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Arab revolutions

# An Unfinished Epoch of Revolution

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV552 - January 2021 -

Publication date: Friday 29 January 2021

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**Revolutions have been the most significant form of political and social conflict in the 20th century, perhaps in human history, with the possible exception of international wars. The outbreak of the revolutionary process in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region over the last decade is part of these major and groundbreaking events in human history. There is no doubt that the first wave of revolts in 2011 marked the opening of an unfinished epoch of revolution and counter-revolution.**

## A Long-Term Revolutionary Process

A revolution is generally understood as a mass popular movement that aims for radical change even if it fails to achieve it. In the case of the MENA uprisings in 2011, they have not won radical material changes in the economic structures of the region, but have toppled family cliques from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, and Sudan, among others.

In other words, we witnessed forms of limited political revolution rather than social revolution, which would have brought about more fundamental changes in the neoliberal regime of accumulation within capitalism, if not the mode production itself. It is important to grasp the limits of political victories, because the problems in the region are not just political but are social products of its particular form of capitalism.

Nonetheless, we witnessed the mobilization of large numbers of people demanding the overthrow of despotic regimes in country after country. This is one of the main aspects of a revolution. As Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote:

The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events. In ordinary times the states, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line of business – kings minister, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime.

Some of the popular uprisings achieved a situation close to dual power. They organized an emergent alternative state to challenge the existing regime. One important example of this was in Syria during the early stages of the uprising when activists established coordination committees and local councils in liberated areas.

These formed a potential alternative to the Assad regime and Syrian capitalism. But they never fully developed. There were problems with them, especially the underrepresentation of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities. Nevertheless, these local organs of self-rule formed at least for a while a political alternative that could appeal to large sections of the population.

Despite the defeat of the first wave of uprisings in 2011, most horrifically in Syria, the revolutionary process has not

come to an end. As the subsequent decade of ongoing revolt has underscored, the region is in the midst of a long term revolutionary process.

# The Roots of the Revolutionary Process

This process is rooted in the political economy of Middle East and North Africa. The region's economic development is blocked by its specific mode of production, which is an adventurous, speculative and commercial capitalism characterized by short term profit-seeking. As a result, the region's masses have a confluence of economic and political grievances that can only be overcome by revolutionary change.

In this analysis, the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa not just of the result of the global economic crisis of 2008. Certainly, the Great Recession helped trigger them, but the region has deeper structural problems compared to the rest of the world system. This mode of capitalist production is focused on extracting oil and natural gas, underdeveloping productive sectors, overdeveloping services, and fuelling various forms of speculative investment especially in real estate.

Each country of course has its own specificities. But all of them share some broad characteristics: patrimonial and neo-patrimonial states rule over this economic structure. In classic patrimonial states like Syria and the Gulf monarchies, a family and their clique preside over dictatorships, enrich a state bourgeoisie, and engage in crony privatization. In neo-patrimonial states like Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Sudan, dictators oversee states controlled by the military apparatus. In both cases, nepotism and corruption are rife.

Neoliberal policies and austerity measures implemented over the last few decades have exacerbated the region's authoritarian politics and blocked economic development. The regimes have cut public services, removed subsidies to basic necessities like food, and privatized state industry often selling them to capitalists linked to the centers of political power.

They have also opened their economies to foreign direct investment, developing the export and service sector – especially tourism. At the same time, the states have kept taxes on both foreign and domestic companies low and guaranteed them cheap labor. The regimes' repressive apparatuses have served as a "security agent" protecting the interests of these companies and cracking down on workers, peasants, and the poor.

As a result, all the region's countries are characterized by extreme class inequality, high rates of poverty, and high unemployment, especially among youth. Those with education and valued skills leave their countries for opportunities elsewhere.

And, in the case of the Gulf monarchies, their economies rely on temporary migrant workers who make up the majority of the laboring population and are deprived of political and civil rights. In Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman, migrant workers represent more than 80 percent of the workforce.

These realities contradict claims made by the international financial institutions and Western states, especially the US, that neoliberal reform would create a "middle class" or capitalist class, which, with imperial support for political reform, would bring about democratization. In fact, it has produced the opposite: deepening neoliberal authoritarianism.

These conditions generated increasing struggle among workers and oppressed people in the run-up to the uprisings

in 2011. It has been driven from below by youth, workers, and poor people desperate for political freedom and economic equality.

# Struggle and Hope for Revolution

This is not to say that we should adopt an economistic perspective, which reduces everything to economic conditions. There are of course many other contributing factors. But the socio-economic blockage combined with the region's dictatorial regimes have made it impossible for the masses of people to overcome inequality and express their grievances through institutional processes.

These material conditions predisposed the people to struggle. But those conditions alone were not enough to detonate the uprisings. As Trotsky argued, popular classes turn to revolutionary action when they see the hope of transforming their society:

In reality, the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection, if it were, the masses would always be in revolt. It is necessary that the bankruptcy of the social regime, being conclusively revealed, should make these privations intolerable, and that new conditions and new ideas should open the prospect of a revolutionary way out.

The hope and new ideas that sparked the revolts in 2011 came from witnessing millions of people in the streets in Tunisia and Egypt demanding the overthrow of their rulers. But the inspiring struggles in those two countries did not come out of nowhere.

In the decade prior to the uprising, significant workers' struggle occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) played a leading role in opposition to authoritarian regimes, despite the fact that it had been seriously weakened by a combination of repression, privatization of public jobs, and compromises by the union leadership with the regime.

In Egypt, the country witnessed its largest social movement since World War II, with strikes and occupations from different sectors of society. The strikes in the factories of Mahala el Kubra in 2008 testified to the strength of the workers' movement despite the repression of the security forces. These struggles progressively paved the way for the establishment of independent workers trade unions, who played a decisive role in the overthrow of Mubarak (although not officially recognized) and the first years of the uprising.

Thus, based on years of struggle, the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt showed how mass mobilization could topple dictators. Their victories, if incomplete in the case of Tunisia and temporary in the case of Egypt, inspired the region's masses to rise up against their own regimes.

## MENA Revolts Spark the Global Resistance

The first decade of the new millennium started with the launch of the so-called "War on Terror" in 2001 and came to a close with the Great Recession in 2008 and subsequent global slump. The popular uprisings in the Middle East and

North African region opened the next decade, triggering resistance throughout the world against the neoliberal order and governments that enforce it.

The uprisings in the MENA region overthrew the dictatorships of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Khadafi in Libya, and Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen, all of whom had been ruling for decades. Without a doubt, the greatest achievement of the popular uprisings was to remind the left that revolution in which masses of people mobilize to remake society is possible. This ABC of revolutionary politics had been widely abandoned among wide sections of the left.

The MENA uprisings inspired revolts throughout the world. A short list includes the Indignados Movement in Spain, Occupy in the United States, uprisings against price hikes and repression in Sub-Saharan African states like Burkina Faso, and similar struggles in many other countries.

The end of this decade of revolt culminated with a second wave of the revolutionary process in the MENA region with uprisings erupting in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Two new dictators—Omar al-Bashir in Sudan and Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria—were overthrown after 30 years of rule, while the sectarian neoliberal ruling classes in Lebanon and Iraq were challenged.

This second wave occurred in the midst of rising massive popular mobilizations throughout the globe for political and social rights and equality from Hong Kong and Thailand to Catalonia and Chile. Massive feminist strikes and protests were also organized to fight against reactionary attacks women's rights from Poland to Argentina. In 2019 climate strikes swept the world and the decade ended with the Black Lives Matter uprising that shook the political and racial order in the US.

The international popular mobilizations deepened the global radicalization against the capitalist system that exploits and oppresses humanity and destroys the environment all for profit. The pandemic has only deepened grievances around the globe and called into question the legitimacy of governments.

## The Counter-Revolutionary Offensive

While the MENA revolts inspired similar uprisings around the world, they also triggered a counter-revolutionary offensive from the regimes, regional powers, and imperialist states. Just like the Russian Revolution in 1917, the uprisings constituted a threat to the capitalist order, especially because its energy reserves power the global economy.

As David Harvey argues, "whoever controls the Middle East controls the global oil spigot and whoever controls the oil spigot can control the global economy, at least for the near future." The Gulf monarchies hold around 40-45 percent of the world's oil reserves and 20 percent of its gas.

The desire to ensure orderly flow of those reserves explains why, after a short period of confusion, state powers carried out systematic counter-revolutions. The region's regimes repressed protests, killed massive numbers of people, and arrested and jailed untold numbers more. For example, the Syrian regime, with the backing of Russia and Iran, massacred hundreds of thousands and laid waste to large parts of the country.

The revolts also confronted another counter-revolutionary force: Islamic fundamentalist organizations. They hoped to hijack the struggles in order to impose their own form of neoliberal authoritarian and theocratic regime, contrary to

the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of the people. The fundamentalists found support from regional powers like the Gulf states and Iran.

Various regional and imperialist powers intervened in multiple and diverse ways to back the counter-revolutions. Powers besides the US have increased room to do this because of Washington's relative decline in power and influence in the Middle East as a result of its failed occupation of Iraq. Russia and China to a lesser extent but above all Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey, Qatar, and Israel took advantage of this situation to play a growing role in backing counter-revolution.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar at first militarily intervened in Bahrain and launched a war against Yemen with the support in both cases from the United States. Iran and Russia intervened in Syria. Iran and its proxy forces in Iraq and Lebanon also opposed the revolts in these countries and did not hesitate to repress protestors.

Turkey and its ally Qatar have supported the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic fundamentalist movements in various countries. Ankara has also intervened in Syrian territory controlled by the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, in its ongoing war against Kurdish self-determination.

While that imperialist and regional rivalries are evident, they don't preclude alliances across those divisions. As Karl Marx noted, capitalists and capitalist states are a "band of warring brothers." Thus, at the same time that they find themselves in competition to assert geopolitical power and corner markets for their corporations, they share class interests, can reach agreements, and often collaborate in repressing popular uprisings.

The latest example of this is Qatar's reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which could pave the way for a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The Trump administration also pushed them all to throw Palestinians under the bus and open official diplomatic relations with Israel. Washington's aim is to bolster Israel, isolate the Palestinian struggle for liberation, consolidate a regional alliance opposed to Iran.

In securing this reconciliation, the US struck two particularly reactionary deals. First, Washington got Morocco to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for the US recognizing the Rabat's occupation of the Western Sahara and its pledge of \$3 billion of investments for "financial and technical support of private investment projects."

Second, the US forced Sudan's new government, in which the military jointly rules with representatives of the popular uprising, to pay for what the old regime did. In exchange for removal from Washington's list of state sponsors of terror, help in repaying its \$60 billion debt to the World Bank, and \$1 billion in aid, Sudan agreed to repay the \$335 million for bombings of African embassies and to recognize Israel.

## Neoliberal Authoritarianism

Thus, the revolts continue to face various counter-revolutionary forces utterly opposed to any and all radical democratic and socio-economic change. They are not just committed to restoring the status quo ante; they aim to intensify authoritarianism, repressive policies, and neoliberal reforms.

In carrying this out, the regimes backed by regional and imperial powers have exacerbated all the conditions that led to the uprisings. They have used the cover of the pandemic to escalate repression of protest movements.

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They imposed lockdowns on large portions of the population, not to protect the health of the working classes, but to prevent them from organizing and fighting for political and social change. They threatened people with fines for breaking the curfews, targeted the media for raising criticisms of their policies, and arrested activists who questioned the official reports about the virus.

They have also taken advantage of global recession and collapse in oil prices to implement previously even deeper neoliberal reforms, reducing the role of the state in the economy and expanding the reach of the market into previously untouched arena. Several countries have adopted public-private partnership (PPP) legislation in order to expand the privatization of public services and state infrastructure.

In Saudi Arabia, PPPs have become a fundamental element in the economic and political strategy of the Vision 2030 promoted by Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. They place private capital at the center of the future Saudi economy. The Financial Times described the plans as “Saudi Thatcherism.”

It has cut subsidies, eliminated the cost-of-living allowance, and increased in VAT from 5 to 15 percent. The government plans to organize PPPs for many government services, including sectors such as education, housing, and health. Meanwhile, the kingdom’s sovereign wealth fund has invested more than \$8 billion since the start of the pandemic in behemoths of the global economy such as Boeing and Facebook.

In a similar fashion, the Syrian regime has accelerated its neoliberal policies. It passed a PPP law in January 2016 that authorizes the private sector to manage and develop state assets in all sectors of the economy, with the exception of oil. The regime has imposed more austerity measures and cut subsidies on essential products from 20.2 per cent of GDP in 2011 to 4.9 per cent in 2019.

This neoliberal authoritarianism further deepened social inequality. Now, in the MENA region, the richest 1 percent and richest 10 percent of the population take in, respectively, 30 percent and 64 percent of income, while the bottom 50 percent of the population only take in 9.4 percent.

In the region as a whole, the wealth of its 37 billionaires was equivalent to the poorest half of the adult population. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2019, the number of wealthy individuals with assets of \$5 million or more in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco increased by 24 percent, and their combined wealth increased by 13.27 percent, from \$195.5 billion to \$221.5 billion.

In a report published in August 2020 by Oxfam, it was estimated that the economic contraction caused by pandemic and recession will throw an additional 45 million people into poverty throughout the region. Conditions for refugees and migrant workers, which was already very difficult, have grown dramatically worse and they have become the target of racist scapegoating.

The imperialist powers have collaborated with the regimes in this neoliberal authoritarianism. Their international financial institutions have used debt, which has reached astronomical proportions in Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan, to demand further structural adjustment to their economies even as they sink deeper into recession.

As a result, movement activists are now raising the demand for debt cancellation. Tunisia is an example. The IMF’s Extended Fund Facility imposed several austerity measures, causing the depreciation of the Tunisian dinar in 2017, and consequent inflation has impoverished the popular classes and sharply increased unemployment levels.

The government’s foreign debt now represents around two thirds of total public debt in 2020 and is funds that would

otherwise go to public welfare are now being diverted to service it. Activists are now opposing debt payment. So, while Tunisia has won greater democracy, the socio-economic conditions for the majority have worsened.

Increasing numbers of Tunisians are fleeing their country, not because of political repression, but poverty. Five times as many people left this year than in 2019. They risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean and if they survive that, they face the EU's brutal border regime and racist discrimination in European countries. The region is thus again becoming a powder keg of economic and political grievances.

## Challenges of the Left: Building a Political Instrument for Resistance

One of the key problems in the waves of resistance to these conditions has been the extreme weakness of the radical left and organized working class. These have been unable to intervene as a central political force among the popular classes and participate in their self-organization to achieve economic and political demands.

In Egypt, there were initially large economic struggles and growing independent trade unions, but they never cohered into a political vehicle of sufficient size to articulate class demands and organize on a mass level. The only exceptions to this situation were in Tunisia and Sudan.

In both countries the presence of mass trade union organizations such as the Tunisian UGTT and the Sudanese Professional Association were key elements in organizing successful mass struggles. Women had also built large feminist organizations that continue to raise progressive demands for their rights.

Of course, the struggles in both countries have also hit the limits of simple political change. The UGTT and Sudanese Professional Association played pivotal roles, but their leadership has been tempted to seek accommodation with the ruling elites rather than radical socio-economic change.

Nevertheless, Tunisia and Sudan's mass organizations remain the exception in the region. Elsewhere, workers and the oppressed did not have such organizations in place, making it difficult for the masses to replace the regimes with a progressive alternative. In the coming years, the left must play a central role in the construction and development of such large alternative political organizations.

The left also needs to develop a political strategy that does just seek a political revolution, but also a social revolution in which the structures of society and the mode of production are radically changed. Indeed, the only way to guarantee a political revolution is to achieve a social one.

The left should not advocate stagist strategy of first carrying out a cross-class revolution for democracy and delaying for an unspecified period of time a complete social revolution. We have seen the problems with that strategy in countries like South Africa, where Apartheid was dismantled, but social and class inequalities have grown worse.

As Daniel Bensaïd argues,

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Between the social and political struggles there are neither Chinese walls nor watertight compartments. Politics arises and is invented inside the social, in the resistance to oppression, the statement of new rights that transform victims into active subjects.

Socialists in these struggles must champion the liberation of all the oppressed, raising demands of rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups. Failure to do so will prevent the left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society.

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The recent outbreak of protests in Tunisia on the 10th anniversary of the overthrow of dictator Ben Ali demonstrates the anger of wide sectors of the popular classes against economic woes, social inequality, unemployment, political corruption, and a whole host of other problems.

Moreover, the new democratic government has violently repressed the protests and arrested more than 1000 people, including minors. It even arrested individuals who had not taken part in the demonstrations – simply because they wrote Facebook posts supporting the protest movement.

This scenario points to the limits of political revolution without social revolution. It also underscores the importance of the left developing an independent class project aimed advancing both democratization and social transformation.

The point about the independence of the left is key because one the mistakes that the left has made especially during the first wave of revolt has been to align itself with one of the two forces of counter-revolution.

Some have collaborated with the authoritarian regimes against the Islamic fundamentalists with disastrous results. That has resulted only in the contraction of the democratic space for workers and oppressed people to organize for liberation. The regimes remain the first and foremost enemy of revolutionary forces in the region.

At the same time, other sectors of the left have allied with Islamic fundamentalist organizations against the state. The Islamic fundamentalists, whether in or out of power, are reactionaries; they target workers, trade unions, and democratic organizations, all while promoting neoliberal economics and reactionary social policies. They are also part of the counter-revolution.

Instead of turning to either of these two forces, the left must build an independent, democratic, and progressive front that seeks to promote the self-organization of workers and the oppressed. In this project, it must be understood that workers' struggles alone will not, however, be sufficient to unite the masses.

Socialists in these struggles must champion the liberation of all the oppressed, raising demands of rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups. Failure to do so will prevent the left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society.

The left must also cultivate a regional and internationalist vision, something currently lacking in much of the world. The region's left must build networks of collaboration in building a progressive alternative to the local, regional, and imperial counter-revolutionary forces.

The ruling classes of the region share experiences and lessons with each other to defend their authoritarian neoliberal order. The left has to do the same because the struggle is a regional one. A defeat in one country is a defeat for all, and victory in one country is a victory for all.

The region's left must develop collaborative relationships with progressive forces internationally. No socialist solution can be found in one country or in one region, particularly one like the Middle East and North Africa, which, because of its strategic energy reserves, has been a battleground for regional and imperialist powers.

New explosions of popular anger are to be expected because the root causes of the uprisings not only remain but have in fact multiplied and intensified. However, these conditions do not necessarily directly translate into political opportunities, particularly for countries that have suffered wars and a suffering deep economic crisis. But struggle lies ahead.

The left must participate in the construction of united fronts against autocracy, exploitation, and oppression, and at the same time build a political alternative among the popular classes. These are the tasks not just of the left in the MENA region, but throughout the world.

## Conclusion

The MENA revolutionary process is an integral part of the global popular resistance against the crisis-ridden neoliberal capitalist order. But it has a particular radicalism born of its particular form of capitalism that has opened a long-term revolutionary epoch. Against Orientalist claims of Arab or Islamic exceptionalism, the region's masses are struggling for the same demands for which people throughout the world are struggling, including as democracy, social justice, equality, and secularism. But to win requires not just a change in government, but both political and social revolutions.

There is no simple path in this revolutionary process. To win will require building a left that can navigate complex and dynamic combinations of political and economic struggles. As Lenin declared decades ago:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable ... without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.—to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So, one army lines up in one place and says, “We are for socialism”, and another, somewhere else and says, “We are for imperialism”, and that will be a social revolution!... Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.

The role of left and progressives is crystal clear: build an inclusive social and democratic alternative in the struggle. The MENA region remains in the midst of a long-term revolutionary process that has – and will – include both revolution and counter-revolution.

There have already been terrible defeats, but also partial victories. But neither has brought the process to an end. This is only beginning...

## 26 January 2021

Source [Spectre Journal](#).

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