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# PERSPECTIVES

Political analysis and commentary from the Middle East



## PEOPLE'S POWER

## THE ARAB WORLD IN REVOLT

HEINRICH  
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# A Revolution of Ideas

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# Revolutions Bring Down Ideas As Well!

Slavoj Žižek describes the popular intifadas the Arab region is witnessing today as miracles. This description is accurate as long as it corresponds to the definition of a miracle being an extraordinary event that no one could predict would take place.

The fact that no one predicted these miracles makes the matter all the more worthy of question and contemplation, at the very least. While Israeli and American intelligence agencies try to figure out the enigma behind their failure to foresee and anticipate these explosions – which the Israeli Prime Minister likened to an earthquake –, one can approach the matter from yet another angle: What obstacles impeded the ability to anticipate this earthquake?

Here, I would argue that of the most important reasons for this failure is the dominant rhetoric that developed after the end of the Cold War, and particularly in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, which combined between the precepts of the neo-liberal imposition under the shadow of American imperialism and attempts to explain the “Islamic exception” by reducing it to a cultural-religious phenomenon. This dominant discourse not only did not allow for forecasting this earthquake, it also presented a vision for the region, its events and developments, its problems and solutions, the tenets and theories of which were rebuked and brought down by the current intifadas in practice.

Scholarly and intellectual efforts on the region have not been devoid of sensing the impending danger, and have warned of the consequences of a number of social and political

manifestations. Early on, demographic experts warned of the dangers of the “demographic time-bomb” in the Arab World, where the population is expected to reach 395 million by the year 2015, of which 60% will be less than 25 years of age, and where no less than 250 million of these populations will be living in urban centers. Furthermore, “Arab Human Development Reports” issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Instead of producing knowledge about the region, intellectual and scholarly efforts have been dominated by an Orientalist dialectic, which ponders over “lacks”, “gaps” and “deficiencies” that the region suffers from.

have indicated that the number of unemployed youth in the Arab region will reach 100 million by the year 2015. At the same time, neither the Human Development Reports nor the UNDP have had much to say about the alternatives to increasing employment opportunities in light of economies that are increasingly and rapidly being dominated by rentier capitalism, financial and services sectors and consumer markets. And, social and political scientists have not missed out an opportunity to provide any judicious advice on what kind of imbalances will result from population growth and rural-urban migration, on all levels, from the birth of “slums” to the disintegration of the patriarchal structure amongst young people. Yet, this



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research and these scholarly efforts have been governed by the prevailing dialectic, with conclusions and recommendations taking on the direction of its dictates and needs. Indeed,

The revolutionary slogan “The people want the downfall of the regime” has also become the slogan of the rebellion of young men and women against prevailing concepts, recommendations and solutions.

social and political scientists have predicted that these new migrants will become a fertile breeding ground for the advocates of Jihadist violence, or will become transformed into a mass market for the social, educational and health services of Islamic movements, which are provided in return for political gains, and will become an addition to the viewership of “radical” televisions like Qatar’s “Al-Jazeera”.

The truth of the matter is that this surplus of educated, unemployed youth is the explosive mix that ignited and played the most prominent role in the current intifadas.

Therefore, instead of producing knowledge about the region, intellectual and scholarly efforts have been dominated by an Orientalist dialectic, which ponders over “lacks”, “gaps” and “deficiencies” that the region suffers from, in comparison to the Western model, which is also proffered to be the culturally-civilized model. Of the most prominent deficiencies portended is the “lack of democracy”, of course. But, the great majority of these analyses have been similar to efforts to explain water, after much ado... as water.

Indeed, instead of undertaking scholarly efforts that seek to understand the attributes and nature of despotism, or in other words, the mechanisms, institutions and tenets of despotism and the factors that allow despotism to persist, continue and reproduce

itself, the logic of inquiry into the region’s “deficiencies” ordained the following brilliant formula: That despotism exists because there is no democracy. Thus, all concerns have concentrated on and converged to preaching the need for... democracy. Here, interpretations have also focused around the disparities of the cultural-civilizations between the Arab world, which was reduced to Islam, and the Western world, which it was determined to be defined as “Christian”. And, it was determined that the latter had attained the status of a “knowledge society”; and, as such, it must be that the Arabs should strive to attain this, as well. Thus, the United Nations Development Programme and the Arab Human Development Reports decided to donate to the cause of the Arabs a fast, luxury, four-wheel drive vehicle that moves forward, on all four wheels simultaneously, towards a knowledge and “rights-based” society, entrepreneurship, freedoms and women’s empowerment.

### **The Fall of Concepts, Recommendations and Solutions**

The revolutionary slogan “The people want the downfall of the regime” has also become the slogan of the rebellion of young men and women against prevailing concepts, recommendations and solutions. “The people want” is, before anything else, a fundamental objection to the theory of the “state/civil society”. Let us set aside the discussion into all the confusion that has come with trying to understand and apply this theory, and the fact that this theory has actually been renounced by its Western proprietors. For, besides the fact that this theory flattens society, in all its consequential and conflicting components, into one harmonious mass (or one mass divided into two domains: “civic” and “civil”), the concept or notion of “the people” has gained reconsideration as being a mass of variant and differentiated powers, interests and groups that form and crystallize around one identity, one will and one goal. It is a vision that is more than far removed from the in-vogue globalized terms that are colored

by doubts and suspicions about any proposition that offers notions of patriotism and nationalism or that refers to the state of the “nation”. Whatever the case is, the return of the terms “the people” and “the will of the people” has come together with, not only the return of

**In the meantime, the central issue was forgotten: Linking educational systems with economic needs. This is how our Arab high schools and universities became incubators for hatching unemployed graduates.**

the patriotic link in every Arab country at the expense of religious, sectarian, tribal and ethnic loyalties and intolerance, but also a return to the fore of the identity of the Arab region, in the face of the string of loyalties imposed upon it from the outside by way of the endless versions of the geo-political identity proffered for the so-called “Middle Eastern”.

On the other hand, the slogan “the downfall of the regime” is yet another critique on the civil society/state theory, and a critique of the prevailing conduct of non-governmental organizations that have worked to separate society's sectors and issues from one another – typical of “post-modern” micro-narratives, par excellence! First, these separations are made and then juxtapositions are established between these sectors and issues by creating theoretical links, or sympathies, (the woman and the environment, sustainable development and human rights, corruption and “business” ethics, and so on), or by “networking” between these non-governmental organizations.

It is possible to view the slogan “to overthrow the regime” hailed by the young Arab revolutionaries as a will to establish and create a new kind of “networking”, with this being: A fundamental re-assessment and

review of the system in which relations between the institutions that comprise the authority and the security, military, economic, financial, social and cultural components of this system all fall under one structure; or, a system whose internal power relations and equations must be dismantled, overturned and replaced by a democratic system or, in other words, by a system that represents the “will of the people”. However, “this will” would not have been able to act had it not been for the fact that the revolutionary youth were actually able to discover the central link of the system, which needed to be pressured and acted upon – the political authority.

This is not a historical assessment and review of more than a quarter century of non-governmental organizational activity in our region. But, it is indicative of the political deficiency in their thinking, their concepts and their practices. These preached and offered ready-made prescriptions that replaced tangible analysis and corporeal knowledge without offering a road map for moving from a dependent, exploitative and despotic reality towards an independent, just and democratic reality. Instead, today, this “popular will” has drawn a road map of its own: The power is in the street; it falls and rises in the street; and, democracy is a revolution that is attained by replacing one system with another through struggle and sacrifice.

The greater “obstacle” in the prevailing dominant vision is the agenda it put forth for youth. Official and private bodies and institutions have constantly sought to study and plan for the development of educational systems, with these efforts overcome by the concern to propagate a “moderate Islam”. In the meantime, the central issue was forgotten: Linking educational systems with economic needs. This is how our Arab high schools and universities became incubators for hatching unemployed graduates. Projects, seminars, workshops and trainings have proliferated with the intention of preparing youth to excel and pioneer in a globalized, capitalist economy, and in citizenship. But, all

these efforts have lacked in envisioning and projecting the kind of economics that provide and generate employment, put bread on the table, allow for competencies and a future, and finally, the means of production for a society of free citizens. Simply, Arab youth have taken the decision to undertake these tasks and attain this mission by themselves.

The same issues are linked to examining the role of the middle classes in the democratic

**The Arab intifadas were launched without any external support; rather, it can even be said that they came into being despite external powers and against them.**

process. The diagnosis of their role has teetered between the middle class taking a leading political role while, at the same time and in reality, this class has been in the throes of an economic death. Whatever the case may be, the current experience has proven that the middle classes, which are the class most active in civil society and non-governmental organizations, have decided, en masse, to take a more proactive role; that is, to join all the other segments of society in creating and forming the “people” who want to construct new democratic systems.

As for the private, capitalist sector – which is usually relied upon to breed liberal politics from the womb of its liberal economics –, it has been a colossal disappointment. Instead of joining all the other segments of the population in their intifadas or uprisings, the greater majority have sung to the tune of the mafia and security-systems of the governing regimes, to which this sector has created strong links of kinship, intermarriage and interests; or is just incapable of breaking its dependencies on these regimes; or has fallen prey to exclusive arrangements, monopolies and easy money. This sector has made the choice to make extortion payments

to the sultan rather than pay taxes that may improve the conditions of those poorer than them amongst their people – with the result being an increased incapacity amongst businessmen to become political agents that may have weight in determining the course of peoples’ lives, or in demanding reform.

Last, but not least, one should stress upon an examination of the way the current uprisings have transcended traditional opposition parties, the majority of which have played and still play the role of “the majesty’s opposition”, biding time and awaiting the opportunity to present their case to the ruler, or to take their share, in one form or another, of authority without demanding any serious structural changes to the power structure. The traditional opposition has been literally dragged to the street and to the protests, and it has followed the movement and initiatives taken and led by the youth instead of exercising its alleged role of initiative and leadership.

### **External Legitimacies at the Expense of Popular Legitimacy**

The Arab intifadas were launched without any external support; rather, it can even be said that they came into being despite external powers and against them. By virtue of this reality, the veil has been lifted from the contract that exists between authoritarian, despotic Arab regimes – whether they are dynastic, populist or military regimes – and Western interests. This contractual agreement, which was concretized after September 2001, stipulated an adherence to the Western agenda in the region, and protected Western interests in return for supporting the continuity of these regimes. In its wake, the West would turn a blind eye to the thieving and the oppression. And, the more these regimes became isolated from their people – or showed more contempt for its people or became more arrogant – the more they came to depend on these Western powers.

This agenda can be summarized in three points:

**First:** Preserving the neocolonialist order under the pretext of prioritizing and maintaining “security and stability” – meaning, the security of American military bases, facilities, airports and ports; securing oil and gas pipelines; ensuring the continuous turnover of high returns on deposits; securing employment in Western economies and bonds in Western treasuries; and, ensuring markets for Western exports that

The experiences in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Algeria have all shown that Islamist movements have not deviated from the conduct and systemic course that traditional opposition parties have taken.

have the highest rate of return in sectors such as the arms industry, infrastructure projects, universities and museums, not to mention luxury consumer goods.

Indeed, “preserving the security of Israel” occupies the highest rank in the geopolitical priorities of these systems and regimes. Here, adhering to the Western agenda entails signing and preserving bilateral peace agreements (in terms of the axis of “moderate” Arab countries), and enforcing the self-restraint and neutralization of what were once radical countries from playing any role in the Arab-Israeli struggle (Iraq, Libya and Yemen), or committing to the formula of bilateral solutions, which today means nothing more than peace with Israel for Arab countries, in return for the latter’s commitment to safeguard the security of the state of Israel and its borders (which are constantly expanding and which have never been defined, in any case).

Finally, these “security” stipulations also include the role that Arab Maghreb countries play in preserving “European security” by restraining the wave of African migration to

Europe from their shores.

**Second:** The vast majority of despotic Arab regimes have used the “dread” of Islamists coming to power as a scapegoat to justify their firm hold on their seats of power, and as a means to elicit legitimacy and financial support from Western powers, not to mention that they have used this fear as another instrument to maintaining their continuity, or justify extensions of their terms “in office” or in bequeathing power to their sons. However, when the masses mobilized, the true size of the Islamist movements was exposed. Indeed, these movements joined these uprisings in accordance to their real scope amongst the ranks of the millions mobilized from all the segments, groups and tendencies in society. This reality has been proven to such an extent that certain experts and academics see in these current intifadas the true beginning of limiting and curbing the spread of the “moderate” Islam that includes fundamental and jihadist Islam.

The experiences in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Algeria have all shown that Islamist movements have not deviated from the conduct and systemic course that traditional opposition parties have taken. Rather, Islamist movements have proven that they are not even amongst the most militant or extreme of “the opposition”, nor have they been the most adamant about demanding the dismantling of dictatorial regimes. It would not even be surprising if these movements actually came to play the role of a centrist and protective ally for the forces working to abort these revolutions, or working to transform them into yet another means for merely replacing one ruler by another. Indeed, it is extremely telling that the Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt deviated from all the other parties and revolutionary youth that decided to boycott the referendum on the constitution because it lacked the most basic requirements for amending the vast authorities held by the president of the republic.

**Third:** The unbelievable wealth amassed by the mafia-rentier-autocratic-repressive families linked to these regimes has exposed

the depth of the relationship between these despotic authorities and globalized, capitalist international (and transnational) institutions and multinational companies. This astounding wealth has indeed been amassed by exploiting the seats of power to steal from public funds, to acquire land belonging to the state, to money launder, to reap immense profits from the privatization and take-over of public sector

The unbelievable wealth amassed by the mafia-rentier-autocratic-repressive families linked to these regimes has exposed the depth of the relationship between these despotic authorities and globalized, capitalist international (and transnational) institutions and multinational companies.

institutions, to regulate monopolies and protect them, and to take commissions and bribes – in the billions – from arms deals, contracts and the contracting of foreign companies. These possibilities would not have existed except for in a global economy, whose main function is to impose the dictatorship of free market economies, where wealth and returns are suctioned from the bottom up, and from the poorer and middle classes to the wealthy – in exact reverse to the claims made by the advocates of the trickle-down theory. This is real corruption. This is not the “corruption” of the small-time employee who can be bribed, or the kind of corruption that is penalized – while the truly corrupt, with access to the kind of money required to sow corruption, are acquitted or given lessons in the culture of business ethics.

Western leaders recognize and are aware of all this. The American administration knows that the real purpose behind the recent deal to provide the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with U.S.

fighter jets and helicopters to the tune of US\$60 billion was to strengthen American balance of payments and support the operations of its military industrial complex – much more than it was a strategic necessity. It also knows that expenditures of this kind come at the expense of fighting poverty and reducing unemployment rates, particularly unemployment amongst young educated Saudis, as well as improving social services and education for the general population. The American administration also knows all too well that six Saudi princes receive proceeds from one million barrels of oil produced per day out of a total daily production of eight million barrels; as the French administration is well aware that Saif al-Islam Gaddafi takes a direct share from the proceeds of the oil production in Libyan oil fields operated by Total.

With that, the advocates of neo-liberalism do not see “waste” except when it comes in the form of expanding state institutions or increased budget expenditures. Here, they show reservations about the money spent by Arab governments to preserve their heads of states and their seats by maintaining subsidies on major staples, raising salaries of employees and increasing spending on infrastructure and social services. In an article, with the telling title “Throwing money at the streets”, the Economist (March 12, 2011) warns of such measures that belong “to the bygone era of state intervention in the economy”. Meanwhile, the fact that Muammar Gaddafi’s sons spent one million dollars of the Libyan people’s money on one show with English and American rock stars is not perceived as worrisome. Moreover, this staid and sober economic weekly does not seem all too concerned about the kind of money thrown around palaces, where, for example, the monthly allowance for members of the al-Saud tribe – which number over 6000 – can reach amounts to the tune of US\$275,000 for each prince.

### Will the Iraqi Experience of 1999 be Repeated?

The issues discussed above are not separate from Euro-American policy towards the region. This is a policy of maintaining silence towards the flagrant abuses of human rights, the imposition of emergency and military laws, assassinations of dissidents, arbitrary arrests, torture in prisons and detention centers and the silencing of the voices of the press and social media.

As for the nonsensical jargon spewed about

The second axis in Western policy towards these authoritarian, despotic regimes is related to programs of political reform and combating corruption.

democracy, in the cases of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and even Syria, this has been simply translated into sufficing with a system of pluralistic parties and press, under tight controls, that are no more than mere facades for a one-man, one-party rule that has persisted over decades, and that has evaded every obligation in ensuring popular representation, divisions of power in a system of checks and balances and the peaceful transfer of power.

It would be difficult to expect the citizens of Arab countries to now believe claims made by Western circles that they tried to give advice to Arab rulers, in secret. Indeed, the exposure of this “advice” only adds fuel to the lies: Advice from President Barack Obama’s administration to deposed President Hosni Mubarak that he should appoint his vice president as president of the republic; or the wishes relayed by George Bush’s administration that the Saudi king carry out municipal elections – the man held elections, but only from man to man, and for municipal councils that were never granted any actual authority, and where the operations of the entire municipal system were suspended four years later when the time came to replicate the electoral experience.

The second axis in Western policy towards these authoritarian, despotic regimes is related to programs of political reform and combating corruption. European and American “donor” governments placed such conditions on Yemen during the sixth round of its war against the Houthi movement in the northwest of the country. But, the Yemeni leader did not live up to or adhere to any of these conditions. Nonetheless, 300 million dollars continue to be pumped annually into Yemen to support its efforts in the war on “terror”.

But, after the rise of the intifadas, the conduct of Western powers has revealed their surprise and confusion. They have all scrambled to try to rectify past mistakes and cover them up. Official statements have been issued defending the freedom of social networking media, protesting the use of violence against civilians and calling for dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. Indeed, calls for taking the demands of the people into consideration escalated to the point of calling for leaders to actually step down, as is the case with Colonel Gaddafi. But, American offers of mediation have always been tainted by the “security and stability” premise and thus have always been biased in favor of Arab leaders. Consequently, while the (traditional) opposition has called for

The Libyan intervention coincided with a marked Western connivance with the Saudi-Emirati military intervention against a popular uprising bloodily repressed by a sectarian monarchy in Bahrain, home of the American 5th Fleet.

clearing the streets and arenas of protest, on the basis that the leader has pledged not to extend his term in office and has pledged not to bequeath his power, the revolutionary youth have maintained their calls for the overthrow of their leader and their regimes.

In Libya, the belated US-led military intervention to impose a no-fly zone came after the troops of Gaddafi had drowned in blood the popular insurrection in most of the rebel-held areas and was threatening the last rebel bastion in Benghazi. Moreover, the Libyan intervention coincided with a marked Western connivance with the Saudi-Emirati military intervention against a popular uprising bloodily repressed by a sectarian monarchy in Bahrain, home of the American 5th Fleet.

Whatever the outcome of those two interventions, which have highly complicated the situation in the region, it is very doubtful that one will save the bloody Bahraini monarchy from the anger and determination of its people and that the other will manage to help the Libyan rebels get rid of their bloody dictator.

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