streets, then the repellent Abdullah of Saudi (whose idea of political reform was to bring in his son-in-law into the Education ministry!).

PG: Does not the ongoing 'Jasmine' Revolution explode the myth of a postcolonial, anti-imperialist Third World, which is precisely what you deal with and kind of theoretically anticipate in your book *The Darker Nations*? If that is so, what is the new programmatic

direction that the anti-imperialist struggle must now take?

VP: My book, *The Darker Nations*, provided the history of the collapse of the Third World Project. This collapse begins to be visible by the early 1980s. The roots are there in the defeat of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) process (that opens in the UN in 1973), in the break-down of solidarity in OPEC, in the exhaustion of the import-substitution industrialisation model, and in the narrowing of political freedoms in the Global South. The “assassination” of the Project comes through the debt crisis (1982 in Mexico opens the door) and through the reconfiguration of the international order by the late 1980s with the disappearance of the USSR, and the push for primacy by the US (the salvo was fired in Iraq in 1991, when the US pushed out the Iraqi army from Kuwait, and ignored an attempt by the USSR to mediate on behalf of Saddam Hussein). US primacy by the early 1990s throws salt on the wound of the Third World Project.

My interest in the book was to seek out the dialectics of freedom that would emerge out of the corpse of the Third World Project. What is left in it to be revived, and what are the social forces capable of building a new revolutionary horizon? The other side of history opens up with La Caracazo, the rebellion in Caracas in 1989 that prefigures the emergence of Chavez. By the way, in 2009, a Brookings survey found that Chavez was the most popular world leader in the Middle East! Where is Chavez of Arabia, we asked, but were not confident. In 2007, in his “Jottings on the Conjuncture,” Perry Anderson bemoaned the paralysis on the Arab Street. The mutterings existed, and indeed the insurgency in Iraq showed that the will was there. Protests in Western Sahara and in Lebanon had become commonplace. But these did not say what the Tunisians said, which was that they, like the Bolivarians, were prepared to stake themselves for an alternative pathway into the future. From Caracas to Cairo, the expressway of Freedom is being paved.

The Bolivarians are at a much more advanced stage. They have been able to stave off counter-revolution, and even though still in peril, they are able to leverage their oil wealth into some very interesting experiments toward socialism. It is going to be imperative to prove for our Egyptian and Arab friends that the path out of Ben Ali and Mubarak does not lead to Paris and New York, but to Caracas and La Paz. The programme of socialist construction is being tentatively written (with lots of errors, of course). We have to nudge in that direction, and against the idea of liberty as the value above egalitarianism and socialism. There are few explicitly anti-imperialist slogans in the air at this time.

By the way, this other side of history will form the final chapter of *The Poorer Nations*, which I am now putting together, and which should be done by the Summer of 2011.

PG: The ‘Muslim Question’ has rightly been one of the key preoccupations of the Indian Left in all its variegated multiplicity. Yet it has consistently failed to frame and articulate it as a question having a transformative potential. What lessons must the Indian Left - which has in large measure centred its articulation of the ‘Muslim Question’ on solidarity with the Islamicised anti-Americanism of the Perso-Arabic peoples - draw from the current upsurges that would enable it to overcome its failing on that score?

VP: To get to the heart of the issue of the ‘Muslim Question,’ one has to understand the theory of alliance formation. In today’s world, the principal contradiction, the Large Contradiction, is between Imperialism and Humanity. The social force of imperialism seeks to thwart the humanity of the planet by creating political rules for economic theft (the preservation of intellectual property for the Multi-national corporations, the allowance of subsidies in the North and not in the South, the enforcement of debt contracts for the South, but not for the international banks), and if these rules are broken, by military power. Imperialism is the principal problem in our planet, for our humanity.

The Lesser Contradiction is between the Left and the Reactionaries, who are not identical to imperialism. Indian Hindutva, American Evangelicalism and Zionism are all reactionary, but not part of the Lesser Contradiction. Those forms of Reaction are ensconced in the Larger Contradiction, since they are handmaidens of imperialism. What I refer to as the Reactionaries of the Lesser Contradiction are organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and so on. I indicate the Muslim groups not from an anti-Islamic point of view, but because, as I just mentioned, most of the other Reactionary religious formations are inside the essence of imperialism (they are joined there by the official clerics of Saudi Arabia, and of Egypt). These other groups are antagonistic to imperialism, and are from this standpoint able to capture the sentiments and politics of the people who are anti-imperialist nationalists. We are divided from them, but not against them in the same way as we are against Imperialism. To make these two contradictions the same is to fall into the liberal error of equivalence. We need to retain their separation.

That said, it is important to always offer a scrupulous and forthright critique of their shortcomings and their social degeneration. In 2007, the Communist Parties in India held an anti-imperialist meeting in Delhi. A Hezbollah representative (I think it was Ali Fayyad) came for it. At the plenary, Aijaz Ahmad lit into Fayyad regarding Hezbollah's position on women's rights. It is just what should be done. By all means form tactical alliances, if need be, but don't let them get away with silence on the issues that matter to us, on social equality, on economic policy, on political rights. Even the Lesser Contradiction needs to be pushed and prodded. It has virulence at its finger tips. That has to be scorched. Clara Zetkin warned that the emergence of fascism can be laid partly on the failure of the workers and their Jacobin to move toward revolution effectively enough. Part of that effectiveness is to challenge those in the Lesser Contradiction, who are equally willing in certain circumstances to turn against the Left and become the footsoldiers of fascism.

In the 1980s, Hezbollah mercilessly killed cadre of the Lebanese Communist Party. Over the past three decades, relationships have mellowed and the much weaker LCP now works with Hezbollah in various ways. The LCP sees Hezbollah as "a party of resistance," as it were. Part of the Lesser Contradiction. That has to be the attitude in the short-term. The LCP seeks out elements who are not fully given over to Dawa, the hardened Islamic militants in Hezbollah. There is another side that is more nationalist than Islamist. They are to be cultivated. There is also a part of Hezbollah that is perfectly comfortable with neo-liberalism, privatisation of the commons and so on. They too lean toward the Larger Contradiction. One has to be supple, forge a way ahead, be assertive in unity, find a way out of the weakness and reconstruct a left pole. A weak left with the national-popular in the hands of the "Islamist" parties: that is the context.

P.S.

* From Radical Notes:

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