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Arab revolutions

"The revolution has just begun"

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The journal Al-Akhbar interviewed Gilbert Achcar on the current stage of the Arab revolutions in June 2011. The translation and introduction we publish here were published in their English-language edition on 24 August 2011.

Gilbert Achcar, professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, has no qualms calling the popular protests sweeping the Arab world a revolution. They are, in his view, part of a revolutionary process that is taking the region into uncharted territory. The forces active on the ground have changed, and, while the future is unpredictable, there is no going back to the previous situation.

Dima Charif: Different terms have been used to describe what the Arab world has witnessed since the beginning of the year: revolution, uprising, popular revolt, protests, etc. What do you think is the best description?

Gilbert Achcar: There has been much debate about what to call what has been happening, whether we're talking about the region as a whole or the countries which have seen successes, namely Tunisia and Egypt. In fact, even in those two countries, there are many who object to the use of the word 'revolution', as it gives the impression that the regime was overthrown in accordance with the people's wishes, when in reality it was not. Only its head and its most despotic and corrupt figures were removed. But the backbone of the regime survives. I think the best description of what is happening today is 'revolutionary process.' This term also explains what happened in Egypt and Tunisia. There were indeed revolutions there, with mass action achieving undeniable successes, even though they did not bring about overall regime change. They are important victories nevertheless, and the process is continuing in both countries. The Egyptians were right to name their revolution by the date it began, the 'Revolution of 25 January.' That was the date of a mass rally, nothing more, not a major achievement as such. But it was the starting date of a process that is still continuing and whose fate is now being contested.

DC: Who is driving these revolutions in your opinion: the marginalized, the national bourgeoisie, the workers?

GA: The situation differs between countries. In Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, there is a broad social front that is opposed to two key features: despotism and corruption. All are united against these two aspects. It is noteworthy that in countries where there is corruption but less despotism, the mass movements have not had the same momentum as when they have been united against both despotism and corruption, as in Egypt and Tunisia. This applies to Morocco, for example. There is no overwhelming sense of political oppression there, as the king instituted some democratic changes and eased some restrictions on freedoms, albeit to a limited extent. Right after the start of the protests he announced a number of reform measures. Thus the protests demanding political change and a constitutional monarchy lack the momentum of Egypt and Tunisia.

In Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, there is a broad social front that is opposed to two key features: despotism and corruption. All are united against these two aspects. The masses suffering from social injustice and poverty took to the streets alongside wealthier social groups more concerned with ending despotism. These social groups are liberal in the political sense. They may favor social reform, and oppose neoliberal economic policies, but their members aspire above all to a degree of democracy and freedom that they believe to be appropriate for our time. They are advocates of modernity.

The bulk of the movement involves a very broad mass of the marginalized, poor, and unemployed who resent the

corruption and the social status quo and understand that there is a link between despotism and corruption. Included in this front are the left and the workers' movements. These were instrumental in Tunisia, as well as in Egypt where the mobilization of the workers' movements hastened the downfall of Mubarak.

Toppling Mubarak thus brought together a broad spectrum of forces, from far-left to far-right. But once he was ousted, a new alignment of political forces developed, with the Muslim Brothers (MB) and Salafist religious currents supporting the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and differences emerging with the other forces – leftist and liberal – over the future shape of the state.

DC: What does the US want from the Arab revolutions? Is it behind the train, on board, or ahead?

GA: America certainly isn't ahead of the train. Washington and its ally the Zionist state were and continue to be extremely concerned about the changes in the Arab world. We know from the Israeli press that they are even concerned for the Syrian regime, because at least it provides a measure of stability. But the US wasn't entirely surprised by what happened. That was clear from the WikiLeaks cables. They know what is going on, especially regarding the corruption of the regimes. They know they are dealing with despotic regimes, but these are their clients. They have no illusions about such regimes lasting forever, and they know there's popular dissatisfaction.

Under George W. Bush, the US posed as champion of democratic change in the region because it needed to provide a pretext for occupying Iraq after the WMD lie was exposed. In 2005, its Arab allies came under heavy pressure to come up with some cosmetic democratic reforms in order to enable the Bush administration to claim it was serious about the venture. Washington managed at the time to get its Saudi allies to hold municipal elections for the first time in 30 years – male-only elections and for only half of the seats. They pressed Mubarak to hold parliamentary elections with a modicum of credibility, and he obliged, letting the MB get 20% of the seats. He was thus sending back his usual message: if you want real elections, you will get Islamist groups who oppose your policies. This served to reinforce the line which had previously prevailed in Washington: that talk of democracy is a fine ideological weapon for the US and its allies to use, but not in the Middle East, where hostility towards the US is intense, not least due to its sponsorship of Israel.

Washington was dismayed by Mubarak's hereditary succession plans and his reversal of whatever limited democratization he had conceded, and it was certainly irritated by the fully rigged 2010 elections. This caused tension between Cairo and Washington, as the US realized that Mubarak had outlived his usefulness and that his continuation in power would jeopardize US interests. So once the protest movement began, and having taken in the lesson of Tunisia, Washington was not completely perplexed. It urged the army – the Egyptian player most organically connected to the US, as it subsidizes it – to remain above the fray. The US administration's statements hailing the peaceful nature of the protests were messages to the Egyptian army to avoid joining in the repression. Joining may have caused the army to split, making it less capable of managing the post-Mubarak period. Washington's much-repeated calls for an "orderly transition" actually meant "We favor a democratic transfer of power while our principal ally remains firmly in control." This is the Turkish scenario of the 1980s: a peaceful transition under army supervision towards a civil state, in which the army retains its supervisory role, and can intervene should a threat arise to strategic interests.

America today is getting out of breath running behind the train, yet it is still attempting to get things under control. The clearest example is the intervention in Libya. There was a popular revolt there after the barrier of fear was broken in Tunisia and Egypt. But Libya is an oil state, and this is a serious matter for Western imperialism, i.e. the US and its allies. Hence the intervention aimed at bolstering the Western countries' image as partners in and supporters of change in the Arab world, while enabling them to hijack the insurgency and contain it. The West was relieved that the protesters in Tunisia and Egypt did not mobilize around slogans hostile to the US and Israel. This was read as a political indication, but it was a mistake. The reason such slogans weren't raised was not that they weren't shared by

the overwhelming majority of protesters, but only that the priority at that point was to get rid of local despotism. People had also grown accustomed, over decades, to their regimes invoking the national cause in order to silence popular protest.

In Libya there is no institution like the Egyptian army that can be employed in a relatively peaceful transfer of power, hence the Western decision to intervene militarily. In its early weeks the Libyan revolt raised the slogan 'no to foreign intervention,' and even now after turning to external support they still reject intervention on the ground. But the Western powers do not want Gaddafi's regime to fall before knowing what will replace it. Everyone realizes that NATO's intervention is motivated mainly by oil. The Libyan rebels also know that. The West won't arm them, it limits their military action, and it dictates terms to them. But once the regime, or what remains of it, falls, the West will not be able to control the course of events without a presence on the ground. Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, the regime's downfall in Libya will mean the disintegration of the existing state apparatus. The main difference between Tunisia and Egypt, on the one hand, and Libya and Syria on the other is that in the latter, the regimes have reorganized the armed forces so that their key components are linked organically to the ruling families. There can be no repeat of the scenario of Tunisia or Egypt, where the establishment could survive without the family and disavow it. In Libya and Syria, the collapse of the regime would cause a massive institutional vacuum.

DC: Do you envisage an Islamist future for the region after the downfall of the regimes? Would the present Turkish model of government be suited to the Arab states?

GA: The recent Turkish experience is based on three components that are nowhere to be found in the Arab world: a secularist tradition represented by the army, a democratic (up to a point) constitution, and a party that split from a fundamentalist Islamic movement and underwent a profound transformation. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) is a conservative party that seeks to combine Islamic heritage with modernity. It is more akin to the Christian Democrat currents in Europe. So on what basis could we adopt a Turkish model? Take Egypt, for example. The army is not an institution that upholds secularism. The MB is a fundamentalist party in every sense, whose slogan is 'Islam is the Solution.' For a Turkish model to take shape, a modernizing Islamic party would be needed, not one that is just the political façade of the existing Brotherhood like the Freedom and Justice Party. It could be created by groups that are splitting off from the MB, especially among their younger members. As for the Egyptian army, it has since Sadat's days been inclined to use religion as an ideological ploy to cover its many failings. We may be actually closer to the Pakistani model – a military-fundamentalist alliance – than to the Turkish one.

There is no point speculating about where things will lead though, because the process is still in its early stages and it may take years of ups and downs before it settles. How and what kind of stability will be ultimately achieved depends on the shifting balance of forces. What is clear in Egypt's case is that the regime survives via the military establishment's continuing control of the reins of power, the maintenance of the economic and social order, and the retention of the regime's personnel (other than a few figures who are being tried, representing the tip of the iceberg). Washington concluded that with democracy making inroads in the Arab world, and in the absence of US-friendly political forces enjoying public support, it would have to win over existing players. The most ideologically open to a partnership with the US is the MB. Qatar and Turkey are both engaged in mediation on this issue.

We are thus witnessing the beginnings of an alliance between Washington and the MB. The movement's statements have become more moderate vis-a-vis Washington and Israel than they used to be. The army and MB have been cooperating, with the latter providing assurances that it does not aspire to take power but only to participate in government. Thus a new page is being turned with Washington. We have also seen a clear shift in the official American line towards the MB. The cooperation in Egypt directly impacts the Palestinian reconciliation effort. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas could not have taken such a step as the reconciliation with Hamas in defiance of Washington. In the final analysis we must not forget that the MB cooperated closely with the US and its intelligence agencies in the 1950s and 60s.

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For two decades after the 1948 Nakba, popular action was dominated by the Arab nationalist movement in its various guises. The 1967 defeat undermined the nationalist current, and the 1970s witnessed the rise of the radical left, which failed to secure a dominant position. The fundamentalist current was also on the rise during that transitional period, and Arab regimes used it to confront the left, often with the Saudi kingdom financing the Islamic movements. Then came the 1979 Iranian revolution which showed that the religious current could evolve in an anti-Western direction and therefore pose a threat to Western interests. This change set a political cycle in motion in the region. The US tried to draw a distinction between Sunni and Shia Islam, as evidenced in its continued collaboration with Sunni fundamentalism in Afghanistan. However, after the invasion of Kuwait, the position adopted by several Sunni Islamic movements led to a breach between them and both the Saudi kingdom and the US. Yet the religious current has remained dominant for three decades, from the time of the Iranian revolution until today.

There were indications since 2009 that this phase is ending and a new one is beginning. In 2009, the Iranian model plunged into crisis faced with popular protests. Meanwhile, the rise of the class struggle and workers' movements in Egypt, in particular, and the sharpening of social conflicts in several countries such as Tunisia and Morocco signaled the things to come. The religious current stays aloof from this kind of struggle, which is at odds with its nature and program. These were important signs.

We are today entering a new political stage, but it is a transitional period in which the leadership of popular action is being contested by three forces. First there is the religious current, which has gained from recent events. But they are now reduced to being one force among others in the movement, after having been virtually the only opposition in previous times. The second force is a new kind of liberal current, composed of middle classes rather than capitalists, mostly professionals, students, unemployed graduates, and intellectuals, who are reformist in the social sense. These groups are not organized in a single party, but form a network which enjoys a certain degree of cohesion. The third force is the workers' movement and an array of allied leftist formations. The condition of the left varies from one country to another. It plays an important role in Tunisia, but less so in Egypt.

We are living through a revolutionary process and cannot prophesize its future. But while people have for years imagined that any shakeup in the region could only be brought about by religious groups, it is now clear that other forces are competing with them to lead popular action.

DC: Can Israel bear all these popular upheavals and revolutions?

GA: With the rise and radicalization of the nationalist current in the 1960s, the Saudi kingdom asked the Americans to evacuate their Dhahran airbase to fend off pressure from this current. The US found compensation for the exit of its troops from the Gulf in building a military alliance with Israel. The Zionist state's standing as a key ally of the US was bolstered after the victory it achieved in 1967, and the Iranian revolution further enhanced Israel's importance. This situation persisted until Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which provided the US with a golden opportunity to stage a military comeback in the region. Israel's value accordingly declined.

At the time, Washington deemed it necessary to settle the Palestinian question, which was fuelling resentment against it. A period of unprecedented pressure and tension ensued between Washington and Tel Aviv in 1991. The Madrid conference was convened, and the Oslo accords were signed two years later. But their limitations quickly became apparent, and they were effectively terminated in 2000 with the second intifada.

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 restored the full importance of the Zionist ally to Washington. Afterwards, with US failure in Iraq, Israel was given free rein in the region. The revolutions we are facing are a source of anxiety for Israel, to be sure. But the Zionist state also sees them as strengthening its standing as a rock of stability from the perspective of US interests at a time when all Arab regimes are teetering.

DC: What kind of resolution could there realistically be to the crisis in Syria?

GA: Frankly, the prospect of a smooth transfer of power has receded with time due to the savagery of the repression there. This has created a great deal of hostility between a large section of the people and the regime. The involvement of the military establishment in the repression has meanwhile given its chiefs a strong interest in adhering to the regime: its downfall would mean them facing trial. I see no line of retreat for the regime. It has been escalating the repression, and this has polarized the situation. We have seen that wherever initial demands for reform have been met with harsh repression, they have turned into demands for regime change. Where the regimes have acted more astutely, as in Morocco and Jordan, the demands have remained confined to reform. In Syria today, the least that the protest movement could accept would be the discard of the existing constitution and free elections. But I cannot see the Syrian regime agreeing to that. If Assad had continued with the reforms that he began immediately after assuming office, he would have avoided the current situation. I see only two prospects for Syria: either bloody regime survival through more violence and repression or a civil war. The regime's collapse could come about as a result of the implosion of its armed agencies. If that were to happen, there would be a civil war.

The revolutionary process is continuing all over the region. Nobody knows what the Arab world will look like in six months time. All options are open, and some of them are frightening indeed. But we've been through a very long night, and things are only beginning to change.

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