

The Jasmine and the Nile Revolutions: A Sociological Reading

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Popular revolutions

Political earthquakes have shaken the Arab World over the last two months. The December jasmine revolution in Tunisia, the Nile revolution in Egypt and the subsequent resignations of Bin Ali and Mubarak, have emphasized the importance of the Arab region on the world map and restored pan Arabism and the "elegance" of being Arab.

The importance of these revolutions resides in the meeting of the social with the democratic. In Tunis, the uprising is a continuation of the encounter between social and democratic claims in the demands of the Tunisian people. After the uprising in Gafsa, two years ago over bread and unemployment, a dissident bloggers' and a Facebook users' protest took place in the Tunisian city of Jarjis, demanding the release of political prisoners and freedom of expression.

Both revolutions were carried out by the unemployed university graduate youth and the working class, and they are marked by their ability to combine the social with the democratic.

The protestors' sensitivity to unemployment and their hostility to the neoliberal and neo-patrimonial regime is linked to their sensitivity to the importance of justice (the so called "Tunisian economic miracle" is in the capital and northern coastal cities but not in the interior of Tunisia or in the south), dignity and freedom: Freedom to join political groups and parties, freedom of expression, freedom of religious practice, freedom to write about corrupt people in the government, the Mubarak and Ben Ali family and relatives.

The encounter of these two types of demands is what made the Tunisian and Egyptian youth feel that they had become a *homo sacer*, in the sense that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) gives it. This situation is the revolt of bare lives, of defenceless hungry bodies that the regime has stripped of political identity and the right to belong to the groups which they prohibit (such as the Islamic Renaissance Movement 'al-Nahda', Tunisian Communist Labor Party, Muslim brotherhood and al-Karama Party).

When Ben Ali and Mubarak assumed the power of sovereigns who hold the ultimate decision over whether to enact a law or to suspend it and over whether to "take life or let live", the regimes' apparatuses violated Egyptian and Tunisian rights - arresting, torturing, murdering and economically spoiling the country.

The Tunisian sociologist, Mohsen Bouazizi, wrote in a book that I edited last year called 'The State of Exception and Resistance in the Arab World', about the silent expressions among the Tunisian youth and how indifference and carelessness are used as mechanisms against the regime. But what Mohsen Bouazizi didn't see then is how Mohamed Bouazizi, who is from the same city as Mohsen - Sidi Bouzid - was

disenfranchised from the social structures to become, echoing Touraine's (1995) words, a subject; the driving force of a social movement.

Mohamed's body, like other young Tunisians', was a target for the oppressive regime and its disciplinary authority, which aimed to strip it entirely of its political activism. Thus by committing protest-suicide, Mohamed has set a stand of resistance to the regime, and the effectiveness is achieved at the moment of his body's self-immolation. We are at a moment, as the Palestinian researcher May Jayussi puts it, similar to the moment when the Palestinian resistance in the occupied territories challenged the sovereign authority that wanted them to be humiliated subjects that could be killed without being sacrificed (i.e. death without value). Mohamed Bouazizi and his fellows, who died committing suicide, became actors who sacrificed themselves and by that act, inverted the relationship with the sovereign authority.

However, despite all the oppression of Ben Ali's regime and the use of a permanent state of exception, this regime is not a total institution, controlling everything. It can be pointed out that in many cases, oppression is a sign of weakness rather than strength. This is evident when the "mighty" regime of Ben Ali was not able to get the army to oppress the people in the same way the police did. Therefore, the army had an important role in pushing Ben Ali to flee. The system also failed in silencing the opposition. For example, many Tunisian intellectuals in France, the UK and Qatar were spreading awareness about the uprising within and outside of Tunisia. This probably gives a glimpse of hope to all those working in the field of democratization; to search for the structure of opportunities and to learn how to use regimes' weaknesses to breed change in the order.

Indeed the symbolic dimension of these two revolutions is compelling. In Egypt, the revolutionary youth are educated individuals; men and women; Muslim and Christian, who use mobiles and laptops to communicate their revolution while carrying handmade signboard. This revolution is fully indigenous; there are no USAID or other international agencies that are funding glossy signs and brochures or workshops in five-star hotels. In complete contrast, the calcified regime supporters came with their horses and their camels, bricks, knives and sticks.

In the two revolutions, the Arab-Israeli conflict was not absent. Both regimes, being part of what is called the 'axis of moderation'¹, have a political discourse that is in deep dissonance with the population's feelings, who saw with their moderation as a sort of green card for Israel to continue its colonial project and the siege of Gaza. I was surprised to see that even in a newspaper like al-Ahram, there were some critiques of Mubarak for having received Netanyahu on January 4, the day after Israeli demolished four houses in East Jerusalem and after the bombing of Gaza where three Palestinians were killed.

Hence the Israeli phobia in these revolutions has genuine meaning. The new democratic Arabic regime will have popular democratic legitimacy and thus they don't need to seek a Western power to defend them. Most probably, Egypt will restore its position as a leading force of Panarabism, empowering the Palestinian people to resist the Zionist colonial project. I was stunned how much the protestors interviewed used the word 'dignity', something that had been previously smashed by the ousting regimes. These two revolutions give us some food for thought about what kind of social movements are emerging in the Arab world and the relationship between internal and

external factors.

Actors of the Social Movement

Two groups of actors that played a crucial role in these revolutions are, firstly, the educated non-affiliated youths, who deftly interacted with the activists of political parties and unions that traditionally give these movements the needed momentum and mobilization and secondly, the working class, whether members of unions or not.² Many analysts, deliberately or not, miss the importance of the latter group and mythically present the youth as classeless and a-ideological. So these two revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt are emerging social movements that combine both the classical form of a movement (in which social class force is salient) with a new form where the civil right dimension is compelling. In addition of the working class, individual constructs itself and exists in the space between social integration and disintegration, what Touraine calls commitment and non-commitment (1995: 285) armed with a self-reflexivity skills. For instance, some activists from the 6th of April Movement are members of the Muslim brotherhood, but they contested some of the modes of actions of the political organization and criticized how quickly this organization went into dialogue with the ousted regime.

In Tunisia, Mohamed Bouaziz's act sparked an uprising which started as an unorganised and spontaneous event and was soon organized and transferred by labour unions. The General Union of Tunisian Workers was masterful in dealing with the regime: In northern Tunisia, especially in the capital, the leaders of the union were negotiating with the regime, while their counterparts in the south were opposing it. The Bar Association also had an important and leading role in expanding the protests, from consisting of only the youth to including all ages and to the capital Tunis. Perhaps, people interested in social movements would want to focus on lawyers and judges movements in more than one location in the Arab and Islamic world, as is in the case of Egypt and Pakistan.

As for Egypt, the revolution was started by the 6th of April Movement that emerged over the last year as youth solidarity for the labor strike movement in Al-Mahalla al-Kubra. They used social media, including Facebook, Twitter and SMS, to mobilized the thousands of demonstrators on January 25, and, with the help of the political opposition parties and unions, to reach some millions of protestors in al-Tahrir Square in Cairo, Alexandria, Swiss (where the working class demonstration were eminent), Zakazik, Mansoura, etc. Indeed, we are in a period of revolutions where political and the civil rights components supersede the ideological. Arabic regimes and some Arab and western scholars and journalists thought that the Arab street could only be mobilized by political Islam. Both the Tunisian and Egyptian cases show that although Islamic movements are important, it is not this momentum alone that can succeed, rather there is a need for alliances with other oppositional groups. (Bayat, 2011 ; Hroub, 2011) The strength of Islamic movements resides in the fact their claims go beyond the simplistic slogan "Islam is the solution" toward freedom and democracy- as in the cases of other oppositional parties.

But what about the human rights associations and civil and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)?

Many donors and international organizations limited their view of the notion of civil society to these "depoliticized" associations only, and thought they were the ones who would carry the winds of change. These associations played an auxiliary role to the

syndicates and opposition parties. This role was manifested by the way human rights associations within Tunis and abroad accompanied the uprising through disseminating documented information about the casualties and death tolls, and through stimulating the international powers, at both of the civil and official levels, to take firm positions against the regime. Therefore, one of the most important characteristics of civil society is the synergy between syndicates and parties and NGOs. It is time for the donors who focus only on NGOs to distribute their support to all those institutions. Otherwise, focusing on NGOs exclusively will not only cause the inflation of the NGOs, but will also weaken the syndicates and parties whose best young men will then turn to work with NGOs.³

In contrast with the Eastern and Central Europe revolutions, these two revolutions do not have a unified opposition leadership. Rather, we witness revolutions without leaders (à la the French revolution), fragmentation and a lack of reflectivity (however over time organization became better).

Mass media, which is less important yet effective, informed people of what is going on, especially when the national Tunisian and Egyptian TVs were completely misinforming their public. On January 26th, Egyptian TV showed a cooking program, as if nothing was happening in the street. Channels such as Al-Jazeera, BBC Arabic and France 24 transmit images sent to them by activists' mobiles and provide information and analysis to the events. I should highlight that Al-Jazeera refused to adopt the paradigm of a "principle of non-interference" in the internal Arab affairs to the paradigm of "solidarity" with Arab public grievances.

Alternative Project in the Social Movements

There is a close relationship between bread and freedom: despite Ben Ali's and Mubarak's promises to solve the unemployment problem and provide proper prices for basic food needs, the mass revolution did not stop. Youth and professionals of the country considered their livelihoods to be connected to freedom of the press and lifting off restrictions on the internet, as expressed by the opposition. Cyberspace has become a crucial site of mobilization and knowledge tools built by the simple efforts of individuals, bloggers and associations is being used in order to communicate with the world and to keep up to date on what is happening in Tunisia and Egypt, effectively eliminating the need for misleading official media.

The internal and the External

There were a terrible suspicious silence of the Western countries, which had fully supported Arab dictatorships on the pretext that they are the only force capable of maintaining political stability and taking part in the "war on terror". Terrorism does not often refer only to movements like Al Qaeda, but also to political Islam.⁴

There are three reasons. First, Western interests seek weak Arab regimes that can protect their and Israeli interests. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, congratulated the stepping down of Mubarak with a tone of superiority, asking the new Egyptian authority to respect the Camp of David Agreement and the security of Israel (February 11) . France has kept silent for more than three weeks in spite of what's happening in Tunisia in order to support its spoiled child, Ben Ali. The Élysée spokesman, François Baroin, said a week ago (Jan 8) that what is happening in Tunisia is an internal affair. If so, why is it not the case of what happened in Iran and Lebanon, or the elections in the Ivory Coast? Many Western countries support change in the Arab region, but only when

the form of the new ruling elite is guaranteed, as happened in Iraq. Second, many journalists and scholars in Western media have suddenly become multiculturalists, arguing that democracy and Islam are not compatible. I full agree with Slavoj Zizek that what is now required is a universalistic position of solidarity. (Interview with him in al-Jazira, 5 Feb.) People's grievances of democracy are universal. The final reason is that in the West, there are corrupt leaders who accept Arab regimes bribes. The French Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie took two flights in the private jet of a Tunisian businessman that is close to ousted Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. One of these trips was after the start of protests against Ben Ali's regime. François Fillon, the French prime minister inflamed a row over the government's links to Arab dictators by admitting he enjoyed a free holiday on the Nile over the New Year paid for by Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. **What's next?**

Finally, perhaps this wonderful uprising is only a starting point for a democratic process that is full of minefields. People will not be convinced with the equation: either stability and security with a dictators or the chaos/danger of extremist Islamism. Mao Zedong's old motto is pertinent: "There is great chaos under heaven – the situation is excellent." We should expect a difficult moment and a lot of negotiation with the Army that took over the presidential authority in both Tunisia and Egypt. In this regard, there are two issues at stake in the next phase.

The first issue is the extent to which opposition elites will unify their basic claim in the face of the military elite. The second issue is the extent of the ability of al-Nahda and Muslim Brotherhood movements to deepen and consolidate their moderate stances that are based on respecting the principles of democracy and pluralism, as often expressed by their leaders Sheikh Rashid Ghannouchi and Issam Arian. It is now known that inside of these movements, there are many trends ranging from those that are close to a Turkish model and those that reflect conservative Salafists. Scholars such as François Burgat (2010) and Hossan Tammam (2010) highlight that the former trend is much stronger than the latter and this gives a great hope that the process of democratization will accompany personal freedom.

With the demise of the tyranny and corruption of Mubarak's and Ben Ali's era and their removal to the dustbin of history, the question now being asked by every Arab is: Arab governments can no longer claim that providing bread for everyone, or the obligations towards the great national battle, or the liberation of Jerusalem necessitates cutting back on the political liberalism represented in the right of every citizen to express themselves and get uncensored information. What is next and which Arab regime is the next candidate to be hit by the winds of change? Most of the regimes in our region are either hereditary monarchies with a very limited role for their parliaments, or authoritarian republican regimes, hereditary or in the process of becoming as such, which are almost worse than the monarchies where the President stays in power "forever." We note in many Arab countries the slogan of "forever may you stay ...". The dots here can be replaced with the name of the Head of State.

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Notes

¹Augusto Pinochet as well as of Shah of Iran, Mohamed Rada Bahlawi, are used to be called moderate regimes.

²For a compelling description of the constituency of the al-Tahrir square, see Amina Khairi articles in *al-Hayat newspaper* (7 and 9 Feb. 2011).

³About a more scrutinized analysis of the non-institutionalized protest movements, compared to the civil society organizations, see (Hanafi, 2010).

⁴About the position of some French scholars who are close to the French political establishment, such as Alain Finkielkraut, Alexandre Adler, Bernard-Henri Lévy, see (Boniface, 2011).