

## Year Two of the Arab Revolutions

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### I. Prologue

The 2011 Arab revolutions have shaken the world, toppling three well-entrenched dictatorships – in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya -- in a battle not only for democracy, but also one that raised issues of economic and social justice while attacking neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, they touched off a year of upheaval, from Wisconsin to Spain, and from London to Wall Street. They have brought to mind Karl Marx's expressed hopes about the internationalization of revolution in another revolutionary period, that of the Polish uprising of 1863: "This time, let us hope, the lava will flow from East to West" (letter to Engels of Feb. 13, 1863, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 41, p. 453).

However, as dialectics teaches us, there is no progress without contradiction, and as Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist-Humanism noted since its inception, counter-revolution arises not just from openly reactionary forces, but can be found in the very innards of revolution itself. (See especially her *Marxism and Freedom* [1958], just translated into [Arabic](#).) This is not of course an inevitability, let alone a cyclical process, but a danger that needs first to be recognized and then fought against. Thus, there was much dismay, not only among their international supporters, but also among Arab revolutionaries themselves, when Islamist parties won big electoral victories in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, and seemed poised to do well in Libya as well. Then came June's presidential election in Egypt, when the final round pitted the Muslim Brotherhood, which won very narrowly, against a candidate linked to the Mubarak dictatorship. All of this led many to feel that the hopes of 2011 had been dealt a most severe setback.

To be sure, it must be acknowledged that even though Islamist politics had not dominated the 2011 revolutions themselves, in their aftermath Islamist parties and movements possessed

both a cohesion and a clear sense of purpose lacking in the more secular and leftist groupings. This does not mean that the game is up, however, let alone that the 2011 revolutions were really Islamist at their core. But it must be admitted that Islamism is a bigger danger now than it seemed to be in the heady early months of 2011.

At the same time, we have witnessed, over the past year, the continued articulation of a more secular and leftist politics, whether on the streets or in some of the election returns, both in Egypt and Tunisia. Nor have the large Islamist parties advocated anything resembling Khomeinism or Taliban-style politics, although the minority Salafists have certainly done so. Still, it must be said that even a relatively moderate Islamism is almost always a conservative movement, whether on culture, economic policy, or basic democratic principles, at best akin to groups like the Republican Right in the USA or the European Christian Democrats.

Over the past 2 decades, Islamism in various forms – from Hamas in Palestine, to the Muslim Brotherhood and more militant strands in Egypt, to the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria – has been ascendant in the region. It came to the fore in the 1980s, an era of ideological reaction exemplified not only by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, but also by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II. This legacy did not completely disappear in the fires of 2011, any more than Reagan-Thatcher style neoliberalism has disappeared in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis and the rise of movements like Occupy. However, the 2011 Arab revolutions changed the conversation in the Middle East, taking us beyond the retrogressive duality of nominally secular nationalist dictatorship vs. radical Islamism.

With all this in mind, let us examine year two of the Arab revolutions, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, but with a glance at Libya and Syria as well.

## **II. Tunisia as Bellwether**

Tunisia’s youth, women, and workers sparked the new era of revolution with lightning speed with their January 2011 overthrow of an entrenched dictatorial regime. But by October, the elections for a constituent assembly gave a 35% plurality to the moderate Islamist Ennahda Party, with the largest secular leftist group, the Congress for the Republic (CPR), receiving only 8% of the vote. The militantly secularist Progressive Democratic Party, whose campaign emphasized attacks on Islamism as a reactionary

force, won very few votes. Afterwards, Ennahda allowed the CPR's Moncef Marzouki to become the new president, while its Hamadi Jebali took over as prime minister.

On the eve of the election, the privately owned Nessma TV showed the celebrated Iranian film "Persepolis," based upon Marjane Satrapi's moving leftist feminist account of growing up as a young woman during the harshest days of the Khomeini regime in Iran. Outraged by the fact that the central character at one point expresses anger at Allah, an image of whom is also given (this itself considered blasphemous by pious Muslims), militant fundamentalists known as Salafists attacked both the station and the home of its owner, Nabil Karoui. The fact that Karoui had strong links to the old regime undermined support for him among the broader public as well. In May, Karoui was fined \$1500 for "disturbing public order and undermining good morals" (*Le Monde*, 5/4/12). In the ensuing months, Salafists, with lavish funding from Saudi Arabia, have taken over about a fifth of the country's 2500 mosques, from which they have staged attacks on the Left and challenged the more moderate Ennahda, which says it is opposed to incorporating Sharia law into the constitution.

Over the past year, a number of other cultural and class conflicts have illustrated both the power of retrogressionist forces and the spirited resistance of more secular and leftist ones, with the outcome still in the balance. One big confrontation took place in December 2011, when some 3000 teachers, students, and workers demonstrated against unemployment, fundamentalism, and corruption outside the Constituent Assembly. Their ranks included mineworkers from the Gafsa region who camped out in tents under the slogan "work, freedom, dignity." Within a few days, a larger group involving thousands of Islamists, many of them extremist Salafists, staged a counter-demonstration demanding sex segregation at universities and the right of students to wear the full veil in the classroom. A physical attack by the Salafists was narrowly averted.

Then, on February 25, another demonstration of about 3000 secularists and leftists was staged against the current government's inaction in the face of Salafist attacks, especially on trade union headquarters, accusing Ennahda of complicity in those attacks. The major speaker, Hocine Abassi, Secretary General of the General Union of Tunisian Workers, did not help the cause when he denounced the "imperialist and Zionist plot" against the Assad regime in Syria. Unfortunately, this kind of statement is not uncommon among the Middle Eastern and global left, some of which also supported the Qaddafi regime to the bitter end.

A series of confrontations has also taken place at Manouba University, whose faculty and more secular students have repeatedly repulsed Salafist demands for prayer rooms and

allowing students veiled in the niqab, which shows only the eyes, to attend classes. One secular woman student briefly became a hero on national TV in March, after she was filmed being thrown to the ground by a large man while trying to prevent Salafists from replacing the national flag with a black Salafist one. A few days later a large national demonstration of mainly secular women celebrated March 8, International Women's Day. But the next day, radical Islamist women wearing black veils demonstrated outside the national TV station, accusing it of being "allied to the left."

The most recent confrontation involved a major art exhibition in a middle class and secular neighborhood of the capital. Among the artworks was one spelling out the name of Allah with figures of ants, and another depicting the bearded heads of fundamentalist men surrounding a naked woman, whose vagina was covered by a plate of couscous. In response, well-organized Salafist mobs attacked the exhibit hall. A few managed to overwhelm police, getting into the hall and destroying some paintings. Mobs also attacked several police stations. The government condemned the mob attacks, declared a curfew, and carried out a number of arrests. It called for national unity, but Ennahda head Rachid Ghannouchi also framed the events not as a fight over free speech, but as having been caused by both "secular and religious extremists" (Isabel Madraud, "Ambiance délétère en Tunisie après la vague d'émeutes," *Le Monde*, 6/15/12). Since then, the exhibition hall has been closed by the government, while a number of the artists have received death threats.

As much of the left sees things, the Ennahda-dominated government has no solution to the class and economic problems that underlay the revolution, such as a depression-level official unemployment rate of 19%. Nor has it taken up the grievances of employed workers, like those at the German-owned Leoni auto cable plant, who staged strikes and sit-ins in January and then had to face management threats to close the plant. Instead, the government is allowing cultural conflicts to simmer, both to distract the working people from the real issues and to undermine its opponents among a population that is as a whole more pious than the secular and leftist groups. At the same time, wary of international public opinion, Ennahda has also been careful to distance itself from the Salafist extremists, but without really cracking down on them.

It must also be said, however, that some of the actions of our secular and leftist comrades, like continuing to forbid veiled women to attend classes at Manouba University, need to be rethought, let alone the outrageous support of some for the Assad regime. As Marxist-Humanists, we have never held to a French Enlightenment or Leninist type of atheism, which in any case cannot be found in any of the political programs endorsed by Marx.

Instead, we have acknowledged progressive as well as retrogressive trends in religion's relation to politics. Take, for example, our co-founder Charles Denby's Lowndes County Christian Movement, a Black liberation association of workers and farmers in Detroit and Alabama that was described so eloquently in part 2 of his *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (1978).

## II. The Egyptian Linchpin

While neither Tunisia nor Egypt has experienced any significant change in the class and economic structure of society despite having undergone political revolutions, the outcomes have been somewhat different at the political level. Where Tunisians have suffered under the vicissitudes of a new political system dominated by Islamists, Egyptians have seen the survival of important elements of the old military-security-judicial state, along with the ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood, which remains more fundamentalist than its Tunisian counterparts. As a result of months of painful betrayals and repression, the Egyptian revolutionary forces have learned that they need to oppose not only the military-police apparatus, but also the Brotherhood. Month after month, the revolutionaries have mobilized on Tahrir Square, often in the hundreds of thousands, to keep alive the spirit of February 2011 in the face of violent attacks and even sexual assaults by the military.

For most of the time since the 2011 revolution, as *Le Monde's* Christoph Ayad notes, “[Muslim] Brothers and military men had managed to agree insofar as keeping a lid on the street and the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square” (“Egypt: 60 ans de lutte entre islamistes et militaires,” *Le Monde*, 6/18/12). This meant helping the military to ram through a slightly amended constitution in March 2011 that favored well-entrenched organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood. It also meant blocking demonstrators from entering Tahrir Square on January 31, 2012. These demonstrators were targeting continued rule by the supposedly interim Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) for its failure to relinquish power and its continuing to arrest, torture, sexually abuse, and imprison democratic and leftist political activists. But at the sight of the Brothers taking an openly anti-revolutionary position, the revolutionaries broke into the chant, “No Brotherhood, no officers.”

During this same period, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to consolidate its hold on the levers of what was at the time projected to be a new political order based upon a new constitution. Taking advantage of its large, disciplined organization and lavish funding

from Qatar, and not hesitating to slander its opponents as anti-Islamic, the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party garnered a large victory in the parliamentary elections last winter. When the final votes were tallied in January, Freedom and Justice had won 47% of the vote, while the utterly reactionary Salafists had won 24%, the latter with substantial financial support from Saudi Arabia. Liberal parties scored a total of only 16%, while the left was shut out almost completely. This marked the low point of the Egyptian revolution, as it now appeared that Egypt was heading for a transition toward some kind of amalgam of Islamist conservatism and the old state apparatus under SCAF.

At this point, however, the Brotherhood began to overreach. Rather than form even a token alliance with the small secular wing of the new parliament, it tacitly allied with the Salafists, granting them leadership of committees on human rights and on culture and the media. It also betrayed its promises regarding the Egyptian presidency. In early 2011, the Brotherhood had stated repeatedly that it would not seek a political monopoly even if it had the votes to do so, intimating that it would back the candidacy of a well-known liberal democrat like Mohamed El Baradei, popular among the revolutionary youth as well. But on March 21, 2012 the Brotherhood went back on that promise, announcing that it would run one of its own for president, this while still controlling both parliament and the committee to write the constitution.

At this point, the military leaders of SCAF saw an opening for themselves. After all, they and their close allies still controlled the state, including the organization of the elections and the counting of the votes. Election judges loyal to SCAF thereupon disqualified the candidacy of a charismatic leader of the Brotherhood, forcing them to run the dour Mohamed Morsi. They also disqualified a prominent Salafist. Meanwhile, the military quietly backed the candidacy of former Air Force officer Ahmad Shafiq, who ran on ferocious "law and order" platform, promising to silence by overwhelming force the disorderly demonstrations on Tahrir Square, while also stoking fears of an Islamist Egypt.

The first round of the presidential election, held on March 31, 2012, saw a big drop in support for the Muslim Brotherhood versus the parliamentary elections of only a few months earlier. While the Brotherhood's Morsi came in first, he scored only 25%, way down from the Brotherhood's parliamentary total of 47% in January. Shocking to many, and possibly due to a degree of election fraud, Shafiq placed second, with 24%. Another surprise lay in the new and surprising strength of leftists and progressives. Left-wing nationalist Hamdin Sabbahi, who had worked closely with the youthful protestors even before 2011, was just behind, with 21% of the vote. In addition, Abdel Moneim Aboul

Foutou, a very liberal Islamist with a progressive social agenda who had been pushed out of the Brotherhood, received 17% of the vote.

This outcome suggested that the broad Egyptian public had not turned into supporters of a conservative form of Islamism and that they were also open to progressive and leftist politics. After all, the combined vote for Sabbahi and Abdel Foutou was no less than 38%, with Sabbahi besting the Brotherhood in some of Cairo's poorest neighborhoods, which he and Abdel Foutou also did in Alexandria. In short, the Egyptian revolution remained in play.

As voters awaited the final round for the presidency between the Brotherhood's Morsi and the military-backed Shafiq, it was now the military's turn to overreach. Judges close to SCAF disbanded parliament, leaving the process of creating a new constitution in utter limbo. SCAF also arrogated vast new powers to itself, suggesting that it, rather than voters or the new president, would nominate a new constituent assembly.

On June 8, another very large demonstration filled Tahrir Square. All opposed what amounted to a coup by the military, with some giving critical support to Morsi and others shouting slogans against both Morsi and Shafiq. Eventually, Morsi won a fairly narrow victory against Shafiq, 52% to 48%. At one level, this was a shocking and retrogressive outcome. Shocking because an open supporter of the old regime received nearly half of the vote. Retrogressive because the political openings of 2011 had been reduced, in this final round, at least, to a choice between two conservatives.

But at another level, this presented an opening. Both the military and the Muslim Brotherhood had discredited themselves, plus they were now at odds with each other, giving an opening to the revolutionary forces. Whereas their cooperation during 2011 and early 2012 had almost completely closed out any type of progressive politics, the sharp new divergences between them may now have created openings for leftists and progressive forces.

During the past year, two other indicators showed the obstacles facing the Egyptian revolution. One indicator of the deep challenges facing the Egyptian revolution is the state of labor. Tellingly, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions was founded just as Mubarak was being overthrown. Many strikes broke out soon after, with not only economic demands, but also calls for firing corrupt and oppressive bosses, many of whom were pushed out. But by late 2011, SCAF promulgated a new labor law that criminalized strikes that disturbed production, in other words almost all strikes. Penalties include

prison sentences and stiff fines. A draft labor law proposed by the Muslim Brotherhood was little better.

A second indicator of deep contradictions since 2011 involved women's rights, so often a bellwether of where a revolution is going. On November 25 of last year, a monster demonstration drew at least 500,000 to Tahrir Square, demanding the resignation of the SCAF in favor of a government of national salvation involving all the nation's political forces. As these protests persisted into December, the military police cracked down. On December 17, soldiers accosted and stripped several women demonstrators, and one of these women was videoed being kicked on the ground by 2 male soldiers who had torn off her blouse. After the "blue bra" video went viral on the Internet, 10,000 women came onto the streets to demonstrate 3 days later, on December 20. This constituted the largest women's rights demonstration in modern Egyptian history, larger than the historic women's demonstration of 1919 against British imperialism.

Other women who had been arrested in various demonstrations also came forward to lodge legal complaints against sexual assaults by soldiers or military doctors, dubbed "virginity tests," which had been going on all through 2011, in fact continuing a practice begun by Mubarak's police. While the courts initially allowed these cases to go forward, by March of this year the cases were dismissed.

Despite this, Egyptian women have continued to protest with great courage in the face of ongoing sexual assaults in broad daylight in Tahrir Square, not only by the police and military, but also by male civilians. For example, a dozen women came to the June 8 demonstration against what amounted to SCAF's coup, but their target was the sexual assaults in Tahrir Square that have made it so difficult for women to participate in demonstrations there. Even though they had several dozen male escorts, their small group of fifty was driven off Tahrir almost immediately, under a shower of rocks and bottles. Feminists suspect that at least some of these sexual attacks have been orchestrated by the military-security apparatus, which has long employed thugs to attack protestors, and which targeted women in this way at demonstrations in the years leading up to 2011. But even if this is the case, how was a group of progressive women and their supporters driven off Tahrir Square in the midst of a demonstration that had an overall revolutionary character?

This points to a problem we noted in our earlier analysis of the Egyptian revolution, even at the height of its revolutionary creativity, when millions flocked to and occupied Tahrir Square day and night: "One youth in the square, Amira Magdy, declared, 'We don't need a leader. This system is beautiful' (Kareem Fahim and Mona El-Naggar, "Some Fear a

Street Movement's Leaderless Status May Become a Liability," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2011). Such skepticism about a leader from on high was certainly warranted, especially given Egypt's history of military rulers, but it begged the question of what to do about the fact that some groups like the Army and the Muslim Brotherhood – not to speak of remnants of Mubarak's National Democratic Party -- were already organized, had their agendas, and would sooner or later seek to project those agendas, something they would be able to all the more easily if the more grassroots, secular, and leftist elements of the revolution did not themselves develop a stronger organizational presence in Egyptian society" (Kevin Anderson, "[Arab Revolutions at the Crossroads](#)," *US Marxist-Humanists*, April 2, 2011)

### **III. Libya and Syria**

I can only touch very briefly here on the two other major revolutions in the region, Libya and Syria. In Libya, the long and bloody process of overthrowing the Qaddafi regime took more than six months, even with significant air support from NATO. The regime's intransigence to the end meant that the old state had to be destroyed. The extent to which the revolution succeeded as a result of NATO intervention has been hotly debated on the Left, but some of the more astute commentators – like Stephen Zunes and Juan Cole -- have emphasized that Libyan forces might have won anyway without the foreign assistance. Moreover, these same observers have argued that the endgame of the uprising, the fall of the capital, Tripoli, in August 2011 was more the product of an internal mass uprising than of an invasion by the military forces of the uprising. As Cole put it, "working-class districts rose up, in the hundreds of thousands and just threw off the regime" (cited in Zunes, "Lessons and False Lessons from Libya," *Truthout*, 8/30/11).

What will replace the murderous, totalitarian Qaddafi regime is still unclear. So far, some regional militia leaders that fought Qaddafi have turned into warlords, who have dominated some areas of the country. This has led to sometimes-arbitrary revenge killings and persecutions of real or perceived regime supporters. Most tragically, some of these attacks have targeted Black Libyans or foreign workers, accused simply on the basis of their skin color or national origin of having fought in the regime's African Legion. In addition, Libyan women have often been shunted aside, despite their crucial participation in the uprising, both by these warlords and sometimes by the provisional governing authorities.

But the situation is still in flux, and there have been a number of positive developments as well. The first post-revolutionary elections, held in July 2012, seem to have given the country more of a sense of national identity and unity. Turnout was relatively high, and little of the threatened violence from regional warlords actually took place. Moreover, unlike much of the rest of the region, liberal rather than Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood may have won a plurality, putting them in a strong position to influence the new constitution.

In addition, some ethno-linguistic minorities like the Imazhigen (Berbers) have achieved an important degree of autonomy, more than anywhere else in the region. Under Qaddafi, people could be imprisoned for even speaking Tamazight (Berber) in public, but since the uprising they have been able to establish a Tamazight TV station. In addition, most Libyans seem to feel a sense of greater freedom and remain optimistic about the future.

Overall, the Libyan revolution stands out as the only example in the current Arab revolutionary wave of an oil-rich country, whose rulers were able to use oil money for a nearly limitless supply of weapons and mercenaries to use them, and yet still succumbed to a popular uprising. This surely holds lessons for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, a base of counter-revolutionary politics in the region. The Libyan revolution also exposed contradictions within the international left, some of which, including prominent figures like Hugo Chavez, backed Qaddafi to the end, claiming this megalomaniacal dictator as a progressive because he had sometimes clashed with Western imperialism. At a more general level, Libya, and then Syria, to which I now turn, also called into question the way in which many on the left, for example Tariq Ali, had attempted, early on when only Tunisia and Egypt had risen up, to portray the Arab revolutions as directed solely against regimes backed by Western imperialism.

Syria offers another example of an Arab revolution that has been forced to take up arms in the face of violent repression, and one that also tests and exposes contradictions on the left, as the Assad regime has long opposed both Israel and US imperialism. This has led to misguided support for Assad from some prominent international leftists like Chavez. Inside the region, the regime continues to receive support not only from the Shia fundamentalist Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also from ostensibly leftist currents like the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the Assad regime has sometimes backed in its fight against Turkish domination of the Kurds. Another leftist group that has supported Assad is the Syrian-based splinter group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

Since March 2011, when mass protests began in one of the country's most impoverished regions, the Syrian regime has killed some 16,000 civilians and imprisoned (and often tortured) as many as 200,000 more. The revolutionary movement is broadly based, ranging from liberal and leftist youth to hardline Islamists. By now, it is said to exercise at least partial control, at least at night, of some 60% of the national territory. As with Egypt or Tunisia during their uprisings of early 2011, the revolutionary activists inside the country have worked scrupulously to keep a sense of unity on a national-democratic basis rather than a sectarian ethnic or religious one.

As reported by French novelist Jonathan Littel, who made a clandestine trip to rebel-controlled areas a few months ago, one youthful activist had this response to his question about fundamentalist influence. Littel's interlocutor began by referring to the failed Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982, which began on a sectarian basis with the killing of a group of military cadets of Alawite origin, that is, from the breakaway Shia religious grouping of the Assad family and many of its closest supporters: "Today, as against Hama in 1982, it is the people that is rising up. The Muslim Brothers, the communists, the Salafists and the other political movements are rushing to capture the people and stand on their shoulders. But the Syrian street opposes the politicization of the movement. It accepts aid from wherever it comes, but this aid cannot come with strings. The street has not risen up to demand a particular political option, but in response to oppression and humiliation" ("Passage Clandestin," *Le Monde*, 2/16/12). Whether this kind of politics can be maintained, in the face of both the regime's sectarian brutality and the lessons of Egypt, remains to be seen.

If the Syrian revolutionary movement has sought to overcome the nation's ethnic divisions, the regime has played the ethno-religious card, attempting to scare its Alawite base, as well as the Christians, the Kurds, and the Druze by arguing that the revolution (which they term terrorism) will bring about domination by fundamentalists from the Sunni Muslim majority, who constitute about 75% of the population. The regime's thugs, many of them drawn from the Alawite community, have targeted Sunni neighborhoods, carrying out brutal massacres. So far, the revolutionary movement has held to a to great extent to disciplined, humanist stance, not only stopping reprisals against Alawite civilians, but also going to great length to highlight the fact that supporters of the revolution come from all ethnic groups and religious communities. At the same time, however, some sectarian and jihadist elements have entered the fray against the Assad regime, raising the danger of an ethno-religious war.

The July 18 bombing that killed a number of top officials of the Assad regime will not in itself alter the course of events, as leaders like these can be replaced, but it is an important sign of the regime's underlying weakness in the face of mass popular unrest.

Above all, the Syrian uprising shows that the Arab revolutions are ongoing, despite the many setbacks and contradictions that have arisen since 2011. Many different forces, among them a secular left, are contending with each other in a vast regional revolution that has yet to run its course.