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Egypt

Whither Egypt?

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To help explain the thrilling developments in Egypt, Farooq Sulehnia interviewed leading Arab scholar-activist Gilbert Achcar on February 4.

Do you think that Mubarak's pledge on February 1st not to contest the next election represented a victory for the movement, or was it just a trick to calm down the masses as on the very next day demonstrators in Al-Tahrir Square were brutally attacked by pro-Mubarak forces?

The Egyptian popular anti-regime uprising reached a first peak on February 1st, prodding Mubarak to announce concessions in the evening. It was an acknowledgement of the force of the popular protest and a clear retreat on the autocrat's part, coming on top of the announcement of the government's willingness to negotiate with the opposition. These were significant concessions indeed coming from such an authoritarian regime, and a testimony to the importance of the popular mobilisation. Mubarak even pledged to speed up ongoing judicial actions against fraud perpetrated during the previous parliamentary elections.

He made it clear, however, that he was not willing to go beyond that. With the army firmly on his side, he was trying to appease the mass movement, as well as the Western powers that were urging him to reform the political system. Short of resignation, he granted some of the key demands that the Egyptian protest movement had formulated initially, when it launched its campaign on January 25. However, the movement has radicalized since that day to a point where anything short of Mubarak's resignation won't be enough to satisfy it, with many in the movement even demanding that he gets tried in court.

Moreover, all the regime's key institutions are now denounced by the movement as illegitimate--the executive as well as the legislative, i.e. the parliament. As a result, part of the opposition is demanding that the head of the constitutional court be appointed as interim president, to preside over the election of a constituent assembly. Others even want a national committee of opposition forces to supervise the transition. Of course, these demands constitute a radical democratic perspective. In order to impose such a thorough change, the mass movement would need to break or destabilise the regime's backbone, that is the Egyptian army.

Do you mean that the Egyptian army is backing Mubarak?

Egypt--even more than comparable countries such as Pakistan or Turkey--is in essence a military dictatorship with a civilian façade that is itself stuffed with men originating in the military. The problem is that most of the Egyptian opposition, starting with the Muslim Brotherhood, have been sowing illusions about the army and its purported "neutrality," if not "benevolence." They have been depicting the army as an honest broker, while the truth is that the army as an institution is not "neutral" at all. If it has not been used yet to repress the movement, it is only because Mubarak and the general staff did not see it appropriate to resort to such a move, probably because they fear that the soldiers would be reluctant to carry out a repression. That is why the regime resorted instead to orchestrating counter-demonstrations and attacks by thugs on the protest movement. The regime tried to set up a semblance of civil strife, showing Egypt as torn apart between two camps, thus creating a justification for the army's intervention as the "arbiter" of the situation.

If the regime managed to mobilise a significant counter-movement and provoke clashes on a larger scale, the army could step in, saying: "Game over, everybody must go home now," while promising that the pledges made by Mubarak would be implemented. Like many observers, I feared these last two days that this stratagem might succeed in weakening the protest movement, but the huge mobilization of today's "day of departure" is reassuring.

The army will need to make further and more significant concessions to the popular uprising.

When you talk of the opposition, what forces does it include? Of course, we hear about the Muslim Brotherhood and El Baradei. Are there are other players too like left wing forces, trade unions, etc?

The Egyptian opposition includes a vast array of forces. There are parties like the Wafd, which are legal parties and constitute what may be called the liberal opposition. Then there is a grey zone occupied by the Muslim Brotherhood. It does not have a legal status but is tolerated by the regime. Its whole structure is visible; it is not an underground force. The Muslim Brotherhood is certainly, and by far, the largest force in the opposition. When Mubarak's regime, under US pressure, granted some space to the opposition in the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood--running as "independents"--managed to get 88 MPs, i.e. 20 percent of the parliamentary seats, despite all obstacles. In the last elections held last November and December, after the Mubarak regime had decided to close down the limited space that it had opened in 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood almost vanished from parliament, losing all its seats but one.

Among the forces on the left, the largest is the Tagammu party, which enjoys a legal status and has 5 MPs. It refers to the Nasserite legacy. Communists have been prominent within its ranks. It is basically a reformist left party, which is not considered a threat to the regime. On the contrary, it has been quite compliant with it on several occasions. There are also leftwing Nasserite and radical left groups in Egypt--small but vibrant, and very much involved in the mass movement.

Then there are "civil society" movements, like Kefaya, a coalition of activists from various opposition forces initiated in solidarity with the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000. It opposed the invasion of Iraq later on, and became famous afterwards as a democratic campaign movement against Mubarak's regime. From 2006 to 2009, Egypt saw the unfolding of a wave of industrial actions, including a few impressively massive workers strikes. There are no independent workers unions in Egypt, with one or two very recent exceptions born as a result of the social radicalisation. The bulk of the working class does not have the benefit of autonomous representation and organization. An attempt at convening a general strike on April 6, 2008 in solidarity with the workers led to the creation of the April 6 Youth Movement. Associations like this one and Kefaya are campaign-focused groups, not political parties, and they include people of different political affiliations along with unaffiliated activists.

When Mohamed El Baradei returned to Egypt in 2009 after his third term at the head of the IAEA, his personal prestige enhanced by the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize, a liberal and left coalition gathered around him, with the Muslim Brotherhood adopting a lukewarm reserved position. Many in the opposition saw El Baradei as a powerful candidate enjoying international reputation and connections, and constituting therefore a credible presidential candidate against Mubarak or his son. El Baradei thus became a rallying figure for a large section of the opposition, regrouping political forces as well as personalities. They formed the National Association for Change.

This whole array of forces is very much involved in the present uprising. However, the overwhelming majority of the people on the streets are without any sort of political affiliation. It is a huge mass outpouring of resentment at living under a despotic regime, fed by worsening economic conditions, as prices of basic necessities, like food, fuel, and electricity, have been sharply on the rise amid staggering joblessness. This is the case not only in Egypt but in most of the region as well, and that is why the fire of revolt that started in Tunisia spread so quickly to many Arab countries.

Is El Baradei genuinely popular, or is he in some way the Mir-Hossein Mousavi of the Egyptian movement, trying to change some faces while preserving the regime?

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I would disagree with this characterisation of Mousavi in the first place. To be sure, Mir-Hossein Mousavi did not want to "change the regime" if one mean by that a social revolution. But there was definitely a clash between authoritarian social forces, spearheaded by the Pasdaran and represented by Ahmedinejad, and others coalesced around a liberal reformist perspective represented by Mousavi. It was indeed a clash about the kind of "regime" in the sense of the pattern of political rule.

Mohamed El Baradei is a genuine liberal who wishes his country to move from the present dictatorship to a liberal democratic regime, with free elections and political freedoms. If such a vast array of political forces is willing to cooperate with him, it is because they see in him the most credible liberal alternative to the existing regime, a man who does not command an organised constituency of his own, and is therefore an appropriate figurehead for a democratic change.

Going back to your analogy, you can't compare him with Mousavi who was a member of the Iranian regime, one of the men who led the 1979 Islamic revolution. Mousavi had his own followers in Iran, before he emerged as the leader of the 2009 mass protest movement. In Egypt, El Baradei cannot play, and does not pretend to play a similar role. He is supported by a vast array of forces, but none of them see him as its leader.

The Muslim Brotherhood's initial reserved attitude towards El Baradei is partly related to the fact that he does not have a religious bent and is too secular for their taste. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood had cultivated an ambiguous relationship with the regime over the years. Had they fully backed El Baradei, they would have narrowed their margin of negotiation with the Mubarak regime, with which they have been bargaining for quite a long time. The regime conceded a lot to them in the socio-cultural sphere, increasing Islamic censorship in the cultural field being but one example. That was the easiest thing the regime could do to appease the Brotherhood. As a result, Egypt made huge steps backward from the secularisation that was consolidated under Gamal Abdul-Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Muslim Brotherhood's goal is to secure a democratic change that would grant them the possibility to take part in free elections, both parliamentary and presidential. The model they aspire to reproduce in Egypt is that of Turkey, where the democratisation process was controlled by the military with the army remaining a key pillar of the political system. This process nonetheless created a space which allowed the AKP, an Islamic conservative party, to win elections. They are not bent on overthrowing the state, hence their courting of the military and their care to avoid any gesture that could antagonize the army. They adhere to a strategy of gradual conquest of power: they are gradualists, not radicals.

The Western media are hinting at the fact that democracy in the Middle East would lead to an Islamic fundamentalist takeover. We have seen the triumphal return of Rached Ghannouchi to Tunisia after long years in exile. The Muslim Brotherhood is likely to win fair elections in Egypt. What is your comment on that?

I would turn the whole question around. I would say that it is the lack of democracy that led religious fundamentalist forces to occupy such a space. Repression and the lack of political freedoms reduced considerably the possibility for left-wing, working-class and feminist movements to develop in an environment of worsening social injustice and economic degradation. In such conditions, the easiest venue for the expression of mass protest turns out to be the one that uses the most readily and openly available channels. That's how the opposition got dominated by forces adhering to religious ideologies and programmes.

We aspire to a society where such forces are free to defend their views, but in an open and democratic ideological competition between all political currents. In order for Middle Eastern societies to get back on the track of political secularisation, back to the popular critical distrust of the political exploitation of religion that prevailed in the 1950s

and 1960s, they need to acquire the kind of political education that can be achieved only through a long-term practise of democracy.

Having said this, the role of religious parties is different in different countries. True, Rached Ghannouchi has been welcomed by a few thousand people on his arrival at Tunis airport. But his Nahda movement has much less influence in Tunisia than the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Of course, this is in part because Al-Nahda suffered from harsh repression since the 1990s. But it is also because the Tunisian society is less prone than the Egyptian to religious fundamentalist ideas, due to its higher degree of Westernisation and education, and the country's history.

But there is no doubt that Islamic parties have become the major forces in the opposition to existing regimes over the whole region. It will take a protracted democratic experience to change the direction of winds from that which has been prevailing for more than three decades. The alternative is the Algerian scenario where an electoral process was blocked by the army by way of a military coup in 1992, leading to a devastating civil war for which Algeria is still paying the price.

The amazing surge of democratic aspirations among Arab peoples of these last few weeks is very encouraging indeed. Neither in Tunisia, nor in Egypt or anywhere else, were popular protests waged for religious programs, or even led principally by religious forces. These are democratic movements, displaying a strong longing for democracy. Polls have been showing for many years that democracy as a value is rated very highly in Middle Eastern countries, contrary to common "Orientalist" prejudices about the cultural "incompatibility" of Muslim countries with democracy. The ongoing events prove one more time that any population deprived of freedom will eventually stand up for democracy, whatever "cultural sphere" it belongs to.

Whoever runs and wins future free elections in the Middle East will have to face a society where the demand for democracy has become very strong indeed. It will be quite difficult for any party--whatever its programme--to hijack these aspirations. I am not saying that it will be impossible. But one major outcome of the ongoing events is that popular aspirations to democracy have been hugely boosted. They create ideal conditions for the left to rebuild itself as an alternative.