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Middle East

The Arab revolutions in perspective

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This interview with Gilbert Achcar was conducted by Yvan Lemaitre, and published in the newspaper of the French New Anticapitalist Party (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste; NPA) on 28 July 28 2011.

Yvan Lemaitre: The smothering of all political life by the Arab dictatorships may have obscured the politicisation through anti-imperialist struggles of intellectual circles, of the workers' movement and of the populations overall in the aftermath of World War II. Isn't this political base re-emerging today in the revolutions underway?

Gilbert Achcar: What is happening today should be placed indeed in the context of the long modern history of the Arab states. Without going back too far in time, we can situate the current revolutionary wave in the evolution that took place since the previous regional wave of upheaval, following the Nakba, the Arab defeat in Palestine in 1948. The rise of the nationalist movement in the 1950s and 1960s managed then to capture and stem the popular protest, but also accompany it in its socio-economic and political radicalisation. The new Arab defeat of June 1967 at the hands of Israel signalled the beginning of the decline of Arab nationalism. The 1970s were years of transition during which three currents battled for hegemony: declining nationalism, a new radical left partly originating in nationalism, and Islamic fundamentalism fuelled by Saudi petrodollars and favoured by the existing regimes as an antidote to the left.

After the Iranian revolution of 1979, a new historic phase began, three decades during which regional popular protest was dominated by religious currents, with the decline and marginalisation of the left. In recent years, however, the socio-economic consequences of neoliberal globalisation have led to a new rise in social protest, class struggle, propelled by the effects of the crisis and the deterioration of living conditions. In Egypt, the years 2006-2009 saw a wave of workers' struggles that went beyond anything the country and the region had seen before.

This revival of class struggle "an area in which the religious currents which advocate social conciliation are virtually absent" indicated that we were entering a new political phase, a new phase of transition. With the current revolutionary wave, we see a strengthening of the mobilisation and role of the working class in Tunisia and Egypt, the two leading countries so far. We see also, more modestly, a new rise of the radical left. We also see the powerful emergence of a new liberalism in the American sense of the word, a political liberalism, rather progressive on the social plane, whose best known representative is the April 6 youth movement in Egypt.

While it is much exaggerated to speak of a "Facebook revolution," it is quite true that a generation exists that got politicised within the limits of this new liberalism, a generation that found in this technology its means of organisation. From Morocco to Syria, we have seen a prominent role played in the organisation of mobilisations by electronic communication networks, whose adherents in their great majority are young people inspired by liberal, democratic and secular aspirations, combined with social reformism. There is here a significant potential for radicalisation that the left, if it knows how to deal with it, could influence.

We have entered a new period of transition, with a reshuffle of the cards creating a strong competition between, on the one hand, the new rising forces "the workers' movement, the left and the liberal youth" and on the other, the Islamic movements.

YL: You talk of revolutions as if there is a single process. What is the role of pan-Arabism in the consciousness of participants and in the actual developments?

GA: We should use the term "Arab" in quotation marks. We could characterise this region as Arab in the geopolitical sense of the Arab League of States, in the sense also that Arabic is the official language there, though not always exclusively. Morocco and Algeria, in particular, are Arab-Amazigh countries.

Pan-Arabism, or in other words Arab nationalism, was the dominant ideology in the mass movement at the regional scale during the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, this nationalism represented an aspiration to a unity in the manner of the great European bourgeois unifications, from above, mainly crystallised around the person of Egypt's President Nasser. The defeat of the Arab nationalist movement was accompanied by an ebb of the "nationalitarian" ideology. Today, the fact that the protest movement has spread like wildfire in the Arabic speaking area bordered by the Sahara, Iran and Turkey, can only be explained by the links created by this cultural, linguistic and historic community. The satellite chain Al-Jazeera strongly contributed to that, as, of course, did electronic communications.

A new regional consciousness is in the process of emerging, which is no longer the aspiration to a unity from above, through dictatorship, but a much more democratic aspiration to unity from below. Rather than the European models of past centuries, it is the confederal and democratic model of the current European Union (putting aside its social content, of course) which best matches what the youth of today may wish for.

The actual attempts at unification which occurred until now in the Arab world have taken the form one might expect for unions between dictatorial regimes. They were either bound to break up, through the failure of one country's grip over another like in the 1958 Syrian- Egyptian union, or lacking in consistency like the 1989 Arab Maghreb Union. Today, there is the consciousness that before arriving at unification, deep democratic changes are needed in the countries concerned.

YL: What stage are the Arab revolutions at now and what are their perspectives?

GA: The point on which a broad consensus exists is that things are only just beginning. Even in the two countries where victories have been won, Tunisia and Egypt, there are as many if not more elements of continuity with the old regime as of discontinuity. What has been overthrown is the tip of the iceberg; all the rest is still there, i.e. the bulk of the dominant class and the power apparatuses. That is indeed why the fight continues, as in Egypt with the mobilisation against the military council that has assumed power since the departure of Mubarak.

The most appropriate phrase to describe what has happened in the region is "revolutionary process," rather than "revolution" in the sense of a finished process. Unleashed by the events of December 2010 in Tunisia and continued in Egypt, the revolutionary process is underway on a regional scale; it is only at its beginning. It has not yet won initial victory in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria – not to mention the other countries where demonstrations have not yet reached a massive scale – and it remains largely unfinished in Tunisia and Egypt. The Egyptians were quite right in calling their revolution by the date of its beginning: the "revolution of January 25."

They are still far from reaching the end. The latter is difficult to predict, because as in any period of revolutionary upheaval marked by the irruption of the masses onto the political scene, history accelerates to a dizzying degree.

That said, any return to the status quo ante is excluded. You can't turn the wheel of history backwards. The Arab world entered in 2011 into a period of transition which opens several possibilities like any revolutionary process.

The most desirable perspective from my point of view is the deepening and consolidation of the democratic conquests in such a way as to allow the construction of a social and political workers' movement capable of starting a new phase of radicalisation of the process, on a class basis. The main alternative perspective today is the limitation of the democratic transformation in favour of the continuity of the regimes, by co-opting the fundamentalist

The Arab revolutions in perspective

movements. This is what the US calls "orderly transition," which is why they have now established official relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. There also remains, of course, the perspective of a phase of prolonged instability with social and economic consequences that could ultimately lead to an authoritarian power confiscating the revolution and its gains — like the aftermath of the revolution of 1848 in France, which led to the "18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" [the title of Karl Marx's book on the 1851 coup of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte]. Such a development cannot be ruled out.

That is why it is fundamental that the left know how to fight for political democracy, with the alliances that this fight requires, while considering it essential to construct an independent workers' movement on both the trade union and political fronts.