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Arab revolutions

Egypt and Syria: The fire of revolution still burns

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Gilbert Achcar, a veteran socialist who grew up in Lebanon, is the author of numerous books on the Middle East, including *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* and most recently *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*. He spoke with Eric Ruder [of the *US Socialist Worker*] in December on the eve of the third anniversary of the Arab uprisings.

ER: At the beginning of 2011, the Arab uprisings generated enormous hope. But today, the euphoria seems to have transformed into its opposite—“deep despair”—under the weight of recent events in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and so on. How do you make sense of the Arab uprising three years on?

GA: I think the euphoria that was aroused by the events of early 2011 was actually unwarranted—as is the very gloomy perception that one now finds. These are rather impressionistic reactions to present developments.

Of course, the initial moment of the uprising, with its huge mass mobilization occurring in several countries, raised a lot of hope, and that's understandable. But it was and it remains important to acknowledge that what is at stake is more than a change in the form of the political regime—i.e., a so-called democratic transition. Ultimately, these uprisings are coming up against the challenge of how to carry out much more radical changes in the face of the hard core of the state, which is the armed forces.

This is a much tougher nut to crack than just the removal of a Mubarak in Egypt or a Ben Ali in Tunisia in the first weeks of the uprising. Mass mobilizations managed to topple the ruler in both these countries, but the “deep state”—the backbone of the old regime—is still there, which means that the ancien régime is still very much in place, and there is more continuity than discontinuity between present conditions and previous ones.

In a country like Syria, where the armed forces are organically linked to the ruling family, even this initial step of toppling the regime cannot be realized without defeating the hard core of the state—and thus, we have seen events in Syria evolve inexorably into a civil war after months of bare-handed uprising were met with increasingly bloody repression.

In all three countries, the difficulties are huge, and neither was going to be a short process—and even less a “spring”—that would be completed by the organization of free elections, in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia.

The key point to understand is that what started in 2011 is a long-term revolutionary process, rooted in decades of economic blockage due to the nature of the prevailing social order. We are actually in the early stages of this revolutionary process. It will drag on for many years, if not decades.

So there is definitely still room for hope—as long as the determination of the mass movement persists to achieve the main social goals that initially inspired the majority of the people who took part in the uprisings. But this hope should be a realistic hope, combined with a real understanding of the difficulty of the task.

ER: Can you talk more about the challenges in Egypt?

GA: What happened in Egypt in 2011 was a superficial change. Only the tip of the iceberg was removed: the Mubarak family and their most narrowly linked cronies, and that's it. We shouldn't forget that Mubarak was not

overthrown by the mass movement alone, but by a combination of the mass movement and a military coup.

What happened on February 11, 2011, was actually even more of a coup than what we saw on July 3, 2013—in the sense that the military removed Mubarak from power and took power directly in its hands. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took power as a military junta, so this was a coup in the most classical sense, set against the backdrop of a huge mass mobilization.

Before that coup, even as the euphoria was at its height, I for one was warning about illusions in the army, because the real backbone of the Egyptian state and of the regime that has been in place for several decades is the army. Thus, the idea that the whole state of affairs that the Egyptian population was rising against would be changed by the mere removal of Mubarak was a total illusion—and all the more so in that Mubarak was removed by the very backbone of his regime.

In fact, Mubarak's removal was aimed at preserving the continuity of the state. It was a conservative coup in that sense. Trying to preserve the regime by sacrificing the head of the regime was possible in the case of Egypt because of a relatively high degree of institutionalization of the state—in other words, the institution is more important than the ruler.

The ruler himself was but a product of the institution—that is, the army. This characteristic of the Egyptian state also applied to the Tunisian state. But you don't find it in most states of the region, such as the oil monarchies or the de facto monarchies calling themselves "republics," as you had in Libya or Syria—or for that matter in Saddam Hussein's Iraq before the regime was toppled by the United States.

In Egypt, however, it was clear that the coup wouldn't end the movement. Indeed, what we have seen is that after a relatively short period of euphoria, the people started confronting the harsh reality of the continuity of the regime. They rebelled against that again, and you had a lot of turmoil by the end of 2011.

The situation was very tense again in Egypt, and then you had the election of the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi as president. Morsi was the victor in the second round of the presidential election because the voters wanted to stop the ancien régime from reasserting itself. Morsi picked up a lot of voters in the second round who didn't vote for him in the first round—he was definitely not their first choice.

For those, as well as for a large part of the people who voted for him in the first round in the hope that the Muslim Brotherhood would solve the key problems of the country, especially in the social and economic dimensions, Morsi turned out to be a huge disappointment.

Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood behaved in such an arrogant manner that everyone became convinced they were trying to seize control of all of the institutions of the state. This raised a lot of fears among other forces—the Muslim Brotherhood even managed to alienate other Islamic fundamentalist currents, such as the Salafists.

Anger at Morsi renewed the mass movement, as well as labor strikes, other struggles and social tensions generally, which culminated in the largest demonstration Egypt has ever seen on June 30, 2013. And again, the same scenario that took place in February 2011 repeated itself. The army intervened to remove the president.

The fact that Morsi was elected in free elections, unlike Mubarak, doesn't change the fact that in both cases, you had a coup. And it also doesn't change the fact that Morsi lost legitimacy, even though he was elected in relatively free and fair elections. He was elected under revolutionary circumstances with a mandate from the people, and he

betrayed this mandate—therefore, the people wanted to get rid of him. In this sense, his removal was the product of a mass movement carrying out the profoundly democratic right to recall an elected official.

The problem is that in today's Egypt, there are only two major organized forces. One, of course, is the army, the backbone of the ancien régime, which is at the same time a social and political force and not just a military institution. Second, and in opposition to the ancien régime, is the Muslim Brotherhood, with its huge organizational machine.

The young people of the Tamarod movement succeeded in initiating a gigantic mobilization, but they didn't have the organized leverage to topple Morsi, who was backed by the considerable political apparatus of the Muslim Brotherhood. So, like in 2011, the popular movement relied upon the army to remove the president.

The army, of course, used the mass mobilization against Morsi as an opportunity to get rid of him because it considered the attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood to extend its control over the state as a major threat—in the same way that the Brotherhood's grasp for power was felt as a threat by the liberals and all of the left.

The big problem is that now, even more than in 2011, people have illusions in the army again, as if the army is somehow an institution in the service of the people that intervenes simply to execute the will of the people. This is, of course, completely preposterous. The army is definitely not the tool of the people. The army is the tool of the ancien régime in many ways, but it is also, and primarily, defending its own interests.

As an institution, the army controls a huge chunk of the economy—nearly one-third of the economy, according to estimates. It is very keen on preserving all the prerogatives and privileges it has enjoyed throughout previous decades. We have seen this very clearly in the recent debate about the constitution, where the military has been pushing for guarantees of its privileges and an elevated status that would ensure that no other institutions—whether the president, parliament or whichever—would be able to interfere in what the military considers its business.

To get back to our initial point, the euphoria of 2011 has turned very gloomy, to the extent that many started publishing obituaries for the Egyptian Revolution—or even pretending that it was never a revolution. But the idea that what started in 2011 has now ended and we're back to square one, if not worse, is deeply wrong.

The key issues in Egypt are social and economic, and they carry an explosive potential. But the military has no conception of how to address these demands, except to repress them. So although there have been a lot of illusions in Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the head of the military, the belief that this will last is very shortsighted.

It's clear that tensions will resume. There has been already some resumption in the social struggle, in industrial actions and workers' struggles, and in increasing conflicts among the vast coalition that opposed the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of those who took to the streets against Morsi on June 30 are now hostile to what the army is trying to impose.

ER: As you mentioned, some Middle East commentators have asserted that no revolution took place in Egypt—or anywhere else in the region, for that matter—because there hasn't been a transfer of political power from one class to another. How would you respond?

GA: Revolution is a term that applies to different forms of transition, but revolutions share common features in that they involve the participation of masses of people in overthrowing the institutionalized political forms of the moment.

A revolution takes the form of an upheaval, which in some cases leads to very deep and radical change, including a

change in which social class holds predominant political power. But if we place the bar so high, then the term "revolution" applies to only a very limited number of historical episodes.

If a mass mobilization topples a president, even if this is combined with a coup, the perception of those involved that they are participating in a revolution is correct. You can't deny them the pride that they are engaged in a revolution. The essential point about what is happening in the Arab region is that this is indeed a long-term revolutionary process.

Most revolutions in history are very long processes—all the more so when a whole geopolitical region is involved in the process. But even if you focus on one country, it's clear that revolutions don't occur in days or weeks.

The French Revolution or the English Revolution took place in the course of several years or decades, depending on when you believe they ended. It is important to grapple with the whole historical process, and even if you can more or less identify a date when it all started, the point is that it becomes a protracted process of change.

If the key problem in Egypt is indeed that development is blocked by a particular sociopolitical structure, it is clear that there is no way to unblock this situation without overthrowing this sociopolitical structure. Replacing this structure with a progressive sociopolitical power may not necessarily culminate in a socialist transformation, though this could serve as a kind of historical horizon. If the overthrow of Egypt's crony capitalism leads to the emergence, for instance, of a political order bearing some resemblance to Chavismo in Venezuela, this would already be a major change in the sociopolitical structure.

For now, what's at stake is the removal of the sociopolitical structure that is currently in power and replacing it with something different. For that to happen, it is essential to be clear about what needs to be changed. The ruling sociopolitical structure, like every social power, is backed by armed force. And in order to remove this obstacle, the mass movement must be able to win over the soldiers in order to prevent their use in defense of the old regime.

But in order to accomplish this, it is necessary to work for the emergence of a mass movement with some degree of organization, coordination and strategic clarity. At present, this kind of organized force is missing, and it won't be built in a matter of weeks or months. That's why revolutions are very long processes.

Historically, the Russian experience of 1917—where there's a revolutionary party like the Bolshevik Party that preexists the revolutionary crisis and is then able to grow very rapidly and seize power—is the exception, rather than the rule. In the Arab countries today, we are not confronted with anything like these conditions.

The organized force for progressive social change has yet to be built. There is maybe only one country in the Arab region where such an organized force already exists to some degree, and that's Tunisia. The Tunisian workers' movement is organized and is very powerful, but what is lacking there is strategic clarity on the left.

ER: The revolutionary challenge to the Syrian regime seems to face even more difficult circumstances. What accounts for this?

GA: Syria is a tragic illustration of one of the shared characteristics of the Arab uprisings generally—namely, the challenge of multiple, overlapping counterrevolutions. Revolutionary movements must, as a rule, confront the counterrevolutionary challenge of the old regime, but in this region, this is just the beginning.

In addition to the counterrevolution organized by the state, there is also the regional counterrevolutionary role played

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by the oil monarchies of the Arab-Iranian Gulf. On top of this, there is the international counterrevolution, which is represented in the region above all by the United States. But in the case of Syria, there is also Russia and Iran, which are the Syrian regime's chief backers.

And on top of this combination of local, regional and international counterrevolutionary forces, there's something even more pernicious: namely, a segment of the forces that emerged in the course of the uprising and appeared to be participating in the revolution had a reactionary agenda. I'm here speaking of the Islamic fundamentalist forces. Whether they are the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafis or any of a number of jihadist elements, these forces have proliferated in the region since the 1970s and '80s.

They have managed to tap into the major part of the popular resentment, because of the decline of the forces of the left—the left nationalists, the communists and the rest. This vacuum has been filled by Islamic fundamentalist forces, which are actually reactionary, not progressive forces. In those circumstances in which they oppose existing regimes, they oppose them not with a progressive agenda, but with a reactionary agenda based on religion, which translates into a socially reactionary ideology.

From the beginning of the uprisings, the United States was faced with the thorny question of how to respond, especially when the uprisings targeted their allies, such as the Mubarak regime in Egypt. Generally, Washington has tried to renew the kind of relationship that it once had with the Muslim Brotherhood from the 1950s to the 1980s, when these two entities partnered in opposition to any force regarded as left or progressive in the region.

In 2011, the U.S. essentially placed a bet that these conservative forces would be able to act as an ally in the effort to undermine the revolutionary dynamic from within—since the local regimes failed to stop it from without through repression, reform, cooptation or some combination of these.

In the case of Syria, the United States has deployed the same strategy as it has in Egypt and everywhere else, which is to prevent the revolutionary movement from getting too radical—to try to keep it within prescribed limits.

In this regard, they invoke the lessons of Iraq. In Iraq, the option rejected by the Bush administration was the right one, as far as the aims of U.S. imperialism were concerned, or so it is believed in Washington today. That option was Saddamism without Saddam—in other words, the preservation of the Baathist state and the various structures of the old regime but without Saddam Hussein at the top.

Today, this is the U.S. blueprint for Syria—Assadism without Assad. In fact, this is what they contemplate for every country in the region where the movement reaches a level that makes the continuation of the old order no longer possible.

This is basically what they tried to get in Egypt, and you see all the contradictions that entailed. They, in fact, accomplished this in Yemen, by means of an agreement brokered by the Saudis, which meant aborting the basic aspirations of the young people, the masses and the workers who were part of the Yemeni uprising. That's why the mass mobilization is continuing nevertheless in that country.

In Syria, they see imposing some kind of agreement to preserve the key structures of the regime as their preferred outcome, but with the minimum condition to preserve credibility that, like in Yemen, Bashar al-Assad steps down. And let's be clear—"democracy" has nothing to do with it.

What you have in Syria is a convergence of interests of the regime and of the oil monarchies that together seek to

divert or dilute the democratic character of the uprising and subsume it under the dominance of Islamic fundamentalist forces.

For the Gulf monarchies, a democratic and progressive uprising in Syria—or anywhere else, for that matter—is extremely dangerous. So whenever they can oppose such an uprising by supporting the regime itself, they do, as in Egypt—or, of course, in Bahrain where they even intervened militarily to uphold the monarchy.

But in cases where they can't back the regime directly, the next best option is to try to control the movement and defuse its progressive potential, and Islamic fundamentalist forces are well suited for this because they represent absolutely no threat—ideologically at least—to the oil monarchies, especially the Saudis, whose official ideology is the most reactionary fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

The Syrian regime, too, wished for such forces to dominate the uprising because they constitute its preferred enemies: they are the best way to dissuade a sizeable section of the population as well as Western powers from supporting the uprising. This explains why the Syrian regime released from jail more than 1,000 jihadists a few months after the beginning of the uprising in 2011. The regime's intent was to allow the Islamic fundamentalist currents to become a major force in the uprising in order to discredit it.

Thus, even though the Syrian regime and the Gulf monarchies had different purposes, they converged on the strategy, and the result is the same. Both have an interest in some way in seeing such forces become dominant in the uprising.

And for the Syrian regime, this was a way of dissuading the United States from supporting the uprising. This strategy was efficient in the sense that we can see how little inclination Washington has shown to provide any real support, beyond vague verbal statements and very limited material means, to the uprising.

More than anything, Washington fears further radicalization of the situation and the potential destabilization of the Gulf, where the major interests of the United States lie—due to oil, obviously. For this reason, the U.S. is perfectly happy to see the Syrian regime survive intact.

ER: Can anything change this dynamic in Syria?

GA: The situation in Syria is definitely a very tragic one. The Syrian population is absolutely exhausted. In addition to the 200,000 people killed and the huge number maimed, there are millions of people displaced and refugees living under appalling conditions. All of this has become a humanitarian tragedy of immense proportions.

The progressives in Syria are rather isolated while the other forces have their various patrons: the regime is heavily backed by Russia and Iran, and the fundamentalist forces receive funding and support from the Gulf. We have seen an evolution in the situation that is definitely worrying, one in which gloomy assessments seem legitimate.

But even in Syria, it is essential to think beyond the present moment. We shouldn't forget that the reversal of the military situation is relatively recent.

Until a few months ago, the Syrian regime was losing ground, and losing ground in such a way that it prompted Iran to intervene massively to rescue it. This included sending thousands of fighters from Hezbollah in Lebanon and from Iraq to fight alongside the regime in order to rescue it. This allowed the regime to reverse the tide militarily and to go on a counteroffensive, which was accompanied by the growing visibility, if not dominance, of Islamic forces within the

armed opposition.

There is still a potential for a democratic and progressive movement to manifest itself again, as it did in the first year and beyond of the uprising. This movement is still there. The Syrian population is definitely not seduced by the prescriptions of the fundamentalist forces.

As long as there is an armed conflict, those who have the means will prevail on the ground. But at some point, the armed struggle will stop, and the socioeconomic crisis will reassert itself, as will the social aspirations of those who made the uprising in the first place. This potential in Syria—the progressive potential, the democratic potential—is fairly strong, as it is throughout the region as a whole.

Ultimately, these are but phases in a long-term revolutionary process, and from that angle, I think the key point is that the whole despotic and reactionary order that has ruled over the region for decades and looked as if it would remain there for eternity has since 2011 been set on fire. The flames of revolutionary change have been unleashed, and it won't be easy to put them out.

Of course, various reactionary forces have also been set loose. There is, alas, no certainty that all this will end with victories and progressive outcomes all over the region. There can also be major defeats and reactionary setbacks, if not historical regressions, but the key point is that the process is ongoing for now, and it's a time for action, for organization, and for political and strategic clarification.

So many observers from afar merely reflect the most recent developments and speak of them as if they represent the final outcome. It is essential to resist this impulse, engage with the process as it unfolds and strive to steer it toward progressive outcomes.

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