

Arab Revolutions

Springtime for the Arab Left?

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A central paradox of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia has been that youth movements and trade unions were central in overthrowing the dictatorships - but in the subsequent elections, these forces were pushed to the margins. How can this paradox be explained? And how can these forces become part of a new left project? Gilbert Achcar comments on developments on the left in the Arab Spring in an interview with Peter Drucker and Alex de Jong.

Peter Drucker and Alex de Jong - In your recent writings, you've tried to address the paradox that in the initial explosions in the Arab region, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, grassroots trade union activists and young people who identified with the left played important roles, but in the political aftermath the left has been very weak. What accounts for this contrast?

Gilbert Achcar - We have to make a distinction between youth, left and workers movements. Left-wing groups were and are marginal. In a situation of crisis we are used to seeing left-wing organizations play a role that is disproportionate to their size. That is because they are naturally inclined to be where the action is. But this doesn't mean that when they play the role of coordinators for a mass movement they exercise real hegemony over the movement. If we speak of the youth networks that were instrumental in bringing these revolutions about, they can't be described as 'left' strictly speaking. They can be described as 'progressive' or 'liberal' in the American sense of the term. But here also there is a difference between acting as coordinators, when nobody else can do it and the situation has reached a boiling point, and capitalizing politically on this role on the other hand. Those are two different things.

The workers movement played a decisive role in Egypt and Tunisia, not in every country in the region. But in these two countries the workers movement has powerful organizations. The workers movement in Tunisia already had an old organization, the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, Tunisian General Labour Union), and new ones have been formed in Egypt, where a federation of independent trade unions was set up after the fall of Mubarak. But in both cases the workers organizations have stuck to their trade union dimension: they are very involved in rising social struggles and class struggle, which right now is particularly fierce. But they haven't intervened on the political scene as such.

Your question refers to the election results: when it comes to elections, neither the youth nor the workers movements were present. In a sense it is natural that the forces with the largest political organizations and the most experience of electoral work get the best results. The religious parties that made such big gains in the elections also received major funding from the Gulf states. Their

electoral victories were to be expected. There is a conclusion to be drawn from this: that the new governments don't represent the real potential of the movement. That is why one has to insist that this is only the beginning of the process.

Just how marginal was the left in Egypt and Tunisia? A member of the Ligue de la Gauche Ouvrière (League of the Working Class Left) in Tunisia argued that in defining the left it was of little use to limit it to members of specific groups. He estimated that only a tenth of the activists who identified with the left were members of left organizations. Many of them would never join any of the existing groups because of the infighting, confusion etc. What is your take on that?

That is certainly true of Tunisia - but only of Tunisia. Tunisia has a long tradition of strong, radical left influences in the student movement. Over the years this produced a mass of people, former students, who are part of a general milieu of radical leftists but are not organized in any political group. What happened is that the trade union became a substitute for that. Radical trade unionists with this kind of background played an important role in the movements. This might change: after the overthrow of Ben Ali, a process began of reconstitution of left organizations and networks. But the radical left as a whole is certainly more important than the sum of radical left organizations. However, in Tunisia too the left doesn't act on the political level in any unified manner. On the political level, the political organizations are active and many of them are characterized by sectarianism. There are too many of them; it's nonsense. But when it comes to the class struggle, they converge in taking radical positions.

The Tunisian trade union, the UGTT, is an exceptional organization, something of a mix between the model of a state-dominated union, which we've seen in Egypt, Syria and so many other countries in the region, and that of a genuine union representing working class interests. The UGTT in peaceful times has a leadership that is dominated by the state - but in times of crisis, under pressure from grassroots members and sometimes because of the role of some of its leaders, it can shift to radical positions. It has done so repeatedly at key moments in Tunisian politics. That is what happened after the protests started in the region where Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire: the local unions played a decisive role in spreading and radicalizing the movement. As the movement spread, the pressure on the union leadership built up, eventually forcing them to declare a general strike. This was a decisive turning point in the struggle to oust Ben Ali.

It's no coincidence that the new government is now viciously attacking the UGTT, even employing thugs to attack their head office. The government is using the union as a scapegoat for all the problems in the country, accusing them of causing social unrest and economic problems. But the union is so popular that I think these attacks could backfire. The social contradictions keep increasing, but this time with the Islamic parties clearly on the side of the counter-revolution - there is no longer any ambiguity about their role.

You described the youth movement as liberal in the American sense. That raises questions about how clear even many radicalized young people are about liberalism. Are there illusions about the European democratic model?

We need to make a clear distinction between neoliberalism, or economic liberalism, and the views of these young people. Those young people can be described as people who support personal freedom and democracy, who have a sense of social justice. If you put their views in a programme, it would be close to social democratic ideas. That is their perspective. In Egypt there was even a party created with people from a left-wing background that calls itself social democratic. Of course, we are speaking of young people, whose views can still undergo profound changes. There is a large potential for radicalization to the left, on the basis of their experience. Their predisposition is

progressive. This is very different from the worldview of the religious parties. The main slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood has been for decades 'Islam is the solution'; that is worlds apart from the outlook of these young activists.

These young people belong to a generation that had greater access to global culture. One important feature of the situation is that Arab governments have lost the ability to impose a monopoly on information. For Westerners the importance of this might be hard to grasp, because here governments haven't had a monopoly on information for a long time. The leap forward in the development of information technology had a profound impact on the Arab world, where 15 years ago governments still had a monopoly on information. It is not only the internet but also satellite television that broke this monopoly and provided people with alternative views of the world. It also contributed to the development of new aspirations in the face of very bad social conditions. Unemployment, especially youth unemployment, is a major factor in the current developments.

I understand that in Egypt some people who identified with the left supported the Egyptian Bloc, which is more like a liberal force. On the other hand you had leftists who called for a boycott of the elections. You would instead argue for an approach oriented towards these progressive young people?

In Egypt these kinds of youth groups are more important than in Tunisia, even proportionally. In Tunisia the radical left is much bigger. But in both countries the priority for the radical left should be the workers movement. This movement of course also includes young people. In both countries, only the workers movement can provide leverage for progressive change, can form a force that can impose itself and change the political situation. There are no shortcuts to creating revolutionary parties from scratch or anything like that.

In a matter of months, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) attracted 1.5 to 2 million members. Of course, not all of those people are socialist workers. But it is their commitment to the class struggle that counts. The social struggle is the key. Religious parties are attacking the social struggles, saying that these struggles are based on narrow self-interest, are contrary to the interests of the nation, etc. That has been the discourse of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and of Ennahda in Tunisia since the fall of the dictators.

Arab societies are very young, so the proportion of young people in the employed labour force is high. This creates a potential for links between the youth and workers movements. As for the unemployed, in Morocco you have a tradition of organizations of the unemployed. You don't have that in Egypt or in Tunisia to my knowledge, but the workers movement there can take up the issues of the unemployed and organize them, represent them. The gap between the potential and the abilities of the left can only be bridged by prioritizing the workers movement.

In a situation where there is not much struggle, one may think that the priority should be building your own organization. But in a situation like the one we see now in Egypt or Tunisia, if you don't want to miss this window of opportunity, you have to adapt. The potential is embodied in the social forces in movement: there is a radicalization of the working class already in progress, and no radical left party can represent that. The existing groups in both countries are just too small. It is a shame that the Tunisian left can't agree on a common project. The UGTT took part in political elections in the 1950s, for example; this is a historical precedent that can be invoked and renewed. Maybe the union could be made into some kind of union/party of the working class. In Egypt the situation is more complicated, but at least the left there is less sectarian and has formed alliances. I would consider the perspective of a party based on the unions to be a priority to explore in Egypt.

To move briefly to another part of the region, can you say something about countries like

Libya and Yemen? To what extent is left politics possible there?

Each of these countries is of course very different. In Yemen a transition was imposed by the Saudis and their friends. That created a lot of frustration. The separatist movement in the south is growing. As you know, until 1994 there were two countries, and the south was the only anti-capitalist experience in the Arab world. But the agreement has the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, which hopes the new president will collaborate with them. The whole situation is affected by tribal divisions, and these tribal structures create a social base for the regime. In Yemen we've seen the only genuine mass mobilizations in favour of the government. The pro-government rallies in Libya were to a large extent fake, and you can discuss the character of the pro-Assad rallies in Syria. But the uprising in Yemen unleashed a potential that is still there, and the social question won't go away. Two thirds of the people in Yemen fall below the poverty line!

Libya is the country undergoing the most radical changes in the region. It is the only country where the state was actually smashed. There is no state in Libya, it has not been replaced; there is a chaotic situation. Local militias have replaced the state as the holders of power. There are attempts to construct a new state, but this is difficult and there is no single political authority. The Transitional National Council (TNC) is being violently attacked by demonstrations in Benghazi, Tripoli etc. The attacks come not from people who supported Gaddafi but from people who were involved in the struggle against him from the beginning. There is a spirit of revolt and discontent. After four decades of oppression, the lid has blown off. But after four decades of a totalitarian regime, there is very little political education in the country. That is why it is very difficult to predict the political landscape even a few months ahead, in the run-up to the elections.

Of course the Islamic current is present in Libya; the Muslim Brotherhood are there; there are liberals. But women are also organizing. There has been a struggle around the draft electoral law, which said the parliament should have at least ten per cent female members - there was a big outcry when this became known, and the quorum was doubled to 20 per cent. The Western media only reported about statements from the TNC leadership on introducing sharia law and legalizing polygamy, but on the ground there are real struggles and victories for women's groups. A union federation has also been formed that is linked to the Egyptian one. So yes, there are possibilities in Libya as well.

P.S.

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* Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Among his books are *The Clash of Barbarisms*, which came out in a second expanded edition in 2006; a book of dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2nd edition in 2008); and most recently *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010). His next book analyzing the Arab upheaval will come out in the spring of 2013.

Peter Drucker is a gay activist in The Netherlands. Originally from the US, he was from 1993 to

2006 Co-Director of the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam. He has written books and articles on the LGBT movement worldwide, and notably has edited and introduced a pioneering anthology on Third World gays and the left, called *Different Rainbows*

Alex de Jong is editor of *Grenzeloos*, the journal of the Dutch section of the Fourth International.