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Book review

The Arab Spring – results and prospects

- Reviews section -

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Is the Arab Spring heading towards what more than one commentator has called ‘Libyan winter’? Was it after all worth it, given the bloody civil war in Syria, the Islamic government then army coup in Egypt and the mayhem presided over by reactionary militias in Libya? Indeed it has been on the socialist and liberal left that disappointment with the outcomes has often been strongest, and where the feeling that once again we are watching a people’s uprising stolen by imperialism and reaction.

Gilbert Achcar’s new book, the first serious Marxist account of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), takes a very different tack. For Achcar the events that started in Tunisia in 2011 have to be seen in terms of a broad historical sweep that takes into account the character of the economies and the regimes in the region, the peculiarities of local political developments and the evolution of opposition movements over decades. The author’s approach is bluntly and unapologetically rooted in classical Marxism and therefore looks first at the most basic determinations – the contradiction between the forces and relations of production.

Here the book starts off with a surprising assertion, which in a sense is the key to understanding the events of the last two years. Contrary to widespread and caricatured images of economically go-ahead states swimming in oil wealth in which the people are mainly getting richer, in fact rates of economic and human development in the MENA states stalled – even compared with sub-Saharan Africa, let alone East Asia.

The result is massive unemployment and underemployment, increasing inequality and a failure to make significant steps forward on women’s equality. With high birth rates the stalled economies are especially unable to integrate young people and even the high qualified young graduates it produces.

The blockage on development is located in the ‘relations of production’ and their interaction with what Achcar calls the ‘patrimonial state’ – highly authoritarian regimes based on massive state ‘rents’, especially oil wealth, shared mainly between, variously, bureaucratic-bourgeois elites, single kleptomaniac families and their wider entourage, tribal loyalties, military integration with the higher echelons of the state and general corruption and cronyism. All this backed up with huge amounts of police-military repression, with all the horrors that involved. No wonder megalomaniac-kleptomaniac families like those headed by Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia were the target of mass hatred and contempt.

Gilbert Achcar identifies four key factors in the uprisings:

“...what I called the four horsemen of the apocalypse in the region: the question of development (of growth and unemployment); the question of women’s liberation; the question of democracy and basic freedoms; and finally the cultural question. I pointed out the role of satellite television and the Internet, and I identified as ‘agencies’ of political and social change, the workers’ movement the women’s movement and the youth movement.” (pp 148-9)

Two things are notable here. First Achcar is one of the few published authors who has written at length on this issue and identified women’s liberation as having explosive potential in the region.

Second, despite the dismissive attitude of a growing number of left commentators towards the importance social media – regarded as ‘pop sociology’ – Achcar continues to defend the idea that social media and satellite TV have played a vital role. In particular he focuses on Al-Jazeera satellite TV. The old patrimonial regimes fought a losing battle against the dissemination of real news by these media.

But here’s the thing: given the four ‘horsemen’ and the agencies of revolt, why then have Islamic movements so

often been the main beneficiaries – at least for the moment – of the rebellions? The author provides a detailed explanation of just that – why is the workers' movement so relatively weak, despite the key role it played in the uprising at a certain stage in Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Egypt? What happened to the Arab left (mainly Stalinist or Stalinist influenced) and to Arab nationalism? How come that even working within repressive regimes the Islamists, especially the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, were able to construct strong and widespread social welfare networks that

helped garner mass support? It's with these political facts on the ground that left renewal has to start.

Complex and contradictory political outcomes take place of course in the framework of the permanent political and sometimes military intervention of imperialism. Achcar provides a blow-by-blow account of the attempts by the Western regimes to co-opt the uprisings into new more or less pro-western constellations of power, showing the flexibility to be able to co-operate with Islamic government and movements, provided they seem like a framework for political and business stability. This was attempted in Egypt with the Morsi regime. Here of course real democracy and human rights are not to the fore of Western thinking.

The People Want includes a forensic, country-by-country, balance sheet of what has been achieved and then a review of future prospects. Gilbert Achcar takes a very different tack to, for example, radical Indian political commentator Vijay Prashad, whose book *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* draws very gloomy conclusions. For Achcar the patrimonial state has to be swept away to open up the road to human development and this is going to be a long and complex process that is not amenable, regrettably, to rapid socially and economically egalitarian and democratic outcomes. Going in this direction will require the building and strengthening of workers movements, the women's movement and radical movements based on the youth. The left has to maximise its co-operation with forces in the MENA region that fight for these objectives