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The State of the Arab Revolution

No question that the uprisings of 2011 have had a decisive impact on the Arab world. Leaders overthrown in Tunisia and Egypt, a regime destroyed in Libya, monarchies nervous in the Gulf, and a deadly civil war bleeding Syria. The scale of these changes was not predictable a decade ago, when the carapace of the neoliberal security state, exemplified by the Mubarak regime in Egypt, held fast. Concentration was on the devastation wrought by the destruction of Iraq. The brazenness of the imperialist thrust petrified not only the leaders in the Arab states, who hastened to collaborate with the United States, but it also threw a blanket of gloom over the population. What could be possible if their own harsh regimes became sub-contractors of the United States, in a world increasingly unipolar and prone before imperialism? 2011 changed all this.

Beneath the ground of the Mubaraks and the Ben Ali, around the corner from their Mukhabarat offices, grew a crafty resistance. It came in many forms, some overlapping, often antagonistic to each other:

(1) The most obvious oppositional force was **political Islam** (*al-harakât al-islamiyya al-siyassiyya*). It emerged in the 1920s as part of a

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global movement to draw Islamic resources toward the anti-colonial struggle. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928, was not only a reaction to what it saw as Westernization, but also crucially it was an attempt to provide modern institutional goods (medical care, education) to the vast mass of Egyptians who had been left out of the modernization of the country. It was this double nature of political Islam that distinguishes it from the more reactionary (backward looking) forms of Islamism, such as the Salafis. The sources of contemporary political Islam are many, deriving their strength from the writings of such varied contemporaries as Sayyid Maududi (1903-1979) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Qutb's theory that political Islam must first go after the "nearer enemy," namely the new states of the Arab world, because they are impious (*kufir*) before going after the "further enemy," the imperialist bloc made their forces a target of internal repression. Killings, including of Qutb in Egypt, pushed its leadership into exile or underground and hastened a turn toward the armed road – a section of the Brotherhood in Egypt split off to form Islamic Jihad, one of the sources into al-Qaeda. Inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, funded by the Gulf monarchies that preferred that the "nearer enemy" be further than their own emirates, and egged on by Western intelligence as a foil against the growth of the Left or even liberalism, political Islam had a growth spurt in the 1980s. It is what enabled them in Algeria and, from a slightly different history, in Turkey come close to political power and then be removed summarily by military force. In Algeria this led to a brutal civil war (1991-2000), while in Turkey the "post-modern coup" (1997) led the Welfare Party to a canny coalitional politics that resulted in the formation of the AKP (2001), the current ruling party. The mass character of political Islam had to remain in the shadows, cosseted in the mosques, as its more public face morphed, with the exception of Turkey, into civil war or terrorism. In Syria, where political Islam had been severely repressed, its leadership lived abroad and it only had a presence in half of Syria's governorates. The advantage of political Islam was that it had a dedicated cadre, a presence through the mosques in the everyday lives of the mass of the population and, because of this, the ability to throw itself into political activity.

(2) The second most powerful force in the Arab world was the groundswell of **young people** whose frustration with the suffocating

regimes came on a variety of axes – anger at the lack of employment options, frustrated with the lack of political opportunities and dulled by the social stultification of the national security regimes. There are class fissures that divide these young people, certainly, and these would require much more clear analysis. Nonetheless, the “clean slate” sentiment amongst the young needs to be put on the table. Having participated in overthrowing Ben Ali and Mubarak, and then tangentially Qaddafi, there is a sense amongst this section of the population that they do not wish to settle for anything short of a true transformation of the political dispensation. They are not without political experience, as was clear in particular from Egypt. During the course of the decade of imperialist aggression, it was these younger people who formed the bedrock of Egypt’s main protest movements. Their political training was, interestingly, provided by the opportunities afforded by left and Nasserite intellectuals who had formed the Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Intifada in 2002. In response to the Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians, students across Egypt organized solidarity protests including at Alexandria University, where the police shot a 20-year-old student Mohammed El-Saqa during a demonstration on April 9 (almost three hundred students were injured during this Egyptian Intifada). An anti-war bloc grew out of this pro-Intifada sentiment as the US planned its war on Iraq. During March 20 and 21, 2003, about twenty thousand Egyptians took over Tahrir Square in protest after the US began its operations in Iraq. The Mubarak regime banned demonstrations and arrested eight hundred people, including two members of parliament, the popular Nasserite leader Hamdeen Sabahi and former Wafd Party member Mohamed Farid Hassanein. In October, the left-wing writer Sonallah Ibrahim courageously went to receive the Novelist of the Year award from the Egyptian government, announced “a government that, in my opinion, does not possess the credibility to grant it,” and walked out, leaving the prize on the table. The cries on the street reflected this sentiment: “Baghdad is Cairo, Jerusalem is Cairo,” linking the pro-Intifada and anti-war sentiments with struggles in Egypt, for “We want Egypt to be free; life has become bitter.” Out of these stands emerged Kefaya, a pillar of the 2011 Tahrir revolution. The “youth” that came to protest had a decade long experience in these consensual struggles against the

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imperialism that had so confidently walked the Arab lands for the past several decades. The youth are also linked to the working-class through the growth of the April 6 Young Movement that developed in solidarity with the planned strike by textile workers on April 6, 2008. It is amongst this youth strand that new social ideas incubate – new ways to consider gender relations, new relationships between different religious groups and so on. Traditional political formations often prey on sectarian differences or hasten back to standard forms of family power, whereas these newer social blocs are more generous to new ways of considering social life. This is an essential development that stands in stark contradiction to the suffocation of even the more moderate religious politics.

(3) The third strand is far more diffused and less identified by the mainstream media although in the long run this is perhaps the most important dynamic: the flickers of political protest from the remnants of **the organized working-class and from the marginal slumlands**. In Egypt, almost two million workers had been involved in a strike wave that opened up in 2004 – this included the monumental textile strikes of 2006 (notably at Mahallah's Misr Spinning and Weaving, with 25,000 workers) and the strikes of the municipal tax collectors in 2007 (10,000 workers went on a sit-in in Cairo's streets and formed the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers). In Tunisia, the phosphate mineworkers of Gafsa who fought a tough war against the State and the mining mafia in 2008 animated the previously somnolent General Tunisian Workers' Union (UGTT). The revival of working-class politics came alongside a dramatic decline in living standards in the Arab world, particularly as the price of bread rose due to instability in the world wheat market in the years before 2011. The heft of the organized working class should not be underestimated, nor should it be exaggerated – because right next to these workers stood the apparently disorganized residents of the slumlands, whose livelihood had been equally constrained. Cities of the Global South are catalysed by overwhelming rural to urban migration and therefore by the emergence of permanent slum-like housing developments. These migrants rarely enter the organized employment sector – they work for sub-contractors, become petty entrepreneurs, work as domestic servants and so on. For them, politics is not often concentrated at

their point of employment, where they work in small groups, often with disciplinary systems that threaten them with abjectness if they as much as object to the tone of voice of their supervisors. Union growth in these new economic areas is constrained, and economic protests are therefore few and far between. What is far more possible is in their place of habitation. Here they are concentrated demographically and they have clear issues to fight for, namely access to water and electricity, prices of foodstuffs and security for their families. It is here that political Islam plays some role, largely because of the presence of the mosque networks inside the slumlands. But they are not decisive because apart from the creation of a parallel social security network, political Islam has a shallow analysis of capitalist pressures and few answers to the questions from the slumlands about deprivation. The politics of the slums is no less important than the politics of the factory. Indeed, these two forces were the unrecognized mass base of the Arab revival of 2011 – but they had no organized electoral platform to allow their demographic strength to translate into legislative power. In Egypt, the closest person to lead this strand is Hamdeen Sabahi, but his political platform, Egyptian Popular Current, has not the organizational capacity to build on its potential. In Tunisia, the assassination of Chokri Belaid in 2013 muted the Popular Front dynamic, which will possibly re-emerge as the carrier of this possibility.

(4) The section favoured by the West, but with only a meagre mass base, is what is called the **secular liberals**. These are often sections of the bourgeoisie and the salariat who have links to the West either through college education or through their own economic activity, who have accepted the view that there is no alternative to Western hegemony (although they would be first in line to speak out against depredations of human rights by Western governments through their imperialist wars), and who believe that one result of this hegemony is that free market economic policy linked to a human rights agenda is the most credible path forward for their countries. These liberal parties do not have a mass base because there is only a limited mass following for their views. As well, liberalism in the Global South is compromised by the ease with which it abjures its human rights agenda when the State begins to go after Islamists, for example, who the liberals see as fair game for state repression – this was most obvious after the ouster

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of Morsi in 2013. Liberalism is also weakened by its adherence to IMF-style policies that are known generally to sharpen inequality, one of the main complaints of the mass of people in the Global South. Despite the fact that these are people who champion legal and legislative agendas, they seem quite comfortable with the religion of free markets, which often undemocratically constrain the lives of the masses. Their standard bearers find it easier to come to power on the back end of a tank (as Mahmud Jibril did in Libya in 2011 and as Hazem al-Beblawi did in Egypt in 2013) than in the electoral field where they simply do not have the organization or the ideology to motivate the millions. In Egypt, the secular liberals were able to assert themselves to the front of the National Salvation Front, a platform set up to oppose the Morsi constitutional process in 2012 that includes liberals (such as Mohamed el-Baradei and Amr Moussa) and leftists (Hamdeen Sabahi and the Marxist left). Key liberal members of the National Salvation Front, such as el-Baradei, Ziad Bahaa-Eldin, Laila Rashed Iskander, Durriyah Sharaf Aldin and Maha el-Rabat joined al-Beblawi's government – which means they went along with the overthrow of the admittedly increasingly authoritarian Morsi government and joined hands with the admittedly authoritative military command. The debate over whether the overthrow of Morsi was a coup or not (whether like Turkey, 1960 or Chile, 1973) is of grave importance to the US and the Egyptian military (\$1.3 billion per year is on the line) and to the liberal-left that would not like the military aspect to overshadow the mass struggles against Morsi. Certainly it was the mass struggles that rattled the Muslim Brotherhood's cage, but it was the military that affected the transfer of power. The liberals were provided with few alternatives but to join the new regime, which is a short-term advantage but has the medium-term problem of legitimacy over its claims for democracy.

(5) Struggles of a mass character develop out of the interplay between economic feints (as in strikes) and political protests (as in the anti-war or pro-Intifada struggles) as well as out of a slow transformation of the social terrain where the legitimacy of the ruler is eroded. There is no way to predict when the constrained struggles (this strike, that demonstration) explode from their marginality to become a major social force. It is in this transformation that the element of spontaneity appears. When that explosion takes place, and

when the protest becomes a social force in its own right, people with no role in the smaller struggles are drawn to join in. The cautious and prudent tendency of sections of the popular classes is thrown to the wayside as a new romantic sentiment comes over the protest. Fear of joining a protest dissipated and an enthusiasm grew to be part of a new historical dynamic. It is this environment of the “mass strike,” as Rosa Luxemburg put it, that typically **apolitical people** began to flood the streets against the old regime but not clearly in favour of anything else. Revolts become revolutionary when the apolitical sections join the struggle – a point that can neither be properly calibrated nor encouraged. This is the element of mysticism in political struggle.

This is a thumbnail sketch of the kind of political forces unleashed by at least a decade of political unrest. Within the conjuncture of 2011-12, these forces inhaled their own power and potential and exhaled to overthrow leaders. But their exhalation was not sufficient to knock down the entire regime in one blow. States are not built on their head alone, but grow deep roots that are often as hard to identify, as they are to unearth. Old social classes with insurance ties to all political branches find themselves standing upright regardless of who takes power, as long as it is not the working-class and its working-poor ally. The bourgeoisie is intimately linked to the military through family ties and through close business arrangements, and it is the bourgeoisie as well that has been able to incorporate itself into the moderate (elite) sections of political Islam. Its interests are held intact despite the transformation. The bourgeoisie’s view of the world is helped along by its intellectual and political allies on the international stage (the bankers, the IMF, the ratings agencies and of course the governments of the North and the Gulf Arab monarchies). They urge the new regimes to follow older policies properly poured into new concepts to sweeten them for political consumption. It is this sense of the intractable nature of change that gives rise to concepts such as the “deep state” and the “shadow state” – ideas that indicate that there are unchanging elements that maintain power regardless of who is now in charge.

Political Islam is incapable and unwilling to challenge these old social classes. It has links to them, and it does not sufficiently grasp the enormity of the economic challenge that it has so cavalierly claimed it can solve. Between the sophisticated Ennahda party led by Rached

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Ghannouchi and the brasher now deposed presidency of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi there is no difference in terms of their solicitude to the IMF and their inability to craft a pro-people alternative. There is no social democratic agenda even: demanding an annulment or a radically renegotiated odious debt and crafting proposals for capital controls to harness Foreign Direct Investment rather than allow it to run riot in the real estate and financial sectors.

Gathering around the new regimes, aggravating their limitations, are forces of global capital and of Northern imperialism who have other objectives in mind than the needs of the Arab people. The revolts of 2011 rattled the US, whose main pillars of stability – the Gulf Arab monarchies and Israel, had been threatened by the power shifts. In *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* (LeftWord 2012), I argued that the NATO-GCC [Gulf Coordination Council] intervention in Libya allowed the North to foist its own social forces back onto the saddle of Arab history. The popular unrest seemed likely to spread via Bahrain into the other Gulf monarchies, and the removal of Mubarak and the potential threats to Assad in Syria and Hussein in Jordan would have encircled Israel with untested Islamic regimes. This had to be forestalled, which provided the urgency of the NATO intervention. Now the North could re-establish itself as the friend of freedom after the ignominy of seeing its allies (France's Ben Ali and USA's Mubarak) being ousted. A rash calculation to back the rebels in Syria followed, although now into its third year of fighting that backing has not amounted to much tangible support and Syria continues to bleed. Via the IMF and through its military subvention, the US has been able to re-enter the everyday management of Egypt and Tunisia – despite the continued antipathy of the people to US meddling (as the chants against US Ambassador Anne Patterson in 2013 and the attacks on US consular facilities in Libya and Egypt in 2012 establish). It is these imperialist manoeuvres that enables the old social classes to comfort themselves about their immortality. Assertions of regional powers (Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) hold the spotlight, but beneath them the old Northern capillaries of power reassert themselves. They are hard to manifest and to defeat.

The spectacular fall of major Arab leaders in 2011 created impatience amongst the population that resembles the short attention spans demanded by our present technologies (not the least of which

is the news cycle of television). But revolutionary waves work at a different cycle. They do not work in the short-term alone. The Mexican Revolution, for instance, opened in 1910 and lasted for two decades. Only when Lázaro Cárdenas took power in 1934 did the dust settle. The Soviet Revolution opened in 1917, but did not find its feet (and then only barely) before 1928. The overthrow of the autocratic government occurs in the short-term, the consolidation of the new regime takes place in the medium term and then the economic and cultural changes required to set up a new dispensation take place in the long-term. The Arab Spring, strictly speaking, was the first phase of the short-term. We are now in the medium term, where the fights to establish new governmental authorities that are loyal to the spirit of the Arab Spring are underway. The overthrow of Morsi in 2013 is part of this second phase, complicated by the entry of the military to sanctify his removal. We are no-where near the third phase. The totality of the Arab Revolution is a “civilizational” uprising, an energetic thrust by very large sections of the population against the dispensation that they have had to live under: a two-headed force, with one head representing neoliberal economic policies and the other the security state. It was an uprising for a political voice, certainly, but not for a political voice alone. This was a revolutionary process against economic deprivation and political suffocation – with electoralism only a tactic in a long-road to a genuine sense of participation in a more horizontal social life.