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Arab Springs

After the Pandemic Subsides, We May See a Third Wave of the Arab Spring

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We are in the midst of the 10th anniversary of the 2011 Arab Spring. While most of the revolts suffered terrible defeats, the revolutionary process in the region did not come to an end, as waves of struggle exploded in country after country even amid today's pandemic and global recession.

In this interview, Gilbert Achcar speaking to Ashley Smith for Truthout assesses the results of the uprisings so far and prospects for the new waves of revolutionary struggle.

Ashley Smith: During this anniversary of the Arab Spring, many mainstream commentators have expressed a very pessimistic view of the uprisings' results. What's your assessment?

Gilbert Achcar: I think that it's misleading to treat the revolts as if they were events that have passed and we were just marking their historical anniversary. It is more accurate to see the region as going through a long-term revolutionary process.

Looking at it this way is not wishful thinking. It is stating a fact. The first wave hit in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread throughout the region. Since then, we have been through a second wave — a second Arab Spring, as it has been called by the media — that started in December 2018.

The first wave engulfed six countries — after Tunisia: Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria; the second wave engulfed another four: Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq. So, until now, 10 of the 20 countries in the region have experienced uprisings; countries that together are home to most of the region's population, making the significance of the revolts even greater.

True, the second wave has been frozen to a certain degree by COVID-19. But the pandemic will not bring an end to the revolts. On the contrary, it is making the conditions that produced the uprisings even worse.

The recession it triggered has led to a massive drop in oil prices, undermining the region's economy, deepening inequalities and destabilizing politics. Once we get through the pandemic, we will see yet another wave of uprisings sooner or later.

The region is experiencing an ongoing revolutionary process. One can be pessimistic about the results so far; the revolutions have not won, and two countries — Syria and Yemen — have been enduring devastating civil wars. But on the other hand, the people's determination to fight is grounds for optimism.

Most people do not look back on failed revolts with regret. A recent poll found that majorities in Algeria, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan and Tunisia do not regret the uprisings.

In sum, we should expect further waves of revolution and counterrevolution. That is characteristic of long-term revolutionary processes.

We have seen a wave of revolts throughout the world since the 2008 global recession. But none so radical as those in the Middle East. Why?

At the global level, neoliberalism has entered a crisis since that recession. In general, most protests since then have demanded changes in government's neoliberal policies or even a change of government, but few have aimed at overthrowing the whole power system.

But that's exactly what most movements in Arabic-speaking countries have tried to do since 2011. "The people want to overthrow the regime" has been the central slogan of the region's uprisings. It demonstrates the difference between the general crisis of neoliberalism and the specific structural crisis in the Middle East and North Africa.

Neoliberalism is a set of policies, a certain mode of regulation — or deregulation as it were — within capitalism. It can be changed through elections or replacement of governments without overthrowing the system.

In the Arab region, by contrast, the people realize that they need to overthrow the power system in order to improve their social conditions. All the region's states are nepotistic. Some are patrimonial states, owned by families, like the monarchies of Bashar al-Assad's Syria. Others are neo-patrimonial states; among them, three — Sudan, Algeria and Egypt — are ruled by the military.

In most of the Middle East and North Africa, you cannot vote politicians out of office. Most of these states extract a sizable portion of their income from oil and gas and other rent sources. Washington and London have long been bolstering despotic oil monarchies to ensure continuous privileged access to their riches.

However, the regional state system thus created combined with the neoliberal turn to produce a structural developmental blockage. That specificity explains the long-term revolutionary process that began in 2011. The people will continue to struggle to overthrow the political, social and economic system. Either they will win, or the region will keep facing calamitous times.

AS: What classes and social groups have joined the revolts?

GA: In the absence of reliable data, how you answer this depends on your diagnosis of the structural crisis and what will solve it. The international financial institutions (IFIs) — the IMF and World Bank — agree that there is a deep social and economic crisis. [1]

But they argue that it isn't because of their neoliberal recipes, but rather that these policies were not implemented as radically as they wanted them to be. For decades, they have pressured all the regimes to cut social expenditure, privatize state-owned companies, deregulate markets and open up to the world economy.

They thus try to portray the uprisings as revolts of the "middle class" for more neoliberalism. They pretend that the middle class will bring in a fully neoliberal economy along with "good governance," their codeword for democracy and the rule of law.

But this is fully at odds with reality. It is in Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's brutal dictatorship that the IFIs have achieved the most radical implementation of their recipes in the region. That fact exposes the claim that neoliberalism goes hand in hand with liberal democracy as a pure myth.

Of course, some people of middle-class background did join the revolts. But the vast majority in the streets and squares belonged to middle- and low-income urban layers, working class and unemployed.

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Take Tunisia, for example. It was not the country's "middle class" that toppled the dictatorship. It was a huge popular movement led by the Arab region's largest, independent workers' unions federation.

Egypt is another example. There, unlike Tunisia, official unions were entirely controlled by government. But, outside those official structures, the country has a very combative working class.

Workers played a major role in February 2011. When the government called on people to resume "business as usual," hundreds of thousands of them went out on strike, playing a decisive role in the ousting of the president.

We find the same pattern in other countries. Bahrain's workers' federation played a key role in the first stage of the uprising in 2011. In Yemen, too, the working class along with the youth were at the heart of that country's initial uprising.

The second wave in 2019 has involved the same social classes. In Sudan, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which includes low-income categories, such as schoolteachers and journalists, played a pivotal role and ended up encompassing newly formed workers' unions.

They were joined by a grassroots movement, the "resistance committees." These are based in neighborhoods and mobilize tens of thousands of young people, mainly students, low-income workers and unemployed.

AS: Is there a key difference between the first and second waves?

GA: In the first wave, there was one revolutionary movement confronted with two counterrevolutionary forces. One, of course, was the existing regimes, which tried to suppress the uprisings.

The other was in the opposition: Islamic fundamentalists in the mainstream form of the Muslim Brotherhood, let alone the extremist far right type of al-Qaeda and ISIS [also known as Daesh]. Nowhere did Islamic fundamentalists initiate the struggle; they jumped on the bandwagon.

In Egypt, the Brotherhood's aim was to hijack the protests, take advantage of the democratic opening, and take over the state. Their program, which combines neoliberalism with religious authoritarianism and sexism, offers no solution to the country's real problems. It can only make them worse.

Their rule in both Egypt and Tunisia quickly squandered the amount of support they had gathered in both countries in the initial post-uprising phase due to being the most powerful opposition force. As for the extremists, ISIS's rule of parts of Iraq and Syria was so brutal, highly oppressive and reactionary, that it quickly undercut whatever popular support it may have had for sectarian reasons and became widely seen as repulsive.

The popular movements in the second wave have learned the lessons of the first. Islamic fundamentalists could not even join them this time.

In Sudan, the movement confronted a state that was based on the alliance between military and fundamentalists. In Algeria, mainstream Islamic fundamentalists had collaborated with the military-controlled regime. In Iraq and Lebanon, sectarian fundamentalist forces are the main pillars of government conveying foreign domination by Iran.

Thus, the movement in the second wave firmly opposed the Islamic fundamentalists as counterrevolutionary forces.

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And they haven't nurtured any illusions in the military, especially after the experience of al-Sisi's tyrannical reign in Egypt.

AS: What role did imperial powers like the U.S. and Russia play in the counterrevolution?

GA: We must bear in mind that the first wave started at the lowest point of U.S. hegemony in the region since the first U.S.-led Gulf War. This hegemony peaked in 1991, when Washington's main adversary, the Soviet Union, collapsed. George H.W. Bush took advantage of that to assert control over the region through war on Iraq.

Washington rallied all the region's states to its side or neutralized them. It even got Assad's Syria, formerly Moscow's ally, to join its war against Iraq. After the war, the U.S. boxed in Iran and Iraq with sanctions and co-opted the Palestine Liberation Organization through the Oslo-Washington Accords with Israel.

The second Bush squandered this hegemonic position with the occupation of Iraq, which turned into a disaster: for the Iraqis first, but also for the U.S. That emboldened Washington's international and regional challengers, especially Vladimir Putin's Russia, and Iran.

While Obama was overseeing U.S. troops' withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, U.S. hegemony in the region had reached its nadir. That, of course, was the very same year the first wave of uprisings hit, threatening the entire established order in the region.

Washington had little leverage to shape events on the ground. Its weakness was displayed best in Libya: it provided air power but excluded any prospect of boots on the ground. NATO's intervention ended in another fiasco with the country fully escaping Western control after the fall of Muammar al-Qaddafi.

This made the Obama administration even more reluctant to intervene in Syria — until ISIS spilled over from there into Iraq. It deployed very limited forces on the ground, relying upon local forces in the war against ISIS, including left-wing Kurdish forces in Syria. Obama's initial reluctance to act in Syria left an opening for Iran, followed by Russia, to intervene massively on behalf of the Assad regime.

Now, Russia has extended its intervention to Libya. It is working there with [Egypt's] al-Sisi and the United Arab Emirates in providing support to a would-be dictator backed by remnants of the old regime.

Part of the left failed to grasp the relative decline of U.S. global hegemony and the rise of rival imperialisms. They are caught in a time warp, mistakenly believing that things are still the same as during the Cold War.

Of course, the U.S. is still the world's dominant imperialist power. However, present-day Russia is plainly a rival imperialist power, even more reactionary in several respects. And there are regional rival hegemonic powers, such as the Saudi Kingdom and Iran, both of which are deeply reactionary.

AS: What is the state of the second wave and where do you expect other uprisings to occur in the coming years?

GA: Second wave movements have been frozen by the pandemic, as I said earlier. The regimes took advantage of it to ban protests, and people themselves have been reluctant to join actions out of fear for their own safety.

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And yet, at the same time, the pandemic and recession have worsened conditions throughout the region and increased anger and frustration. Some events can also enrage people to a point when they overcome their caution and hit the streets, as happened in the U.S. with Black Lives Matter.

There's still a very long way to go in this long-term revolutionary process. The good news is that people are learning what they're up against and drawing lessons from both defeats and victories.

For example, the explosion in Lebanon's port last August has set off a new round of protests in the country, albeit on a smaller scale. For now, though, the pandemic has put an effective hold on the uprisings in general, but larger ones will come when it subsides.

It is difficult to tell which country in the region will be next. Every single one is a tinderbox, and any spark could light the fire.

In Egypt, the rate of poverty even by official statistics has dramatically increased over the last few years under al-Sisi. In Algeria, the movement is merely on hold, and will resume in some form or another. The present president, elected with ridiculously low participation, is widely perceived as illegitimate.

Morocco is another powder keg. Jordan had a popular revolt in 2018 that brought down a government. The struggle in Iraq is ongoing. Sudan's revolutionary process is far from over. It is in a transition period with tense coexistence between the popular movement and the military.

Even the Saudi Kingdom is not immune from these dynamics. The two countries that are the least likely to see uprisings are the most artificial — the Emirate of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, where only 10 percent of the people enjoy the privilege of citizenship. The rest have much less rights than migrant workers in Western countries.

AS: What are the movements fighting for? And what kind of organizations are needed to win?

GA: The people are fighting for their livelihood, democracy and social justice. To achieve these goals, a radical change in the social and political nature of the region's states and economic system is indispensable.

The popular movements need to bring down the corrupt and despotic regimes and replace them with truly democratic ones. Only then will they be able to implement egalitarian social and economic policies.

This requires a high degree of organization and political determination. The region's rulers and their states are very brutal and willing to go to extremes to remain in power.

Just look at Syria. The ruling family destroyed much of the country, massacred hundreds of thousands of its people, and drove millions into exile just to preserve its rule.

To defeat such regimes requires effective organization. The new generation of revolutionaries are wary of the old forms of top-down centralism and charismatic leadership.

As a result, most of the struggles since 2011 have been characterized by a key role of horizontal grassroot structures and the absence of charismatic leaders.

But everyone has realized that you need organization to be effective. In Sudan, the "resistance committees," while

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refusing to set up a central body, practice a high degree of political and organizational coordination, in part through social media.

Some of the neighborhood committees in the capital play a vanguard role. The committees act in tandem with the SPA, the equivalent of a trade-unions' federation. These forces lead the struggle together, but they are not a traditional party-like organization.

The movement cannot go forward, much less succeed, without at least such a level of organization. A revolution cannot win just through social media. The claim that the uprisings were a "Facebook Revolution" was always an exaggeration.

Sudan has shown the way forward. Of the 10 countries where you have had major uprisings until now, their movement is the best organized. And people in the region are learning from them.

There's still a very long way to go in this long-term revolutionary process. The good news is that people are learning what they're up against and drawing lessons from both defeats and victories.

Therefore, there is hope. Without such hope, with nothing but "pessimism of the intellect," there can be no "optimism of the will," as in the famous phrase from the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Source: [Truthout](#).

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[1] Reuters, 19 October 2020 "[COVID-19 may inflict a decade of economic pain to Mideast, Central Asia, IMF says](#)".