

From one Arab Spring to another

Gilbert Achcar

The crisis of the neoliberal stage of capitalism has been unfolding spectacularly under our eyes in recent months, provoking ever greater social upheavals in an ever greater number of places.¹ Events in the Arab region fit into this general global crisis, to be sure, but there is also something specific about the region. There, the neoliberal reforms have been carried out in a context dominated by a specific type of capitalism: one determined by the specific nature of a regional state system characterised by a combination in various proportions of rentierism and patrimonialism, or neopatrimonialism. What is most specific to the region is the high concentration of fully patrimonial states, a concentration unequalled in any other part of the world. Patrimonialism means that ruling families literally own the state, i.e. its apparatuses and resources, whether they own it by law under explicitly absolutist conditions or just in practice, as a matter of fact. Such ruling families regard the public sector as their private property and treat the armed forces – especially the elite armed apparatuses – as their private guard. These features explain why neoliberal reforms achieved their worst economic results in the Arab region, of all parts of the world. Neoliberal-inspired changes implemented in the region resulted in the slowest rates of economic growth of any part of the developing world and, consequently, the highest rates of unemployment – specifically youth unemployment.

The main reason for this is that neoliberal dogma is based on the primacy of the private sector, the idea that the private sector should be the driving force of development, while the state's own social and economic functions must be curtailed. 'Introduce austerity measures, trim the state down, cut social expenditure, privatise state enterprises and leave the door wide open to private enterprise and free trade, and miracles will happen', says the dogma. However, in a context lacking the

prerequisites of ideal-typical capitalism, starting with the rule of law and predictability (without which long-term developmental private investment cannot happen), most private money tends to go into quick profit and speculation, especially in real estate along with construction, rather than into manufacturing or agriculture, the key productive sectors.

This created a structural blockage of development. Thus, in the Arab region, the general crisis of the global neoliberal order goes beyond a crisis of neoliberalism into a structural crisis of the specific type of capitalism that is prevailing regionally. There is therefore no way out of the crisis in that region by a mere change of economic policies within the continued framework of the existing kind of states. A radical mutation of the whole social and political structure is indispensable, short of which there will be no end to the acute social-economic crisis and destabilisation that affects the whole region.

That is why such an impressive revolutionary shockwave as the Arab Spring rocked this whole region in 2011. This was much more than a series of loosely connected mass protests. The prospect was truly insurrectionary, with people chanting 'The people want to overthrow the regime!' – a slogan that has become ubiquitous in the Arab region since 2011.² The first revolutionary shockwave of that year forcefully shook the regional system of states, revealing that it had entered a terminal crisis. Almost every single Arabic-speaking country saw a massive rise in social protest during the 2011 Arab Spring. Six of the region's countries – that is, more than a quarter of them – witnessed massive uprisings. And yet, the 'lesson' according to the IMF, the World Bank, those guardians of the neoliberal order, is that all this happened because their neoliberal recipes had not been implemented thoroughly enough. The crisis, they claimed, was due to an insufficient dismantling of the remnants of yesterday's

state-capitalist economies. The solution, they said, was to end all forms of social subsidies, in even more radical fashion than had already occurred.

However, governments of the region did not do *more* of what the international financial institutions have been advocating because they were worried about the political consequences. They had good reason to worry. Unlike Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when people swallowed the bitter pill of massive neoliberal changes in the hope that it would bring them capitalist prosperity, people in the Arab region are under no illusion that their countries will become similar to Western European countries. In order to impose further neoliberal measures on the people, brutal force is therefore required in most of the region's countries.

The full implementation of neoliberalism does not go hand in hand with liberal democracy as Fukuyama's 'end of history' fantasy claimed thirty years ago. The first such radical implementation was in Chile, of course, under the rule of General Augusto Pinochet. In Egypt, it is currently taking place under the post-2013 restorationist dictatorship led by Field Marshal Sisi – the most brutally repressive regime that the Egyptians have endured in decades. The Sisi regime has gone the furthest in implementing the full range of neoliberal measures advocated by the IMF, at a huge cost to the population, with a steep rise in the cost of living, food prices, transport prices, etc. People have been completely devastated. The main reason why their anger did not explode once again on the streets of Cairo on a massive scale is that they are now deterred by state terror. But the full implementation of the IMF's neoliberal recipes has produced no economic miracle, and it won't produce one in the future. Tensions are building up and, sooner or later, the country will erupt again.

Unfortunately, both the left and the workers' movement in Egypt are in bad shape. They have suffered a painful defeat – not only due to the brutal return of the repressive state, but also because of their own contradictions and illusions. The major part of the Egyptian left has pursued a politically erratic trajectory, switching from one misconceived alliance to another: from the Muslim Brotherhood to the military. In 2013, most of the left and the independent workers' movement supported Sisi's coup very short-sightedly, subscribing to the illusion that the army would put the democratic process

back on track. They thought that the overthrow of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, after their year in power, would reopen the way to furthering the revolutionary process, even though the overthrow was brought about by the military.

This terrible blunder discredited the left as well as the independent workers' movement. As a result, the left-wing opposition is much weakened and marginalised in today's Egypt. This is another crucial reason why people have not mobilised massively against the new neoliberal onslaught. When there seems to be no credible alternative, people tend to accept the regime's discourse that says: 'It's us or chaos, us or a Syria-like tragedy. You must accept our iron heel. It will be tough, but at the end of the day you will find prosperity.' Most Egyptians do not really buy the last promise – prosperity – but they are still paralysed by the fear of falling into a situation much worse still than what they are enduring.

Linked to all this is another specificity of the regional revolutionary process, of which Syria is the most tragic illustration. The Arab world has experienced the development over several decades of an Islamic fundamentalist reactionary current, long promoted by the US alongside its oldest ally in the region, the Saudi kingdom. Islamic fundamentalism was sponsored by Washington as an antidote to communism and left-wing nationalism in the Muslim world during the Cold War. During the 1970s, Islamic fundamentalists were green-lighted by almost all Arab governments as a counterweight to left-wing youth radicalisation. With the subsequent ebb of the left-wing wave, they became the most prominent opposition forces tolerated in some countries, such as Egypt or Jordan, and severely repressed in others, like Syria or Tunisia. They were, however, present everywhere.

When the 2011 uprisings started, Muslim Brotherhood branches jumped on the revolutionary bandwagon and tried to hijack it to serve their own political purposes. They were much stronger than whatever left-wing forces remained in the region, very much weakened by the collapse of the USSR, while the fundamentalists enjoyed financial and media backing from Gulf oil monarchies. As a result, what evolved in the region was not the classical binary opposition of revolution and counter-revolution. It was a triangular situation in which there was, on the one hand, a progressive pole – those groups, parties and networks who initiated the uprisings and

represented their dominant aspirations. This pole was organisationally weak, except for Tunisia where a powerful workers' movement compensated for the weakness of the political left and allowed the uprising in this country to score the first victory in bringing down a president, thus setting off the regional shockwave. On the other hand, there were two counter-revolutionary, deeply reactionary poles: the old regimes, classically representing the main counter-revolutionary force, but also Islamic fundamentalist forces competing with these old regimes and striving to seize power. In this triangular contest, the progressive pole, the revolutionary current, was soon marginalised – not or not only due to organisational and material weakness, but also and primarily because of political weakness, of the lack of strategic vision.



Nevertheless, a new generation has entered the struggle on a mass scale in the region in recent years, one that came of age through and after the 2011 Arab Spring. The bulk of this new generation aspires to a radical progressive transformation. They aspire to better social conditions, freedom, democracy, social justice, equality, including gender emancipation. They reject neoliberal policies and dream of a society in sharp contrast with the programmatic views of the Islamic fundamentalist forces that hijacked or tried to hijack the uprisings to direct them towards their own goals.

This huge progressive potential came back to the fore in the second revolutionary shockwave that started in December 2018 with the Sudanese uprising, followed since February 2019 by the Algerian uprising, and since last October by massive social and political protests in Iraq and in Lebanon. Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon have been boiling since then, while all other countries of

the region are on the brink of explosion. The Covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly suspend the revolutionary process for a while – it has already ended the weekly mass demonstrations in Algeria and the various forms of protests in Iraq and Lebanon – but it will only worsen the conditions that led to its ignition in the first place.

Protracted revolutionary processes, such as the one that is unfolding in the Arab region since 2011, are cumulative in terms of experience and know-how. They are learning curves. The peoples learn, the mass movements learn, the revolutionaries learn, and the reactionaries learn as well, to be sure; everybody learns. A long-term revolutionary process is a succession of waves of upsurges and counter-revolutionary backlashes – but these waves are not mere repetitions of identical patterns. The process is not circular, it must move forward or else it degenerates. People grasp the lessons of previous experiences and do their best not to repeat the same errors or fall into the same traps. This is very clear in the case of Sudan, but also for Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Sudan and Algeria, along with Egypt, are the three countries in the region where the armed forces constitute the central institution of political rule. Of course, armed apparatuses are the backbones of states in general, but it is direct military control of political power that is peculiar to these three countries in the Arab region. Their regimes are not patrimonial. No family owns the state to the point of making of it whatever its members wish. The state is instead dominated collegially by the military high command. They are 'neopatrimonial' regimes: this means that they are characterised by nepotism, cronyism and corruption, but no single family is in full control of the state, which remains institutionally separate from the persons of the rulers. This explains why, in these three countries, the military ended up getting rid of the president and his entourage in order to safeguard the regime. That's what happened in Egypt in 2011 with the dismissal of Mubarak, and last year in Algeria with the termination of Bouteflika's presidency, followed by the overthrow of Bashir in Sudan, all three carried out by the military. However, when this happened in Egypt, there were huge illusions about the military among the population, which were renewed in 2013 when the army deposed the Muslim Brother president Morsi. These illusions were not reiterated in Sudan or Algeria in 2019. On the contrary, the popular movement in the two countries

has been acutely aware that the military constitute the central pillar of the regime that they wish to get rid of.

But there is more than just that difference at work in Sudan. There is a leadership that embodies the awareness of the lessons drawn from all previous regional experiences. This is mainly due to the role of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which started in 2016 with teachers, journalists, doctors and other professionals organising an underground network. As the uprising that started in December 2018 unfolded, the association developed into a much larger network involving workers' unions of all key sectors of the working class. It has been playing the central role in the events on the side of the popular movement. The SPA was also instrumental in the constitution of a broad political coalition involving several parties and groups. These forces are presently engaged in a political tug of war with the military. They agreed temporarily on a compromise that instituted what can be described as a situation of dual power, somewhat reminiscent of the situation in Russia after February 1917. The country is ruled by a council in which the leadership of the people's movement is represented alongside the military command. This is an uneasy transitional period that can't last very long. Sooner or later, one of the two powers will have to prevail over the other, which will inevitably entail splitting the other.

The real spearhead of the Sudanese revolution is constituted, however, by a network of 'resistance committees' that involves several thousands of mostly young and politically unorganised people in big cities' neighbourhoods and small towns across the country. These committees are defiant towards the existing political parties and refuse to centralise their activities and statements, insisting on the preservation of their local autonomy. They are as radically opposed to military rule as they are to Islamic fundamentalism, especially since both were represented in power under Omar al-Bashir. They decided to authorise the SPA to speak for them, but they keep it under vigilant scrutiny as well as they exert a critical pressure on the whole political process.

The popular movement in Algeria is remarkable for having staged huge mass demonstrations every week for over a year. Its stamina is truly exceptional. But it has no recognised and legitimate leadership. Nobody can claim to speak in its name. This is an obvious weakness, in stark contrast with Sudan. Forms of leadership naturally

change over time, but we haven't entered some post-modern age of 'leaderless revolutions' as some want to believe. The lack of leadership is a real and far-reaching impediment: a recognised leadership is crucial in order to channel the strength of the mass movement towards a political goal. This exists in Sudan, with all its contradictions, but not in Algeria, nor in Iraq or Lebanon.

The role of women in the second wave of the revolutionary process in the Arab region is another very important feature, and a further indication of the higher degree of maturity achieved by the popular movements. In Sudan, Algeria and Lebanon, women have participated massively and very visibly in the demonstrations and mass rallies as well as in heading them. In the three countries, feminists have been a crucial component of the groups involved in the uprisings. Even in Iraq, where women were hardly visible in the initial stage of the protests, they got increasingly involved, especially since the students joined the mobilisation.

The big question in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon is clearly this: in a situation shaped both by the endurance of mass mobilisation and by the new opportunities for oppressive state interventions provided by the menace of Covid-19, will the popular movement succeed in finding ways to organise, like their Sudanese brothers and sisters did, in order to amplify their struggles' impact and achieve major steps towards the fulfilment of their goals, or will the ruling classes manage to quell each of these three uprisings and defuse them? The fate of the Sudanese revolution will very much impact the regional revolutionary process in its entirety. There is ground for hope, albeit not for optimism given the difficulty of the challenges lying ahead.

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Notes

1. Some material here is adapted from an interview in *Marxist Left Review* 19 (Summer 2020). It is rewritten and updated.
2. For a full account, see Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).