

Arab Revolutions at the Crossroads

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March 31, 2011

Introduction: A New Era Is Born

In less than three months, the people of North Africa and the Middle East have made two revolutions, in Tunisia and Egypt, and launched a mass uprising followed by a revolutionary civil war in Libya. They have also staged major uprisings in Yemen and Bahrain that may yet go to outright revolution, plus a number of other serious rebellions as seen most recently in Syria. These upheavals – rooted in a new generation of revolutionaries beholden neither to the authoritarian Arab nationalism of the past nor to the radical Islamist currents of more recent years — have resonated throughout the Arab world, with serious protest movements in nearly a dozen other countries in the region. Operating under the banner of democracy and human rights, these upheavals have challenged the political order, in some cases by toppling longstanding authoritarian regimes.

At the same time, beginning with the crackdown and massacre of the population in Libya, which was soon extended to Bahrain, combined with the attempts by the Egyptian military, with the aid of the Muslim Brotherhood, to channel the revolution into pathways harmless to it and to other entrenched power structures, the Arab revolutions have reached a crossroads. Will they continue to advance, or will the rulers, aided by global capital, succeed in bringing this revolutionary wave to a rapid end?

The present military intervention by Western imperialist powers in Libya, conducted after calls by the Arab masses and a vote by the Arab League asking for military assistance to prevent the massacre of the people by Qaddafi's military, does not fundamentally change this dynamic, even though Libya – unlike Egypt and Tunisia – has not in recent decades been closely tied to the Western powers. Support from these powers will come with a price, whether in civilian casualties or in future attempts at economic or military influence. In addition, it should be mentioned that the situation in Libya has disoriented some on the global Left, who are getting themselves into the position of concentrating all their fire on opposing an intervention that has gained the support of both the Libyan people and most of the wider Arab world. I will discuss Libya and the urgent need to

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extend solidarity to the Libyan youth, workers, and women who are engaged in a life and death struggle against Qaddafi's regime in more detail below.

These Arab upheavals of 2011 have challenged more than the political order, however. While none have yet moved from political to full social revolution, in their attacks on unemployment and neoliberalism, their important labor dimension, and their more general demands for dignity and social justice, the new Arab revolutions and protest movements have also challenged the economic order. This combination of political and economic demands is a distinctive mark of the 2011 upheavals. It also constitutes a point of difference with other important democratic movements of the last few years, which, while massive in size and including the participation of working people, did not critique neoliberalism or develop a distinctive labor dimension. I refer to movements like the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004-05, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005, or the Green Movement in Iran in 2009-10.

Because of their important labor and economic dimensions, the North African and Middle Eastern upheavals can also be connected to the recent labor and youth protests and upheavals in Greece, France, Spain, Ireland, and Britain. More widely, they can be linked to the "anti-globalization" or global justice movements that have arisen since Seattle in 1999 and that have continued through the World Social Forums and other global networks of resistance to capital.

In recent decades, the Middle East and North Africa seemed trapped between two reactionary alternatives, pro-imperialist authoritarianism imbued with a nominal secularism (as in Egypt) and equally authoritarian religious fundamentalist movements and regimes that operated in the name of anti-imperialism (as in Iran).

In the immediate aftermath of the radical Islamist terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the neoliberal Bush administration plunged into a seemingly permanent "war on terror." At that point, the world seemed destined to repeat the tragic cycle of the 1980s. Then, as a result of the fundamentalist takeover of the Iranian revolution of 1979, various forms of reaction had taken the global stage, closing off radical and emancipatory politics. Instead, we had witnessed the flourishing of figures like Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran. Each of these leaders cracked down on labor, feminism, Marxism, and any other progressive idea, while also fomenting a spurious "clash of civilizations" between East and West. A similar process began to take hold in 2001-03, with Bush's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the concomitant rise of radical fundamentalist resistance, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

A decade ago, it looked as if September 11, 2001, the Iraq war, and radical Islamism – not the 1999 anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle — would mark the new century. But

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with the economic collapse of 2008-09, which was preceded by the exhaustion of US imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan, something new began to stir. Radical labor movements took root in 2009 and 2010 in Greece, France, and elsewhere, and while these have so far been hemmed in by the power of capital, their emergence raised questions about the stability of the global order.

The Arab revolutions and upheavals of 2011 have gone far beyond such stirrings, to outright revolution. In sidelining both pro-Western authoritarianism and, for the most part, radical fundamentalism as well, these upheavals, carried out by a new generation of youth, have posed the question of the character of the new century in a different way than what occurred after 2001. In this sense, they can be characterized as post-Islamist as well as post-nationalist.

The events of 2011 suggest, therefore, that Seattle 1999 and the global justice movement it helped to spawn might still be in the running as the marker of the new century. Moreover, on the agenda in 2011 was not only a continuation of the movement for global justice, but also the possibility – and the actuality – of outright revolution, of “regime change” from below, from the masses.

In what follows, I will trace country by country the dialectics of revolution and of mass upheaval as it has emerged over the last few months, and its deeper roots in the new social ferments of the past decade, in many cases largely unnoticed even by close observers of the region.

The Tunisian Crucible

“Revolution is never practical – until the hour of the Revolution strikes. Then it alone is practical, and all the efforts of the conservatives and compromisers become the most futile and visionary of human imaginings” – James Connolly, 1909

The revolution that shook the Middle East and North Africa took place in tiny Tunisia, population 10 million. Mass discontent came to the surface with a single incident in Sidi Bouzid, an impoverished agricultural town. On December 17, after having been harassed one too many times by local police, 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself to death in front of the local governor’s office. Police had confiscated his scale and other property after he had apparently refused to pay them a bribe, and then beat him up when he asked for their return. Bouazizi’s death galvanized protests among other impoverished youth, who pelted the governor’s office with coins, chanting, “Here is your bribe.”

While this tragic incident may have seemed small at the time, within a month the mass protests it generated had overthrown Tunisian dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, in power

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since 1987. Initially, the protests were orchestrated by internet-savvy youths who also received publicity through *Al Jazeera*, the Arabic language TV network. In keeping with the international media's focus on the "middle class" aspect of these and subsequent revolts in the region, it was initially reported that Bouazizi was a college graduate unable to find a job commensurate with his education. These same reports also played down the fact that the youthful protestors, who were in any case overwhelmingly working class, had by early January gained the support of the previously pro-regime General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT).

Throughout, the revolution had as much an economic as a political character, targeting mass unemployment amidst economic growth, and the amassing of wealth in the hands of a few families connected to the regime. This can be seen in one of the early chants at demonstrations, "Bread, water, and no Ben Ali."

By mid-January the protests reached the capital, Tunis, despite the fact that police were using live ammunition to kill demonstrators. At this point, revolutionary crowds also breached the gates of the elite resort town of Hammamet, torching the mansion of a wealthy member of Ben Ali's family, burning banks, and putting the police to flight.

The next day, January 14, saw Ben Ali and his family themselves flee to Saudi Arabia, as the revolutionaries scored a victory. How did this happen so quickly? The regime had certainly been in power a long time, and had alienated many sectors of the population, especially the poor and the working class. Moreover, a new generation of youth had come onto the scene, unwilling to put up with Tunisia's oppressive social relations any longer. In addition, other sectors, like organized labor and the professional associations came into open opposition once the youth started to move. Finally, the military refused in the end to fire on the people, leaving the regime and its police force in the lurch.

The Ben Ali regime had originated in a 1987 coup that displaced the nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba, who ruled the country since its independence from France in 1956. Ben Ali tightened what was already an authoritarian regime, often using the threat of radical Islamism as an excuse to muzzle political life and to gain the support of foreign imperialist powers, especially the US and France. Elections were routinely rigged, dissidents were imprisoned and tortured, and the general population lived in fear of the secret police. Ben Ali also allowed the US to send terrorism suspects to Tunisia for interrogation under torture.

Especially in the area of women's rights, some vestiges remained of the progressive politics of the early years of Bourguiba, who had banned polygamy, banned repudiation and otherwise made the divorce laws relatively egalitarian, legalized abortion, and supported women's education. The legacy of this could be seen in the anti-regime protests of 2011, where women took a prominent role.

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As the feminist scholar Nadia Marzouki noted, “At all the major demonstrations leading to Ben Ali’s flight from the country, men and women marched side by side, holding hands and chanting together in the name of civil rights, not Islam. The national anthem, not ‘*Allahu akbar*,’ was the dominant rallying cry, and the women were both veiled and unveiled. The tone of the protests was rather one of reappropriating patriotic language and symbols: Women and men lay in the streets to spell ‘freedom’ or ‘stop the murders’ with their bodies and worked together to tear down and burn the gigantic, Stalin-style portraits of Ben Ali on storefronts and street corners” (“Tunisia’s Wall Has Fallen,” *MERIP*, Jan. 19, 2011).

At an economic level, Ben Ali dismantled Bourguiba’s heavily statist economy, enacting privatization plans that won the praise of the IMF and the World Bank. While the GDP grew in recent years at annual rates of 4-5%, unemployment skyrocketed as well, reaching 14% by 2010, with the youth rate much, much higher (Alex Callinicos, “Tunisia: Patterns of Revolt,” *Socialist Worker*, Jan. 29, 2011).

All of this won the public praise of the leading Western powers. As late as 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, responding to criticisms from human rights groups, opined that “some people are way too harsh with Tunisia, which is developing openness and tolerance in many respects.” Sarkozy added that “the space for liberties is progressing” (cited in Nadia Marzouki, “Tunisia’s Wall Has Fallen”). In private, however, some US diplomats were more critical. Cables revealed by Wikileaks last fall expressed disgust at the opulent lifestyle of the Ben Ali clique, one of them describing a party for one of his sons in Hammamet that included ice cream flown in from the French Riviera. These leaks confirmed the outrage the Tunisian people already felt about the regime. They also suggested that Ben Ali’s support from outside powers might not be as solid as it seemed on the surface. Later on, Tunisia’s revolution received several labels, among them the “first Wikileaks revolution.”

Although not widely reported at the time, the mass strikes of 2008 in Gafsa were one indicator of the underlying social tensions in Tunisia. This phosphate-mining region, long a center of labor unrest, has in recent decades been wracked by mass unemployment due to mechanization. In January 2008, the Gafsa phosphate miners rose up after a rare instance of taking on new hires at the mines showed that those hired were the beneficiaries of corruption and nepotism. The revolt lasted six months, after which several of its leaders were imprisoned. Gafsa strikers were not supported by the UGTT, then still tied closely to the state. The workers did gain the support of dissident bloggers and Facebook users, however, who launched a campaign on behalf of those imprisoned (See Sari Hanafi, “Lessons of the Jasmine Revolution,” *Al Jazeera English*, Jan. 23, 2011).

After Ben Ali left on January 15, an interim government composed of former regime loyalists took power briefly, but these ministers were forced out under mass pressure ten

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days later. Various banned political tendencies reasserted themselves, from the seemingly moderate Islamist party to the Communist Party. Several women's associations held a march of several hundred on January 29, putting other revolutionaries on notice that they would fight any attempt by Islamists or other forces to push women back. Those participating included trade unionists, intellectuals, and youth. One of the demonstration's leaders, Sana Ben Achour, declared that they had no intention of "exiting one dictatorship in order to fall into another one" ("Nous voulons une Tunisie de lumière scandent les femmes de Tunis," *Tunisie Focus*, Jan. 29, 2011).

The outcome of the revolution remains contested at other levels as well. Youth from all over the country have continued to gather from time to time in Kasbah Square in Tunis to pressure the interim government. In early March, they succeeded – after a new round of confrontations with the police – in getting more old guard politicians to resign. As part of these efforts, a High Commission to Safeguard the Revolution has been created, which includes among its members trade unionists and Marxists. In response, a more conservative political center has arisen in the affluent Tunis neighborhood of Menzah, which claims to represent a "silent majority" opposed to "radicalism" ("Les jeunes de la Kasbah reprennent la révolution tunisienne en main," *Le Monde*, March 5, 2011).

Egypt: Linchpin of the Arab Revolution

"On one fine morning the infection has penetrated every organ of cultural life. Memory alone then still preserves the dead form... And the new serpent of wisdom... has in this way painlessly sloughed off merely a shriveled skin" – G. W. F. Hegel, 1807

"What slow and subterranean cultural evolution is at the origin of the revolution...? Without a doubt there has been a double mutation... of the consciousness that the women and men of these Arab peoples have of themselves and of their existence" – Abdennour Bidar, 2011

As in Tunisia, Egypt's people seemed to have been locked in an attitude of bleak resignation. Had not the dictator, Hosni Mubarak, blatantly stolen the November parliamentary elections and easily crushed some scattered protests by democratic activists, who were themselves worried that if Mubarak fell, the authoritarian Muslim Brotherhood was waiting in the wings? True, Mubarak was now 82 years old, but he was grooming his son Gamal to succeed him and all seemed well in the US's key Arab ally, the recipient of nearly \$2 billion in annual foreign aid, second only to Israel. Mubarak paid that back in part by making Egypt the world's largest torture chamber for terrorism suspects sent there as part of the US's program of "extraordinary rendition" after September 11, 2001. Egypt was also a torture chamber for its own citizens, who were still living under the state of emergency declared in 1981 following the assassination by radical Islamists of Mubarak's predecessor, Anwar Sadat.

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Its economy had shown some signs of prosperity in recent years, averaging over 6% in GDP growth from 2007-09, at a time when most of the world was in recession. Nonetheless, the mass of Egyptians remained locked in grinding poverty, with *per capita* GDP just over \$2000 per year, with nearly a fifth of the population subsisting on less than \$2 per day. The official unemployment rate has stood in recent years at 10%. Prices of bread and other staples had also skyrocketed in recent years, hitting not only the poor but also the middle classes. Gamal Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's son who was being groomed as his successor, had been instrumental in pushing neoliberal economic policies that gutted social programs, ended price controls on bread and other basic commodities, and sold off state assets to private interests, whether Egyptian or international. A favorite of the international banking sector, Gamal Mubarak had gathered around him a group of younger crony capitalists who were cashing in from their involvement in the ruling National Democratic Party to enrich themselves fabulously during this period of privatization. (See Nomi Prins, "The Egyptian Uprising Is a Direct Response to Ruthless Global Capitalism," *AlterNet*, Feb. 4, 2011).

Suddenly, on January 25, just 11 days after Ben Ali's fall, the revolutionary wave burst over Egypt. Less than three weeks later, on February 11, the Mubarak regime fell from power under the pressure of a mass democratic movement that took over the streets and pushed back the police. With its youthful courage and mass support, it created a situation whereby the army refused to intervene to protect the regime. As in Tunisia, the movement was overwhelmingly young, women as well as men, with democratic and human rights demands that did not include calls for an Islamic state, and with a strong labor and class dimension.

Below the surface, of course, tensions had been brewing in recent years. Mass strikes had broken out in 2006, which seemed to peak in 2008, but these were little discussed outside Egypt. Workers were responding to the harsh neoliberal policies – put into place by Gamal Mubarak and his friends – that had been accelerated from 2004 onwards. Historian Joel Beinin notes "the existence of a whole array of social, political, economic mobilizations that have been going on for the last decade":

"There were the popular committees in support of the Palestinian uprising in 2000, the popular committees opposed to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Egyptian Movement for Change in 2004-06, which was a pro-democracy movement that demanded that Mubarak not run for reelection in 2005, which of course he did."

"There was big support for the independence of the judiciary in the spring of 2006. In addition, and most important, there were over 3,000 strikes, sit-ins, and protests by over 2,000,000 workers since 1998. And that's still going on" ("Historian Joel Beinin on the Egyptian Labor Crisis," February 2010 <http://humanexperience.stanford.edu/beininegypt>)

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Particularly crucial here was the formation of the April 6 Youth Movement, an internet based group that was organized to support the mass strikes in the textile center of Mahalla al-Kobra in 2008. On April 6, a general strike took place in Mahalla, in which tens of thousands took to the streets. After police killed two strikers, crowds set fire to buildings and stomped on a giant portrait of Mubarak in the central square. The April 6 Youth Movement posted videos of these events on YouTube and Facebook, helping to galvanize wider support. “This uprising was the first to break the barrier of fear all over Egypt,” recalled Mohamad Murad, a leftist railway worker (Timothy M. Phelps, “Egypt Uprising Has Its Roots in a Mill Town,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 9, 2011; see also Anne Alexander, “Inside Egypt’s Mass Strikes,” *International Socialism* 118, March 31, 2008).

Another type of social tension involved outrage at police abuse and torture, which extended even to middle class youth. This came to a head in the summer of 2010 as thousands took to the streets of Alexandria to protest the June 6 death of 29-year-old Khaled Said. Said was beaten to death in front of a large number of witnesses, after which police told his family that he had choked on a clump of marijuana.

Another set of tensions building below the surface concerned a split inside the dominant classes. It came from the Egyptian Army, which had ruled the country since 1952, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and then Mubarak, and which had for several years been privately expressing its opposition to the efforts to promote Gamal Mubarak as his father’s successor. This became widely publicized through Wikileaks in December 2010. The military leaders controlled a vast empire of state-run businesses, and they resented the neoliberal politics of Gamal, who, they also pointed out, had never even completed his military service. The fact that the State Department was reporting on this also suggested that the US was not putting all its eggs in one basket and that it might not in the crunch support the Mubarak regime.

As the revolutionary movement grew in January and February 2011, many were surprised at the relative marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was slow to join the demonstrations. Moreover, it was silent on the economic oppression facing the overwhelming majority of Egypt’s 85 million people. As Bassima Kodmani of the Arab Reform Initiative has gone so far as to argue:

“The Islamists have nothing to say about the economic and social situation in the Arab world. They have not taken part in the social movements. In Egypt, the social movements are distinct from the Muslim Brotherhood; they have nothing to do with the Islamists. The latter... have presented no alternative to the burgeoning economic liberalization of these economies” (“La société s’empare de la rue,” *Le Monde*, Jan. 20, 2011)

This could be seen on January 25, the day of a demonstration called through the Internet by the April 6 Youth Movement in the wake of the Tunisian revolution. The call for the

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demonstration centered on the following issues: poverty and unemployment, ending the state of emergency and establishing judicial independence, resignation of the interior minister, and political reforms, including the dissolution of the fraudulently elected parliament, the limitation of the president to two terms, and new elections. Over 10,000 showed up that day on the streets of Cairo, with other demonstrations across the country. Police responded brutally, but demonstrators fought back, trying to hold their ground, not only in Cairo, but also in other centers like Alexandria and Mahalla. Some 800 people were arrested. Working class and poor youth took part in large numbers, as did students and more middle class youth. Adopting a cautious stance, the Muslim Brotherhood and other more established opposition groups were neither seen nor heard from on January 25.

On January 28, taking advantage of the weekly religious holiday, protestors called for a “Day of Rage” following Friday prayers. By now, the crowds had swelled to over a million people from all social classes. By this time, the Muslim Brotherhood and other parties had begun to join in. The police were overwhelmed by the size of the demonstrations, like nothing Egypt had seen in decades. In some places, like Alexandria, police essentially surrendered.

Mubarak went on TV announcing some cosmetic changes. He changed his cabinet and appointing an old security hand, Omar Suleiman, as vice-president. Protestors responded by calling for the resignation of both Mubarak and Suleiman. The regime cut off mobile phones and the Internet, but by this time protestors knew where the by now daily demonstrations would take place, in areas like Cairo’s central Tahrir (Liberation) Square, or similar ones in other cities. However, the Internet cutoff did undermine the April 6 Youth Movement, organized mainly around the Internet.

As soon the movement began to gain steam, Mubarak’s fellow dictators in the region expressed solidarity with him and his regime. Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, himself 86 years old, attacked “infiltrators” among the Egyptian people, while Libya’s Col. Qaddafi telephoned Mubarak to “reassure himself about the situation in Egypt.” The US also extended support, but as a global superpower it sought as well to assure a transition that would not upset Egypt’s relations with the West and Israel, and above all, one that stopped at the political level rather than challenging the underlying class structure of society. Hedging its bets, and operating with greater subtlety, the US called upon Mubarak to allow the Egyptian people to demonstrate peacefully, but there was no talk of cutting off aid or any kind of real pressure were he to ignore this type of verbal criticism. Still, it served to undermine Mubarak by making him look a bit weaker than before.

Mubarak also played his last card and called out the military. But the military hesitated. Although it deployed tanks in Tahrir Square and other protest centers, the tank crews were not ordered to do anything. Instead, the demonstrators, who were by then occupying Tahrir Square, solidarized with the soldiers.

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Meanwhile, the police largely disappeared from the streets. Perhaps Mubarak hoped that this would lead to chaos, after which support would flow back to the authoritarian state. Instead, neighborhoods formed popular committees to enforce security against criminals and regime thugs.

As political scientist Paul Amar reports, the labor movement also took independent organizational action during this period: “On 30 January 2011 clusters of unions from most major industrial towns gathered to form an Independent Trade Union Federation. These movements are organized by new leftist political parties that have no relation to the Muslim Brotherhood, nor are they connected to the past generation of Nasserism” (“Why Mubarak Is Out,” *Jadaliyya*, Feb. 1, 2011). The class dimension of the struggle was revealed in another way by those who counted the dead. As a medical volunteer reported, “Among the dead who fell during the recent demonstrations was found not a single well-known oppositionist, nor even a known activist. These are young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods, who put themselves on the front lines” (Cécile Hennion, “Au Caire, une foule de manifestants de tous horizons en quête de port-parole,” *Le Monde*, Feb. 2, 2011). Class anger was also seen in how the sumptuous home of Ahmed Ezz, a Mubarak crony who controlled two-thirds of the Egyptian steel market and who had also headed the official New Democratic Party’s campaign during the fraudulent November elections, was torched not once but three times during this period.

A day later, on January 31, the military hierarchy announced that it would not repress the people. Although it took eleven more days for Mubarak to face facts and resign, effectively this was the end of the regime. In so doing, the military not only sealed Mubarak’s fate, but it also assured its own unity and a major place for itself in post-revolutionary Egypt. In addition, by moving so quickly from the top, the military brass avoided the possibility that the ranks, which were composed of conscripts, would start to break away from their officers and join the people of their own accord.

By now, hundreds of thousands were appearing in Tahrir Square daily. In a country where harassment of women on the streets has over the years taken on epidemic portions, new social relations were also emerging. According to one account:

“Each seemed to bathe in the sense of empowerment represented by the square. From those kneeling in the mud for noon prayers and the couples walking by, with no fear of harassment, the message was the same: They would prove to the government that they were better than it had so long portrayed them. ‘You see all these people, with no stealing, no girls being bothered, and no violence,’ said Omar Saleh. ‘He’s [Mubarak] trying to tell us that without me, without the regime, you will fall into anarchy’.” (Anthony Shadid, “Obama Urges Faster Shift of Power in Egypt,” *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2011).

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The gathering on the Square expressed many elements of a new society fermenting within the old. Medical care, food, and security were organized on a decentralized, democratic basis. Every left wing tendency as well as the Muslim Brotherhood was present, but no single one dominated. The demands remained centered on democracy, human rights, and the economy, with no mention of an Islamic state. Youths from the Muslim Brotherhood with their heads covered mingled with other more secular youth from groups like the April 6 Youth Movement in amicable fashion. Moreover, everyone hung together against the murderous assaults of Mubarak's paid thugs. There has been no clearer example anywhere in recent years of the creative power of mass self-activity for freedom than that 18-day occupation of Tahrir Square.

There was also the fear that established political parties and organizations would try to take over the movement, narrowing its emancipatory agenda. One youth of 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. Moreover, those more secular elements were deeply divided between proponents of "free market" capitalism and more leftist tendencies.

At this point, a huge strike wave hit the country, often combining political demands with economic ones and calling for the firing of corrupt managers: "A statement issued by iron and steel workers included among its demands the 'immediate resignation of the president and all men and symbols of the regime,' the abolition of the tame-cat pro-Mubarak trade union federation and for a general assembly of workers 'to freely establish their own independent union without prior permission or consent of the regime which has fallen and lost all legitimacy,' the 'confiscation of public sector companies that have been sold or closed down or privatized ... and [their] nationalization in the name of the people and formation of a new management by workers and technicians,' the 'formation of a workers' monitoring committee in all workplaces monitoring production, prices, distribution and wages,' and a 'general assembly of all sectors and political trends of the people to develop a new constitution and elect real popular committees without waiting for the consent or negation with the regime'."

This was not limited to blue-collar workers: "The mostly female staff at the Egyptian Animal Health Research Center staged a demonstration on the center's front steps calling for the immediate resignation of the director, Mona Mehrez. 'She's totally corrupt,' one

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doctor told *Daily News Egypt*. 'She used the money allocated for studying and preventing avian flu to build personal villas in Cairo and Alexandria.' Other members of the strike cited poor working conditions and nepotism as reasons for the protest" ("Egypt: Strike Wave Hits Regime," *Green Left Weekly*, Feb. 11, 2011).

Once Mubarak resigned, the military took effective power, appointing a committee to amend the constitution in order to allow for free elections in a short time. This committee was composed of six judges, all them male. In a nod to the Muslim Brotherhood, one of its members was appointed to the committee, but no one associated with the more secular opposition was included. Such a fast track was bound to favor previously established groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and the remnants of Mubarak's National Democratic Party.

While not engaging in much visible repression (although there were reports of the secret detention, torture, and sexual harassment of a number of activists by the military), its other two goals were to clear out Tahrir Square and to bring the strikes to an end, both in the name of stability. Instead, the strikes continued, whether in Mahalla or at the Suez Canal, although the latter strike did not actually threaten to shut down maritime traffic. Everywhere, the workers were demanding shake-ups in management. Many were joining the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the one established on January 30.

When tens of thousands of protestors returned to Tahrir Square on February 25, two weeks after Mubarak's overthrow, the military attacked them, beating demonstrators and ripping down their tents. The demonstrators were calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq, a Mubarak holdover, and the implementation of core demands of the uprising, like the release of all political prisoners, something that has been carried out only sporadically. They also expressed support for the Libyan revolution, which had broken out a week earlier.

The military leadership soon backtracked, apologizing for having attacked the demonstrators at Tahrir Square, but suspicions were growing concerning army's intentions. The demonstrators were somewhat reassured when Shafiq was replaced as prime minister by Essam Sharaf, a US-educated engineer who had briefly participated in the Tahrir Square demonstrations. But the grassroots movement continued to act independently, as protestors forced their way into secret police headquarters in several cities, where they set fires and made some surveillance documents public.

A major test of the alignment of forces in post-Mubarak Egypt came on March 20, when the referendum was held on the amendments to the constitution as composed by the military's six-man committee of judges. The new articles were written as if the president of Egypt would necessarily be a man, and also included a restrictive clause requiring that

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both parents of an Egyptian presidential candidate had to be Egyptian citizens. Other language limited the power of the presidency and especially the right to declare a national emergency. The Muslim Brotherhood campaigned actively in favor of the referendum, while the more secular and leftist groups involved in the revolution campaigned against it, mainly on the basis that too quick elections would favor established organizations like the Brotherhood or even the remnants of Mubarak's party. During the campaign, some of the more liberal and leftist groups formed the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, but others, like the April 6 Movement, decided to remain a non-party watchdog type organization.

Liberals and leftists made strenuous efforts to organize public meetings across the country to present critiques of the amendments and the accelerated calendar for national elections, drawing large crowds in many cities. "It is a battle between the liberal democratic forces and two other forces – reactionaries from the old regime and the Islamists in general," stated one prominent member of the more secular wing, the Internet activist Mohamed Ghoneim. At the same time, complained Ghoneim, rumors were being spread by amendment supporters to the effect that if people voted no, they would be actually voting to remove all references to Islam from the constitution (Neil MacFarquhar and Michael Slackman, "Hopeful Egypt Votes on Shape of Its Future," *New York Times*, March 28, 2011). In the end, the referendum passed by a very wide margin, 77% to 23%. This was a serious setback for the more secular, liberal, and leftist forces that had been in the forefront of the revolution. The process of the referendum also suggested that a tacit alliance has been formed between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military.

Another troubling issue concerns women's rights. While the Egyptian revolution involved millions of women struggling alongside men in an atmosphere of relative equality, especially in Tahrir Square, the legacy of male domination – and not only from Islamist tendencies – remains strong. Thus, when a group of several hundred women demonstrated in Tahrir Square on March 8, International Women's Day, they were harassed and driven off the Square by male bystanders who told them they belonged in the home. Two weeks earlier, in an article denouncing the absence of women on the committee drafting the constitutional amendments, the veteran feminist Nawal al-Saadawi, who at age 79 had gone into Tahrir Square, warned: "History has taught us how popular revolutions are aborted by remnants of the ousted regime, and the first thing to be abandoned is the rights of women" (Shortcomings of the New Constitution Committee," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Feb. 26, 2011). In addition, women have sometimes been harassed and even raped, not only on the streets or when detained by the military or the police, but on occasion even inside crowds supporting the revolution, as happened to US reporter Lara Logan on February 11. This has led some to compare the situation to Iran in 1979, when the first sign of just how reactionary the new regime would be was seen in the attacks on the March 8 women's demonstration in Tehran. But 2011 is not 1979. No political force in Egypt today, not even the Muslim Brotherhood, is putting forth the slogan of an Islamic Republic, or making restrictions on women's rights part of its program. Moreover, Saadawi and others are engaged in refounding the Egyptian Women's Union.

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At the end of March, student protests broke out, demanding that corrupt regime hacks serving as university presidents and in other top academic positions be ousted. The military police intervened brutally, but then there was another apology from on high.

Overall, the situation in Egypt remains extremely fluid, with the more leftist and secular democratic forces, as well as labor, having spearheaded an actual revolution, and having grown and developed from that process, which has involved millions of people. That revolution has created a new consciousness, not only in Egypt but also in the Arab world as a whole.

With Egypt, the Arab world's largest country, in the throes of revolution, some have been pointing to a new form of Pan-Arabism as the revolt spread far and wide. Among them was journalist Lamis Andoni, who wrote: "The scenes are reminiscent of those that swept Arab streets in the 1950s and 1960s. But this is not an exact replica of the pan-Arab nationalism of those days. Then, pan-Arabism was a direct response to Western domination and the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel. Today, it is a reaction to the absence of democratic freedoms and the inequitable distribution of wealth across the Arab world. We are now witnessing the emergence of a movement for democracy that transcends narrow nationalism or even pan-Arab nationalism and which embraces universal human values that echo from north to south and east to west" ("The Resurrection of Pan-Arabism, *Al Jazeera English*, Feb. 11, 2011).

One of the next places the Arab revolution hit was Libya.

Libya: Revolution, Counterrevolution, and Intervention

"The subjectivism that we have been considering – Mao's – which has no regard for objective conditions, behaves... as if a party of the elite that is armed can both harness the energies of men and 'remold' their minds" – Raya Dunayevskaya (1963)

After the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, some on the left were suggesting that these events showed above all a defeat for Western imperialism, as they had broken out in two of the closest allies of the West in the Arab world. But when Libya erupted on February 15, only four days after Mubarak's fall, the full breadth of the 2011 Arab revolutions became more evident.

Headed since 1969 by Col. Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan regime takes the form of a semi-totalitarian dictatorship that has sought to rule over not just the lives of its 6.5 million citizens, but their very minds. A *Green Book* of Qaddafi's sayings, which purports to lay out a "third way" between socialism and capitalism, was virtually enshrined after its publication in 1976. If Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book* from the Chinese Cultural Revolution could be regarded as part of a tragedy that set Chinese development back by

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decades and disoriented the 1960s generation of revolutionaries around the world, Qaddafi's *Green Book* could be considered part of a farce, but not if one were a Libyan forced to absorb it from childhood onwards. One could even be compelled to listen day and night to recordings of Qaddafi's speeches while being imprisoned and physically tortured for real or imagined opposition. When the hour of revolution struck this year, among the first edifices of the regime to come down were the ubiquitous statues in public squares of the Green Book, an excess that did even Mao one better.

Qaddafi has a long history of confrontations with Western imperialist powers and with Israel, as well as many of his Arab neighbors. He has also supported various terrorist movements, and occasionally, more progressive insurgent movements. In 1986, Libya was bombed by Ronald Reagan, who saw Qaddafi as a convenient target through which to build support for his militaristic assaults on countries that had opposed American imperialism, above all what was then a truly revolutionary country, Nicaragua. By 2004, however, Qaddafi made his peace with the US and Britain, after which he and his British-educated son Saif enjoyed a sort of honeymoon in the Western media and among intellectuals, not least Anthony Giddens, the British sociologist and theorist of Blairism (see Giddens, "My Chat with the Colonel," [Manchester] *Guardian*, March 9, 2007; see also Elisabeth Rosenthal, "A Son Radiates His Own Light in His Father's Libya," *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 2007).

Libya is also a wealthy oil producer, with a per capita GDP of \$12,000 per year, but in reality, most of that largesse has been squandered on Qaddafi's pet projects, whether at home or abroad. There is little of the economic and social infrastructure that one finds in the oil kingdoms of Arabia and the Gulf. But the oil largesse also means that, as in those kingdoms, the military and security forces are to a great extent composed of foreign mercenaries, and, whether of domestic or foreign origin, exceedingly well paid to do the regime's dirty work.

The spark that launched the Libyan uprising was seemingly small. On the afternoon of February 15 in the eastern city of Benghazi, Libya's second largest, Fathi Terbil was arrested at his home by 23 security agents. A human rights lawyer, Terbil was being targeted because he was involved in plans for a demonstration in the spirit of the Egyptian revolution to be held on February 17. Terbil had been among a small number of attorneys representing the families of some of the 1270 political prisoners executed in 1996 at Abu Salim prison in Benghazi. By the evening of the February 15, 2011, events took a sudden turn, as hundreds gathered outside the police station to demand Terbil's release. The regime's police hesitated, releasing Terbil conditionally, a clear sign of weakness. Within two days, by Feb. 17, eastern Libya was in full insurrection (Nicolas Bourcier, "Libye: L'Homme qui a fait le printemps," *Le Monde*, March 22, 2011).

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The 1996 massacre had taken place after the prisoners at Abu Salim had gone on strike and occupied part of the prison in order to demand medical care, better conditions, family visits, and the reopening of their cases. Abdallah Senussi, chief of security to this day, promised to meet all of the demands except new trials, which he said was not in his power to grant. The prisoners accepted this and returned to their cells. The next day, some 400 were taken to another prison, after which soldiers started firing from the roof at the remaining prisoners, killing 1270 men (Nicolas Bourcier, “Le massacre d’Abou Salim,” *Le Monde*, March 22, 2011).

Ever since, the families of those killed, especially the women, have kept up their attempts to seek justice. As recounted by the Franco-Libyan writer Kamal Ben Hameda: “The ‘madwomen’ of beautiful Benghazi, initially not very numerous, opened up a breach [in the system] with their weekly demonstrations. In the unfolding of their very despair at never being able to see their loved ones, they opened up a terrain of hope in being the first to dare to speak out in a public square, in the face of the henchman of [Qaddafi]” (“Qu’il parte, le tyran de Tripoli!,” *Le Monde*, Feb. 25, 2011).

As the mass demonstrations began in Benghazi and nearby towns on February 17, 2011, Qaddafi’s police were utterly merciless, shooting people on the streets with live ammunition. But this only enraged the crowds, which kept coming back, larger and larger. Soon they were being joined by defecting soldiers and police, who had weapons, including a few tanks. Lightly armed youths repeatedly stormed security headquarters buildings where they faced machine-gun fire, yet they kept coming until they succeeded.

By February 20, Benghazi had fallen to the revolution and unrest was also breaking out in the capital, Tripoli, over 500 miles to the west. At one in the morning that same day, Saif Qaddafi, the reputed liberal within the leadership, went on TV. “Libya is not Tunisia or Egypt,” he warned, threatening all out war to keep the regime in power. If a civil war started, he added chillingly, Libya would be “mourning hundreds of thousands of casualties.” At this point, a number of top regime officials began to defect to the revolution, including the whole of Libya’s United Nations delegation. Saif Qaddafi was not joking, and in the coming days, the regime massed thousands more lavishly paid fighters in Tripoli, many of them drawn from other African countries to the south.

Within a week, on Friday, February 25, Qaddafi’s forces succeeded in suppressing mass unrest in Tripoli. By now, however, many of the surrounding cities had fallen to rebels. At this point the structure of the new society began to be posed. It was recalled that Libya had once had numerous political parties – Nasserite Arab nationalists, leftists, and Baathists — and a sizable labor movement as well, all of them driven underground by the regime. To what extent they had survived underground or even as a memory remained unclear. What was clear was that in places like Benghazi, people were expressing basic democratic aspirations. For her part, Iman Bugaighi, a representative of the Transitional

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National Council, stated: “We want a democratic republic, multiparty, which respects the rights of ethnic minorities like the Taoureg, Amazighs, or Berbers. No party scares us. If the Islamists receive 5% of the vote, we will accept them as part of the political debate” (interview with Nicolas Bourcier, “L’insurrection est ‘au debout d’un processus qui ne s’arrêtera pas,” *Le Monde*, March 12, 2011). Despite such declarations, we do not know as much about the Libyan rebels as we did about those in Tunisia and Egypt, which had over the years had a little more scope to develop their agendas, as seen with groups like Egypt’s April 6 Youth Movement. For his part, Col. Qaddafi asserted that the rebels were Al Qaeda militants and crazed drug addicts, something that was laughed at in the liberated areas of the country.

Those in the liberated towns and cities had little time for debate over these issues, however. For by the middle of March, the tide of battle had turned. Qaddafi’s oil money had succeeded in mobilizing a military force sufficiently organized and well armed that it began to retake many of the towns that had gone over to the revolution. The numbers massacred in these first days of counterrevolutionary violence were said to number as many as 8,000.

Soon, the troops of the counterrevolution were at the edge of Ajdabiya, the gateway to Benghazi and the entire eastern region. The fear returned. This was a very somber moment, not only for Libya, but also for the Arab world as a whole. Referring to how King Al Khalifa of Bahrein had invited Saudi troops in to launch a violent crackdown on the mass democratic movement there, Maylif, a Libyan revolutionary in Benghazi who gave only his first name, told a Western reporter: “If we give in, all the dictators of the region will follow the example of Qaddafi. In Bahrein, they are also beginning a bloody repression” (Nicolas Bourcier, “Benghazi doute: ‘C’est la guerre, ce n’est plus la révolution,” dit une figure de la rébellion,” *Le Monde*, March 15, 2011).

At this point, a surprising turn occurred at the international level. The Arab League, meeting in Cairo on March 12, voted to support a no-fly zone over Libya in order to save the Libyan people from a disastrous massacre at the hands of Qaddafi’s forces. This was a surprising decision in light of the League’s longstanding position against interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries. Evidently, the mass revolutions and protests had put considerable pressure on that body.

After considerable diplomatic maneuvering by the US and other Western powers, the UN Security Council voted on March 17 to authorize a no-fly zone and other measures against tanks and artillery to prevent a wholesale massacre of the Libyan people. This vote was equally surprising, since Russia and China have almost always used their veto power to block such resolutions concerning humanitarian intervention. Over the years, they have done so with regard to genocide in Sudan and Bosnia, just as the US has used its veto to block even strong criticism of Israel, and would surely veto a no-fly zone over Gaza to

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protect Palestinian civilians from Israeli air attacks. This time though, Russia and China abstained, allowing the resolution to be voted through. Evidently, they too were worried about a backlash from the Arab world were they to have blocked intervention to protect the Libyan people.

The US, the main imperial power in the region, realized that if it allowed Benghazi to fall after having called upon Qaddafi to stop his crackdown, it would suffer an irreparable blow to its image in the eyes of a new generation in the Arab world. However, the US intervened very reluctantly, after having said it would not do so unless the UN Security Council supported intervention, a barrier that initially appeared to be insurmountable.

When the US and other powers intervene in during a revolutionary civil war, as in Libya, one of their concerns, here as elsewhere, is undoubtedly to make sure that these revolutions are channeled in such a way that they stop at the political level, and do not go on to challenge the class, property, and production relations of society. Thus, the US is glad the Egyptian Army has assumed control after Mubarak's fall. And it goes without saying that the US is of course being hypocritical, as it does nothing to protect the Palestinian people, and precious little to support the democratic aspirations of those in revolt against governments that it has supported, especially in Bahrain and Yemen.

Within days of the UN vote, massive air strikes by the US, France, and Britain decimated Qaddafi's forces. The Libyan Air Force was nearly destroyed, and tank units that were outside Ajdabiya and moving toward Benghazi were destroyed. As these attacks continued, Qaddafi's by now overmatched forces pulled away or fled from the eastern region, leaving Benghazi in the hands of the uprising. After a few days of fighting, the revolutionary forces eventually retook Ajdabiya as well. By the end of March, the revolution had taken back control of most of eastern Libya. In the west, which included Tripoli, Qaddafi retained control of most areas, except for the port city of Zawiyah, which had bravely resisted for weeks. But even in locked-down Tripoli, Libyans found ways to express their oppositional sentiments. This occurred most dramatically on March 26, when battered and bruised Iman al-Obeidi burst into a hotel lobby filled with Western reporters in Tripoli to tell of her torture and rape at the hands of Qaddafi's soldiers. She was brutally silenced, and taken away, to an uncertain fate.

From the beginning of the Libyan uprising, some voices on the left defended Qaddafi on the basis of his past support for some anti-imperialist causes. Among them was Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, who telephoned his "friend" Qaddafi, declaring that the Libyan leader was "about to take part in another great battle" ("Castro, Chavez, Ortega aux côtés de Kadafi," *Le Monde*, February 28, 2011). Once a principled revolutionary, Ortega has almost totally discredited himself in recent years as he has clung to power in alliance with some of Nicaragua's most reactionary political forces. Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro were initially a bit more measured in their remarks, but this changed once the US-UN

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intervention started, after which anti-imperialism trumped all other factors, even the need to support a people in its struggle for democracy and human rights. Castro declared: “Not even the fascist leaders of Germany and Italy were so blatantly shameless regarding the Spanish Civil War unleashed in 1936.” Amazingly, Castro was not comparing the butcher Qaddafi to Franco’s fascists, but instead the Libyan democratic revolutionaries! (“NATO’s Fascist War,” *Counterpunch*, March 29, 2011). Chavez also supported Qaddafi, extending that support as well to his “brother,” the “humanist” Bashir Assad of Syria as well, once that country also began to feel the tremors of revolution (“Venezuela’s Chavez Offers Supports to Syrian Leader Amid Protests, Blames US for Unrest,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2011). Another vocal supporter of Qaddafi was the conservative Black nationalist and anti-Semite Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, who referred portentously to the Libyan dictator as someone whom “God raises... from among you,” then going on to cover a number of other themes, including the need for Black women to dress conservatively, all of this at an event celebrating the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi (Farrakhan Defends Gadhafi, Pans US Role in Libya,” Associated Press, March 25, 2011).

A sort of knee-jerk anti-interventionism gripped certain parts of the intellectual left as well, of a type we have experienced before, especially during the Bosnian and Kosova wars a decade ago. Alexander Cockburn, who infamously argued in the 1990s that the Bosnians shelled their own civilians to gain international sympathy and who defended the genocidal and Islamophobic Slobodan Milosevic until the end, termed the Libyan intervention “one of the stupidist martial enterprises” since Napoleon’s invasion of Russia. He also supported Qaddafi’s ludicrous charges that his opponents are Al Qaeda supporters (“Libya, Oh What a Stupid War,” *Counterpunch*, March 25-27, 2011).

These kinds of arguments have been answered with great incisiveness from other parts of the left. The noted Middle East scholar and blogger Juan Cole demolished Qaddafi’s argument about fundamentalism: “The libel put out by the dictator, that the 570,000 people of Misrata or the 700,000 people of Benghazi were supporters of ‘al-Qaeda,’ was without foundation. That a handful of young Libyan men from Dirna and the surrounding area had fought in Iraq is simply irrelevant. The Sunni Arab resistance in Iraq was for the most part not accurately called ‘al-Qaeda,’ which is a propaganda term in this case. All of the countries experiencing liberation movements [today] had sympathizers with the Sunni Iraqi resistance; in fact opinion polling shows such sympathy almost universal throughout the Sunni Arab world. All of them had at least some fundamentalist movements. That was no reason to wish the Tunisians, Egyptians, Syrians and others ill” (“An Open Letter to the Left on Libya,” *The Nation*, March 28, 2011).

As far as the narrower forms of anti-imperialism common in some parts of the Left were concerned, Cole, whose own writings are staunchly anti-imperialist, added: “Leftists are not always isolationists. In the US, progressive people actually went to fight in the Spanish Civil War, forming the Lincoln Brigade. That was a foreign intervention. Leftists

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were happy about Churchill's and then Roosevelt's intervention against the Axis. To make 'anti-imperialism' trump all other values in a mindless way leads to frankly absurd positions. I can't tell you how annoyed I am by the fringe left adulation for Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on the grounds that he is 'anti-imperialist,' and with an assumption that he is somehow on the Left. As the pillar of a repressive Theocratic order that puts down workers, he is a man of the far Right, and that he doesn't like the US and Western Europe doesn't ennoble him."

The Middle East scholar and Marxist thinker Gilbert Achcar also supported "the victory of the Libyan democratic uprising," whose "defeat at the hands of Qaddafi would be a severe backlash negatively affecting the revolutionary wave that is currently shaking the Middle East and North Africa." As to the intervention, Achcar argued:

"We all know about the Western powers' pretexts and double standards. For example, their alleged concern about harm to civilians bombarded from the air did not seem to apply in Gaza in 2008-09, when hundreds of noncombatants were being killed by Israeli warplanes in furtherance of an illegal occupation. Or the fact that the US allows its client regime in Bahrain, where it has a major naval base, to violently repress the local uprising, with the help of other regional vassals of Washington."

"The fact remains, nevertheless, that if Gaddafi were permitted to continue his military offensive and take Benghazi, there would be a major massacre. Here is a case where a population is truly in danger, and where there is no plausible alternative that could protect it. The attack by Gaddafi's forces was hours or at most days away. You can't in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians. In the same way, even though we know well the nature and double standards of cops in the bourgeois state, you can't in the name of anti-capitalist principles blame anybody for calling them when someone is on the point of being raped and there is no alternative way of stopping the rapists" ("Libyan Developments," interview with Stephen Shalom, *Znet*, March 19, 2011).

To be sure, whether in North Africa or elsewhere, revolutions that survive with the help of imperialist powers will necessarily pay a price for not having been able to prevail on the basis of their own resources. It goes without saying that if the movement against Qaddafi can survive with US and Western help, the US and other powers will seek to influence and channel it, above all steering it away from deepening its agenda beyond political change and into any sort of challenge to imperialism or neoliberalism. Moreover, these powers are profoundly hostile toward any kind of revolution from below, which is why they are trying to engineer a coup from the top, from within the Qaddafi regime's inner circle. However, the vulgar Marxists are wrong to say the intervention is about oil, since the US and other powers—and the global corporations—have been able to tap Libya's oil under Qaddafi without any problem. Nonetheless, other imperialist aims might emerge as the

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situation unfolds. For example, if the rebels were to win with US and Western help, the US could, for example, try to re-establish a permanent military base in Libya, something it was never allowed to do even by the Mubarak regime in Egypt.

While it is unfortunate the Libyan revolution has had to seek this sort of outside help, it should be underlined, as mentioned above, that oil monarchies and dictatorships — from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain to Libya — have financial resources that allow them to hire mercenaries to do their fighting for them, forces that are impervious to popular sentiment in a way that the conscript Egyptian Army is not. Should Qaddafi fall, it would have a salutary effect throughout the region on such countries, not least on Saudi Arabia, which also relies on hired mercenaries (often linked as well to outside imperialist powers) to keep one of the world's most reactionary regimes in power.

As Marxist-Humanists, we have always based our political-philosophical perspectives on the human subjects engaging in revolt and resistance, and on the need to ensure their positive self-development. We have refused to ignore their subjectivity in order to turn the focus away from these emancipatory and humanist principles and toward a narrow focus on the machinations of various state powers that may temporarily claim to support them. That was true of our support for the East German Revolt of 1953 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and later on, of our support for the Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and our principled solidarity with Bosnia's struggle against Serbian national chauvinism in the 1990s. Such principles have never been more important than now, as the Arab revolutions reach the crossroads.

Concluding Remarks

“A revolutionary movement does not spread by contagion, but by resonance. Something that develops here resonates with the shock waves produced by something over there” – Jean-Marie Gleize

During this same period, major uprisings also took place in Bahrain and Yemen, albeit without quite as markedly a post-Islamist character as has been observed in Tunisia and Egypt. In Bahrain, the long-oppressed and economically exploited Shia majority rose up in a nonviolent mass movement, maintaining its discipline even in the face of being gunned down by police from the Sunni-led monarchy of that small oil kingdom. Bahrain is now on lockdown after the regime called upon Saudi Arabia to send troops to aid it in repressing its own people. Since the US has a major military base in Bahrain, it has only haltingly commented, calling a negotiated settlement with the monarchy rather than democracy. In Yemen, an even more complex situation is unfolding, as the decades long rule of the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime is facing a mass nonviolent uprising of students, intellectuals, workers, and rural people, with key figures in the military and the state having gone over to the uprising. Again because it is a US ally, in this case in the face of

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some pockets of Al Qaeda militants in rural areas, the US has been even more reticent about giving any support to the democratic movement, which appears to be on the verge of at least some sort of victory.

The Arab revolutions of 2011 have resonated far and wide, impacting in some form almost every Arab country in the region, from Morocco to Iraq and from Palestine to Sudan, also hitting non-Arab Iran, where demonstrations also occurred in February. By March, a democratic movement surfaced even in Syria, one of the Middle East's most repressive dictatorships, which has not hesitated to massacre and assassinate its opponents, at home and abroad.

One of the key characteristics of the 2011 movements is that they are no longer dominated by Islamism, which has served to distort and displace radical opposition to imperialism in a reactionary direction ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979. As Olivier Roy, a noted French specialist on Islam, writes: "If one considers those who launched this movement, it is clear that it is a post-Islamist generation.... This new generation is not interested in ideology: its slogans are all pragmatic and concrete: 'Step down!' They do not appeal to Islam as did their predecessors in Algeria at the end of the 1980s. They express above all a rejection of corrupt dictatorships and a demand for democracy" ("Révolutions post-Islamistes," *Le Monde*, February 13, 2011).

Over the last three decades, Islamist uprisings were crushed by authoritarian nationalist and nominally secular states, as in Egypt and Algeria, which took advantage of the radical Islamists' indiscriminate violence to gain a second wind that preserved the existing system for another generation. But the authoritarian regimes that defeated Islamism also exhausted themselves during this struggle, leaving them vulnerable to the new revolutionary wave that broke out in 2011. One could argue, therefore, that the new Arab revolutions are not only post-Islamist, but also post-authoritarian nationalist, in the sense that they will no longer abide with authoritarian regimes that attempt to keep themselves in power, whether by appealing to nationalism, to the fear of Islamist takeover, or to the need to unite against Israel or Western imperialism.

Roy and others are certainly correct that the new revolutionary movements exhibit an anti-ideological character. And while a somewhat cynical former Maoist like Roy applauds this, it too has its problems, not least that it cuts these movements off from the Marxist tradition, and all of its intellectual resources concerning both revolution and the critique of capital. But it also should be noted that the anti-ideological sentiment of 2011 is different from that of the 1980s, when the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe were collapsing and "non-ideological" meant adopting Margaret Thatcher's infamous nostrum that there is no alternative to capitalism, and thereby offering no real critique of her savage form of neoliberalism. Instead, the North African and Middle Eastern revolutions of 2011 are deeply hostile to neoliberal capitalism, to the accumulation of wealth by the few and the

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exploitation and marginalization of the many. Moreover, most of the current movements have strong links to labor. In this sense, a truly radical opening has been created, not only for North Africa and the Middle East, but also for the world (see Paulo Morel, "[Egypt: The Times Are Changing](#)," U.S. Marxist-Humanists, February 4, 2011). It therefore behooves us not only to support these movements, but also to learn from them, all the while engaging in the type of critical dialogue that is the hallmark of Marxism and Marxist-Humanism.

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