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Book review

The Arab Revolutions: The Game's Not Over Yet

- Reviews section -

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Long-time revolutionary activist, historian, and analyst Gilbert Achcar has produced a provocative assessment of the Arab Spring. In *The People Want*, Achcar develops a Marxist analysis of the roots of the Arab revolutions, traces their trajectories since December 2010, and draws a tentative balance sheet of what progress has been made and what possibilities remain.

Using a classical Marxian framework, Achcar roots the dysfunctionality of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Arab regimes in a clash between outmoded relations of production and the forces of economic production. Achcar relies heavily on the concept of “rentier” capitalism to explain the modalities of Arab states and economies. Rentier capitalist states derive the bulk of their income not from taxing profits and incomes but in collecting royalties, fees, and foreign aid (rents) for providing vital services. Such rents can include payments to states for private concessions to export raw materials (e.g., oil and gas), tolls for access to vital trade routes, or foreign aid in exchange for playing a particular regional military role (72-83; all page numbers refer to the Kindle edition).

While rents produce fabulous wealth for a narrow elite tied to the state, they do little to develop the economies of their countries. Nor do they mesh well with neoliberal modernization and its emphasis on privatization and a smaller state.

The wave of post-colonial nationalist revolts of the 1950s and 1960s elevated to power dictators in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Iraq. All of them relied upon nationalist rhetoric and top-down bureaucratic versions of “socialism.” This model of socialism involved extensive nationalization and states powerful enough to regulate domestic capitalism. These dictators established Bonapartist regimes in which the means of social production were not socialized and some big capitalists were embedded within the state (116-120). In Egypt, for example, many landed aristocrats who had urbanized in the early twentieth century and transitioned into the export sector became bulwarks of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime in the 1950s. Similarly, Syrian Baathist ruler, Hafez al-Assad, although an Alawite, struck a historic bargain with the Sunni bourgeoisie of Damascus in 1970. The latter tied their fates to the Baathist state from that point to the present day. Libya, however, seems partially exceptional. Achcar describes Muammar Gaddafi’s regime as a peculiar combination of absolutist patrimonialism and charismatic authority. In the 1970s, his first decade in power, he adopted sharia law while at the same time engaging in a nationalization program modeled on the Communist bloc (199-203).

The 1970s was a turning point in that it marked the failure and decline of Arab nationalism, the turn toward partial privatization, and the growth of political Islam. The defeat of the Arab alliance at Israel’s hands in 1967 shattered popular confidence in a pan-Arabist vision of liberation led by nationalist dictators. Many nationalist dictators followed the course of Egypt’s *intifah*—a partial opening to private and foreign investment.

However, even Egyptian rulers feared social discontent. Dramatic “shock therapy”—wholesale privatization and cuts in social services—could trigger strikes and protests. The growth in the labor movements in Egypt and Tunisia justified those fears, as did the earlier histories of labor activism in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The result was a series of rotten compromises: halting, partial, highly regulated, and corrupt privatizations in the 1980s and 1990s.

The result of this local neoliberal dead end is that most of the region’s economies have ended up marrying the disadvantages of a bureaucratic state capitalism that had reached the limits of its developmentalist potential with the disadvantages of a corrupt neoliberal capitalism—without the benefit of any of the purported advantages of statism or neoliberalism (94).

Achcar's attempt to connect the crisis of Middle Eastern economic development to the theorized conflict between the forces and relations of production does not come across clearly enough. Nonetheless, his historical tracing of the manifestations of the crisis and its national specificities is quite strong and original. Achcar's analysis of the growth of political Islam since the 1970s is also complex and innovative. He argues that political Islam's appeal to the petty bourgeois and professional sectors, particularly in Egypt, followed the discrediting of pan-Arabism and the growth of a super-rich bourgeois elite. While much of that history has been explored by others, his examination of the shifting interrelationship between the United States, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the dictatorships of Anwar el-Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, and Saddam Hussein, and the Saudi and Qatari monarchies is illuminating and little discussed elsewhere.

Also powerful is his critique of those on the international left who, taken in by the radical rhetoric of numerous nationalist dictators, have been ambivalent in their support for the revolutionary movements unleashed by the Arab Spring. Some have even supported Assad and Gaddafi as "anti-imperialists." Achcar writes,

If one opposes imperialism because, by definition and as a general rule, it violates the peoples' right to self-determination, one will prioritize defense of that right, even in the exceptional cases in which, for purely opportunistic reasons, imperialism, too, defends certain peoples' exercise of it. It was inadmissible to qualify, in any way whatsoever, recognition of the Czechoslovak people's right freely to decide the kind of political regime it wished to establish [in 1968]. A fortiori, it was inadmissible to deny it that right on the pretext that the United States expressed support of it (simply because it was asserted against Moscow).

If, on the other hand, one considers anti-imperialism as such to be the supreme value, one will unhesitatingly endorse the crushing of peoples who assert their right freely to choose their own future, if only imperialism opportunistically supports them, or if one considers the despotic regime oppressing them to be "anti-imperialist." This is the dismal logic that has it that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" and, conversely, that "anyone who benefits from the friendship of my enemy is my enemy." Such logic is self-defeating. The best service that anti-imperialists can render imperialism is to demonstrate that they attach no more importance to the right of the peoples than it does. (238-9)

In the final chapter Achcar draws up a balance sheet of the progress of revolutionary change in a number of countries. He argues that in Egypt and Tunisia the revolutions have thus far been political: they have overthrown historic dictators and brought new actors onto the stage. The labor and women's movements have grown, as have political Islamist forces. However, the key institutions of the state, notably the Egyptian armed forces, remain intact and their commanding role in the economy has not changed. Quite the contrary, the uprisings of 2011 to the present may have temporarily safeguarded their economic power as they thwarted the project of Gamal Mubarak (the deposed dictator's son) to privatize assets owned or controlled by the army.

Achcar's assessment of Libya will likely prove more controversial. There the uprising of February 2011 triggered a ferocious backlash from the regime. By March Gaddafi's forces appeared on the verge of slaughtering the opposition. At that point the United Nations adopted Resolution 1973 which authorized air strikes against Gaddafi's forces. Achcar argues that the western powers were seeking a "Yemeni solution" — one in which the dictator would be overthrown but, as in Egypt, the instruments of the state would remain intact. (In other writings and interviews Achcar makes a similar argument about western goals in Syria today.) Thus they bombed Gaddafi's forces but refused to arm the rebels. However, the Yemeni solution proved elusive. Unlike in Egypt there were neither autonomous state institutions nor an independent ruling class that could step in and push Gaddafi aside. Instead, when the dictator fell in August 2011 he brought the state down with him. The aftermath, in Achcar's view, provides grounds for hope. Conservative Islamic movements have been weaker than in other countries in the region and women's and youth movements have been stronger. Achcar does not directly address the debate within the international left over western intervention in Libya. At the time he did not oppose UN Resolution 1973, at least as long as the revolutionary movement was in imminent danger of being destroyed by Gaddafi's forces. By pointing out, however, that the defeat

of Gaddafi has kept open further revolutionary possibilities, he is, at least implicitly, confirming the view he held in 2011. While his argument is convincing it would have been stronger had he confronted some of the thornier problems his critics have raised: the number of civilian casualties caused by NATO bombings, and the racial violence unleashed against Black Africans during and after Gaddafi's collapse.

Achcar emphasizes that we are still in the early phases of what may turn into a decades-long revolutionary process. He argues that the political Islamic movements, while conservative and often (although not uniformly) counter-revolutionary, may have already peaked. He writes,

What this overview suggests is that while the earthquake of the Arab uprising has certainly caused an "Islamic tsunami," as was only to be expected, it was, all in all, limited in size and scope. We would, moreover, do well to spin the metaphor out to the end. A tsunami is a transitory phenomenon; it rarely engulfs stretches of land for good. In time, we may very well discover that the "Islamic tsunami" was both the high point of the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism that has been under way since the 1970s and also the point of departure for a new political cycle in the Arab region, one determined by the long-term revolutionary process that was set in motion on 17 December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. (261)

It is easy to follow the events of the Arab Spring as it continues to unfold and get excited by some developments only to have the enthusiasm dashed by new twists and turns. While it is important to not gloss over troubling data, Achcar is correct to insist that we are still in the early stages and many different roads are still open. What he says about Libya is true for the entire region: "The game is not over yet"

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