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Middle East/North Africa

“Everything depends on what will happen in Algeria and Sudan”.

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An interview with Gilbert Achcar, originally published on April 22, 2019 in the Moroccan publication *Tel quell*.

In Algeria and Sudan, the army has become an arbiter in the ongoing revolutions. For what reasons?

These are military institutions which everyone knows are the real backbone of the regime in countries like Algeria, Sudan or Egypt. Seeing the extent of popular discontent, they decided to act in a conservative coup, sacrificing the head of the regime to preserve the rest. We saw this with Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and we are witnessing the same thing with Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir. In all three countries, the army is at the heart of the regime. They get rid of a president who has become more an embarrassment than a benefit in order to preserve the regime.

While there may have been illusions about the role of the army among many people in Egypt in 2011, which were very actively maintained by the Muslim Brotherhood at the time, we can see that in Algeria as in Sudan people are not deluded and continue to demand a civilian government, which the Egyptian movement did not do in 2011.

How is it that certain elements of the military could join these movements?

In both countries, the armies sacrificed one leader after another, throwing them to the people to mollify them. But this does not work because the protesters understand what is happening. The difference is that the leadership of the Sudanese movement is better organized and more politically advanced than we have seen since 2011 in the Arab world.

Another advantage of the Sudanese is dissension in the army. The fact that soldiers and officers openly declared themselves in favour of the protesters and joined them to protect them from the security forces, which resulted in their imprisonment, witnesses to a situation which limits the possibility for the military hierarchy of using troops against the popular movement. Soldiers, as well as middle and lower rank officers, have shown a willingness to mix with the popular movement so any attempt to use the military for repressive purposes runs the risk of turning against the hierarchy.

In the Arab world, the army seems to be an essential anchor of power. How is this reflected?

Everyone knows that the military-security institution is at the heart of the regime, although there may be tension between the security forces and the military. In both Algeria and Sudan, the military-security complex is the mainstay of the regime. The difference between these countries and others lies in the place occupied by the army in the regime.

Tunisia is a country where the state apparatus, in the broader sense than the armed forces alone, is separable from the president's family. And it got rid of them in 2011. In this category of countries, heads of state can jump like fuses.

There is another category of country in the Arab world, which includes all the monarchies as well as the so-called republics, like Gaddafi's Libya, Assad's Syria or formerly Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which are organized as monarchies. In these countries, the ruling families own the state and have built the military-security complex so that it is organically linked to them like a private guard that might be called royal or republican depending on the country.

These situations have a lot in common with regimes that go beyond the president and his family.

If we look at the regime in its broader sense, with the military-security complex as the backbone of the state regime, we can see that the only way to achieve radical democratic change without a civil war is if the popular movement gains the sympathy of the vast majority of the armed forces, especially the soldiers. Unless this happens, civil wars become almost inevitable.

In Sudan, there have been signs of tension in recent years between the regular army and the intelligence service, the Niss. The latter wanted to assert its authority over that of the regular army. This annoyed the latter, so that might explain why they joined the demonstrations.

It must not be forgotten that the regular soldiers of the regular army are children of the people. There is a high probability that their relatives will be among the demonstrators in a movement of this magnitude. The degree of dissatisfaction among the troops also depends on material conditions and is probably very high in a country like Sudan because of its economic difficulties. Sudan has lost the means to offer its armed forces a privileged position as can be the case in oil-producing countries such as Algeria or Saudi Arabia, at least for the officer caste. The dissatisfaction of the troops seems to me to be an essential factor in leading the military hierarchies to bow to the movement.

The situation is probably better in Sudan than in Algeria because the Sudanese movement has a much more homogenous political leadership, organized since the beginning of the year. This is not the case in Algeria where we do not see a legitimate leadership of the uprising emerge, beyond meetings of opposition parties.

The opposition movement in Sudan is one where the Muslim Brotherhood did not participate for the very reason that it was linked to the regime. I have described Omar al-Bashir as a “Morsisi”, that is, a combination of Marshal Al-Sissi and Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood president whom Sissi overthrew, the al-Bashir regime was a military dictatorship linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. [1] These played a very negative role in the leadership of the various uprisings in the region in 2011. They jumped on the bandwagon everywhere, because nowhere did they cause the uprisings. Having jumped on the bandwagon and given the organizational, financial and other means at their disposal, they then played a determining role in the political orientation of the events.

How did the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the uprising in Egypt manifest itself?

In the case of Egypt, they played a key role in spreading illusions about the army in the beginning, before they themselves broke with the military. In the period immediately following the fall of Mubarak, they were in open alliance with the military. The first constitutional referendum was between the military, in alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists against progressive forces that stretched from the left to the moderate secular or moderate Muslim forces.

What about the case of Libya where we see a rebel marshal, Khalifa Haftar, who presents himself as the sole guarantor of stability, particularly through the fight against terrorism?

What is happening in Libya is the same scenario as elsewhere as it was imposed from 2013. We then entered a second phase of the process started in 2011, a reactionary phase during which the situation was dominated by the marginalization of the progressive forces that led to the so-called Arab Spring and the confrontation between the two other poles of the triangle: the old regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. These two camps have support in the Gulf states. For the old regime, it is the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, enjoys the support of Qatar.

Libya is another illustration of this same situation. Haftar is supported by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Russia. And France has also given him support. On the other hand, there is the UN-recognized government, which the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar support.

Do you think that these events question the place of the army at the heart of the governance systems in the region?

We must not forget that at the root of these movements, there is a deep socio-economic crisis which results in massive unemployment and the highest unemployment rates in the world, especially for young people. This is the basic reason for the explosion that has been going on since 2011. The socio-economic stalemate has resulted in growth rates that are much slower than what would be needed to get the countries in the region out of sub-development. These reasons have fuelled a strong political discontent against the existing regimes, all of which are despotic, or at least authoritarian, systems without popular sovereignty. The demand for this sovereignty is today at the centre of the uprisings.

In the post-independence years, monarchies were overthrown in a series of countries in the Arab world. Since then, lessons have been learned and states have been reshaped with Praetorian guards, trained to ensure the sustainability of the regimes and their control of the country's military-security complex. Some regimes did this by placing their own, their extended family members, their clan, their tribe, even their province ... all that was possible to guarantee a military-security caste with complete allegiance to the regime.

**Can we talk about a new Arab Spring, which takes into account the failures of the first movements in 2011?
Can we anticipate new uprisings?**

In 2011, the term “Arab Spring” was used with a lot of illusions. It indicated the hope for rapid, peaceful change that would be limited to constitutional change and free elections. We have seen later that the crisis is much deeper and requires much more than a simple political adjustment. What is at stake, beyond the democratic question, is the socio-economic question. This can be seen in Tunisia, which is the only country where there has been lasting democratic change, whose achievements have been preserved until today.

This country is also experiencing endless regional social explosions. Even in Syria, we see in the areas controlled by the regime a return of social protest. There is effervescence everywhere.

What started in 2011 is what I called a long-term revolutionary process. The region has entered a long phase of unrest which will experience phases of revolutionary rise and others of counterrevolutionary reflux. If we want to talk about “spring”, we must understand it as a transitional season in a succession of seasons. Since the turn of 2013, we have entered a particularly hard winter.

Are we witnessing a new spring today? Yes, in part, because the situation is contradictory. In Syria, there is a consolidation of the old regime. Another old regime, in Egypt, attempts to prolong itself through constitutional changes. There are a series of elements in the region that still belong to the counter-revolutionary phase.

And then, we have the new uprisings in Algeria and Sudan, of the same magnitude as those of 2011. This is not yet a new generalized spring in the region, but a moment of transition. Everything depends on what will happen in Algeria and Sudan. If that ends badly, the regimes could emerge strengthened. If, on the other hand, these movements lead to strong gains, it will give courage to the popular movement everywhere.

“Everything depends on what will happen in Algeria and Sudan”.

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[1] [The Fall of Sudan's "Morsisi"](#)