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Arab revolutions

Continuation and difficulties of the revolutionary process in the Arab region

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This interview with Gilbert Achcar was made by Jacques Babel on Monday 29 July 2013 for the [online publication](#) of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA, France).

The revolutionary process in the Arab region continues to surprise the media. How do you analyse the recent events in Egypt and Tunisia?

There are certainly qualitative changes that have taken place, but the fact that there are twists and turns in the process is not surprising. We must understand that what began in late 2010-early 2011 is a long-term revolutionary process. The idea that the electoral victories of the currents coming from Islamic fundamentalism in Tunisia and Egypt would close down the changes under way proved completely wrong.

These forces were doomed to failure since, they, like the regimes they replaced, had no answer to the very serious social and economic problems that caused the uprisings. They are a continuation of neo-liberal policies and therefore cannot solve these problems which have only got worse.

The revolutionary process can take surprising forms, but we will continue to pass from upheaval to upheaval in the region as a whole, before the situation stabilises. This would mean, in a positive hypothesis, a profound change in the social nature of the governments in the region and their move towards policies based on the interests of working people .

How do you see the battle going on today in Egypt?

We must distinguish two levels: the manoeuvres and conflicts between those concerned with political power, and the underlying wave of popular discontent. The second has been unleashed, but like the unrest of 2011, has ended in a military intervention.

Mubarak, had already been dismissed in February 2011 by the military, which then took direct power, placing the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces at the head of the executive. This time, they have not repeated the same operation, having burnt their fingers trying to govern the country in a state of upheaval such that it would rapidly wear out any government that limited itself to carrying out neo-liberal. But the civilians that have been appointed to head the executive cannot hide the fact that it is the army that has the power.

However, the argument that the army intervened against a democratically elected government is a very right-wing view of democracy. That would be to say that elected officials have carte blanche to do whatever they want during their term of office, even if they blatantly betray the expectations of their constituents. A radical conception of democracy involves the right to recall elected representatives.

This is the form that the movement took in Egypt with the petition calling for Morsi to go and for new elections to be held launched by the youth movement "Tamarrod" (Rebellion). In a few months they gathered an impressive number of signatures, a much higher total than From this point of view, his dismissal was entirely legitimate.the number of votes Morsi obtained in his election to the presidency.

However the big problem is that rather than organising the broad movement to overthrow Morsi by means of mass

struggle – a general strike, civil disobedience – we saw the opposition leaders, both liberal and left, agree with the military and applaud the coup whose ultimate logic is to capture the potential for popular mobilization and impose a return to hard-line “order”, which has been confirmed by the actions of the military. This is extremely serious and in this respect there is a strategic failure on the majority of Egyptian left. The army’s image has been restored, and the commander in chief of the army (Al-Sissi) has been covered with praise.

Al-Sissi is the strong man of the new *ancien regime*. Although only Defence Minister, called on the people to demonstrate in support of the army – completely ignoring the new government.

Today, even the youth of Tamarrod have begun to worry – rather late in the day – about the trap of their own making they have fallen into. The coup has allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to rejuvenate itself politically, posing as martyrs, and victims of a military coup. They have reconsolidated their social base, which is important although it is now clear it is a minority. The military action has polished their image anew.

So the position of the Islamist movements who took the place of the previous regimes in Tunisia and Egypt has quickly deteriorated , but the weakness of the left is now equally a big problem ...

Apart from the revolutionary left that remains marginal in Egypt, most of the left have put their forces behind the National Salvation Front. Most of those who originate in the traditional Communist movement and those from the Nasserist current, which remains the left with the most influence on the people at large, have participated in the process of mystifying the role of the army. This is all the more unfortunate in that these forces were in the streets against the army in the months leading up to the election of Morsi!

When Hamdeen Sabahi, the Nasserist leader, explained a few days before June 30, that it had been a mistake to have shouted a year earlier “Down with the military government” he drew the wrong lessons from history. The real mistake was to repent and to say now that we should be applauding the army.

What do you think of Tunisian plans to end the power of Ennahdha?

Unfortunately, there is a risk that Tunisia will develop into a similar scenario to Egypt: a left that does not have the political insight to fight on a left-wing agenda, and is preparing to build alliances even with the parts of the former regime. These links are present in Nidaa Tounès. [1] Such an approach ultimately benefits the Islamist forces who have a golden opportunity to denounce the agreements of the left with remnants of the former regime. This allows the Muslim Brotherhood or Ennahdha to pose as bearers of the legitimacy and continuity of the revolution.

There is a problem of political representation of the working classes in the revolution?

Yes. The problem is that instead of trying to win hegemony in the mass movement – fighting primarily on social issues – which would unite against its supporters of neo-liberalism ranging from fundamentalists to men of the old regime and even the Liberals, the Tunisian left has made a short-sighted alliance with sections of the old regime.

In a country like Tunisia, in my opinion, the trade union Federation, the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Workers) is a socially hegemonic force and can easily become the politically dominant one. But a wall is erected between union struggles and the political. Tunisia’s left now heads the UGTT. But rather than launch the union federation into the political battle, with a strategy of forming a workers’ government, this left seems to be moving towards alliances – against its own interests – between its different political groups organised in the Front Populaire, on the one hand, and the Liberals and the remnants of the former regime, on the other.

Despite these difficulties, the uprisings are continuing in many countries, we are seeing “Tamarrod” movements in Libya, in Bahrein...

In the six countries which were most deeply affected by the 2011 uprisings, the mass movements are continuing. In Libya it is constant turmoil. The media do not report it but there are constant popular mobilizations, in particular against the fundamentalists; the elected institutions are subject to different pressures from the popular base.

In Yemen the movement goes on even though it has been weakened by the compromise that a section of the opposition forces has made. Radical forces, particularly from the youth and the left, are continuing to fight against this pretence of change. In Bahrein the popular movement against the monarchy is continuing.

And in Syria the civil war is in full swing, it is at a tragically high level today with a ferocious counter-offensive from the regime supported by Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Syria is a flagrant case of the cynicism of the great powers, who are allowing the massacre of a people in whom they have no confidence.

So, two-and-a-half years after the beginning of the process it is still continuing?

A revolutionary dynamic was unleashed in 2011, a long-term process that will have its ups and downs, periods of reaction, of counter-revolution and revolutionary upsurges. But for there to be a positive outcome to this process forces that defend progressive answers to the social and economic problems posed must emerge.

If not, there are other possible scenarios, regression, reaction, repressive alliances against the populations between those who today seem to be in different sides: the military and the fundamentalists. There is nothing determined in one way or another. It is an open situation, in full turmoil.

The left must urgently find a third, independent, way, against the old regimes and against the fundamentalists, in order to satisfy the social demands of the women and men who rose in revolt.

[1] "Call of Tunisia" – an initiative launched by Beji Caid Essebi, former Minister of Defence and Foreign Affairs under Habib Bourguiba, a lawyer specializing in arbitration cases – become a recognised and authorised party in July 2012.