

Interview

Middle East and North Africa: “The region entered what I call a long-term revolutionary process”

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INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST REVIEW - THERE’S A lot to cover. The Middle East has been in the news from the assault on Gaza to the situation in Tunisia, from the Morsi power grab in Egypt to the threats against Iran, any number of things. I want to start with a general assessment of the Arab Spring, what is called the Arab Spring, which began almost two years ago almost to the day, on December 17, 2010, in Tunisia. Can you give us a general sense of what that has meant for the region?

GILBERT ACHCAR - THE MOST general comment to make is that, for the first time in the history of the region, things are really moving and changing, and changing very fast at that, so that the region entered what I call a long-term revolutionary process. It is a tremendous change in the history of the region. Blockages of all sorts are exploding. I think it will remain with us for many many years to come.

YOU MENTIONED blockages, do you mean in part the existence of sclerotic or aging dictatorial regimes? The first would be Tunisia. Can you say something about that and the present situation in Tunisia?

YES, BUT it’s larger than just dictatorial regimes. Of course that’s the most visible part of it, what was most directly affected by the uprisings in the countries where they have achieved victories until now. But this is one part of a more general blockage that involves an economic blockage. The region lags behind the rest of the world in economic growth and more generally in development, despite being endowed with very important natural resources.

It holds the world record in unemployment rates, and that has been the case for decades, and thus you have a social blockage going on, not to mention the very obvious one related to the condition of women. So you have a whole set of blockages and I just mentioned a few and the most prominent ones, and all this is now bursting out in this huge explosion which started in Tunisia.

It all started in Tunisia on the 17th of December 2010. That is the date when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, setting the whole country and then the whole region on fire.

The fact that it started in Tunisia is related to the struggles in that country over the whole decade of the 2000s, which itself is related to the existence of an important left-wing tradition there, mostly active through the trade union center of the country, the UGTT [Tunisian General Labor Union]. It is this specific situation which explains why it was in that country that the explosion took place before the rest, but it doesn't mean that conditions were more ripe in Tunisia than anywhere else, as we can see from the fact that the explosion in Tunisia set off a whole series of explosions in other countries. There's hardly any Arab-speaking country which hasn't been affected by that uprising, from the western extremity of Mauritania and Morocco up to Syria and Iraq on the eastern side.

IT SEEMED at one stage, certainly as a result of the elections in Egypt and previously in Tunisia, that the immediate political victors of the Arab Spring were organizations, Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Can you comment about that first in Tunisia and then maybe move on to Egypt?

YES. THIS of course was something very much predictable. The most common expectation concerning the region was that there would be or will be social explosions, political explosions: you can see from the reports of US embassies in the region made public by Wikileaks that the US itself didn't have much illusions. They knew how tense, how dangerous the situation was. Related to this, the most common expectation was that the explosions to come would propel the Islamic fundamentalist movement to the fore at a time when—seen from Washington—this was regarded as a threat to US interests. Now when the uprising started there were tendencies toward wishful thinking and believing that by some miracle new forces emerging would be able to lead and fuel the whole process and just push the Islamic forces to the background.

It is true that new forces emerged, especially among the new generation, among the youth. It's true that new networks of young people using all the Internet resources played a key role in shaping and organizing, coordinating all these uprisings; there's no doubt about that. But with uprisings calling for free elections, which is a normal demand for people thirsty for democracy, as this is the case, it was obvious that in any short-term election those who would come out victorious would be those having the means it takes to win elections, which cannot be won with the Internet as you know well from the United States. You need political machines. You need money. You need grass-roots organizations implanted where you have a mass of voters, like in the countryside, etc. So this was not to be invented or improvised in a few weeks and that's why it was very much predictable that the Islamic fundamentalist forces, especially the Muslim Brotherhood in their various branches and organizations, would win. These forces had the accumulated force of many years of building networks, especially in countries where they were able to work openly like Egypt. This wasn't the case in Tunisia, but it has been compensated by the fact that these forces benefited from a lot of oil money, and from the power of television. Many of the television networks in the region are geared toward these kinds of groups whether through religious programs, and you have a lot of religious channels, or through the specific political role of the main satellite channel in the region, which is Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera works very obviously for the interest of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is quite prominent in its team and is sponsored by the government of Qatar, which owns and runs Al Jazeera. So they had these crucial resources and, of course, a lot of money coming from the Gulf monarchies.

It was quite predictable that the Muslim Brotherhood would get the largest share of votes, thus it was no surprise. People who indulged in wishful thinking reacted to these elections by returning from the rosy pictures they adhered to initially into very gloomy pictures with comments like "the spring is turning into winter." Well, the truth is that what was most surprising actually is the weakness of the electoral victories achieved by the religious forces. Most striking of all is Egypt, of

course, where one can see how quickly the clout of the Muslim Brotherhood and its electoral achievements dwindled. Look at the number of votes that the Muslim Brotherhood got from the parliamentary election to the presidential election, the first round that is, to the referendum on the constitution: it is obvious that they are losing clout at amazing speed. They are losing ground and that's the most amazing. The same can be said about Tunisia where despite the problem of the division of the Left—which was ridiculously split into an incredible number of groups and organizations: in the capital city there were dozens of Left and radical Left lists competing against each other—if you add up the votes that went for the various Left you get a result that, had the votes been combined, would have translated into quite a significant number of seats in the parliament. Despite all that the Muslim Brotherhood got 40 percent of the votes with an electoral turnout of less than half, which means actually they got some 20 percent of the registered voters voting for them. This is not exactly a landslide. Since then Tunisia has seen a deterioration in the social conditions, and the coalition that came to power involving the dominant Islamic force has been losing ground. It is more and more discredited because of its inability to bring any beginning of solution to the real problems of the country, which are those I pointed to: unemployment, economic problems, social problems, and the like. We have seen in Tunisia as well as in Egypt a rise in social struggles, in workers' struggles, with increasing clashes between these social struggles and the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government in both countries.

In Tunisia, this has reached even dramatic levels with a confrontation between the UGTT and the government which turned violent. The country is heading toward new elections, but also before that new round of electoral confrontation, the social and political confrontations are raging, so everything is boiling. Everything is changing very quickly, very rapidly. Both the wishful thinking at the beginning and the gloomy comments into which it turned very quickly are very impressionistic and quite wrong. The real point is that we are facing a long-term revolutionary upheaval, a long-term revolutionary process that started in December 2010 and will carry on both in those countries where the upheaval led to initial victories and in those countries which have not yet been affected to a significant degree. All the region is boiling.

WHAT HAPPENED to the call by the UGTT for a general strike in early December, which I gather was called off?

YES, IT was called off after reaching some kind of compromise. Essentially the leadership of the UGTT feared that the confrontation could turn sour, because there has been only one precedent for a call of a general strike in the country and that was in 1978, when it led to a very harsh confrontation. So there was some fear about what would happen, and that's why they just accepted to backtrack into a compromise where no one lost face, but the warning is there and the UGTT has been very blunt in its attacks on the government, in its criticism of the way they behave in power, and still demands the dissolution of the militias controlled by the Islamic party. The Muslim Brotherhood whether in Egypt or in Tunisia proved even more effective than Mubarak at having this kind of organized thugery.

So that's what you have, and the prospect in Tunisia is very interesting because it is the only country of the region with an organized workers' movement that is really leading the process. It was already the real leadership of the uprising in December 2010/January 2011. Ben Ali fled the country on the day when the general strike was reaching the capital city on January 14, 2010. The union activists were those who led the struggle, from Sidi Bouzid, the city where it started after the suicide of Bouazizi, to the day when the uprising peaked in the capital. Rank-and-file union activists and intermediary leaders were the real leadership of the struggle. However, after the fall of the dictatorship, there has been a change in the UGTT leadership and this change brought the Left, including the radical Left at the helm. The Tunisian Left finally drew the lessons of its recent experience and managed to unite in what they called the Popular Front. The fact that this coalition

of the left-wing forces is dominant in the UGTT is hugely important: it puts Tunisia in a quite more advanced stage of the struggle than any other country in the region.

IF WE can move from there to Egypt, where since the election of Morsi as President last summer, there has been an attempt to put together an opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Can you say something about the Left forces there since the revolution?

YES, BUT there's a major difference between Egypt and Tunisia. It's the fact that the role of the Left is much more important in Tunisia because of the fact that the Left has been for a very long time, several decades, very much active in the union movement, in the trade union federation, the UGTT. And even though for most of the time, the bureaucratic leadership of the union would be under governmental control or influence, the Left nevertheless always managed to be very active in local union branches, the most prominent activists of the union belong to the Left. Unfortunately, you don't have the same anywhere else in the region, and that includes Egypt. In Egypt the opposition did organize into a coalition of left wing and liberal forces, including some remnants of the old regime. Of course, this is something that could also happen in Tunisia in the sense that some people on the Left or in the union may be tempted into an alliance with the remnants of the old regime in confronting the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic fundamentalist forces. In Egypt, however, that is happening already with Amr Moussa being part of the coalition, but Moussa, it must be said, represents the liberal faction of the old regime. He is not like Shafiq, the former presidential candidate, who was seen as the official representative of the continuity of Mubarak's regime. Moussa actually ran in the presidential election against Shafiq. So what you have in Egypt is a liberal-Left coalition. Inasmuch as it is a front around democratic demands, it can be seen as legitimate, but the problem is that it went beyond that into becoming an electoral alliance.

The broad Left itself is mostly represented by Hamdeen Sabahi, who is the candidate who surprised everybody in the presidential election in achieving the third position and even winning the vote in Cairo and Alexandria, the two most important urban concentrations. That was absolutely amazing. Sabahi came to represent those seeking a left-wing alternative to both the old regime and the Islamic forces. After the election, he founded the Popular Current in which most groups of the radical Left are involved. Unfortunately, the Popular Current has been currently superseded by the broad coalition instead of building on the left-wing potential that gathered around Sabahi on the first round of the presidential election.

THE MOVEMENT toward confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood-led regime in Egypt raises the question of the role of the army. Any thoughts on that question, that is both the balance of forces and the kind of likely development given unresolved economic and political problems and a regime which is losing electoral support and in a certain sense electoral and political legitimacy?

THE SPEED at which Morsi is losing ground and legitimacy is the real surprise. I always felt, and I am not the only one who thought so, that the people needed to go through an experience with these guys in power so as to know what they really are and stop being fooled by empty slogans like "Islam is the solution," hiding the absence of concrete alternative programs. But it is going actually faster than expected, and one reason for that is the very clumsy way in which the Muslim Brothers are dealing with the situation. They have displayed so much arrogance believing that it's their day with God's help and they have things firmly in their hand, which is completely short-sighted. Actually if they were smarter than that they would have understood that it's not even in their interest to rule at this stage. Anyone trying to rule the country with the kind of program that they have, which is but a continuation of the economic program of the previous regime, is doomed to fail miserably. The most telling act of what has happened in Egypt is when Morsi signed the deal with the IMF recently. He signed a deal with the IMF, which includes conditionalities deemed by all would-be funders of Egypt

as crucial. And, of course, they signed the deal because it corresponds to their own neoliberal thinking, which is not different from that of the previous regime. And it was at the worst moment, when the Muslim Brothers were starting their confrontation with the opposition, that Morsi's government decided to raise prices of basic staples and change the tax system in a way that would not affect the richest. This led to such an outcry that Morsi had to cancel it a couple of days after through his Facebook page! It became a joke. This shows you how much these guys don't have a clue about any real solution to the deep social economic problems of the country.

Now about the army. There has been much ado about the "revolutionary coup" of Morsi in dismissing Tantawi and the second-in-command who were at the head of the SCAF, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. But the fact is that this was done in full agreement with the military brass, which really wanted to get rid of these guys who were in their posts only because they were imposed by Mubarak against the will of the military. Just look at the age of Tantawi who is far beyond the age for any military position. We know from Wikileaks, again from US diplomatic reports, that army officers used to call Tantawi "Mubarak's poodle." So the fact of signing him off had absolutely nothing "revolutionary" about it. They were given medals and generous sinecures, moreover, including immunity against everything they did while at the head of the SCAF. The belief that the army's position has been weakened is quite wrong.

Look at what happened just recently when the confrontation appeared at its peak between Morsi and the opposition. The new head of the army took the initiative of coming out openly as an arbiter and calling for a conference that would include the president and the government on the one side and the opposition on the other. The army made a few comments before that exactly symmetrical to those they did at the time of the uprising against Mubarak saying that they were not going to repress the people. The message was: "We haven't accepted to be used politically by Mubarak and won't accept to be used politically by Morsi." So the army is playing this game, and one can presume that it is very much advised by Washington to stay out of the feud, to stay in the arbitral position so that they can play the role of "saviors" if ever the situation degenerates totally, with a repetition of the traditional sequence of revolution, turmoil, and then coup. But the Egyptian people, at this stage at the very least, are too critical toward the army for anything like that to be possible in the short term. Now in the longer term no one can tell.

BEFORE ASKING you about Syria can I just segue by saying how the question of the Palestinians and Gaza plays into this situation? Because it was interpreted as a coup for Morsi the way he helped negotiate an agreement. As you know, Time magazine called him the most important man in the Middle East only to have him rebuffed the following week, but the whole question of Israel and the Palestinians looms large in this picture. Can you say a few words about that?

WELL, THIS points to an important fact. I mentioned the hubris and arrogance of the Muslim Brotherhood, but one key element in that is the support they have from Washington. That's a key element in their belief that they are in control, that they can rule. Washington was actually taken aback by the uprising at a time when it was at—and still is—at its weakest in the region since the 1991 peak when under Bush Sr. half a million US troops were deployed in the Gulf at the time of the first US-led war on Iraq. This peak of US hegemony at that time also led to the beginning of the so-called peace process between Israel and the Arab states, and then to the Oslo agreement in 1993. All this is behind us. All the main factor in ending it all was the Bush Jr administration, the George W. Bush administration, and the major catastrophe for the US Empire in general, for US imperialism, that the occupation of Iraq proved to be. It turned into a disaster. US forces had to leave Iraq without achieving any single one of the fundamental objectives that they had when they occupied the country. They had to leave the country, without keeping a single base, nothing, and no control over the government, which is much more under Iranian influence. The first thing that Iraq did after US

troops left was to negotiate an arms deal with Russia of all places. Iraq was a disaster for the United States.

So they are really at a very weak point. The US feels quite weak in the region and took the backseat in the NATO operation in Libya keeping low profile, unlike in any of the other operations that we have seen until now, whether NATO ones like Kosovo or Afghanistan or non-NATO ones like Iraq. On Syria you can see Washington's impotence very clearly. Facing all this, the only force they found on which they could bet is the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Emir of Qatar arranged the deal, as he has been the main sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood since the mid-nineties. Washington ended up betting on the Muslim Brotherhood because it lost its usual allies, people like Mubarak and Ben Ali. Because we entered a new phase in the region's history, Washington needs now a force with a real popular base, and the only one they found available is the Muslim Brotherhood toward which they were all the more well-disposed that they had a long history of collaboration. In the fifties, sixties, and eighties up to 1990 the Muslim Brothers were aligned with the United States basically, especially during the fifties and sixties when they were seen in the whole region as collaborators of the CIA. That's the role they actually played, working against Egyptian president Nasser and Soviet influence in close collaboration with the CIA, with the United States, and with the Saudi Kingdom. At that time they were sponsored by the Saudis. That was before they shifted to Qatar in the 1990s.

So Washington is again betting on them, and the role that Morsi played in the Gaza episode was actually carrying on the role that the Mubarak regime used to play, but with a higher efficiency because of the fact that Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood's Palestinian branch. So they have more clout with Hamas and therefore they negotiated this deal and got applause from Washington. Washington is betting on these guys, whether in Tunisia or in Egypt or in Syria for the future, when the regime falls. In the entire region there's no country where the Muslim Brothers are not present and where they don't play an important role, and that's why Washington is betting on them and has been extremely cautious in commenting on what is happening in Egypt. The Obama administration was actually bolder in criticizing Mubarak than they have been in criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood.

CAN YOU comment on Syria? Right now the whole process there has been incredibly arduous and violent on the part of the government and there's no unanimity in the opposition, even of the Left against the regime, since sections of the Left seem to support the regime. Can you comment on the developments there?

WELL, SYRIA is no exception to the whole pattern of the uprising in the sense that you have a very dictatorial regime, actually one of the most despotic in the region, along with Gaddafi's Libya and the Saudi Kingdom. On the other hand, this is a country where the social economic crisis was most acute, with very high unemployment, 30 percent poverty rate, and on the other hand, a ruling family concentrating power and wealth at an incredible degree. The cousin of the Syrian president controls 60 percent of the economy. His personal wealth is estimated at \$6 billion. All this was a very explosive cocktail, and it exploded.

On the Left, you've had communists participating in the Syrian government. It's a tradition that exists from the time of the Soviet Union, which used to have close relations with the Syrian regime that were continued by Putin's Russia. But most of the Left, if not all the Left in the true sense of the term, is against the regime. The major left-wing party of Syria is represented in the Syrian National Council: it is the dissident wing of the Communists, which split in the 1970s and opposed collaboration with the regime.

To believe that the Syrian regime is on the left or, worse, that Assad is “a socialist, a humanist and a pacifist” as Chávez put it so embarrassingly, is at best ignorance. There shouldn’t be any hesitation for anyone on the left in standing completely on the side of the Syrian people in their fight against this brutal, exploitive, and corrupt dictatorship. Beyond that, in Syria as in every other country of the region, you find among the forces struggling against the regimes Islamic fundamentalists. It was the case in Tunisia and Egypt likewise. They should not be taken as pretexts to denigrate the whole uprising. In Syria like everywhere else, the Left should support the popular movement against the dictatorships unhesitatingly, and in doing so, all the more once the dictatorships are down, it should support the most progressive forces within the movement, along the process of radicalization within the revolution that Marx once called “permanent revolution.”

P.S.

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