

Sudan, Algeria, and the Long Arab Spring

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The recent uprisings in Sudan and Algeria show that the conditions that gave rise to the Arab Spring are not going away. But movements against authoritarianism and exploitation still face existential threats.

After years of counterrevolution and bloodshed, the Middle East began to see some glimmers of hope last month. In Algeria and Sudan, mass demonstrations emerged to challenge the autocratic regimes of presidents Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir, respectively. And in that respect, both have been successful: both leaders have been removed, their decades-long rules at an end. But protests have continued, because as in Egypt after the 2011 revolution, the basic power structure behind those leaders remains intact. So do the material conditions driving the uprisings: the rock-bottom wages, mass unemployment, insecurity, and lack of a future for youth baked into the structural adjustment model imposed by the IMF.

Thus, popular forces in Algeria and Sudan are in a precarious position. The specter of the counterrevolution waged against the actors of the Arab Spring looms large. But today's protesters have learned from the recent struggles in the region, and may benefit from such retrospective vision. To discuss the dangers and hopes of these developments, *Jacobin* contributor Ashley Smith spoke to Gilbert Achcar, who has written extensively about the Arab Spring and the politics of the Middle East.

Ashley Smith (AS)

The uprisings in Sudan and Algeria have inspired renewed hope in the Middle East and North Africa after a long period of counterrevolution. What is happening in these two countries?

Gilbert Achcar (GA)

In Sudan and Algeria, we are witnessing two waves of mass protests equal in magnitude to the revolts that erupted in 2011. Back then it was called the Arab Spring. As a result, in the mainstream media, we've had a lot of commentary asking whether we are in the midst of a new Arab Spring.

In reality, the uprisings in these two countries are the product of what I've been calling a long-term revolutionary process that started in 2011 for the whole Arab-speaking region. The main cause for this is the social and economic blockage brought about by the combination of IMF-sponsored neoliberalism and the rotten authoritarian political systems that impose it throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This blockage produces systematic social problems, the most important of which is enormous youth unemployment.

The blockage produces many other deep grievances among the populations in the region that keep driving uprisings. In Sudan, the trigger of the revolt was the increase in bread prices after the state cut subsidies at the behest of the IMF. In Algeria, the immediate cause was political; the Algerian regime tried to secure a fifth term for Abdelaziz Bouteflika despite the fact that he has been semi-paralyzed by a stroke for the last six years. This offended the democratic aspirations of people.

So, again economic and political grievances are driving another wave of popular revolts just like those we saw in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria in 2011. This confirms that it was wrong to view those risings as a “spring” that would, just like the season, last a few months and end with mere constitutional changes, or end in failure. In reality, we are still in the midst of a long-term revolutionary process born out of the region’s very deep structural crisis.

This means that there won’t be any kind of stabilization of the Arab-speaking region short of a radical change in the social, economic, and political conditions that have produced this developmental blockage. Until this happens the crisis will go on and we’ll see more explosions of struggle and more counterrevolutionary offensives.

If we look at the years after the first wave of uprisings from 2011 to 2013, we have had six years dominated by counterrevolution. The counterrevolution took various forms but led either to the consolidation of the old regimes or degeneration into civil war and chaos. The Gulf monarchies beat back the revolt in Bahrain early on. The Syrian regime has for now won its brutal counterrevolutionary drive backed by Iran and Russia. The old regime returned to power in Egypt with a vengeance. And civil wars have erupted in Libya and Yemen between equally reactionary forces with criminal intervention by the Saudi kingdom and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

At the same time, social volcanoes continue to erupt throughout the region because the old regimes can offer no solutions to the people’s grievances. So, we’ve had important social movements over the last years all over the region from Tunisia, which started the whole process of uprising in December 2010 and witnessed several social upsurges since then, to Morocco and Iraq through Sudan and Jordan and beyond the Arab countries to Iran.

This should come as no surprise. As every long-term revolutionary process in history has shown, there will be a dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution as long as the key political and economic problems have not been solved. Short of that we risk having more and more mayhem and tragedies.

AS

What lessons have the activists in the new revolts in Sudan and Algeria learned from the earlier wave of struggle?

GA

There are two major lessons that political forces have learned from the past experiences. One is seen in their insistence on the nonviolent character of the movement. They are very keen on avoiding doing anything that would give the state the opportunity to use the full spectrum of its repressive means against them.

The first wave of revolts too was actually very keen on that. They all raised the slogan “silmiyya, silmiyya,” which means “peaceful, peaceful,” even in Syria. All attempted to stick to nonviolent means. Violence was started everywhere without exception by the regimes themselves. Of course, faced with a qualitative escalation of state violence, the mass movement has only two options left: one is to give up the struggle, and the other is to defend itself.

Civil wars attracted foreign intervention of various kinds. In Libya, foreign intervention by the US and its allies came in favor of the insurgents in an attempt at co-opting their struggle. The result was that it is the only Arab state that has completely collapsed due to the victory of the insurgents. That’s because the whole state machine was organically tied to Muamar Gaddafi and his clique.

On the other hand, in Syria, foreign intervention mainly by Iran, its proxies, and Russia was on the side of the regime. It enabled Bashar al-Assad’s regime to survive, commit terrible massacres, and

destroy whole swathes of the country. The scale of atrocities has been far worse in Syria than in any country so far. Even Yemen comes second in terms of the scale of the tragedy. There, foreign intervention is conducted by the Saudi kingdom and the UAE on the side of one counterrevolutionary camp opposing the alliance of two other counterrevolutionary forces.

In light of these tragedies, new mass movements have become acutely wary of this risk of violence and foreign-backed civil war and are very much taking it into consideration. In a sense, what is most amazing is that the Algerians and Sudanese started their revolt at all given the tragic outcomes they saw in other countries. The regimes in the whole region have been using those outcomes as a powerful new counterrevolutionary argument to dissuade their peoples from rising. The Algerian regime explicitly warned the mass movement that they risked a Syrian scenario. But that was not enough to deter the people from going into the streets and fighting for their aspirations and demands.

The second lesson that Sudanese and Algerian activists have learned is that the military command is not an ally. They learned that from the experience in Egypt, whose kind of state is most similar to theirs. These states have in common the fact that the military are in control of political power. The armed forces are not just a repressive backbone of the state, which is something common to all states, but the center of gravity of political power.

The Sudanese and Algerians had watched how the army removed Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in 2011 on the background of the uprising only to restore the old order at first opportunity. So, when the military removed Bouteflika in Algeria and Bashir in Sudan, the popular movement knew that this was not enough. It understood that the removal of the president and his cronies was just the removal of the tip of the iceberg, that the mass of the iceberg — what people call the deep state — made up especially of the military-security complex, is still in place and that as long as power remains in its hands, there is no end to the regime.

Even when the military relinquished control of the head of the state for a year in Egypt, they were actively preparing their comeback. And on the first chance they got, they staged a coup against the elected president from the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi, and came back to full political power with the crowning of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The regime is so authoritarian now that it made the Egyptians miss the previous dictator, Mubarak!

So, the movements in Sudan and Algeria have learned the lesson that one must get rid of the deep state. You can see the difference between the Egyptian uprising's reaction to the military taking down of Mubarak and the Sudanese and Algerian movements' reaction to the similar removal of their dictators. In Egypt, people thought it was victory and emptied the squares after celebrating. But in Algeria and Sudan, people said that's not enough and carried on demonstrating.

They want to get rid of the whole regime, not just a few people at the top. Getting rid of the regime means giving back political power to civil society through democratic means including elections and provision of rights. Full relinquishing of power by the military is what the popular movement is insisting on in both countries.

AS

Libya seems to stand in stark contrast with the hopeful signs in Algeria and Sudan. There we are witnessing an intense battle between factions for the reconstitution of state power. What's your assessment of what's happening there?

GA

Libya had — in the aftermath of the fall of Gaddafi, after decades of totalitarian rule — a period of

democratic blossoming with large numbers of political groups and NGOs emerging, newspapers developing, and elections, which were the first free elections in that country and among the freest the region has seen, with a remarkable rate of participation. They were won by a liberal secular alliance that defeated the Islamic fundamentalists. Then the counterrevolution started with the fundamentalists rebelling against the elected government.

In the middle of the resulting chaos, a former military leader, Khalifa Haftar, launched a counterrevolutionary bid for power, backed by Egypt and the UAE. His troops clashed with the fundamentalist forces. In Libya exactly like in Egypt, Syria, and the other countries of the 2011 uprising, there was a triangular dynamic with a revolutionary pole facing two rival counterrevolutionary ones: the old regime and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents. Everywhere, the progressives got marginalized and the situation overwhelmed by the clash between the two counterrevolutionary poles.

AS

This triangular scenario you describe doesn't seem to fit in Sudan. Why is it different?

GA

In Sudan, Bashir's regime actually combined both counterrevolutionary poles. He ruled through the military just as the dictatorships in Egypt or Algeria, but at the same time he did so in close collaboration with the Islamic fundamentalists. They were also part of the regime. That's why I referred to Bashir as a combination of Morsi and Sisi; I called him "Morsisi."

The fact that the Islamic fundamentalists were part of the regime prevented them from playing a role in the uprising; the people were actually rising up against them. So, they were in no position to hijack the uprising as they did in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. This difference is very important, and it has shaped the revolt itself, which has had to challenge the fused poles of counterrevolution.

This has helped make the Sudanese protest the most progressive of all the uprisings we've seen in the region so far. It's the most advanced in terms of organization as well as politics. The coalition of groups leading it is called the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC). It includes originally underground professional and workers associations, and political parties from leftists like the Communist Party to liberal Muslim, armed movements fighting ethnic oppression, as well as feminist groups.

These progressive forces have shaped the politics of the revolt. In particular, women and feminist organizations, who have played a prominent role, have pushed for feminist demands to be included in the FDFC's program. It now stipulates, for example, that the new legislative council must be 40 percent women.

But we should not underestimate the challenges the FDFC face. The coalition is locked in a tug of war with the military, who want to maintain power in their hands and only grant subordinate functions to civilians. The FDFC are instead demanding that sovereign power should be fully in the hands of a civilian majority and the armed forces limited to the apolitical defense role they ought normally to play in a civilian state.

So, the Sudanese revolutionaries are confronting the military, who are backed by all the regional and international forces of counterrevolution. Qatar, the Saudi kingdom, the UAE, Russia, and the US are all supporting the military in that tug of war. Add to the picture the Islamic fundamentalists who are naturally backing the military.

In this situation, the movement's main strength has been its ability to win over the rank and file of the armed forces and some of the lower-ranking officers. That has so far dissuaded the military from attempting to drown the revolution in blood. Bashir wanted the army to crush the uprising, but his generals refused, not because they're democrats or humanists, to be sure, but because they were not confident that the troops would follow their orders.

The military command knew that part of the soldiers and lower-ranking officers sympathized with the uprising to the point of even using their weapons to defend demonstrators from attacks by the regime's thugs and political police. The troops' sympathizing with the popular movement was determining in leading the generals to get rid of Bashir.

The most important thing now is for the movement to consolidate its support among the rank and file and lower-ranking officers of the armed forces. The success or failure of that effort will determine the whole fate of the revolution.

AS

Why have the Sudanese progressive forces been able to make such a big breakthrough compared to the rest of the region?

GA

The FDFC are not much different in their political composition from the progressive forces everywhere in the region. But elsewhere, these progressive forces have been discredited by siding with one of the two counterrevolutionary poles. Where the Islamic fundamentalists were in the opposition they managed to jump on the bandwagon and hijack the movement thanks to the far superior means they had in organization, funds, and media.

Look at the example of Egypt. There the Muslim Brotherhood hijacked the popular revolt. They spread illusions about the military in 2011. At the time of Mubarak's overthrow and in its aftermath, the Brotherhood were working hand in hand with the military. That greatly helped the military defuse the popular movement.

Because the two counterrevolutionary poles were combined in Sudan, a space opened for the progressive forces to break through on their own. This is not entirely the case in Algeria. While Islamic fundamentalist forces are not playing any visible role in the uprising there, they retain a powerful network and can thereby still play a counterrevolutionary role if the occasion arises. Moreover, unlike in Sudan, there is no recognized leadership of the uprising in Algeria, and that makes the movement vulnerable to political manipulations.

AS

Throughout this whole revolutionary process, various imperial powers and regional powers have played a major role in the uprisings. This was especially true after the relative decline of the US due to its defeat in Iraq; that gave all the other states greater leeway to pursue their own interests. Now Trump seems intent on reasserting American power by backing allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as deploying ships and bombers to the Persian Gulf against Iran. What is Trump up to?

GA

Well, as of everything with Trump, his policy is very crude. That term "crude" is particularly well suited in this case because his entire strategy, if it can be called one, is determined by crude oil. So, he is withdrawing troops from Syria because he's not interested in supporting left-wing Kurdish guerrillas and because the country has little oil. But he has not called for a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. In fact, when Trump visited the US base in that country, he voiced determination to stay

there. The alibi was the supposed need to surveil Iran, but that's really a mere pretext since the US already has plenty of bases all over the Gulf as well as sophisticated surveillance technology to watch Iran.

But, in his typically undiplomatic fashion, Trump had admitted the real reason he wants US troops in Iraq — oil. He actually stated that oil was the prize the US should have taken as a reward for its invasion and occupation of that country. He bluntly said, "we should have taken Iraq's oil." So, he's extremely "crude" in this double sense.

That's why he supports the Saudi kingdom and Washington's other client states among the oil monarchies of the Gulf. He treats them as running dogs and they go along with it. Even when Trump insults them openly as he recently did in Wisconsin, they didn't dare protest. They are just vassals of the US who depend on their overlord for protection.

The same oil consideration is behind Trump's sudden change of tack on Libya. He reversed what has been US policy, which was to support the UN-backed government in Tripoli, by suddenly backing Haftar openly. Why? Because Haftar is now in control of the oil fields in Libya.

That's the logic of what Trump is doing — very "crude" imperialism determined by economic interests above all else without any kind of ideological pretenses about democracy or human rights. In that regard, as he openly states, he actually envies authoritarian rulers.

Likewise, his aggressive stance against Iran is not only to please his far-right buddy, Israel's Netanyahu, nor is it for any democratic purpose, of course, not any more than his aggressive stance against Venezuela is. Trump's focus on these two countries cannot be separated from their holding major oil reserves. Whatever one thinks of the regimes in both countries, countering the Trump administration's threats and gesticulations is crucial — especially in the case of Iran, where the risk of war is quite high.

AS

This much is clear. But what should the international left be doing toward Sudan?

GA

The most urgent need is solidarity with the uprising, which is dangerously isolated right now. It confronts a single counterrevolutionary camp backed by all imperial and regional state powers. In such a situation international solidarity is extremely important.

Any meaningful gestures of solidarity will embolden and give courage to the Sudanese movement. The key in the US is to expose Trump's support for Sudan's military along with his buddies among oil monarchs. It would be important to compel the Democrats, even if just for electoral gain, to call that policy into question. This is urgent because it could greatly help the FDFC gain advantage in its tug of war with the military over the democratic transition in the country.

The US State Department has been recently pushing for a short transitional period whereas the Sudanese revolutionaries are demanding a longer one during which there would be transitional civilian institutions before elections are held in the country. They want time to develop their parties after decades of being subject to intensive repression.

They know from the experience in Egypt and Tunisia that the sooner elections take place, the more likely it is that those with the most organization, resources, and international backing will win. In those countries it was the Islamic fundamentalists. In Sudan it would likely be political forces developed out of the old regime including the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists. They have far superior material means to those of the FDFC.

So, it's very important for left political forces in the US to rally in support of the Sudanese uprising and back the demands of its leadership. This is part and parcel of rebuilding a tradition of internationalist left solidarity with the global movement of exploited and oppressed.

INTERVIEW BY Ashley Smith

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