

Tunisia, Egypte...: Change of the Century

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THE HEROES OF Tahrir Square in Cairo and other Egyptian cities, and in Tunisia, have already changed the course of 21st century history. They have torn a huge hole in the fabric of imperialist dominion over the Middle East. They have begun to reverse what has been 35 years of almost continuous “permanent counterrevolution” in the region. As we write this statement in mid-February, the uprising is spreading to some of the Middle East’s most brutal police states, with outcomes that are impossible to foretell.

It is difficult to comprehend all that the crowd in Tahrir accomplished in the battles of early February. They fought off multiple assaults by the regime’s secret police and armed goons disguised as “pro-Mubarak demonstrators.” When the military generals — unprepared to take direct responsibility for a Tiananmen-type massacre, but only too willing to let the police goons do the dirty work — stepped aside and let the gangsters rush the square, the popular resistance stood their ground and actually pushed the invaders back until the army again was forced to “separate the battling sides” to salvage its remaining credibility.

Their self-defense under gunfire, their security and arrest of police infiltrators, their emergency medical clinics, their defense of journalists who were attacked by the goon squads, were all miracles of self-organization. Democracy is power: let no one say that a people who could accomplish all this aren’t capable of running their own country. This was the very opposite of the “liberation” from above that the United States proclaimed in Iraq, plunging that country into catastrophe.

In Egypt itself, the end of Mubarak is obviously only the beginning. A wave of strikes, the formation of political currents, debates over the shape of a new Constitution and system of representation are unfolding at a pace that can only be called — revolutionary. The picture will already be different by the time this magazine reaches our readers. We won’t try here to predict whether the Arab democratic insurgency will achieve or fall short of its peoples’ demands for freedom and dignity. Rather, looking toward the future, we’ll briefly discuss why these revolts have changed the realities on the ground in ways that were unthinkable even at the beginning of this year.

The Threat of Democracy

We’ll begin by looking at some conventional self-serving imperial paradigms, the first of which is about “what the United States can do to promote the peaceful spread of democracy.” In fact, nothing threatens “American interests” in the Middle East more seriously than the eruption of democracy. Neither the Obama administration, nor the Bush-Cheney crime-spree regime that preceded it, anticipated or desired a democratic popular uprising in Egypt or other “friendly and stable” states.

Without the Egyptian regime enforcing Israel's blockade of Gaza, the population there would not be kept at the edge of starvation. Without the Yemeni ruler's connivance, as we now know from WikiLeaks, U.S. drone attacks couldn't be disguised behind the pretext that Yemen's air force carried them out. Even more, the threat of democracy tears the veil off imperialism's Middle East strategy, which has always relied on ruling-family potentates (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait) to control "our" oil supplies and on presidentialist dictators to control impoverished populations.

Thanks to WikiLeaks, the world knows that these very regimes, bitterly alienated from their own people, have been the ones secretly pleading for the United States to attack Iran. It is entirely logical that the Israeli state, which preens itself as "the only democracy in the Middle East," along with the Saudi royal house, were the only ones openly calling for the United States and Europe to back Mubarak at all costs.

The uprisings caught the Obama administration in an awkward position. Imperial realpolitik demands preserving as much as possible of the oppressive system, even when it becomes necessary to sacrifice the much-hated Ben Ali and Mubarak types. We must admit, however, the astonishing ability of the U.S. government to create the after-the-fact myth that it supported democratic revolt all along — an instantaneous "change of line" that Stalin could only have envied. Hillary Clinton's first statement after Tunisia's revolution, that the Mubarak regime in Egypt was "stable," is almost forgotten.

In his State of the Union address, the president intoned that "the United States stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people." Back in the real world, the United States has blocked the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to Haiti, backs the coup-installed president in Honduras, and supports the collective punishment of the Palestinian people for electing the wrong party (Hamas) in 2006.

Israel's now-routine shooting of nonviolent demonstrators in Palestinian West Bank villages meets with deafening U.S. silence. Does anyone think that U.S. complicity in crushing democratic aspirations, in places where it has real influence, is balanced out by rhetorical denunciations of thugs like Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, or the horrible Iranian regime, where Washington is effectively powerless?

Back in 2003, when George W. Bush and his acolytes proclaimed "the democratic transformation of the Middle East" while launching the invasion of Iraq, his rhetoric was rightly regarded as an obscene gesture to the region. In contrast, early in president Obama's administration when he issued his message of friendship to the Muslim world in Cairo, he enjoyed tremendous credibility. Two years later — having pursued the ruinous war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, maintained the Guantanamo prison and allowed the government of Israel to openly mock the U.S. administration's feeble pleas to halt settlement building — Obama had largely burned through his reservoir of political capital in the Arab and Muslim world.

The present crisis also coincides, of course, with the leaked Palestine Authority documents showing (if it weren't already clear) that the "peace process" is a giant fraud; with a political upheaval in Lebanon that could fracture that country and/or present a pretext for another Israeli invasion; and with a deepening impasse between the United States and the Iranian regime.

Myths and Realities

Another set of questions revolve around the alleged dangers of "Islamic extremism" and "anti-American sentiment" taking ascendancy in Egypt or elsewhere once the dictatorship is gone. (How could people be so irrationally "anti-American" after decades of U.S. sponsorship of their

oppressors?)

The mythical construction has it that the “stability” of the pro-western Mubarak regime might be replaced by a new dictatorship of the Muslim Brotherhood, that the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel brokered by Jimmy Carter will collapse and that Israel “will be surrounded by the terrorist Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Hamas terror state in Gaza and a hostile Egypt with its huge army.”

Let’s break some of this down. First and foremost, as a matter of basic principle the people of Egypt have as much right as the people of the United States, or any other country, to choose their own government. No outside power has the right to tell them what choice is or is not “legitimate.”

Secondly, the political reality is that in a democratic representative political system, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood might be roughly comparable to that of the fundamentalist Christian religious right in the United States (and less, say, than the combined weight of the evangelicals and the Catholic Church) and almost certainly less than that of Orthodox religious parties in Israel. While this level of religious political power is admittedly absurd by European standards, it would no more mean a “theocracy” in Egypt than it does here.

What about Egyptian-Israeli relations — even if one makes the unlikely assumption of an Islamist-led government? Contrary to media-driven mythology (and perhaps some radical delusions too), states act in the interests of their ruling groups. Does anyone imagine that any fraction of the Egyptian capitalist class, or the army, or for that matter any significant segment of the population, have any real or perceived interest in returning to a state of war with Israel? There are no Israeli-Egyptian territorial disputes, nor any reason to imagine that their state relations would revert to war preparations.

On the other hand, the emergence of a democratic Egyptian regime would mean the end of the U.S.-ordered enforcement of the Gaza blockade. That should have happened yesterday! This is the “threat of democracy” — that the most important Arab country would no longer act as a guard over the Palestinian open-air Gaza prison.

This is one reason why the Obama team actually sought the replacement of Mubarak with his hand-picked vice-president Omar Suleiman — the longtime intelligence director who has supervised the Egyptian part of the U.S. “rendition” program that delivered kidnapped suspects for extended torture, and can be relied upon to carry on the collective torture of the Gaza population. It is hardly surprising that the democratic insurgency rejects this kind of “orderly and stable transition.”

Quite clearly, the Palestinian catastrophe is not the primary motivation for people who are rising up first and foremost against the crushing weight of dictatorship on their own lives. But both in Egypt and beyond, the spread of democratic revolt in the Arab world would impose a powerful veto on Israel’s strategy of punishing a defenseless Gaza, or the population of Lebanon, with unlimited destruction.

Ever since 1967, it’s been the U.S.-protected Israeli state — not the regimes in Egypt or any other Arab state — that has felt free to act as it pleases without having to worry about the consequences of its behavior. The Arab popular rage over Israeli atrocities in Lebanon and Gaza is quite rightly directed at the United States. With the “stable” buffer of Arab dictatorships removed, the costs to imperialism of allowing such action may become too high. Nor will the “virus” of democracy fail to penetrate Palestinian politics, as the impact of the leaked “Palestine Papers” has already shown.

Looking Forward

The U.S. left, above all we who are socialists and dare to dream that winning the “democratic aspirations” of the people throughout the Middle East is the first step toward the birth of a revolutionary socialist movement there, must present a clear answer to the elite warnings of “the democratic danger.” Power in the hands of the masses is the solution, not the problem. Democracy is the power of people to reshape their own societies in the interests of the vast majority, over those of the local ruling classes and the multinational corporations and the pirates of international finance.

The power of reactionary forces in the Middle East has seemed overwhelming since 1976, the year of the defeat of the left in Lebanon by Syrian invaders. There followed the hijacking of the 1979 Iranian revolution by the mullahs; the 1980 separate Egyptian-Israeli “peace” that gave Israel a free hand to invade Lebanon in 1982, with the massacres that ensued in the Palestinian refugee camps; the regional rise of Islamist politics as Arab left and nationalist forces were spent; the rise and rise and rise of the Israeli settler-colonial occupation of the Palestinian territories, and the defeat of the first Intifada with overwhelming Israeli brutality; U.S. support of Saddam Hussein’s hideous tyranny in the 1980s, followed by his disobedient 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the U.S. Operation Desert Storm, in 1991; the Clinton-era sanctions that reduced the Iraqi population to misery; then September 11, 2001 and the decade of horrors too numerous to list that have followed.

It has not been an unbroken string of triumphs for U.S. power — quite the contrary, given its defeat in Iraq and the quicksand in Afghanistan and Pakistan — but it certainly has been an almost unmitigated nightmare for the peoples of the Middle East. When the Palestinian Intifada first erupted in 1987-1991, the Arab police states were able to partly wall off that struggle from the mass solidarity that was so desperately needed. Other democratic attempts in the region were isolated and smashed, with far too little attention from the West.

The chains of oppression are beginning to break, and new links of hope forged. “Walking like Egyptians” as the popular new slogan has it, the men and women who stood up in Tunisia and Tahrir have brought a change of the century, reopening a window to a human future for the Arab world, perhaps for the people of Iran and Central Asia beyond — indeed, for all of us.

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P.S.

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