

Two Types of Revolt

The Long Arab Revolution

Wednesday 16 February 2011, by [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 15 February 2011).

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The Arab Revolt of 2011 is unabated. Protests continue in such unlikely places as Bahrain. On Valentine's Day, a protest march in Manama had no love for the al-Khalifah royals. It wanted to deliver its message. "Our demand is a constitution written by the people," the protestors chanted. Opposition leader Abdul Wahab Hussain told the press, "The number of riot police is huge, but we have shown using violence against us only makes us stronger." The police fired rubber bullets and dispersed the as yet small crowd. "This is just the beginning," Hussain said after he had been beaten off the streets.

Such protests appear unlikely only because the wave of struggle that broke out in the late 1950s and peaked in the 1970s was crushed by the early 1980s. Encouraged by the overthrow of the monarch in Egypt by the coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, ordinary people across the Arab world wanted their own revolts. Iraq and Lebanon followed. On the peninsula, the people wanted what Fred Halliday called "Arabia without Sultans." The People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf emerged out of the Dhofar (Oman) struggle. It wished to take its local campaign to the entire peninsula. In Bahrain, its more timid branch was the Popular Front. It did not last long. With Nasserism in decline by the 1970s, the new momentum came to this Arabian republicanism from the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Islamic Front of the Liberation of Bahrain attempted a coup in 1981. They had the inspiration, but not the organization. This Arab archipelago could not go the way of Yemen, where a revolution allowed a Marxist organization to seize power in 1967.

Exertions by these revitalized forces in the 1990s was met with stiff resistance by the al-Khalifah regime. But the new ruler, Hamad (a graduate of Cambridge University), was smart. He knew a thing or two about hegemony. Not enough to smash the heads of the Islamists, he hastily called for an elected parliament, allowed women to vote, and released some political prisoners. It was enough to please Washington, and the oil companies. Nothing like stability that looks like democracy. The Egyptian virus of 2011, however, overcame the façade of democracy erected by Hamad. Protests are back.

The contagion is not only political. It is also, and perhaps decisively, economic. Bahrain relies upon oil for its wealth. Oil money spawned real estate speculation (the Dubai model). The beneficiaries of this process have been the royal family, and a crony clique. The vast mass, mainly Shi'a, are enraged that this wealth has had almost no social outlet. Afraid of the Shi'a population, the monarch imported 50,000 foreign workers to reconfigure the demographic landscape. This Bahranization policy was a smokescreen to pit the (local) labor against the (foreign) labor. It has not worked. To top it off, an outcome of the credit crunch since 2007 has been the Bahrain government's proposal to cut subsidies of food and fuel. These have already been withdrawn because of popular anger. The youth in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen are kin to the young people in Britain, Ireland, France, Italy – all

of whom have been on the streets against austerity. Young people are at the forefront of the revolts because they have the most to lose from the cuts, and from the policies that mortgage their futures. These are also, therefore, convulsions against the overpaid agents (bankers) of over-ground powers (the Davos elite and their institutions).

Meanwhile, the U. S. Fifth Fleet has a berth in Bahrain. Vice Admiral Mark Fox must be powering up the EA-6B Prowlers for emergency action.

Explanations for the Arab Revolt flounder. There are those who take refuge in the trans-historical, finding this an example of the striving for human dignity. The Arabs were angry. They would not take it anymore. This is all very good, but it is too general. Why did the protests happen now, why in this way, why these demands?

There are others who lurch in the other direction, away from the trans-historical to specific circumstance. They think that broad explanations are reductive, and so, they take refuge in the contingent: this event (the immolation) led to that event (the protest) led to another event (the occupation of Tahrir Square), and so to the grand event (Mubarak goes to the seaside). History becomes a series of events that measure up to shifts that have no bearing beyond the surface.

Such attempts to understand the Arab Revolt leads in two directions: they confuse these revolts for Revolution, and it tends to see them as the 2011 Revolution against the 1952 Revolution led by Nasser. Inspirational as these current revolts are, they are part of a long process in the Arab world that stretches back into the 19th century. That long process is the Arab Revolution, one that strives for a total transformation of the structures of domination that constrain Arab futures. One episode in that long Arab Revolution is Nasser's revolt of 1952. It was defeated by the late 1960s, and it returned Egypt (and the Arab world) to its historical subordination. Another episode is the current wave. The long Arab Revolution poses two questions that remain unanswered. These should provide part of the scaffolding to understand what is afoot in the Arab lands. The first question is of its politics, and the second is of its economics.

Politics.

When will the Arab people rule themselves, and not be ruled by one-party dictators and monarchs who are beholden to bond markets and foreign capitals? Not long ago France's Sarkozy and America's Clinton offered praise for their "democratic" friends Ben Ali and Mubarak. To top the obscenity, Obama conferred with the Saudis on the democratic transition in Egypt, which is like asking a vegetarian how to cook prime rib.

In 1953, the aged King Farouk set sail on his yacht, al-Mahrusa, guarded by the Egyptian navy, he waved to people who he considered his lesser: Nasser, son of a postman, and Sadat, son of a small farmer. Their Colonels' Coup was intended to break Egypt away from monarchy and imperial domination. Nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy came alongside land reforms. But these were ill-conceived, and they were not able to throttle the power of the Egyptian bourgeoisie (whose habit for quick money continued, with three quarters of new investments going to inflate a real estate bubble). The economy was bled to support an enlarged military apparatus, largely to fight the U. S. backed armies of the Israelis. Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war led Nasser to resign on 10 June. Thousands of people took to the streets of Cairo, this time to ask Nasser to return to office, which he did, although much weakened.

The democratic opening of 1952 was, however, unable to emerge. Military officers, however, progressive, are loath to hand over the reins of power. The security apparatus went after the Muslim

Brotherhood certainly, but it was fiercest against the Communists. Nasser did not build up a strong, independent political culture. "His 'socialism'," as Stavrianos put it, "was socialism by presidential decree, implemented by the army and police. There was no initiative or participation at the grass-roots level." For that reason, when Sadat moved the country to the Right in the 1970s there was barely any opposition to him. Nasserism after Nasser was as hollow as Perónism after Perón.

The current revolt is against the regime set up by Sadat and developed by Mubarak. It is a national security state that has no democratic pretensions. In 1977, Sadat identified Nasserism with "detention camps, custodianship and sequestration, a one-opinion, one-party system." Sadat allowed three kinds of political forces to emerge, but then hastily defanged them (the leftist National Progressive Grouping Party), coopted them (the Arab Socialist Party, and the Socialist Liberal Party), or tolerated their existence (Muslim Brotherhood). Cleverly, Sadat put in place what he accused Nasser of building. It was under Sadat, and Mubarak (with Omar Suleiman in tow) that the detention camps and torture centers blossomed.

In Tahrir Square, 22 year old Ahmed Abdel Moneim said, "The French Revolution took a very long time so the people could eventually get their rights." His struggle in 2010 is to repeal the national security state. That is the basic requirement, to return to the slogan of the French Revolution. The dynamic that Ahmed wants to be a part of is the dynamic of Nasserism, but this time it should be without the military. That is one lesson of history.

The other lesson comes to us from Nadine Naber, who reminds us that women formed a crucial part of this wave of revolt, as they did in the previous ones, and yet, when the revolt succeeds women are set aside, as secondary political actors. "What are the possibilities for a democratization of rights in Egypt," Naber asks, "in which women's participation, the rights of women, family law, and the right to organize, protest, and express freedom of speech remain central?" Naber repeats a question raised in 1957 by Karima El-Said, the deputy minister of education of the United Arab Republic ("In Afro-Asian countries where people are still suffering under the yoke of colonialism, women are actively participating in the struggle for complete national independence. They are convinced that this is the first step for their emancipation and will equip them to occupy their real place in society"). It is history's second lesson, that the democracy that emerges be capacious.

Economics.

The second unanswered question of the long Arab Revolution is about bread and the dignity of work. When will the economies of the Arab region be able to sustain their populations rather than fatten the financial houses in the Atlantic world, and offer massive trust funds for the dictators and the monarchs? Cursed with oil, the Arab world has seen little economic diversification and almost no attempt to use the oil wealth to engender balanced social development for the people. Instead, the oil money sloshed North, to provide credit for overheated consumers in the United States and to provide banks with those vast funds that are otherwise not garnered by populations that have stopped saving (for a long while Americans saved 1 per cent of their paychecks, an understandable figure given the stagnation of wages since 1973). The oil money also went toward the real estate boom in the Gulf, and the baccarat tables and escort services of Monaco (the Las Vegas of Europe, which has another decrepit monarch, Albert II, at its head).

As part of Sadat's de-Nasserization of Egypt, he opened the economy (*infatah*) to foreign capital. Nationalization and subsidies ended, and free enterprise zones were created by February 1974. Sadat wanted a "blood transfusion" for the Egyptian economy, and so the Atlantic banks began to draw pints of blood from the ailing Egyptian working class. They replaced it with liquor stores and

nightclubs (the targets of the January 1977 riots in Cairo). Inequality flourished in Egypt, and neo-liberal policies produced an haute bourgeoisie with more investment in London than in Alexandria. By 2008, some 40 per cent of the population lived on under \$2 a day. In October 2010, the courts directed the government to raise the minimum wage from \$70 a month to \$207 a month. Because Sadat and Mubarak eviscerated the attempt to create a diverse economy, Egypt now relies upon rent income for its survival (remittances from Egyptian workers, Suez Canal tolls, oil and gas exports, tourism revenues, and payment for privatization, among others). A substantial part of this rent was diverted by Mubarak to his coffers in the Swiss banks. There is no democracy for its economy. The tyrant here is not only Mubarak, but the IMF, the World Bank, the Banks, the Bond Markets, the Multi-National Corporations.

Labor strikes across Egypt, protests before the housing authority, protests at food stalls – this is the face of the ongoing revolt. The Egyptians seem clear that the departure of Mubarak means also the end to the neo-liberal dispensation that was set up in the 1970s. They want to expand the social wage, to better manage whatever rental wealth enters the country and to expand economic activity.

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Over the past twenty years we've seen two types of revolts. The first, those in Eastern Europe for instance, were revolts against the suffocation of the late Soviet-era State. Indifferent to the tarnished promises of such socialism, the people sought refuge in the glamour of the market economy. It was a revolt for the market. Two decades later, the East European dreams have become a horrid nightmare.

The second, those in the Arab world today, but also the people's revolt in the Philippines against Marcos and the people's revolt in Indonesia against Suharto, were revolts *against* the market. These were revolts by masses of people who wanted an expansion of the social wage. They began with revolts against long-standing autocrats (Ben Ali, Mubarak, Marcos, Suharto) and cascaded into demands for a different social and economic order.

For the Arab lands, these events of 2011 are not the inauguration of a new history, but the continuation of an unfinished struggle that is a hundred years old. Some people already sink back into gloom, discounting the remarkable victory of ejecting Ben Ali and Mubarak. Such acts raise the confidence of the people and propel other struggles into motion. The old order might yet remain, but it knows that its time is on hand. In *Gladiator* (2000), the Germanic barbarians sever the head of a Roman soldier and toss it in front of the Roman battle lines. One of the Roman generals says, "People should know when they are conquered." He meant the barbarians. The dictators of the Arab world, our barbarians, might yet throw some heads before the advance of the people. But they should know already that they are defeated. It is simply a matter of time: a hundred years, or ten.

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P.S.

* From Counterpunch:
<http://www.counterpunch.org/prashad02152011.html>

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