

Did Arab leftists betray the revolution?

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Leftists have learned a few hard lessons in the wake of the revolutions that swept across the region in 2011.

The traditional Arab left-wing parties were as surprised as the Arab dictatorial regimes by the popular uprisings that started in late 2010 and swept over the region. Ironically, most left-wing parties were caught unprepared for what has become an important revolutionary movement in the modern history of the world.

The Arab revolutions forced the Left to redefine itself and its priorities. Questions of social and political liberation became pressing matters in the region. The Egyptian and Syrian revolutions, in particular, have played an important role in widening the divide among traditional leftist groups, while making way for a new generation of activists to emerge.

Left-wing parties, labour movements and unions in the Arab world have generally followed one of two trajectories: Either giving in to the state and becoming completely coopted by its apparatus; or, facing harsh repression and being banned from political life. For example, both the Egyptian and the Syrian communist parties were banned under Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Baath regime (during the unification years) until they agreed to align themselves with the regimes.

In Syria, the communist party was only allowed to operate after it accepted to be part of the National Progressive Front established in 1972 by Hafez al-Assad in the name of pluralism, but for the clear goal of controlling any political activism. This step has consolidated an age-old split within the Syrian communist party, with more radical members forming the "Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau)" led by Riad al-Turk. This opposition group has been fiercely repressed by Assad's regime that has banned the organisation and put Turk in prison in 1980 for 18 years.

Therefore, the so-called "progressive", "socialist" and "nationalist" regimes of the Arab world since the 1950s, have actively killed any serious prospect for the emergence of a radical leftist or working class movement through co-optation or repression.

In 2011, the Arab uprisings have exploded and diffused for a mixture of reasons to do with deep socio-economic roots and clear political repression by brutal regimes. On the eve of the uprisings, the socio-economic indicators of the Arab world were alarming. In addition to political oppression by dictatorial regimes, a considerable number of people in the Arab world were struggling to survive.

The neo-liberal policies that have started with Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt reaching Syria in 2000 after the ascension of Bashar Al Assad to power have clearly been beneficial for the ruling class and those around them; however this has happened at the expense of the big majority of the population that suffered from increasing inflation, rising costs of living, high unemployment rates (especially among the youth) and extreme poverty. In Syria for example, the percentage of those living under the poverty line (\$1/per) rose from 11 percent in 2000 to 33 percent in 2010.

With such socio-economic indicators, one would have expected the Left to organise and mobilise in

demand of social justice; however this didn't happen. The Arab uprisings detonated in a very random way and rapidly spread cross-nationally defying old concepts of national borders and nationalism and proving that people from different parts of the Arab world (and the world at large with movements like Occupy and Indignados) could identify with each other on the ground of oppression and inequality.

However, the question remains: What role did the Left play in those uprisings?

The answer varied, depending deeply on the level of absorption within the regimes prior to 2010. With the exception of Tunisia, where the General Labour Union played a crucial role in the revolution because it has historically been independent from the state, most other left-wing parties in the region have been marginalised and basically played no important role in the uprisings.

Communist parties in Syria (Bakdash branch) and Lebanon for example have opposed the uprisings saying that "it is very clear that what has been taking place in Syria has been in accordance with the imperialist plans". The traditional Left has been discredited by the popular movements in the streets because of their relationships with the old regimes.

New forms of left-wing activism have, however, surfaced in the last few years such as the Revolutionary Socialists[Ar] in Egypt, the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria and the Socialist Forum in Lebanon. Although these groups are still relatively young and do not have enough political leverage or popular support, their understanding of the Arab revolutions and their analysis of its developments show a long-awaited "political maturity" in the Arab Left.

The Arab Left today

Whereas the traditional left-wing parties mostly adopt a Stalinist top-down approach focusing on a national liberation approach, the growing leftist movements in the region are clearly influenced by a Trotskyist approach believing in the power of popular grassroots movements and socialism from below.

The main difference between those currents within the Arab Left today is that the traditional Left believes that priority should be given to national liberation; whereas younger leftist groups consider that the main focus should be on social liberation since no real independence can be reached under a capitalist and repressive system.

Contrary to the traditional leftist parties that focus mainly on geo-politics (favouring Iran and Russia under the illusion that these countries are anti-imperialist forces) and external imperialist and Zionist threats, these new leftist movements prioritise activism against internal inequalities and repression without losing sight of the broader geo-political context and the fact that Israel is an occupier.

In other words, the Trotskyist approach believes in the permanent revolution, which combines both the struggle for national liberation, and social and economic emancipation. For instance, whereas the Lebanese Communist Party considers that the events in Syria are part of a bigger conspiracy to strengthen Israel's position in the region by trying to topple the Assad regime, the Lebanese Socialist Forum sees that what is happening in Syria today is a heroic popular revolution against a dictator even though there are many attempts at killing it through the rise of reactionary movements such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the severe backlash from the brutal Assad regime.

In addition, traditional left-wing parties have surrendered to the dichotomous political analysis whereby they feel the need to side with one camp against the other. This has rendered these parties

no more than weak followers who have no real leverage at the political or popular level. The new leftist groups, however, have given way for an analysis outside the rigid dichotomies and reductionist approaches.

For example, the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt are at once against the old Mubarak regime, the army (represented by military chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi) and the Muslim Brotherhood. A similar position is taken by revolutionary leftist groups in Syria, who are radically against both the Assad regime and the reactionary forces such as the ISIL or Al Nusra front.

Finally, if there is one thing both the traditional and younger left-wing organisations have learned from the Arab uprisings, it would be that their romanticised idea of the revolution is not accurate. In as much as revolutions are powerful and essential, revolutionary periods are not as rosy and easy as the Left would have wished.

The Arab revolutions should be understood as a long-term process of deep economic, social and political change that will undergo many ups and downs before it finally settles. During this process, many of the social taboos will be broken, many of the norms and values will change and many movements will grow, but at the same time, many lives will be lost, many people will suffer and entire cities can be demolished in an attempt by the brutal regimes to erase not just the present, but the past as well.

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