

LETTER FROM BEIRUT

# Hassan Hamdan (Mahdi Amel): The Arab Gramsci

Monday 7 December 2015, by [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2014).

**The killing of Hassan Hamdan, better known as Mahdi Amel, a highly regarded Marxist theoretician who strove to produce Marxist concepts that would be faithful to Arab reality, is part of a continuing battle between religious fundamentalism and communist doctrine.**

Contents

- [The Red Oak](#)
- [When a tree falls](#)

ON MAY 18, 1987, Hassan Hamdan left his apartment in west Beirut (Lebanon). He was a professor at Lebanese University and a central committee member of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). Hamdan turned right and headed to an errand. On Algeria Street, not far from his home, two men accosted him. They called out his name. He turned. They shot him. He was injured, taken by a passer-by to the American University of Beirut's hospital, where he died. He was 51.

Lebanon was then in the midst of "the events" (*al-ahdath*), the civil war that ran from 1975 to 1990. Different phases of the war pitted different sections of Lebanon's society and its militias—that often acted as proxies for outside powers—against each other.

Palestinians and the Left joined up to fight the Christian Right, a struggle that morphed through Syrian and Israeli military intervention into a brutal war to suppress the Palestinian bases in Lebanon. When the Palestinians were ejected to Tunisia in 1982, the war metastasised into an attack on the Left.

Islamist militias opened a war against the Communists who had powerful strongholds across Lebanon. In 1984, militants captured 52 Communists, forced them to renounce their atheism, killed them and, according to the Communist Party, dumped their bodies into the Mediterranean.

On February 17, 1987, Hussain Muruwwa lay in his bed. Muruwwa, also an LCP intellectual, had injured his leg. He was the editor of the LCP's newspaper *al-Tariq*, and had written a series of books that showed how Arab culture was not just about religion and sentiment. It also had deep roots in science and reason. This seam of materialist culture—evident in the 10<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna)—had been denied by Islamist scholarship. Some men entered Muruwwa's house and shot him dead. He was 78.

The attack on Muruwwa took place in the context of a battle between the LCP and the Islamist militants. The fight, said Jamil Nahmi, Director General of Lebanon's General Security (Surete Generale), was between "religious fundamentalism and communist doctrine", irreconcilable ideologies that first came to blows in south Lebanon. According to the LCP, in the next 10 days, over

40 LCP members were killed, with 17 members kidnapped. A sheikh in southern Lebanon's town of Nabatiye issued a fatwa that stated: "No communist must be allowed to remain in southern Lebanon." It was a death sentence. Old communist villages came under attack. Adham al-Sayed, the current secretary of the LCP's youth sector, calls these "martyr towns", such as Srifa, Kafr Rumman and Houla, which were once "fortresses of the party". Party members died or fled, or else abandoned politics.

The killing of Hassan Hamdan is part of this battle, although nothing conclusive can be said of the killing itself. Senior police officers sniff at the lack of information—"after all", says one, "this is Lebanon". As with the killing of Muruwwa, theories abound but there is nothing of substance. Police reports do not exist.

Few know Hassan Hamdan by his name. He is known now as Mahdi Amel—in the Arab world one of the most well-regarded and beloved Marxist theoreticians of his generation. Hamdan wrote widely and left behind a score of important books whose topics range from revolutionary theory to poetry. In his apartment, his son Redha tells me that the family and the Mahdi Amel Culture Centre continue to hear from those who find his work inspirational. Most recently, during the uprising in Tunisia, students painted a mural of Mahdi Amel on the walls of their campus. His image looked down on them with a benevolent sharpness. His books—all in Arabic—remain in print, and his work continues to be closely utilised by Arab intellectuals. It has been 26 years since his death, and yet little of his work seems to have faded.

In a corner of the study in Hamdan's apartment sits his desk. It now carries a portrait of him. This is where he would sit and work at night while his family slept. What drove Mahdi Amel was a simple problem: how to produce Marxist concepts that would be faithful to Arab reality? This is a question that has plagued thinkers across the Third World ever since they encountered Marxism. The Peruvian Marxist Jose Carlos Mariategui's *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928) sought to understand the history and struggles of the indigenous peoples of the Andes alongside their domination by the Spanish conquistadors and the creation of new land tenure and labour systems. The Egyptian socialist Salamah Moussa's *Our Duties and the Tasks of Foreign Countries* (1930) tried to provide a narrative of Egyptian society using socialist concepts. E.M.S. Namboodiripad's history of Kerala and report on the land tenancy Bill of 1938 are part of this attempt.

In one of Mahdi Amel's early essays, "Colonialism and Backwardness", published in *al-Tariq* (1968), he wrote, "If you really want our own true Marxist thought to see the light, and to be capable to see reality from a scientific perspective, we should not start with Marxist thought itself and apply it to our own reality, but rather start from our reality as a foundational movement." If one starts with the historical development of a society and its own cultural resources, "only then can our thought truly become Marxist" (translated by Hisham Ghassan Tohme). Marxism could not be adopted whole cloth. The reality of colonial "backwardness" (*takhalluf*) had to be explored and Marxism elaborated to take this into account.

Arabs bore the stigma of being "backward", Mahdi Amel wrote. It was as if they were not capable of anything but failure. But the ruin of Arabs was not because of their culture but because of what had befallen them. Colonial rule for a hundred years would alter the structure of politics and economics as well as society. Old Arab notables would be sidelined or absorbed into a new world where they were merely the representatives of forces that lived elsewhere. The new elites that emerged represented external forces, not their own populations. When Paris sneezed, they caught a cold. The United States' Ambassador became more important than elected officials. (An old joke that used to do the rounds: "Why is there no revolution in the United States? Because there is no U.S. embassy there.") The experience of backwardness was not the fault of Arabs, Mahdi Amel suggested, but it

was the way in which their lives had been structured. Marxism had to take this idea seriously, he argued.

At this time the Pakistani scholar Hamza Alavi had offered his theory of the colonial mode of production; in India there was a debate over the modes of production; and the Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin had produced work on the same theme. Like them, Mahdi Amel saw backwardness not in cultural terms, but in terms of the way the global order had been structured—with the South to provide raw materials and markets, while the North would produce the finished goods and earn the bulk of the social wealth. The feeling of backwardness was a reflection of this order. The political mess in the South was also related to this economic subordination. All these thinkers—with greater or lesser success—tried to provide a theory of how this is so.

## **The Red Oak**

Born in 1936, Hassan Hamdan left Lebanon 20 years later to study philosophy in Lyons, France, at a time when a progressive opening in his homeland had been closed off. Arab nationalism and communism had begun to make strides in Lebanon. An armed uprising led by these two forces was crushed by the Lebanese elite, who were assisted by a U.S. military intervention. In France, Hamdan joined a clandestine group of Arab communists. The Algerian war was in full swing, and Charles de Gaulle would not allow any dissent within the country. It was fitting that Hamdan left France in 1963 for Algeria, where he and his wife, Evelyne Brun, came to help build the newly independent country. Evelyne Brun taught French, while Hamdan taught evening classes on the newly deceased Frantz Fanon in the provincial town of Al-Qustantiniyah (Constantine). Hamdan's first published article was on Fanon for the review *Revolution Africaine*.

Political ferment in Lebanon drew Hamdan home. Lebanon's Communist Party held its second Congress in 1968 where, as the youth leader Adham al-Sayed points out, "we put our own concepts, our own theory to the forefront". The LCP distanced itself from the Soviet approach to the Palestinian question, throwing itself fully behind the resistance to Israel and to building up the Arab national movement. In the aftermath of this Congress, Interior Minister Kamal Jumblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party gave legal sanction to the LCP. Between 1970 and 1975, as the Left emerged from repression, union activity increased—there were 35 strikes a year. High levels of militancy during the Ghandour food workers' strike in 1972 came alongside a renewed student movement. In 1974, fifty thousand people demonstrated against the move to privatise education. Veteran LCP labour leader Elias Habr said he had never seen such an event in his life.

In the tobacco fields of southern Lebanon the farmers went on strike, with the South Lebanon Tobacco Farmers' Union attempting to come out from under the thumb of the old notables. Hamdan had taken his nom de plume —Mahdi Amel—from Lebanon's southern mountains, the Jabal Amel, one of the homes to the country's Shia population. This was an area of economic wretchedness. Tobacco is an unfriendly crop. It is hard work to grow and worse on the smoker. But it provided a living, and the peasants in the region had gradually given up their subsistence crops and planted this cash crop. What cash came to them was minimal as the state monopoly seemed to always get the better end of the deal. As the struggles emerged out of and alongside the Communist movement, Mahdi Amel travelled across the tobacco farmers' bases, giving lectures about Marxism and its relevance to Lebanon's contemporary problems. He spoke in homes and mosques, remembers Evelyne Brun, and was listened to "with religious silence". He explained how backwardness worked, and what were the intentions of Lebanon's right wing (the Phalange) as representatives of outside forces. Years later, Evelyne Brun learned, he was known as "the man with the green beard" and had attained a legendary status amongst the farmers.

Evelyne Brun recalls one of the major themes of Mahdi Amel's work, "Being a Marxist is being a person who can provide answers to the problems of daily life." During the Israeli occupation of Beirut in 1982, Mahdi Amel threw himself into organising water distribution with as much energy as he had into helping build the armed resistance. None of these matters had priority. One cannot overturn the condition of backwardness if one ignores the everyday maladies of the people.

### **When a tree falls**

Mahdi Amel was killed in 1987, two years before the Soviet experiment began to fail. Already, the LCP had suffered major setbacks. Entry into the civil war in Lebanon meant that it had to concede to the rhetoric of sectarianism, the war between Christians and Muslims. It was impossible not to be sucked into that logic, as Mahdi Amel noticed in his cautionary books on sectarianism and the Lebanese civil war, say two LCP youth leaders, Adham al-Sayed and Jana Nakhal. It was hard to sustain the party in the new context. It began to flounder.

The Left in the Arab world suffered gravely over the past two decades. Communist parties had largely been destroyed by the Arab nationalist regimes. The room to grow seemed limited. Trade union activity was also not as easy as before, with the relocation of firms breaking links to older union traditions and the importation of migrant workers on restrictive visas making union activity virtually impossible. The rise of religious politics and the reinforcement of sectarianism made the severely rational world of Marxism seem alien to everyday life.

Nevertheless vibrant political movements did emerge in the 1990s and 2000s—new political movements around Palestine solidarity, brave trade union efforts in the mines of Tunisia and the factories of Egypt, and new social movements around women's rights and the rights of migrant workers. The concatenation of these efforts led directly to the upsurge of 2011, the Arab Spring. Expressions of new left-wing initiatives are visible across the Arab world. In Egypt, for instance, the Eish we Horria (Bread and Freedom) party looks backward to the socialist tradition and forward to a new kind of politics for Egypt against the military-dominated state and political Islam.

But not everything is bright. In Tunisia, the Left seemed in the best position to make a claim on that country's future through the Democratic Patriots Movement. As the movement grew, one of its leaders, Chokri Belaid, was assassinated outside his home on February 6, 2013. He was 48. Belaid, like Mahdi Amel, wrote poetry. One of his poems was on the assassination of Hussain Muruwwa. The wheel turns, and sometimes repeats itself.

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\* Frontline. Print edition : March 21, 2014:

<http://www.frontline.in/world-affairs/the-arab-gramsci/article5739956.ece>