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Arab spring

“We're facing an important crossroads”

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Gilbert Achcar, interviewed by correspondents.org/eg, says Egypt is at an historical and highly important crossroads in the development of the long-term revolutionary process—stressing the urgency in building leadership and formulating strategies appropriate for change. Imminent catastrophe can be avoided, he advises, by deploying organized political forces pursuing a strategy that seeks to construct a third, revolutionary phase, equally removed from the old regime and religious radicalism.

Gilbert Achcar, don't the successive failures and defeats in countries that have witnessed uprisings over the last four years make you reconsider the concept of “the long-term revolutionary process” that you outlined in your book, *The People Demand*?

There have certainly been failures and setbacks, but “defeats”—in the sense of doing away with the revolutionary process for good—seems to me inaccurate. Since 2011 I have been saying that what began back then was a long-term revolutionary process that would play out over many years, decades even, and pass through a number of phases. In many countries the process is currently going through a phase of retracting after its initial spread, faced as it is with an assault on all fronts by the counter-revolution in its various forms.

This brings us to the issue of leadership. The great revolutionary wave, which first broke in Tunisia in 2010 and left no Arab country untouched, was produced by measurable results—objective social and economic realities and a highly combustible political situation. But the course of these revolutions is determined by the interaction of these objective circumstances with the condition and actions of the potential leaders of revolutionary change.

This is the main weak point: we face revolutionary circumstances but without organized revolutionary forces that pursue a revolutionary strategy capable of advancing the process of revolutionary change. This applies to all Arab countries. If we look at Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, we find that progressive forces have not performed the required role, which is to form a revolutionary front independent of what I term the “two poles” of the counter-revolution.

What exactly do you mean by two poles of the counter revolution?

There is one counter-revolution, represented by the old regime, and another represented by the reactionary forces opposed to the old regime, and which trade in religious ideology. The issue with the progressive leadership in our countries is that they have effaced their progressive identity by allying with one counter-revolutionary pole against the other, or otherwise by hopping from an alliance with one to an alliance with the other, instead of forging a third way, equally removed from both.

Is there any hope of overcoming the consequences and returning to the revolutionary path?

Hope rests on us realizing that the revolutionary process is long-term and that it might take decades. When we talk about the French, English or Chinese revolutions, we are talking about processes that ran on for decades, from the first explosion to the point at which these societies reached a new state of sustainable stability.

Our revolutionary process is bound to continue as long as objective circumstances continue to generate crises and explosions and in the absence of any solution to the underlying problem, which is the blockage of economic development and the resulting high levels of unemployment, against the backdrop of a social system linked to a

rentier patrimonial state.

Nor do revolutionary processes develop in a straight line: the course is crooked. There will be phases of ebb and flow in the interaction between the revolution and counter-revolution. To ignore this is to fall prey to short-sightedness, like the euphoria of the 2011 “Arab Spring,” which was built on a fantasy that “peaceful” uprisings could lead to the rapid spread of democracy and the improvement of social conditions. It involved turning a blind eye to the seriousness of the obstacles that our societies are facing, obstacles that we must pay a high price for removing. There is no avoiding it: we are due further revolutionary explosions in our countries in the medium-term, if not the short-term.

So will it be possible to overcome these consequences in the future?

In some countries in our region, progressive forces have sufficient political weight to entertain the possibility of leading the revolutionary process. This is the case in Tunisia, where the labour movement is objectively capable of leading society. In Egypt, though, there is no single organized force with comparable power, but there is a tremendous revolutionary energy, particularly among young people, that could be brought together through a coalition of revolutionary progressive forces. This energy manifested itself in the vote for Hamdeen Sabahy in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections: five million people rejected the old regime as represented by Shafiq and his reactionary rival, Morsi.

However the problem here is the lack of a suitable strategy. In Egypt, Hamdeen Sabahy has unfortunately pursued a twisty “if not mazy” political path. He has gone from an alliance with the Brotherhood in the 2011 parliamentary elections to an alliance with the old regime on June 30 / July 3 2013, heaping praise on Field Marshal El Sisi. Hamdeen paid a high price for it, since he disappointed the youth movement and all those who were eager to enact progressive revolutionary change by establishing a third pole, as well as losing almost of the credibility he'd accumulated at the height of his popularity in 2012 when he distanced himself from both Shafiq and Morsi.

Lacking a suitable strategy we are threatened by degeneration across the board. When a leadership capable of advancing revolutionary change falls away, the threat of a vicious reactionary backlash is doubled. So long as we remained trapped in the binary polarization of the old regime and reactionary forces that trade on religion, the likelihood of a descent into what in an earlier book I termed “the clash of barbarisms” grows ever stronger.

Leaving absolute optimism and pessimism aside, we need to be aware that we are facing a historical and highly important crossroads in the development of the long-term revolutionary process, which should make us determined to build leadership and formulate strategies appropriate for change if we wish to avoid imminent catastrophe.

Is it the lack of a progressive leadership that has allowed IS and other jihadist movements to offer themselves as an alternative leadership in Syria?

The case of Syria provides the starkest expression of the historical problem we face. In the early months of 2011 the Syrian uprising was concerned with the same social, economic and political problems that led to uprisings across the region. The uprising was being led first and foremost by the youth, who used social media to coordinate and organize the movement. They formed “local coordination committees” based on a political program that was democratic, not sectarian, and clearly voiced the great progressive aspiration of the 2011 uprising.

More than in Egypt, the problem in Syria lay in the absence of an organized progressive vanguard capable of leading the revolutionary process in the long-term. The coordination committees did not attempt to form an organized leadership on the ground, other than online, and what happened was that, in their absence, certain political forces appointed themselves as leaders from abroad, a deeply flawed alliance that included certain progressives under the

overall control of the Muslim Brotherhood. The coordination committees made a serious mistake when they recognized this leadership, which was in thrall to Turkey, Qatar and the US. They combined this with completely failing to acknowledge the impossibility of repeating in Syria the Egyptian scenario of January 25 to February 11, i.e.: the impossibility of bringing down Bashar Al Assad in the way Hosni Mubarak had been brought down before him.

In a “royal republic” like Syria, where the armed forces fall under the control of the ruling family’s private guard, there is no way of toppling the head of the regime without bringing down the whole regime, including the “deep state”. So, the uprising never had a chance of achieving victory “peacefully”, but its transformation into an armed conflict took place in a piecemeal, disorganized fashion, the initiative of officers and soldiers who deserted from the army in protest at its oppression of the public.

As things stand, the lack of a progressive leadership, with progressives throwing themselves into the arms of the Brotherhood and Qatar, left the way open for forces with a more radical hostility to the regime to come to the fore, even though this hostility has a reactionary, religious, sectarian inspiration. Simultaneously, the Al Assad regime has done everything in its power to strengthen these religious forces at the expense of the democrats, in order to be able to accuse the opposition as a whole of religious extremism, to demonize it, and to forestall the danger of Western countries lending it their support. This is how the Syrian opposition got sucked into a degenerative dialectics of religious extremism that led to the founding of ISIS.

The rise of IS and its military expansion have taken place with staggering speed, suggesting that it might collapse equally quickly. In the medium and long-term there is still hope that an alliance might take shape that is capable of representing the progressive revolutionary energy that has burned so brightly since 2011, and even to return it to its rightful place in the future, once the war is over. This, however, will depend on those who want to create revolutionary change having the ability to create an alternative pole equally removed from the criminal regime and the fanatical gangs.

Do you think that the current regimes are being reckless in their defence of the old order and their failure to offer the smallest concessions to keep the masses happy?

The Syrian example is quite clear: This regime, like all Arab regimes, will not leave the stage voluntarily, and anyone who imagines it will is dreaming. These regimes are built on the ruling class’s exploitation of public resources to such a degree that it necessitates dictatorship. These rulers will defend their privileges to their last soldier. The starting point for any strategy must therefore be that these regimes “as long as they retain control over the armed services and agencies” will work to safeguard their interests at any cost, whether through civil war as in Syria, or by tightening the grip of dictatorship, as in Egypt.

This means that radical revolutionary change can never be achieved without paralysing the repressive capabilities of the current socio-political regime. This will either take place through victory over it in a drawn-out civil war (as happened in Libya), which as we see from Syria can have a heavy price, or otherwise by the revolutionary forces winning over the majority of the armed forces to the side of the revolution. Armies are composed of a minority of elites totally dedicated to the regime and a majority of ordinary citizens. The disaster of the Syrian revolutionaries was that they were unable to divide the Syrian army on a large enough scale: indeed, they did not even attempt to do so during the early stages of the uprising.

This brings us back to a basic condition for profound change: leadership. It is impossible to influence soldiers and the armed agencies of state without a political leadership capable of winning “the hearts and minds” of the common men who serve in the armed forces and convincing them to support the popular revolution.

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The chief obstacle to the Arab uprising is the lack of such a leadership, or the lack of a strategic vision when they do exist. What is needed is organized forces that follow a strategy to construct a third, revolutionary pole, equally removed from the old regime and religious radicalism, the two poles of the counter-revolution.

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