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Arab revolutions

One year on

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV444 - January 2012 -

Publication date: Wednesday 11 January 2012

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One year after the start of a revolutionary process which swept through the Arab region and continues today, *International Viewpoint* asked Gilbert Achcar to look at the current state of play throughout the region. This interview was conducted on December 14, 2011.

We are approaching the first anniversary of the outbreak of the "Arab Spring", in Tunisia. The overthrow of Ben Ali opened the way to the mass mobilisations in Egypt and the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya, the mobilisations in Yemen and the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the mobilisations in the Gulf States and in Syria in favour of democracy. How can we characterise these movements?

These are effectively movements which have as their common point the demand for democracy: they take place in countries with despotic regimes and they demand a change of regime, a change in the form of government and the democratisation of political life. This dimension is common to the movements cited, and it also gives them their strength because the democratic demand allows unification of a broad mass of people of different views, when it combines with a potential for social revolt that is very strong in the region. It should not be forgotten that in Tunisia the movement began with a social explosion. Young Mohamed Bouazizi, who set fire to himself, protested against his conditions of existence and did not advance political demands. His case highlighted the problem of endemic unemployment in the countries of the region, notably youth unemployment, the economic crisis, the absence of social perspectives. These are the basic ingredients. But when they combine with the opposition to a despotic regime, it takes on considerable proportions, as we can see in the countries mentioned. In contrast, in the countries where the despotic question has not been posed with the same acuteness, or the regime is more liberal and more tolerant of political diversity – Morocco for example – we find a movement built on social questions, but which has not yet acquired the breadth rapidly attained in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.

How do you see the evolution of US policy and that of the European countries in the region? Do the elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, or the military intervention in Libya, constitute a recovery of the initiative on the part of imperialism or the comprador national bourgeoisies?

In your question, there are two actors: the bourgeoisies and imperialism. These are not exactly the same thing. Moreover, this is a part of the world where those who now work in concert with the Western powers, with the US in particular, are not all governments that one could characterise as bourgeois – I am talking about the Gulf oil monarchies, which have a pre-capitalist dimension, which are rentier castes, exploiting the oil rent. In these countries, it is not the local bourgeoisie – whether comprador or not – which is in command. One should make the necessary distinctions.

As for the United States – the main imperialist force in the region – one could say that they have restored the balance a little after the very difficult situation in which the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings had put them, but to speak of a “recovery of the initiative” seems exaggerated to me. They have been able to regain a little credit by intervening in Libya, at relatively little cost for them, and by presenting themselves as being “on the side of the uprisings”. They combine this with a general discourse on democracy and – contrary to what some claim – this hypocritical discourse extends also to the Gulf monarchies, although they do not in their case combine it with any action. The US is trying to present itself as the repository of the values of liberty which they brandished as an ideological weapon for several decades, notably during the Cold War. In Syria, they do this with a certain ease, because it is a regime allied to Iran, for which they have no particular affection, any more than they had for the Libyan regime. But to say that they have recovered their hegemonic position in the region would be extremely exaggerated. In fact the events underway signal a significant decline in US hegemony. We see this in particular in the cases of

Syria and of Libya.

In Libya the Western intervention was essentially an intervention from a distance, without troops on the ground. The influence that the US can have on the process underway is very limited. In fact, nobody controls the situation in this country where there are increasingly developments which are not at all to the taste of the United States, including a growing protest against the Transitional National Council and against its attempts "very timid, incidentally" to undertake a reconstruction of the state.

In Egypt, we see that Washington's military allies still have a grip on the situation, but their rule is very much contested by the street, by a popular movement which continues "notably at the social level, where it is reflected by tough ongoing struggles. The emergence in force at the electoral level of the Islamic currents attests to a new regional factor: even if these currents do not represent a threat to US imperialism, they are not an instrument or ally as docile as the military for it. There are tensions in the alliance, in the cooperation, between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not comparable to what the Mubarak regime was for the US.

This also explains why the US has had very extensively to redefine their policy in the region since their traditional allies have very little popular legitimacy "something on which they did not have too many illusions as the Wikileaks revelations show. Now that the affirmation of popular sovereignty is in the street, the US must find allies with a real social base. That is why they are turning to the Muslim Brotherhood, who, after having been demonised in recent years, are now presented as "moderate Muslims" in contrast to the Salafists. The Muslim Brotherhood is present in the whole region. The US needs them, as in the good old days of the alliance with them against Nasser, against Arab nationalism, against the Soviet Union and its influence in the region from the 1950s to 1980s.

The Gulf monarchies "in particular two among them who play a very significant role in the Arab world today, the Saudi kingdom and the emirate of Qatar" are also trying to retake the initiative. These two monarchies do not necessarily have the same policy, they have a tradition of rivalry with sometimes even tensions between them, but they have made common cause alongside the US in the effort to orient the events in a direction which does not threaten their own interests and which allows them to stabilise the region in the short term. Qatar, in particular has seen its influence increase considerably with the uprisings, unlike the Saudi kingdom which like the US is experiencing a decline and ebbing of its influence. The emirate of Qatar has betted for several years on its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, becoming its main financial backer, creating the satellite television channel Al-Jazeera "a political tool of considerable power, which is at the same time at the disposal of the Muslim Brotherhood, who have a significant presence among its staff. Qatar has played these cards for a long time now and the events have turned them into strategic advantages. The emirate has thus become a very valuable and significant ally for the US, with whom it has had very close relations for a long time, sheltering on its soil the main US military base in the region. But it has also for a time cultivated relations with Iran, with the Lebanese Hezbollah, and so on, to "spread the risks" "this is the mentality of the rentier consolidating their investment portfolio. Today, Qatar can fully play upon its regional influence in the eyes of the US.

All this combines also with Turkey's regional role. There, we can speak truly of the bourgeoisie being in power, of a country where the government is certainly the expression of local capitalism above all. The Turkish government is the ally of the US "Turkey is a member of NATO" but it also intervenes with the perspective of the specific interests of Turkish capitalism, whose trade and investment offensive in the region has in the course of the years taken on a growing importance.

There are some of the big players at the state level in the region. But the biggest player today is the mass movement. Even in the countries where semi-victories have been achieved, like Tunisia or Egypt, the mass movement continues.

How do you analyse the electoral success of the Islamist parties in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt? Can these successes be interpreted as a repetition of the bringing to heel of the Iranian revolution of 1979-1981 or do they amount to another phenomenon?

It's different according to the country. In Morocco it isn't the same thing as in Egypt or in Tunisia. In Morocco, the success of the Islamic party is very relative, first because the elections were massively boycotted. According to the official figures, participation was less than the half of registered voters, the number of which had, moreover, curiously fallen since the previous election. This happened on the background of an energetic campaign in favour of the boycott from the forces of the real opposition grouped in the February 20th Movement. I should say, to correct the impression, that these opposition forces also include a significant Islamic component, radically opposed to the regime. The success of the Islamic party of the "loyal opposition" in Morocco is then very relative. It has probably been much welcomed, if not supported, by the monarchy with the aim of giving the impression that Morocco has thus experienced, under peaceful and constitutional forms, the same process as elsewhere. The party in question has links with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Tunisia and in Egypt, the electoral victories of the Islamic parties are more impressive, but there is nothing surprising about them. In the case of Egypt – here again we should highlight the differences between countries – these elections came after decades during which the Muslim Brotherhood were the sole mass opposition that existed, whereas the Salafists enjoyed a freedom of manœuvre because Mubarak considered them as useful to his regime, since they preached apoliticism. These two components of the Islamic movement were able to develop themselves over the years, despite the repression that the Muslim Brotherhood has had to suffer. Although they did not initiate the mass movement (they rallied to it en route), when this movement succeeded in imposing a relative democratisation of the institutions, these forces were better placed than anyone to benefit from it. It should not be forgotten that Mubarak only resigned last February, and that there were only a few months to prepare for the elections. This is not a lot of time to build an alternative force of credible opposition capable of triumphing at the electoral level. The mass movement broke the party of the regime – which was the main electoral machine in the country – but this was a broadly decentralised uprising in its form of organisation, multiple networks rather than a "leading party". The Muslim Brotherhood was then the only organised force with material resources in the movement.

The case of Tunisia is different, because Ennahda – the Islamic party – was persecuted and banned under Ben Ali. But the repressive regime of Ben Ali also prevented the emergence of left or even democratic forces. These forces did not have the breadth that Ennahda acquired in the early 1990s before its repression, and which has allowed it to appear in the course of the years as the strongest and most radical force of opposition to Ben Ali, with the aid of Al-Jazeera notably. Ennahda again did not initiate the uprising in its country, but given the short period for the preparation of the elections, it was in a much better position than the other political forces.

The Islamic parties in Egypt and Tunisia had money, which is essential for an electoral campaign. If in the past left forces in the Arab world could benefit from the material support of the Soviet Union or of this or that nationalist regime, all that ended a long time ago. On the contrary, for the Islamic parties, we even observe a competition between their backers: Qatar, Iran, and the Saudi kingdom. The role of Qatar is very important in this respect. Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leader, went to Qatar before returning to Tunisia. The new Ennahda headquarter in Tunis, several stories high, is not within the normal means of an organisation emerging from decades of repression. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has not stopped opening new offices in every corner of the country, with a profusion of resources, since last February when they were legalised. We have seen the considerable funds that they have deployed during the electoral campaign. The money factor then operates fully, it adds to their symbolic capital as main force of opposition, and, in the case of Egypt, to their implantation as a religious political force which knew how to draw together a significant network by carrying out social and charity works. It is not surprising that these forces emerged as the principal winners of the elections.

In the longer term, could the Islamic parties be replaced by other forces which will build themselves?

The main problem for the moment is the absence of a credible alternative. There it is not only time which matters, but also the capacity, the existence of a credible political and organisational project. The sole force which, in my view, could counterbalance the Islamic parties in the region, is not the liberals of all stripes who have by their nature a limited social base, but the workers' movement. In countries like Tunisia and Egypt it represents a considerable force – a force which has popular roots, unlike the liberals. The workers' movement is the sole force capable of building an alternative to the religious fundamentalists in the countries concerned. Indeed the crucial problem is the absence of political representation of the workers' movement.

A strong workers' movement exists both in Tunisia and Egypt: the UGTT in Tunisia, which has been a decisive factor in the overthrow of Ben Ali, and the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions in Egypt. The latter is not a marginal force; it already claims a million and a half members. The EFITU was set up after the overthrow of Mubarak on the basis of the strike movement which preceded it and followed it. This strike movement played a decisive role in the overthrow of Mubarak. In a sense the EFITU resembles the opposition trade unions created against the dictatorships in Korea, Poland or Brazil.

The problem is that that there is no political representation of the workers' movement in Tunisia and Egypt, and unhappily I must say also that the radical left in the countries concerned has not given priority to such an orientation. It thinks that by self proclamation and building itself politically it can play a major role in the events, whereas their rhythm demands a politics oriented much more directly to the promotion of the social movement itself. One can give priority to the construction of political organisations during slow periods, in the periods of crossing the desert, but when one is in situation of upheaval self-construction is not enough – I do not say that it is not necessary, but it is not sufficient. We need initiatives seeking to create a broad movement. In my opinion, in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, the classic idea of the mass workers' party based on the trade union movement should be central, but it is unfortunately not prominent in the political thinking of the radical left in these countries.

Why do the monarchies (Morocco, Jordan, and the Arabian Peninsula) seem to be “holding”? For Morocco, you mentioned the elements of “tolerance” of the current regime, but this is not really the case for the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula.

Here again we need to make distinctions. I should say first that Jordan is more like Morocco than certain Gulf monarchies. It also presents a façade of “liberal despotism”, “liberal absolutism”. These are absolute monarchies where there is no popular sovereignty, but they have granted constitutions and a certain measure of political liberalism, with a political pluralism which is not illusory. There is also a social base for the monarchy, a retrograde base, rural or of rural origin that the monarchies cultivate. This is combined of course with a selective repression.

But the current social situation differs between Morocco and Jordan. In Morocco, there is a strong social movement. The February 20th Movement has succeeded in organising significant mobilisations and until now, it has shown a remarkable perseverance. This movement made a mistake, in my view, in starting on the constitutional question, on the democratic question which, in Morocco, has no great acuity, whereas the social question is very much sharper. But there has been an evolution over the months and today the social is emphasised much more. Nonetheless, in the present conditions, there could be a popular uprising in Morocco of the type of those in Tunisia or Egypt only on social questions, and not on the democratic question, because the regime is intelligent enough not to show its teeth on the latter. There has been very little repression in Morocco compared with other countries of the uprising, Ben Ali's Tunisia or Mubarak's Egypt, not to speak of Libya or Syria.

There are common elements between Morocco and Jordan, where the regime allows a controlled freedom, it opens the safety valve and lets the steam out. At the same time it plays on the ethnic factor. In Jordan too, there are mobilisations which are not negligible and which continue. Thus in these two countries – Morocco and Jordan – there is a real movement, even if it does not have the impressive scope of what we have seen in Tunisia, Egypt,

Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, or Syria. But the highly artificial ethnic cleavage in Jordan between “native Jordanians” and Palestinians (that is people originating from the exodus from the other bank of the river Jordan) is exploited by the regime. Knowing that the Palestinians originating from the West Bank are in the majority in the country, the Jordanian monarchy cultivates a fear of “native Jordanians”, of being in the minority. It’s the classic “divide and rule” recipe.

If we turn to the Gulf monarchies, the situation is different. There have also been popular movements where it is possible. In Oman, there has been a social movement, we now see the development of a political movement in Kuwait, there have been protest movements and riots “harshly repressed” in the Saudi kingdom. And there is of course Bahrain, the only Gulf monarchy to have been confronted with an uprising of great breadth.

The exceptions have been the eminently artificial micro-states “Qatar and the United Arab Emirates” where 80 to 90% of the inhabitants are “foreigners”, that is have no rights and can be deported at any time. These then are states that do not fear too much the social movements and that benefit from the direct protection of Western powers “the US, Britain or France (which has important link with the UAE in particular, notably at the military level). Everywhere else, there have been movements “even in Kuwait, where the native population is a little more significant, although here again limited.

And above all there has been the uprising in Bahrain, which the local monarchy and the Saudis have tried to present as a strictly sectarian Shiite movement “the Shiites constitute the great majority of the island's population” against the Sunni monarchy. The sectarian dimension exists, certainly, and it is strong in the region: the Shiites are persecuted in Bahrain as well as in the Saudi kingdom (where they are a minority). The regimes in power use the most abject sectarianism to prevent the coming together of a mass movement, and cultivate in their own social base hostility against the Shiites. Of course, they also use their financial resources to buy off those who they can. In Bahrain, we have seen a considerable democratic movement, given the relationship of forces. Without external intervention, this movement would have been able to “and could still “overthrow the monarchy. The external intervention took the form of troops from the Gulf countries, above all Saudi, hurried to the island to supplement the local forces so that they could devote themselves to the repression of the movement. But the movement continues in Bahrain, and it is not ready to collapse.

Finally there is Yemen, which is not among the Gulf monarchies, but belongs to the same region. It is “with Sudan and Mauritania “one of the poorest Arab countries. Two thirds of the population there live below the poverty threshold. Yemen has experienced an absolutely extraordinary mobilisation for months. There it is the tribal factor which is exploited fully by the regime, as well as the regional factor, in such a way that the events have taken on aspects of what we could call “cold civil war” between two fractions of the population with imposing mobilisations on both sides. It is the only one of the countries concerned where the regime has succeeded in organising considerable authentic mobilisations, contrary to those which Gaddafi organised in Tripoli or which Assad organises in Syria, which are partly artificial. Yemen is a country whose situation directly affects the Saudi kingdom, and this explains why the Saudis are so directly involved there: they support Saleh, they are behind his “resignation” “which is a masquerade which fools nobody, above all not the radical opposition which continues the struggle.

The Algerian regime has not up to now been shaken by popular mobilisations, how do you explain this?

We can say the same of Iraq or Sudan, as well as Lebanon. These are countries which have known prolonged phases of civil war. In such conditions, it is understandable and natural that the people are not very inclined to destabilise the situation. There is a fear of the unknown, a fear of the resurgence of the most extremist fundamentalist forces, a fear of renewal, including by manipulation of the regime, of the dirty war that Algeria has known and for which the people have paid the price. This background is very important. It should not be forgotten that Algeria is a country which has already experienced a popular uprising in 1988, which certainly did not have the same breadth, or the same forms of organisation as what we have seen this year, but which nonetheless led to

political liberalisation. The electoral rise of the Front islamique du salut (FIS - Islamic Salvation Front), which followed, was ended by the coup d'état as we know, and the civil war. It is natural and normal that the people do not wish a repetition of this scenario. This is a stumbling block in Algeria, in the absence of forces capable of organising a horizontal social convergence on a class basis, which could be the base of a new uprising. There have been attempts at mobilisation in Algeria, but they have had little resonance. The perspectives seem rather blocked for the moment. That could change if the regional movement, which began in December 2010 in Tunisia, continues to broaden. We should also take account of the fact that neighbouring Tunisia and Libya are experiencing democratisations which benefit in both cases Islamic forces resembling the former FIS, repressed in Algeria. Ultimately that can have direct consequences on the Algerian situation and that worries the ruling military.

Do you think the revolutionaries can win in Syria? And who are these revolutionaries?

The mass uprising in Syria is above all an uprising of the popular base, of which the youth are the spearhead. It is the expression of exasperation faced with a family dictatorship which has ruled for 41 years. Hafez el-Assad took power in 1970 and died in 2000, after thirty years in power and since then, for eleven years, his son Bashar, promoted to this post when he was only 34, has ruled. There is then a very understandable exasperation, all the more in that the social dimension, ever-present in the background and as part of the infrastructure of the uprisings, is very present in Syria. It is a country which has been subjected for decades to economic liberalization reforms, which have accelerated in recent years and which are reflected in a dizzying rise in the cost of living, a very difficult social situation and considerable poverty (with 30% of the population living below the poverty level). This combines with the minority, confessional character of the regime, the ruling clique belonging mainly to the Alawite minority. All this explains why, when the inspiration came from the Tunisian example, then Egypt and finally Libya – including the international intervention in the latter country, which encouraged the Syrians to enter into action, hoping that it would dissuade their regime from repressing violently – we have seen the explosion of this movement that no political force can claim to control and still less to have initiated. Youth networks in particular – as we have seen everywhere from Morocco to Syria, using the new technologies of communication (like Facebook, of which much has been said) – have initiated and organised these uprisings under the form of “local coordination committees” now federated, which continue to propel the movement. They have no political affiliation.

But there are also political forces which are coalescing so as to “represent” the movement. We have seen two forces emerge, two competing groupings. One basically includes left forces, some of whom were not in the radical opposition to the regime and have ambiguous attitudes with respect to it, after having called for dialogue with it, believing they could act as mediators between the popular uprising and the regime and convince the latter to make reforms. They have quickly seen that this would not work and since then most have rallied around the objective of overthrowing the regime.

The other includes parties which are more radical in their opposition to the regime, a variety of forces going from the Muslim Brotherhood (who, here also, play a central role) to the Democratic Peoples' Party (originating from a split in the Syrian Communist Party), which has evolved ideologically in an “Italian” manner, but remains a left opposition to the regime, as well as the Kurdish parties. These forces have formed the Syrian National Council, which has been accepted by a good part of the rank and file of the Syrian popular movement as their representative, although this doesn't mean that the movement is controlled by political networks. It is then a peculiar situation which is reflected in the fact that they have chosen to entrust the presidency of the SNC to Burhan Ghalioun, an independent who is rather to the left. We see him now participate increasingly in a diplomatic game led by the Muslim Brotherhood in agreement with Turkey and the USA. This is a dangerous dynamic.

Finally, there are the army dissidents. After several months of repression, what should have happened did happen. Even in the absence of an organisation capable of organising the passage of soldiers to the side of the popular revolt, the discontent of the soldiers has led to defections, initially completely unorganised. Since August they have set up a Free Syrian Army, against a backdrop of the beginnings of a civil war, with confrontations between army

dissidents and the Praetorian guard of the regime.

There is then in Syria a spectrum of forces. Because the country has not known any political life for decades – although the regime here is less totalitarian than was the case in Libya – it is impossible to know what the relative weight is of one or the other. We need to await the overthrow of the regime, if it happens, and free elections to see the relative force of the organised political currents.

To return to Libya, does the fall of Gaddafi mean the end of the civil war or could we see the re-emergence of armed confrontations and if so, who are the protagonists?

First, it should be stressed that in Libya, more than forty years of totalitarian regime had suppressed any form of political life. Libya appears then an uncharted land in political terms, and nobody knows what political landscape will emerge there, or what will emerge from the elections in this country, if they take place.

If by civil war, you mean the war which culminated in the arrest and liquidation of Gaddafi, then the arrest of his son, this is essentially over for the moment. What there is currently is rather a chaotic situation, a little like Lebanon in the first years of the civil war after 1975, or, to take an extreme case, as in Somalia. There is a government, but there is no state. If we define the state first and foremost by its armed spinal column, there is no longer an army in Libya (even if there are attempts to reconstitute one): there is a plurality of militias, structured on various bases, regional, tribal, political-ideological and so on. The regional factor, in the narrowest sense – Misrata or Zintan, for example – is determinant. Each region has its own armed militias.

That testifies to the popular character of the war that brought the regime down. What we have seen in Libya is without a shadow of a doubt a popular insurrection and even a popular war, in the most classic form: civilians of all professions metamorphosed into combatants, who threw themselves into the battle against the regime.

Those who believed that the NATO intervention meant the end of the popular character of the rebellion and transformed the rebels into NATO puppets made a serious error. Besides, most of those who said this sought to justify their support for Gaddafi's regime against the Libyan revolution. We have seen attitudes of every kind and an indescribable confusion in the international left. To believe that NATO would have control over the situation in Libya after the overthrow of Gaddafi was to entertain great illusions. The US has not succeeded in controlling Iraq with a massive deployment of troops in this country, so how could anyone believe that they can control Libya without even having troops on the ground.

The potential of popular protest liberated by the uprising against Gaddafi is still present in Libya. Witness for example the demonstrations which took place on December 12th in Benghazi against the Transitional National Council and against the fact that it seeks to co-opt personalities linked to the old regime. NATO has not ceased to advise the TNC to integrate members of the Gaddafi regime, saying that these are the lessons learned from the Iraqi fiasco. Well, that is rejected by the people; there are popular movements which oppose it. Witness also the organisation of women – for the first time in Libya, an autonomous movement of women has emerged and is mobilising whether it is on the question of rape or around the issue of political representation. There are also protests by civilians who wish to get rid of the militias. Libya is a country where the situation is exploding in all directions, where the potential awakened by the uprising is being strongly expressed.

To be sure, the perspectives there are handicapped by the absence of a left, given what the regime has been and what it has done to any form of political opposition. But there has been some small progress nonetheless – for example, the constitution of a Federation of Independent Trade Unions which has established links with its Egyptian equivalent. We shall see what will happen.

For the moment in any case, from the very fact of the uprising and the armed overthrow of the regime, and in spite of the imperialist intervention in the conflict, Libya is, of all the countries in the region, the one that has experienced the most radical change up until now. The Gaddafi regime has been radically destroyed, even if there are remnants of it which provoke popular mobilisations. But the fundamental structures of the regime have fallen – which is very different from Tunisia, Egypt, not to mention Yemen. In Egypt, still more than in Tunisia, the basic structures of the regime are still in place, and a military junta is even in power in Cairo.

Of all Arab countries, Tunisia is the one where the organisations of the workers' movement – trades unionism – have the longest tradition and strongest organisation. But the workers' movement was marginalised in the electoral process for the Constituent Assembly. Do you think that we are witnessing the beginning of a stabilisation, or simply an electoral interlude?

Tunisia is a country where there is a real bourgeoisie, which tolerated or profited from the regime of Ben Ali. This bourgeoisie has had recourse to the remnants of the Bourguiba regime – that is, the regime which preceded Ben Ali's seizure of power – represented by Béji Caïd Essebsi, who was prime minister until the elections. Today, the Tunisian bourgeoisie tries to co-opt the new majority – the Ennahda party, the Congress for the Republic led by the new president Moncef Marzouki and so on. These forces are assimilable by the bourgeoisie because they do not have an anti-capitalist social or economic programme. On the contrary, they are either more or less progressive liberal democrats, like Marzouki, or an Islamic current of fundamentalist origin, Ennahda, to which the new prime minister, Hamadi Jabali, belongs, and which claims to have transcended its fundamentalist character and to have become a Tunisian equivalent of the ruling AKP party in Turkey. Just as Turkish big capital has perfectly well accommodated to the AKP party, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has today even become its best representative, the Tunisian bourgeoisie seeks to co-opt Ennahda.

At the same time, the movement continues at the grassroots level. Hardly were the elections over than we saw an uprising in the Gafsa mining basin – whose struggles, in 2008 in particular, preceded the revolution which broke out in December 2010. The protest this time, as in 2008, concerned the social question, the demand for the right to work and for jobs. And this will continue, because the movement in Tunisia began around the social question and the coalition now in power has no response to this question.

So in Tunisia there is a favourable terrain for the construction of a political force based on the workers' movement, provided that the left forces take the initiative in this direction.

How are the mobilisations in Yemen developing after the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh?

The movement continues in Yemen also. A significant part of the opposition understands perfectly that the resignation of Saleh is only an attempt to change the façade, without modifying the base.

Separatist demands are also gathering momentum in South Yemen, faced with this unconvincing compromise. It should not be forgotten that Yemen was only unified in 1994, after a long division into two states. The southern state had the only regime identifying with Marxism in the region, with a social experience which is little known, but remarkable. After a bureaucratic degeneration that was facilitated by its dependency on the Soviet Union, the regime collapsed in the wake of the collapse of its tutelary power. But we are now seeing once again a separatist movement in the South which sees itself as socially more advanced than the North where pre-capitalist, tribal and other structures are more decisive.

There is also in Yemen a sectarian war with a minority that has been the subject of attacks from the Saleh regime, and there is also Al-Qaida – Yemen is today the Arab country where the Al-Qaida network is the strongest at the

military level. Yemen then is a considerable powder keg.

What do you think of the difficulty in Europe in leading solidarity campaigns with the revolutions in the Arab region?

Contrary to the implication of the question, I believe that there has been a very strong sympathy, even in the USA, with the uprising in Tunisia and still more with the uprising in Egypt.

The fact that it did not lead to mobilisations, it seems to me, is because people have not seen a particular reason to mobilise. I am not going to engage in counterfactual history, but I think that if there had been any attempt at a repressive intervention by Western governments against the revolution in Tunisia or in Egypt, a significant solidarity movement would have emerged. In the case of Libya, the Western governments intervened on the right side, in appearance at least, in the eyes of public opinion. In the Libyan case, it is generally the opposite question that is posed: why was there no mobilisation against this Western military intervention? In the case of Syria, people hear contradictory assessments, and they see that the attitude of their governments is "cautious", a fact that does not incite them to mobilise.

I see things otherwise. The echo of the Arab uprisings is very strong among the peoples of the world. We have already seen the mobilisations of February 2011 in Wisconsin, in the US, which took Egypt as a reference point, and we have seen the big trade union demonstration in March in London, where many placards referred to Egypt, or again the movements of the indignant in Spain and Greece, then more recently the Occupy movement which has spread through the US and elsewhere. Everywhere we find references to what happened in the Arab world, and in particular to the Egyptian uprising "because there was much more significant media focus on the events in Egypt than on all the rest. People say "We will do the same as them", "They dared to do it, we will do it"! Of course, there should be no exaggeration in the other direction. In saying that, I am perfectly aware of the limits of all this, even where the movements have taken on a considerable breadth, as in Spain. In no European country is there currently a situation similar to that in the Arab world; that is, a combination of sharp social crisis and of illegitimate despotic government. In Europe, with bourgeois democratic regimes, things do not have this sharpness, and recurrent resort to the ballot box helps dampen the level of explosiveness.

It is not so much about organising solidarity, in my view, since for the moment there is no Western intervention against the uprisings in the region "if that should take place, it would of course be necessary to mobilise against it. But for now, what is more important is to take inspiration from the regional example, which shows that a mass movement can bring about radical changes in the situation of a country. This is the lesson that is snowballing today, and what seems to me the most important

Don't you think that in the historic, traditional left, which is quite decayed now, there is a loss of bearings which holds back mobilisations? You mentioned the movement of the indignant, but it is also a movement which says "no party, no union represents us", which means that it does not feel itself linked to this traditional left, or at least not in the same way as in the past...

I believe, more fundamentally, that we have for some years been confronted with a historic transformation of the political forms of the left, the forms of the workers' movement, the forms of class struggle. It seems to me that this transformation is very unevenly understood in what remains of the left. There are still too many people who continue to think within the frame of thought inherited from the 20th century. And yet the experience of the 20th century left, which has tragically ended in bankruptcy, is today completely obsolete. It is necessary to renew with conceptions of class struggle which are much more horizontal, much less vertical and centralised than the model that imposed itself within the left since the Bolshevik victory in 1917. Today the technological revolution allows much more democratic forms of organisation, more horizontal, in networks... This is what young people are doing; it is what we see at work

in the movements underway in the Arab world. Without entertaining illusions though: to believe that Facebook will be the equivalent for the 21st century of the Leninist party would be to entertain big illusions. But between the two, there is room for an inventive combination of much more democratic political organisation, using these technologies, capable of linking to social and citizen networks, capable of appealing to the new generations. The new generations are practically born in these technologies, we see how they use them, how they insert them into their lives. That sketches a future, which necessitates a political, ideological, organisational rearmament of the left at the world scale. That is the challenge which is posed, as shown also by what is happening in the Arab world. This challenge had already been illustrated by the Zapatista revolt, which was a strong attempt at reinventing the forms of expression of the radical left; then with the movement for global justice and in the thinking of components of this movement; and today between the uprisings in the Arab world, the indignant, Occupy, and so on, we see an explosion of mobilisations, in particular of the youth, but not only them, who use these methods of action. The radical left needs to recharge its batteries; it is essential to try to combine the radical left's programmatic and theoretical legacy, the Marxist legacy, with these modern forms, this radical renewal of the forms of organisation and expression, in order to build a revolutionary left of the 21st century.