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Arab Revolutions

Theses on the “Arab Spring”

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1. The gigantic upheaval that is shaking the entire Arab world since its initial tremors started in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 was determined by a long and deep accumulation of explosive factors: lack of economic growth, massive unemployment (the highest average rate of all world regions), widespread endemic corruption, huge social inequalities, despotic governments void of democratic legitimacy, citizens treated as servile subjects, etc.

The mass of people who entered into action across the Arab region is a composite, encompassing a wide range of social layers and categories that are affected to various degrees by this or that element of this complex set of determining factors. Most share, however, a common aspiration to democracy: political freedoms, free and fair elections, a democratically elaborated constitution – these are the common denominators that unify the masses involved in the uprising in all the Arab countries where it took hold powerfully. (The fact that the single country where these same conditions are lacking to the highest degree – i.e. the Saudi kingdom – has not yet faced a massive upheaval is a testimony to the intensity of dominance and oppression in that country.)

2. Several impressive features of the ongoing upheaval are directly related to the global information revolution. The speed at which the uprising spread to the entire region has been rightly attributed above all to satellite TV, the new factor that gave the linguistic unity of the region much stronger effect, thus giving renewed and much stronger substance to the old concept of an “Arab Revolution.” Transcending states’ boundaries, ignoring state censorship, the new communication technology allowed the populations of the whole Arab-speaking region to follow the events in real time as they were unfolding – in Tunisia initially, and then, on a much larger scale and with much more breathtaking impact, in Egypt, and finally at the level of the whole region. The power of the Tunisian example was magnified by this new ability for millions of people to watch the uprising as it unfolded. The populations of the entire region took part “virtually” in the Egyptian uprising: they were all in Cairo’s Tahrir Square through the cameras and reporters of satellite TV channels, partaking in the joys and anxieties of the gigantic mass of people gathered at the epicenter of the Egyptian Revolution. In instances where repression prevented TV cameras from attending protests, like in Syria, they were supplanted by countless activists using their phone cameras and Youtube in order to project images of struggle and repression on the global virtual sphere from where they were relayed by TV satellites and conveyed to their vast public.

3. Satellite TV and global communication through the Internet allowed the peoples of the Arab region to get much greater access and exposure to the global cultural melting-pot and global realities as well as fictions. For an entire new generation – the first one that grew up in this age of information revolution – this experience has been eye-opening in the extreme. The huge gap between, on the one hand, the aspirations and envies created by this virtual citizenship in the fiction-come-true “global village,” and, on the other hand, the bitter and repulsive real subordination to futureless societies ensconced in medieval cultural traits was a hugely powerful determinant in bringing into action a whole layer of young people belonging to a broad social spectrum ranging from the poor but educated to upper middle class. One more time in world history, young educated people (former and present students) stand at the forefront of social and political protest. This new layer made intensive use of the new communication technologies, especially the “social media.” Facebook in particular allowed them to network with an ease and at a speed that would not have been imaginable a mere decade earlier.

4. A most striking paradox characterizes the “Arab Spring”: whereas it has largely been determined by the above described cultural revolution, it is removing the lids that have been containing the expression and action of religious fundamentalist forces – forces that have been the overwhelmingly dominant organized currents of opposition and the major available vehicles for the expression of protest in the region for the last three decades. Hence the paradoxical result of a gigantic movement of emancipation giving way to electoral victories won by forces of social and cultural –

if not political (experience will tell us soon) – repression. This paradox is but the natural outcome of the fact that the lids imposed by the existing despotic and corrupt regimes in the Arab world had created an environment particularly suitable for the growth of this form of opposition and cultural retrenchment. Religion and religious forces have been extensively used by most regimes in the region to quell the remnants of the old nationalist and communist left and prevent the rise of new left forces in the post-1967 era. At a time when progressive political forces had gradually lost all their sources of state support and funding, religious fundamentalist forces had been funded and sustained over the whole region by three regional oil-rich states, which competed in pouring money to them: the Saudi kingdom, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the emirate of Qatar.

5. For this paradoxical state of things to change, it will require that the Arab world go through a new historical experience, during which two simultaneous processes must unfold: on the one hand, regional populations will have to give the religious forces a chance in power and witness their obvious limitations, especially the fact that they lack any programmatic response to the deep social and economic problems that lie beneath the Arab uprising; on the other hand, the new forces of social, political and cultural emancipation that rose powerfully during the upheaval, after taking the lead in igniting and conducting it, will need to build actual organizational networks of political struggle capable of constituting a credible alternative to the religious backlash. For this, they will need to be bold enough to fight the cultural obscurantism of the religious fundamentalist forces instead of accommodating it in the futile belief that they could thus gain access to their constituencies.