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Covid-19 pandemic and the Arab spring

Pandemic and Oil Crisis Could Make Second Arab Spring Return With a Vengeance

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV544 - May 2020 -

Publication date: Saturday 9 May 2020

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As the world confronts a global economic crisis exacerbated by the current pandemic, what lessons can the U.S. left learn from those outside our borders?

In this interview, Gilbert Achcar discusses with Ashley Smith how Middle Eastern oil-exporting countries' price war has impacted the world, the ongoing revolutionary actions that could result in a Second Arab Spring and how the U.S. left must revive the true meaning of internationalism. The following transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Ashley Smith: What will be the impact of the pandemic and global recession on the Middle East and North Africa?

Gilbert Achcar: There is one kind of impact which the region will share with the rest of the world. That is, of course, the big economic crisis that is unfolding and that is already far beyond anything the world has seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

But there is something specific to the region, and that is oil and natural gas. The region is basically economically dependent on these resources. Their price has collapsed to the point of going below zero in the U.S. for a short while; the oil sellers paid buyers to take their oil, because they didn't have any space left to store it.

Leaders in Saudi Arabia helped create this disaster when they launched their so-called oil price war in early March just as the coronavirus crisis struck. The combination of their overproduction and the contraction of demand amid the pandemic and recession produced this enormous glut of oil and consequent collapse in its price.

The Middle East and North Africa region is in a revolutionary conjuncture because of global neoliberalism, the specific absolutist nature of many of the region's states and their economic dependence on oil.

Of course, the price will eventually recover from the abysmal level it reached, but it will remain low because the demand is depressed as a result of the shutdown of the economy during the pandemic. This will have a devastating economic impact on all the countries in the region.

This is true not only for oil-exporting countries but also other countries of the region. They too are dependent on oil revenues in the form of grants and investments in their economies from the oil-rich countries.

But the impact won't be the same on all. The oil-rich countries with small populations or high income per capita like Saudi Arabia will implement some austerity measures, but they have huge financial resources to draw upon.

The oil-exporting countries with large populations like Iran, Iraq and Algeria will face much bigger problems. Their economies are much weaker, they have much smaller financial reserves, and they will be forced to enact severe austerity measures, further angering populations that have staged mass revolts over the last year.

All other countries in the region that depend on the oil producers will be thrown into sharp crises. They will be

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suddenly deprived of Gulf money, which has helped economies like Egypt's stay afloat, thus increasing austerity and poverty. So, the entire region faces an even deeper social and economic crisis than what it has been in for the last decade.

AS: What has been the impact of the pandemic in the region so far?

GA: It has not been as apocalyptic as many feared, at least so far. Some rich countries like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have the means to deal with the pandemic. They take care of some sections of the population but not others, especially migrant manual workers.

These migrants already live in appalling conditions and could be devastated by the pandemic if the virus breaks out among them. But the rest of the population will be more insulated as they enjoy conditions similar to those of countries of the Global North, if not better.

By contrast, if the virus spreads into countries like Egypt or Iraq, not to mention Yemen, where conditions for most of the population are very bad, it could have a terrible impact. Iran has already been severely struck, and Turkey is being in turn.

AS: What will the pandemic and collapse in oil prices do to the geopolitical balance of power in the region?

GA: Oil-rich Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia have huge financial reserves. So, they will not suffer too much of a setback in their regional influence. By contrast, Iran and its influence will be severely impacted. It is already suffering under U.S. sanctions, and these have greatly aggravated the consequences of the pandemic and collapse in oil prices.

On this question of a progressive alternative, Sudan is setting the example for the rest of the region. It has achieved the most advanced gains among the 10 countries that had gone through major uprisings.

The Saudi oil war has hammered Iran's economy, which was Riyadh's intention to begin with. The combination of all this on Iran is catastrophic. Its ability to consolidate its regional influence in its outposts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon will be severely curtailed.

Behind Saudi Arabia stands the U.S., and their combined ability to shape the region geopolitically is much greater than Iran and its half-hearted friends, Russia and China, which are much less able to influence events.

But all great powers and regional powers are faced with big problems posed by the crisis. And, if struggle returns as the pandemic abates, the initiative could be seized again by popular forces.

AS: Let's discuss the state of the struggle from below. We have witnessed over the last year, a new wave of revolts that many call a Second Arab Spring. What is the state of the struggle now?

GA: Last year we witnessed a global wave of resistance from Latin America to the Middle East and North Africa to Hong Kong. All these struggles have been frozen in place by the pandemic.

In Hong Kong, the government and Beijing behind them have taken advantage of this situation to crack down on the movement. In the Middle East and North Africa, the story is the same. In Algeria, the weekly massive demonstrations have stopped, and arrests have taken place. In Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq, the struggle has been also on hold.

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The pandemic has enabled the states to impose lockdowns "not for medical, but for political reasons. They were happy to do so, unlike Donald Trump in the U.S. or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil" not because they care more about the people's health but because they seized the opportunity to end social protests.

Once the pandemic is over, we should expect a resumption of struggle on an even higher scale due to the worsening of the social crisis. Already now, a resumption of the movement in both Lebanon and Iraq has started. People in Lebanon have been driven to do so by the collapse of the economy. They can no longer afford their basic needs like food.

AS: Sudan has been one of the key countries in the last year of revolt. What does the situation look like there today?

GA: It is in a state of flux like it has been since last July, when the movement reached a compromise on a transitional arrangement with the military. This agreement created what I would describe as a duality of power between the popular movement and the military, both coexisting within the same state. But this is only a tense and provisional stage; it will necessarily end with the victory of one of the two sides, the military or the movement.

The military have attempted to take advantage of the frozen struggle to block implementation of some key concessions they had to make. Of course, they may attempt something like a coup. But the popular movement would challenge any such attempt, returning the country back to open confrontation between the masses and the military.

What are the roots of the persistent waves of struggle in the region? What is part of the general pattern of global revolt that we have witnessed and what is particular to the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa?

Neoliberalism has had a common impact throughout the world but there are also regional and national specificities. Globally, the neoliberal drive to privatization, deregulation and internationalization has increased social inequalities and dismantled social safety nets. All of this has provoked uneven but worldwide resistance.

Internationalism has never been standing with one imperialism against another; it was always about solidarity between the oppressed people and working classes across borders.

But, as I've argued since the Arab Spring in 2011, the Middle East and North Africa region is in a specific, distinct and revolutionary conjuncture because of the interaction between global neoliberalism, the specific absolutist nature of many of the region's states and their economic dependence on oil.

This combination has produced a structural blockage in economic development. The regimes deny freedom to their people, rely on rents from oil and gas, and private money pours not in economic development but in speculative investments.

All of this has made the impact of neoliberalism far more severe than elsewhere in the world. For example, the region has held for many years the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world. Avenues to change this predicament through democratic elections are precluded.

You cannot vote a government out of office, change the administrative team and alter policy as you might be able to do in Europe or the U.S. That's why the uprisings went far beyond the protests in countries such as Chile, Spain or Greece.

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The Middle East and North Africa has entered a long-term revolutionary process. Short of a radical transformation of the whole social, economic and political structure, the area will remain in deep crisis.

AS: We have been through two waves of revolt in the region. What is the balance sheet so far? And what are the lessons of the revolutionary process?

GA: In this period, 10 countries in the region have gone through major uprisings. Six in 2011, four more in 2019 – almost half of the region's countries have experienced massive and sustained revolts.

That is a revolutionary shock wave at a regional level, comparable to what Europe witnessed at the end of World War I. This scale of the process proves that these revolts are not the usual resistance to neoliberalism.

The movement has matured politically from the first wave of uprisings to the second one. This is typical of long-term revolutionary processes like all others we have seen in history. They go through a learning curve – both the dominant classes and the popular movement learn.

In the Arab Spring in 2011, Islamic fundamentalist forces were key players. They formed a major part of the opposition to the dictatorships and when the uprisings started, they jumped on the bandwagon and tried to hijack the revolts for their reactionary aims.

Unfortunately, they succeeded in several countries, marginalizing the progressive forces that were not sufficiently organized and independent to provide a political alternative. As a result, we witnessed a clash between two counterrevolutionary poles – the old regimes, on the one hand, and the Islamic fundamentalists on the other hand.

In some countries, this took tragic, bloody forms – civil wars. At the regional level, the initial revolutionary phase morphed into a counterrevolutionary phase beginning in 2013. Since then, the old regimes managed to restore their power in the region in Syria and Egypt, and partly in Tunisia.

AS: How did the movement reemerge? How does the new wave of revolts differ from the first one?

GA: The movement never entirely went away. Despite the setback in 2013, the revolutionary process continued with occasional social explosions throughout the region, from Morocco to Tunisia, Sudan, Iraq and Jordan. Then, beginning in December 2018 in Sudan, a new wave of uprisings started and spread to Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon. The media dubbed this the Second Arab Spring.

In this new phase, the Islamic fundamentalist forces that were so prominent in the first phase played no role at all. In Sudan, they were originally aligned with the dictatorship. In Iraq and Lebanon, fundamentalist forces aligned with Iran were actually a main target of the uprisings.

In Algeria, part of the fundamentalists collaborated with the regime, and the movement did not let them play any role. Unfortunately, though, no progressive force was able to step in to provide a way forward nationally.

On this question of a progressive alternative, Sudan is setting the example for the rest of the region. It has achieved the most advanced gains among the 10 countries that had gone through major uprisings.

AS: What have progressive forces done in Sudan that stands out?

GA: They have built an organized movement operating on several levels. At the base, there are grassroots organizations in every neighborhood. These involve thousands of mostly young people who are, for the most part, unaffiliated with political parties but have been radicalized through the revolution of which they constitute the driving force. They are its critical conscience, which is why they are keen to preserve their local autonomy and refuse centralism.

These committees delegated the right to represent the popular movement to a coalition of professional associations that was formed underground before the uprising, comprised of doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers and professors.

The Sudanese Professionals Association has played the role of coordinating and centralizing the struggles at the national level. It has entered a coalition with political parties to form a united front of the opposition to the dictatorship, forcing it to a transitional power-sharing agreement. That is the current situation of dual power that I described before.

Sudan thus shows the kind of organization it takes for a progressive popular movement to obtain major gains. That doesn't mean that the movement has achieved a final victory; a tense standoff remains between the movement and the dictatorship.

AS: Finally, what are the pivotal lessons for the region's left? And what should the posture of the international left be in relation to these struggles?

GA: There are two kinds of lessons. First, there are general lessons from the region for all progressive movements. Sudan's example of building a mass grassroots, progressive struggle pole is useful for everyone throughout the world. Just imagine if the movement born around Sen. Bernie Sanders could take the shape we've seen in Sudan with grassroots neighborhood committees active throughout the country!

The second major lesson is about internationalism. The Arab Spring confronted the international left with the test of whether it would stand with the regimes or the popular movement in countries whose regimes were on bad terms with Washington. This was a challenge for some sections of the left who are used to binary thinking through the imperialist/anti-imperialist lens alone.

The uprisings challenged this framework. They have occurred both against regimes supported by the U.S., like Egypt, Tunisia or Bahrain, and against others opposed by the U.S., like Libya or Syria — the latter being supported by Russia, another imperialist power.

Far too many people purported to be on the left in the U.S. supported the Syrian regime because it is opposed by the U.S. government, and refused to extend solidarity with the Syrian revolution, even in its initial popular phase. They kept defending the regime despite all the atrocities that it committed. Ironically, they did so in the name of anti-imperialism, when the Syrian regime was in fact backed by another imperialist power, Russia, which got deeply involved in the massacres in Syria.

This bears no relation to internationalism, which is above all solidarity of the exploited and oppressed. The left should always stand with the oppressed and exploited fighting for democracy and social justice, regardless of whether the state they are confronting is opposed to Washington or not.

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Internationalism has never been standing with one imperialism against another; it was always about solidarity between the oppressed people and working classes across borders. We must revive this deep meaning of internationalism.

6 May 2020

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