



History in the making - the Arab revolutions and the struggle for democracy

League for the Fifth International Tue, 04/10/2011 - 10:18

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[En Espanol](#) [1]

2011 will undoubtedly be remembered as the year of the Arab Revolution. We have seen an explosion of democratic aspiration and courageous struggle as revolutions spread in a few weeks from Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Like all such movements, which challenge and topple leaders and systems that had once appeared to be fixed features of the global order, the world was taken by surprise by the speed, scale and energy of the mobilised masses who sensed an opportunity to dislodge their rulers.

Movements also broke out in Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco but were either quickly repressed or contained by economic concessions and promises of reform by the regimes. Palestine, too, saw the emergence of youth organisations, although Hamas and Fatah alike quickly suppressed their street actions. But Israel's intransigence and its remorseless eating away at the remains of the West Bank have brought Hamas and Fatah together in a move to get the UN to recognise Palestine as a state ? should it be rejected a new Intifada may be in offing. Indeed, with so much instability and revolution sweeping the Middle East, Lebanon and Iraq were notable for remaining relatively quiet.

We cannot however simply record only a positive balance sheet ? there are negative features of the situation, obstacles in the path of the masses that are still to be overthrown, and challenges not yet overcome. There have been no new uprisings since March. In Egypt and Tunisia, although a wide range of freedoms have been established de facto, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) headed by Mubarak's old crony Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi, still holds a tight grip on state power. By holding a rushed plebiscite, the military avoided any radical rewriting of the constitution or other laws by the democratically elected representatives of the ordinary people, which could only have meant the convening of a sovereign constituent assembly. The Muslim Brotherhood, which scarcely supported the 25 February Revolution and now supports the military junta, is expected to win elections planned to take place in November.

In Syria, six months of heroic struggles have not yet brought down the Ba'athist regime. In Libya, Gaddafi was only overthrown with the aid of NATO bombing and military advisers; though the masses on the street delivered victory, their self-appointed leaders, the Transitional National Council, have clearly become a puppet of Anglo-French imperialism, a roadblock in the path of the aspirations of the Libyan people.

In the face of these enormous opportunities for social transformation, which have already put the strategy of revolution back on the agenda of 21st century global politics, and the deep challenges still remaining if they are to be realised, revolutionary socialists have to show, by patient agitation, political argument and analysis, along with participation in the mass struggles, that bourgeois democracy ? i.e., democracy which leaves the capitalist class in control of society through their wealth and domination of the media, education, the army, the police and the state bureaucracy ? can only fail to meet the needs and hopes of the youth and the exploited masses. The systemic inequalities and injustices which drove the revolt of 2011 are written into the DNA of global capitalism.

To date, however, the revolutions in the Arab world have not yet established even a functioning bourgeois democracy. Moreover, those who hold power, and even the liberal aspirants to it, let alone their Western masters, have no intention

whatsoever of establishing it. Only those who absolutely have to use democratic rights to fight for their emancipation, have the motivation to see this struggle through to the end.

It is plain, therefore, that new revolutionary struggles are needed to unblock the road to democracy and social justice, to bring down not only individual dictators but entire dictatorial regimes, not only to liberate the Arab world from imperialism's puppets but from the hold of the banks, the oil multinationals, the IMF over their economies.

Ultimately, it is only the working class, united with the peasants, revolutionary youth and women, can realise in full the democratic revolution. This is not just a question of the right to vote, but the whole range of democratic rights including the right to form trade unions and political parties, complete equality in all spheres for women and all ethnic groups, redistribution of land to those who work it, equal access to health and education and complete sovereignty of the elected government over the nation's territory and resources. Just to summarise, what is required makes it clear that the workers and peasants can only achieve their own liberation by means of a workers' and peasants' government, a government based on their own fighting organisations. To do this means waging a struggle for an uninterrupted transition from democratic to socialist objectives; from a struggle against military dictatorship, open or concealed, against poverty and inequality, to a struggle against their root causes in capitalism and imperialism.

Trades unions are vital in rousing and mobilising workers to fight for their vital interests, as are revolutionary movements of youth and women, but even these are insufficient when the question of power is posed. The instruments for such a struggle must be revolutionary parties that can give leadership to all these different struggles and can link them together across the region and the world in a new Fifth International. Although it is certainly true that the lack of such parties leaves workers without representation when elections are held, such parties are not just organisations for standing candidates in elections; their militants must strive to be leaders in every progressive struggle up to and including the struggle for power.

Democratic revolutions in the eye of uneven and combined development

This year, 2011, has an international scope similar to that of other "mad years"; 1848, 1919, 1936, 1968 and 1989, when revolutionary outbreaks inspired one another and spread across whole continents. Like those historic uprisings, the Arab Spring is a democratic revolution. Its foremost demands are either for the removal of longstanding military dictators such as Ben Ali, Mubarak, Saleh, Gaddafi, Assad, or for constitutional government and free elections in the Gulf, Jordanian, Saudi and Moroccan monarchies.

The Revolutions of 2011 have revealed how important personal freedom is to young people of all the subaltern classes. The demand for age old liberties, that liberal modernity so long ago promised but so often failed to deliver, are often the focal point for the demands of today's movements: freedom from arbitrary arrest, harassment, extortion, beatings and torture by the police. In the 21st century, these principles have been extended to embrace the fruits of the technological revolution - free access to news via an uncensored media and the web. This goes far beyond the fight for the right to live and breathe a modern culture which has been denied and repressed in many of the countries now thrown into turmoil, because the internet has also become an essential tool to expose political corruption and police abuse, to organise demonstrations and launch strikes. It also been used to form parties and fight elections, to challenge the monopoly of ownership and control of the 'old media' by the millionaires and the state.

All these elementary individual and collective freedoms have been curtailed or absent in the Arab world for decades and in many other countries and continents, too. It would be a great mistake for Marxists or anti-imperialists in the West to denigrate these aspirations as 'just bourgeois liberalism', on the grounds that western parliamentarism has proven to a hollow sham that has fed alienation and disillusionment, or similarly conclude that the overriding question in the oppressed and disempowered countries of the global south should be opposition to the domination of these countries by imperialism.

Those who lecture the democratic youth and the workers fighting for democracy and the right to organise that they should only direct such demands against the puppet regimes of Western imperialism, and not against Iranian, Syrian or

Libyan dictators because of their anti-imperialist pretensions, are trying to hold back the tide with a broom. It expresses a deeply arrogant 'first world' disregard for the civil rights of the Middle Eastern masses. If Marxism is again to become a weapon for human emancipation, it must recall and re-elaborate the democratic demands of its classical programme, so important to the communism of Marx and Engels in their fight to dislodge Europe's 19th century tyrants.

The accessibility of satellite TV stations, the internet, social media (Facebook, Twitter) has ensured that millions, if not billions, of workers, peasants and youth in all these dictatorial regimes know that these freedoms have been won by the masses in other countries and this strengthens their resolve. It is a striking example of how the enormous productive power of humanity in the 21st century, our capacity to continually revolutionise our mode of living, can come into violent conflict with the oppressive and exploitative social relations that bind together our societies.

The democratic revolution always tends to find in young people its most dynamic agency. In the era of the information and communication revolution, new technology, the web and the expansion of higher education globally, a huge new 'popular intelligentsia' has been formed, that goes far beyond the privileged ranks of the upper middle classes. Capitalism, now in a state of prolonged crisis, declining in its old heartland regions, cannot fully employ, let alone ideologically hegemonise, this new, global layer.

Starting from its democratic ideals and promises, capitalism systematically disappoints and disillusion young people with its 'actually existing regimes'. The latter are compelled to argue simply that they are 'inevitable' and 'unchallengeable', because they struggle to make a positive case for their own existence, let alone to live up to the great utopian visions of the classical liberal tradition. Democratic ideals alone cannot obscure for very long the fundamental questions, 'Democracy for who?', 'Freedom to do what?'

The unemployed, or under employed, products of schools and universities want jobs and they want jobs commensurate with their new skills and abilities, not precarious, tedious, mind numbing or humiliating jobs. The same applies to workers who find themselves in the huge textile factories, car factories, steel mills that have sprung up in countries like Egypt, India, China and Brazil where either under the guise of the old dictatorships or liberal regimes elementary trade union and workers' rights are denied.

For all the features the polities of the Middle East have in common, for all the web interconnections that bind them to one another and the world, it remains a region of enormous diversity and great unevenness. It has 'many capitalisms', in the sense of polities with markedly different class and social structures. Each and every one of its tyrannical rulers, while sharing all the corruption, greed and nepotism which comes 'as standard' for their position, draw upon divergent bases of support and promote quite distinct forms of justification. In this regard, the social and political physiognomy of the region, and the tumultuous struggles that have now emerged within these conditions, testify to the dialectic of uneven and combined development in the modern world.

The revolutionary contradictions of uneven and combined development

The Arab world has long been a battleground. First it was the site of bitter contestation amongst the old colonial powers of the late 19th and early 20th century, before giving way to the Cold War with a similar contest between liberal imperialism and Soviet Stalinism. Now it is increasingly a focal point for the new period of geopolitical rivalries between the emerging powers of the modernising east and south, and the declining metropolitan heartlands of western capitalism. During the carve up of the Ottoman Empire and the periods after the two world wars the Arab states and their non-democratic regimes ' monarchies and military dictatorships (pro and anti imperialist) came into being. Although the idea of the Arab nation and then the Islamic Ummah (community) were promoted in order to resist or reverse this carve up, the history of their development since has exposed the illusory character of these aspirations, as both have been internalised into the global class structure of late capitalism.

24. In the inter-war period, Britain and France colonised the region under the pretence of League of Nations mandates. After the Second War the second Arab uprising arose to challenge the hegemony of the client regimes the colonists left

behind. Then it was led by military bonapartist and bourgeois nationalist forces, who tended to put democratic reform a low priority behind modernisation. Under the pressure of superpower rivalry and succumbing to the lucrative possibilities alliances with imperialism offered to semi-colonial elites, the hopes of the post-war Arab Revolution were never realised. Instead the preponderant superpower, the USA, established a disguised settler colony that acted as a wedge capable of splitting the Arab states.

The Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa have long played a crucial geo-strategic role in world politics and economics; not only because its countries hold 56 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves but also due to the region's location on the main trade routes from Europe to the far East. Hence the presence of 45,000 United States Army personnel in Iraq, 10,000 in Kuwait, 8,000 in Qatar, plus the over 100,000 in Afghanistan. In addition, there are the 15,000 naval personnel on of the US Fifth Fleet in the Gulf and Indian Ocean and the 21,000-strong Sixth fleet in the Mediterranean.

Support for military regimes and absolute monarchies clearly gave the lie to the US and European propaganda on the universal value of liberal democracy but the actual attitude in Washington, Paris and London was that expressed about Latin American dictators in an earlier period: "they might be SOBs but they were at least our SOBs." The most vital assets were the Egyptian regime (Sadat and Mubarak from 1973 onwards) and the House of Saud, the Hashemites, and the miniature petro-monarchies of the Arabian peninsula.

Today's Arab Revolution is the third wave of resistance to have swept the region in opposition to the influence and power of western imperialism, following on from the challenge of Pan-Arab nationalism (1918 - 1970s), the relatively recent emergence of radical Islamism (1970s to 2000s), at least in its "anti-imperialist" colouration. Yet, so far at least, today's Arab Revolution has been aimed first and foremost at the client regimes of the west, not at the influence and power of imperialism itself. This has allowed the liberal order to once again hypocritically invoke human rights discourse in order to gain leverage amongst the mass movements and to promote liberal, in the political and economic sense, i.e. neoliberal, figures like El Baradei in Egypt.

Nevertheless, the Arab Spring caught the US and EU leaders in an embarrassing state of warm relations with Ben Ali, Gaddafi, and Mubarak. These figures had done all they could to help the West's multinationals, were carrying out neoliberal privatisations and were helping with the USA's "dirty business" (torture) of extraordinary rendition. The relatively peaceful, but incomplete outcome in Egypt was however in part a product of a sudden volte-face in US and EU policy. This took place after the Tunisian uprising and during the unfolding of events in Egypt. Up to then Obama, Cameron, Sarkozy had actually abandoned the limited democratisation policies of their predecessors, even favour of "realism" over "liberalism". Hilary Clinton even described the Mubaraks as "part of the family." Gaddafi had quite literally pitched his tent in the gardens of the Elysée Palace, partied with Silvio Berlusconi and welcomed Tony Blair to Tripoli.

As a result of the Egyptian Revolution, the US, Britain, France and Italy changed tack to pose as the sponsors and, if need be, the assistants of democracy movements in the Arab world. Of course there were some notable exceptions - Bahrain and its big neighbour Saudi Arabia. These were too valuable and the outcome too incalculable to play democratic games with. Ultimately, their aim is simple one: to ensure the regimes of the MENA region remain 'loyal' to the policy interests of the US and EU.

Above all, their purpose is to halt or deflect the democratic revolution at the most restricted stage possible - i.e. as a facade of parliamentary institutions, with a strong army behind the scenes as guarantor of "order" and domestic capitalism with an open door to the US multinationals. NATO member Turkey provides a conscious model for just such a development, i.e. a state with all the vestiges of liberal democracy, but with a powerful and military structure at its centre and politically aligned to western interests.

In short, the objective of the West is to halt the revolutions as soon as possible and encourage and support a democratic counterrevolution through the medium of the military whom they pay, know and have worked with for decades. A lesson they may have drawn from the mess in Iraq and Afghanistan is that NATO "boots on the ground" is not the

best way to create a credible and compliant regime.

Since the 1970s, a high number of US "assets", i.e. client states, have been maintained by massive arms sales and links to their military and security services. The reason that imperialism has, with a few exceptions, tended to back these dictatorial regimes and continues to back the Saudi kings and the Gulf emirates, lies in the geo-strategic importance of the region- based on its vital oil reserves, its nexus of sea and pipeline routes and consequently its focus for rivalries between the great powers new and old.

Russia is trying to keep its toehold in the region (Syria) and China, though militarily a non-contender, it is, as an eager purchaser of oil and an advocate of non-interference, is pushing its way into the region, as it has been doing in Africa for nearly a decade. Turkey likewise is breaking free of its role as a US/NATO gendarme and ally of Israel to play a more independent role with its conservative Islamist culture and democratic pretensions.

All these factors and the shrinking oil reserves of the planet indicate that in the decades ahead the Middle East will continue to be a powder keg of great power rivalries. The Middle East may well prove to be for the early twenty first century what the Balkans was for the European powers in the decades before 1914.

Despite the combined regional character of these revolutions there is also great unevenness between them, based on the differences in their economic foundations, their differing class structures, divergent political and cultural history and types of political regime. Some of the regimes are oil-rentier states, i.e. capitalist class closely aligned to the state, who control access to physical assets (land, oil, minerals, etc) from which they draw a revenue stream. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, other smaller Gulf States and Libya all fall into this category. As their wealth has accumulated over the decades, some of these rentier bourgeoisies have however become financial, commercial and even industrial capitalists by investing their money abroad in the global marketplace.

These countries have an atypical class profile in that a majority of the working class are foreign migrants, with no citizenship rights. In 2007 Saudi Arabia had (officially) 67 percent of the workforce from abroad or 8.2 million in a population of 25.6 million. In Libya there were on the eve of the revolution, 2.5 million foreign workers in a population of 6.4 million. The insecurity of these workers enables government and employers to expel them if they cause trouble and, when there is high unemployment amongst the indigenous population, the existence of this huge migrant workforce, often results in ruling elites seeking to divide the working class through racism and chauvinism.

Countries like Egypt, Syria, and Algeria have a more 'normal' class profile for the global south and east. Still 'underdeveloped' in terms of a sizeable peasant or urban artisan classes, but with a significant industrial working class, which often dates back to the post-WW2 policies of import substitutionism, but also embraces new layers who have entered the working class in the globalisation decades.

The more totalitarian regimes (Libya, Syria, Iran to some degree) have shown greater powers of resistance thanks to having parties with mass social organisations, or "popular committees" etc, and semi-fascistic militias, huge secret police structure which have atomised, not to mention terrorised, their domestic populations for decades. Similarly, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in Iran was able to contain the recent short-lived revival of the Green Movement through the mobilisation of the basaji thugs.

These regimes have also protected themselves in the eyes of the masses - traditionally at least - with an anti-imperialist ideology, (Islamist, nationalist or like Gaddafi with some combination of the two), along with the espousal and funding of the Palestinian cause. Last but not least, they also utilised a fraction of their oil revenues to create elements of welfarism, tied to their party, in order to create a social base. In Libya and Yemen there was also the use of tribalism to divide potential opponents to the regime.

The more classically 'military bonapartist regimes' like Egypt and Tunisia, which allowed a greater degree of civil society and political parties, trade unions etc, to exist and even began a very limited democratic reform programme from 2004 onwards had relatively peaceful revolutions. The reason was that the army high command was always

functionally distinct from the family and court camarilla of the dictator. The latter also engaged in massive corruption. But here it must be added that these revolutions are far from complete even as regards the most elementary democratic issues.

Causes and motive forces of the Arab Spring

Acute observers had already noted the growth of a huge educated youth demographic, much of it (40-60 per cent on average) unemployed and those employed often in insecure jobs well below their qualifications. On the eve of the Egyptian Revolution there were according to official figures one million unemployed young people (aged 20-24) who made up the vanguard of the Revolution. Moreover according to an investigation by the Egyptian Central Agency of Statistics that at the end of 2010, more than 43% of the Egyptian unemployed had university degrees. Thus this vanguard was not only young but also highly educated. Indeed, BBC correspondent Paul Mason calls them "a new sociological type, the graduate with no future".

The access of these strata to foreign news websites like Al Jazeera, which broke the monopoly of information and were in Arabic, made them aware of events outside the region, especially in Europe. 2010 saw major youth and/or worker mobilisations in Greece, France and Britain. Use of Facebook, Twitter and text messaging enabled them to mobilise networks whose members could mobilise even broader numbers locally. Without giving in to the nonsense that this was a Facebook revolution savvy use of the social media help account for its velocity. The number of Internet users in Egypt was 21.2 million before January 25th.

Just as the birth of an independent workers movement goes back to the earlier years of the last decade so too does the youth movement. The birth of a democracy movement in Egypt originated in support for the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 by university and secondary school students. Another wave of mass demonstrations took place in 2003-04 against the invasion of Iraq and Mubarak's support for the war. In 2004 the Egyptian Movement for Change or Kefaya (Enough!) emerged from these movements. Its youth wing, Youth for Change, was a training ground for the youth who initiated the 2011 Revolution. One was the April 6 Youth Movement created in 2008 in support of textile workers of the Egyptian city El-Mahalla El-Kubra, who planned a strike on April 6, 2009. It has since grown to almost 70,000. The young activists skills in using social mobilised solidarity not just in Egypt but worldwide.

Another crystallised around the activities of Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive, provoked to political activism when the police beat to death a 28-year-old young campaigner against police corruption named Khaled Saeed in Alexandria in June 2010. Ghonim set up a Facebook group called "We Are All Khaled Saeed" which attracted 220,000 members in few weeks and eventually reached 800,000. By the summer of 2010 it was thousands of people were taking part in weekly protests.

Suggestions that the Egyptian Revolution was simply spontaneous are wide of the mark, except in the sense that all movements of millions are the result of an action or event suddenly triggering repressed feelings of anger, discontent and revolutionary aspiration amongst the masses. But Marxists do not just rejoice in revolutionary spontaneity but we look to find the ?trigger event? and social forces, those pre-existing organisations that had prepared the way for it, organised it and led the movement into battle.

In fact, there were already several such revolutionary-democratic youth networks of considerable size and outreach. They had an experienced, dedicated and well-organised cadre of activists and organisers and networks organised through the internet and social media. They coalesced into an ad hoc united front, the Revolutionary Youth Coalition (RYC), after the Tunisian Revolution broke out and brilliantly chose the police day national holiday to launch the demonstrations in Tahrir Square and other key centres in Egypt. A numbers of the core organisers were consciously revolutionary socialists.

What were the underlying causes of the Arab Revolutions? The world economic crisis certainly affected the Middle East, but not primarily because of any absolute fall in production. Egypt's economy had indeed seen steady growth in the new century (around 3 per cent real GDP growth in 2001-2003 then 4 percent in 2004 and 5 per cent in 2005 rising

to a peak of 7.2 per cent in 2008. There was even regime talk of "the Tiger on the Nile." Thereafter came a serious decline in growth, but 2010-11 Egyptian real GDP is still estimated to have grown by around 2 per cent.

The most immediate elements of social crisis leading to revolt were growing inequality and social insecurity as neoliberal reforms, begun in the late 1990s and early 2000s under the prompting of the IMF, intensified under the pressure of the global financial crisis. Between 20 and 40 per cent of Egyptians live below the "absolute poverty" line, though this is a lower figure than in India or China, it is still a vast number. The most immediate economic cause was the spike in food prices in early 2011. No countries in the region are anything close to self-sufficient in food so world prices have an immediate effect, not just on the poorest, but also on the working class. Thus in spring 2008 protests against food price growth surged in Egypt. They were not the first.

A revival of Egyptian trade union struggle began as early as 2004, prompted by unemployment, stagnant wages, loss of benefits, and dramatic price increases on basic items. Starting in textile factories in the delta a wave of protests and strikes quickly spread to transport, food services, and construction workers. White-collar professions such as teachers, journalists, and tax collectors joined in. The local committees of the official union federation the ETUF refused to authorize strikes, as did its national leaders. Thus workers struck illegally, demanding the right to form independent unions.

In 6 April 2008 a militant strike broke out of spinning and weaving factory workers in the industrial city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Young blog activists launched a Facebook group to support the strikers called "April 6 Youth Movement". This was to be a central point of crystallization for the Egyptian Revolution 2011. In April 2009, the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETA) applied for recognition as Egypt's first independent trade union. RETA then teachers, technical, and health workers organised independent unions.

On January 30 2011, these four independent unions came together, along with industrial workers from other sectors and the Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), an pro-union rights NGO, to form the Egyptian Independent Trade Union Federation (EITUF). It immediately issued a call for a general-strike which was widely taken up, especially in Suez and the delta, and led to fierce battles with the police.

The fear of the strike wave becoming a nationwide general strike played a vital role in pushing the military chiefs to dump Mubarak. In March, however, the new interim government passed an anti-strike law, they claimed workers action was preventing recovery and harming the national economy. The new unions campaigned for the corrupt pro-Mubarak administration of the ETUF to be removed and on 4 August the government dissolved it with elections for a new leadership to take place in 90 days.

An unfinished revolution - results and prospects in Egypt and Tunisia

The Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, whose mass forces were spearheaded by youth, triumphed because of intervention by the working class through strikes and occupations. The objectives of the movement were anti-dictatorial and democratic with, as an important (subordinate) element, a desire for social justice, jobs and trade union rights. This democratic ideology gave them enormous mass appeal. A component part of this was the ideology of peaceful protest, remaining non-violent even in the face of severe police and ruling party thuggery (over 800 'martyrs' in Egypt) and appeals to the army to remain neutral or protect the people. In both cases, the army eventually stood outside the conflict, refusing appeals from the dictatorship to fire on the crowds.

Although Ben Ali was forced to flee, Mubarak and his family were forced out of power and eventually into prison and their parties were dissolved under the pressure of continued mass protests, the military, drawn from the old elites and standing behind the governments of reformers, have escaped the real danger of revolution for any ruling class. This would have been the going over of the armed forces to the people, the joining of the revolution by the rank and file soldiers. Indeed, this probably would have occurred if Ben Ali and Mubarak's demands for the army to open fire had been implemented.

The result however is that the "revolution" of 11 February was also a palace revolution in which the army removed the old dictator. This gave the army, and thus the tiny elite who still controlled it, considerable prestige and therefore power to shape political developments. The Tahrir Square slogan that "the army and the people are one" was successful as an appeal to the soldiers not to open fire, but it was wide of the mark as a statement of fact. A military junta, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, assumed all of Mubarak's powers. Egypt's Emergency Law of 1958 remains in place, if not enforced. The reforms have been slow and had to be forced by further mobilisations. Roughly the same process has occurred in Tunisia.

Though in Tunisia and in Egypt major democratic rights have been conquered de facto, the freedom to form political parties, new independent trade unions, freedom of meeting and demonstration, freedom of the press, to name the most important, they are safe only for as long as the masses are mobilised to defend them.

The political weakness of the radical leadership of the movement was revealed by the results of the referendum on constitutional changes on 19 March. This was a classic bonapartist plebiscite aimed at relieving pressure for a radical replacement of the whole constitution, such as a Constituent Assembly would have undertaken.

More than 14 million were in favour of the changes proposed by the SCAF whilst around 4 million were against. Encouraged by this endorsement, the cabinet promulgated a law against strikes and demonstrations which they said harmed the national economy. If this is the democratic side to the taming of the revolution and extinguishing its potential, the right wing Salafists, who have burnt churches and attacked Copts and left wing activists, constitute a fascistic spearhead of the same counterrevolution.

In Egypt, Tantawi owed his success in holding on to power not only to the ditching of Mubarak, but also to the political weakness of the leaders of the Tahrir Square protesters. They contented themselves with winning the neutrality of the armed forces as a whole, rather than positively winning over the rank and file, NCOs and junior officers to the side of the revolution and against the high command. This was an important, indeed an essential, component of the "peaceful revolution" strategy.

The revolutionary youth movements, which had provided the central core of the organisers of the mass protests in Egypt, soon found themselves divided after their victory according to the old maxim 'victory divides the victors'. The youth of the Muslim Brotherhood fell back into line because a new party was being formed and an electoral victory in the autumn elections looked likely. The liberal youth likewise rallied to the building of an electoral base for one or other prominent "international statesman" presidential candidates like Mohammed al Baradei or Ayman Nour's Al Ghad Party. Others, those closer to the working class, have tried to set up socialist or workers' parties. Socialist Worker reports, "more than 2,000 have joined the new Workers' Democratic Party, which has an anti-capitalist platform. Similarly, more than 3,000 leftists, socialists, and activists have formed the Socialist Popular Alliance Party with a radical pro-worker programme. In May, four revolutionary groups formed the Socialist Front." It is clear then, that a variety of forces and programmes are now contesting the country's future.

Another wave of Friday demonstrations in Tahrir Square, in Alexandria and Suez, was mounted in response to attempts to declare the revolution over, with hundreds of thousands turning out on 1 and 8 April. A major mobilisation took place in July, reoccupying Tahrir Square on 8 July for nearly a month. Towards the end of the month, however, on July 23, an attempted demonstration was brutally disrupted and dispersed by the police and on July 29 the Muslim Brotherhood and more fascistic "Salafist" Islamist groups took over Tahrir Square with a million strong demonstration, denouncing secularism and raising chants in support of the army high command. Then, on August 1, the army and police roughly expelled a few hundred remaining occupiers. This was clearly a major setback for the revolution.

Nonetheless, in September it now looks like another counteroffensive against the counterrevolution is building with calls for a general strike now abounding across the working class. A wave of strikes by textile workers, teachers, postal workers and Cairo metro workers is spreading. A day of action, including both strikes and mass occupation of the squares, is planned for 9 September. Issues being raised are an end to military trials which have seen an amazing 13,000 individuals go before military tribunals since the SCAF seized the power last February, the undemocratic nature

of the plans for the elections and the anti-union laws passed by the government in March.

The Libyan Revolution

In Libya, we now have a revolution that has triumphed thanks in part to the youth who not only learned how to create a mass movement on the streets, but also how to use military means to confront repression. But they won in part thanks to the support given to them by NATO air strikes, which took out Gaddafi's airforce and repeatedly hit his armoured columns and heavy artillery, thus allowing the lightly armed and initially ill-disciplined but enthusiastic rebel fighters to defeat the regime's better trained troops and mercenaries. Now a variety forces, as in Egypt, are vying for power.

We do not, as the pro-Gaddafi left blithely do, deny the agency of the Libyan people, i.e. their right to act, to overthrow their regime simply because they were helped in doing so by western imperialism. But neither can it be denied that imperialist intervention assisted them against a vastly better armed force. Having such "friends" holds the potential of disaster for the young revolutionaries who want freedom and social justice.

The National Transitional Council will undoubtedly do all they can to honour the promises they gave in public and in secret to the West for its support. However, the plans of the great powers are not compatible with the aims and aspirations of those who actually did the fighting. The youth and the workers want to build a democratic and also a socially just Libya, with jobs and better housing and with oil revenues used to the benefit of all. If the country is simply plundered by the imperialists then this will make that dream fade very quickly. Therefore, there will be a powerful tendency for them to fight back and even a minority vanguard of them can use democracy and the comradeship of the struggle to win people to the cause of resisting the imperialists and their new puppets.

The Libyan revolutionaries are undoubtedly hampered by the severe limitations of their programme and the lack of thoroughgoing anti-imperialist consciousness. The very idea of this has been degraded by Gaddafi's misuse of it, rather like the Stalinists' degradation of Marxism. But it is our duty as revolutionaries to outline a course of action, based on the youth and the workers' elemental need for democracy and social justice, that can take the revolution forwards and defend it against the plans of the imperialists and the NTC.

Now that Gaddafi has fallen, the Libyan Revolution must go deeper and break up the remains of the old regime - popular committees need to stop the new NTC government and the NATO powers from stealing the fruits of the people's victory. The entry of the rebels into Tripoli spelled the beginning of the end for Gaddafi. The dictator's offer to arm the people of Tripoli against the rebels went completely unanswered - because the masses were already in the streets celebrating his downfall.

Like all victorious uprisings, the Libyan Revolution will have to crush the remaining elements of the old regime including Gaddafi and his sons. At the same time, the revolution needs to discipline itself. A popular armed militia needs to be formed in every community with its actions and weapons subject to democratic control. The horrifying cases of killings of black people need to be stopped. Though Gaddafi hired sub-Saharan mercenaries, it seems that, in Tripoli, gangs are treating black migrant workers and black southern Libyans as if they were all Gaddafi mercenaries. Anyone doing this should be tried and summarily punished.

The greatest danger to the revolution however is NATO. The imperialist powers, led by France and Britain, only supported the rebel side in the civil war to regain their prestige and position in the Middle East after 'their guys' were toppled in Egypt and Tunisia. It is the poisoned chalice of imperialism, its hypocrisy and self-interest, which is ultimately why no support whatsoever could be given for its bombing campaign in Libya by revolutionary socialists. While we stand unconditionally for the victory of the revolution, we were and are totally opposed to the intervention of the West.

The New York Times is reporting openly the plans of the oil companies of the Western European powers, the Italian Eni, BP of Britain, Total of France, Repsol YPF of Spain and OMV of Austria, to start exploiting the country at full strength. They were, the NYT says "all big producers in Libya before the fighting broke out, and they stand to gain the most once the conflict ends". Foreign Minister Franco Frattini of Italy boasted that Eni "will have a No. 1 role in the

future". There are now reports that the NTC has promised France 35 per cent of Libya's crude oil and Russia is negotiating with the NTC to secure the deal it made under Gaddafi for its energy monopoly Gazprom to acquire 33 percent of Eni's shares in Libya's Elephant oil and gas field, a project worth 113 million euros.

Pro-Gaddafi leftists who describe this as an imperialist takeover or plunder of Libya's oil should observe that this was all going on under Gaddafi too. NATO has found willing allies among members of the former Gaddafi regime who defected to the revolution, many of whom are now sitting on the leadership of the National Transitional Council \which is installing itself as the government in Tripoli.

Nevertheless the forces of the Libya Revolution are heterogeneous. Even the NTC is made up of former Gaddafi officials, plus some of the original rebels who launched the democratic uprising before NATO launched its intervention. There will almost certainly be a struggle to decide the composition of the new government. There are huge numbers of armed rebels on the streets and only cynical enemies of the Libyan Revolution will claim they are all just stooges or reactionaries. Many of them can potentially come to realise that the imperialists are no friends of the Libyan people, that the defectors from Gaddafi's regime are corrupt and will not help the people, that the murderous old police and state bureaucracy will not meet the urgent needs of ordinary Libyans.

The next stage of the revolution needs to be to fight the pro-imperialist leadership of the National Transitional Council. The Libyan Revolution is part of the Great Arab Revolution of 2011. Now, three countries bordering one another across North Africa have all thrown off their dictators: Tunisia, Libya and, of course, the biggest of the three, Egypt. Why respect the old colonial borders that divide these states? The people should extend their fight for democracy into a fight for a United States of North Africa.

Which force in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt is strong enough to take the fight forward in this way, to defeat the NTC in Libya and the generals in Egypt? It is the working class. A strong working class party needs to be built to link up these fights, deepen the democratic revolution and take it forward to socialism: which means the rule of workers' councils and the peoples' militias, and the establishment of a planned economy for the people's needs, not the greed of capitalists at home...or abroad.

Syria: Assad's bloody repression of the masses

Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Ba'ath regime and Muammar Gaddafi's overthrown Libyan dictatorship have much in common. Both have existed for more than forty years, although Bashar "inherited" power from his late father Hafez al-Assad in 2000. Both traded for legitimacy on their antagonisms with the Western powers, although this has always gone alongside quite shameful acts of collaboration.

Both Gaddafi and Assad abandoned state-led development in favour of neo-liberalism, undermining their previous bases of support in the process. Both used NATO's intervention in Libya to attack the revolutions against them, Gaddafi by posing as a protector of Libya's independence, and Bashar by presenting the Syrian revolution as a plot to bring about a foreign invasion of the nation. Both have tried to shoot the people off the streets to remain in power. Unlike Gaddafi, however, Assad has combined brute force with deceptive promises of "reform". Gunboats shelled the coastal city of Latakia on 14 August, killing 26, including in its Palestinian refugee camp, while soldiers shot unarmed demonstrators in Homs, Hama and Deir ez-Zor, in the same week that the government claimed to have ceased all military and police actions.

While soaking the movement in blood, the Syrian regime has promised to hold "free and fair elections" by the end of the year, and allowed opposition figures led by journalist Michel Kilo to hold a conference in Damascus at the end of June. For the democracy movement, the most promising development has been the creation of a "General Commission" to coordinate the uprising, bringing together 44 opposition groups, which have rejected any dialogue with the regime until it ceases all acts of violence.

Much as in Libya, where imperialist intervention, and the Gaddafi regime's faded "anti-imperialist" credentials, have

persuaded Latin American populists led by Hugo Chavez, Stalinists and the decayed remnants of Healy's tendency to support the regime against its own people, the recent events in Syria have seen many ostensible socialists indifferent or even opposed to a popular uprising for elementary democratic rights. Like parts of the Arab nationalist-influenced left, they have preferred the illusion of an alliance with a bourgeois dictatorship backed by Iran, as a supposed bastion of "resistance" to imperialism, to the reality of a living revolution.

The left or anti-imperialist credentials of the Assad dynasty are little better than those of Gadaffi. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the rivalry with Ba'athist dictator Saddam Hussein saw Syria lurch towards US imperialism, supporting the US-led war to eject Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. Syria's role in policing the post-civil war Taif Agreement in Lebanon, its role in supporting Hezbollah, its opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords and its sponsorship of anti-Oslo Palestinian factions, were all bargaining chips in its dealings with the imperialist powers, as well as allowing it to restore its "anti-imperialist" credentials in the Arab world.

Conversely, the wave of privatisations (and their attendant corruption) that began after the disappearance of Soviet support in the 1990s, their acceleration following Hafez al-Assad's death and his son Bashar's succession in 2000, the failure of the "political reforms" promised by the latter in his early years in power, Syria's ejection from Lebanon following the assassination of former prime minister Raffeic Hariri in 2005, and its opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, have in various ways increased its internal and external isolation. A rejuvenated Russia has, however, consistently protected Syria in the UN as a client state and is still doing so.

The causes of the uprising against it are no different from those elsewhere in the region: the complete absence of democracy or free speech, the alienation and frustrated social ambitions of the younger generation and deepening social inequality exacerbated by the global economic crisis. Revolutionary socialists should not allow themselves to be swayed for a moment by the notion that the purportedly "anti-imperialist" Arab regimes are any exception to the revolution now sweeping the Arab world. Only a revolution of the Syrian workers and peasants can resolve the tasks of democracy in Syria - and in doing so, all of Syria's communities will have a legitimate role.

Yemen on the brink

The mass youth uprising in Yemen against President Ali Abdullah Saleh blends features of the popular revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia with elements of the civil war in Libya and bloody repression in Syria. It has like Syria important potential fissures between Shia population in the north and Sunni in the south; numerous tribes and modern urban populations. Yemen is in the middle rank of Arab state in terms of its population with an estimated population of 25 million (cf Syria 22 million, Saudi Arabia 27 million, and Iraq with 34 and Algeria with 36 million). Yet it is the Arab world's poorest country with less than half the GDP per capita of non-oil states countries with similar sized populations. Its neighbour, Saudi Arabia, has a GDP per capita of \$23,825 compared to \$2,485 for Yemen. Despite its small oil deposits and undeveloped gas reserves Yemen's importance to the imperialist powers and the regional powers like Saudi Arabia lies in its strategic position on key sea, including tanker routes. American intervention in Yemen is a product of the "war on terror", after the bombing of the American destroyer Cole in 2000.

The Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations has spent up to \$300m on military and internal security forces loyal to Saleh, including helicopters, tanks, vehicles, high-tech surveillance equipment and training personnel. WikiLeaks of US Embassy cables reveal that the White House knows very well this arsenal is regularly used against the regimes political opponents. The Saudi government too has a special commission headed by government ministers with a massive budget to interfere and manipulate Yemen's politics. Yemeni tribal leaders and politicians and clerics all receive far more generous aid payments from are suborned from Riyadh.

The Yemeni revolution caught fire at the moment when it could directly draw on the inspiration of Egypt's Tahrir Square. But there had been a lower intensity campaign of anti-regime protests by students and unemployed civil servants from the former "socialist regime" since 2007, which provided a pre-existing infrastructure for the mass movement as it emerged. On 11 February thousands of young people converged on Sana'a's own Tahrir (Liberation) Square only to be attacked by security forces and regime-thugs armed with sticks and knives. Prevented from

occupying Square, they set up camp outside Sana'a University in an area they named Taghyir (Change) Square.

Occupations of squares in Sana'a, Aden and other cities followed with mass 'days of rage', on the Egyptian model. The campaign has witnessed many vicious attacks, sometimes with dozens of dead. Meanwhile, the parliamentary and tribal opposition engaged in a series of fruitless negotiations with Saleh. The bourgeois opposition is grouped in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of Adeni Socialists, Sunni Islamists and other conservatives affiliated with the party known as Islah, and partisans of Nasserist, Baathist and liberal platforms, as well as Islamists from the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism from in northern Yemen. Major defections have taken place from the Saleh regimes upper echelons; most notably Ali Muhsin, head of the First Armoured Division and the Northwest Military Command who waged a bloody and victorious war against southern secessionists in 1994 and against the northern Shia in 2010.

Worried by the prospect of a successful revolutionary overthrow of Saleh or a Libyan style civil war the Saudis backed by the Americans used the mediation of the Gulf Cooperation Council to try to persuade Saleh to resign the presidency and give way to a joint administration with the parliamentary opposition. But despite repeated promises to go Saleh reneged on them time and again. On June he was severely wounded in a bombing of the presidential mosque and retired to Saudi Arabia, but his son Ahmed Saleh unofficially took over command.

A low intensity civil war has occupied the summer months while the attempts at peaceful protest continued and were continually fired on by the regime. The youth quite rightly do not trust either the JMP or a butcher like Ali Muhsin. But it is now plain that, just as with the Gadaffis, peaceful protest alone will not get rid of the Saleh dynasty.

If the revolutionary youth are not able to arm themselves and if a general strike does not paralyse the regime the initiative will slip from the hands of the democratic forces. Then if Saleh and his murderous cohorts are defeated the regime that replaces it could itself be very repressive - supported by the Saudis and the Americans in the name of combating Al Qaeda. In reality, both these states are terrified of a popular democratic revolution in Yemen, one that given the country's left wing nationalist past might have a blow back on the Saudi monarchy and the petro-emirates of the GCC.

In mid-September the fighting and repression is mounting yet again with more than 50 protesters killed in Sana'a in two days. Things are approaching a critically turning point. In this conjuncture it cannot be ruled out that there will be a Saudi intervention with US backing under the pretext of the danger of an Al Maida takeover or preventing a Somali scenario. The international workers movement and antiwar movement which made little noise about the Saudi takeover of Bahrain on behalf of its monarchy and against it people must this time be loud in its protests and effective in its actions.

Whither the Arab Revolution? Between liberal capitalism and socialist transformation

The Arab Revolutions of 2011 are from over as events in Libya, Syria and Yemen amply testify. In these countries, as well as in those where rebellions have been crushed or contained, Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco, or those where they have resulted in the removal of dictators and the winning of democratic freedoms but that state power remains out of the grasp of the masses, i.e. Egypt and Tunisia, the revolution is far from complete.

The phase of a relatively swift toppling of regimes and 'peaceful' victories, hailed by some libertarian and pacifist commentators as a new 21st century model of revolution, has given way to a very old pattern of bitter and often violent struggle. Indeed, a fight to the death with tyrannical regimes is now underway, ultimately they can only be totally removed by mass workers' action and armed insurrection.

In these quite tumultuous times, we should recall the basic postulates of two central Marxist ideas. Firstly, the strategy of permanent revolution, which states simply that only the working class can realise the democratic and social aspirations of the people, that it must form workers' governments of transition towards a socialist order. Secondly, the central role of political organisation and the accompanying idea that all these revolutionaries struggles can only be resolved on the terrain of politics, dependent on who, and which class, seizes the control of the states. These ideas will

be proven in the months and years ahead, either positively or negatively, should the masses suffer a bitter defeat and miss the opportunity to transform an entire epoch of human development.

The opportunity presented is quite enormous. Revolutionary youth and the working class can consciously take the lead, seizing the opportunity to organise in states like Egypt or in sharp conflict with the forces of repression in Syria, to build democratic workers' councils and revolutionary parties. They will not succeed spontaneously, let alone by peaceful means, and even less if they put their hope in western intervention.

The lessons so far can be enumerated quite simply:

The revolutionary youth, both from the unemployed intelligentsia and the working class and the poor, played a vital role in spearheading, spreading and sustaining the revolt. Their creativity in using all the means of communication, new and old, to create ad hoc mass networks of struggle, is a lesson not just to the Arab countries but to the subaltern classes the world over.

It can be copied not merely by youth but by rank and file workers hemmed in by bureaucratic leaderships in the trade unions or by bourgeois parties that monopolise political life. Agitation and mass mobilisation are possible given bold initiative and improvisation. Our debt to the youth of Tunisia, Egypt and the rest is incalculable and can only be repaid by imitating them.

However, events in Tunisia and Egypt show that the revolt of the youth can only turn into a revolution (an overturn of governments and regimes) if the working class, the poor, the peasants, participate en masse, by direct action, that is, by waves of strikes, general strikes, occupations of workplaces, repeated mass demonstrations. Only when the toiling masses become ungovernable will the ruling class split and the armed forces waver and divide, with a part or the whole coming over to the side of the people.

Once a full-blown revolutionary situation or a mass democratic revolution emerges, the 'spontaneous' networks or united fronts of youth movements and trade unions are insufficient to direct the revolution toward the radical and complete fulfilment of its demands. Regimes will either delay or suddenly call elections or plebiscites to isolate the vanguard from the masses. They will resort to liberal figures or parties to do this among the intelligentsia and the middle classes and to Islamists amongst the workers and the peasants.

Trades unions can play a vital role in rousing workers to self-organisation but on their own they cannot combat the forces of political Islam. Equally, vitally important as they are, economic struggles alone cannot enable the workers to cast their hegemony over the broader masses of the poor and exploited politically. The only counteracting move is to organise the mass of workers, youth, urban poor via mass assemblies in workplaces and communities, to elect councils of delegates comparable to the soviets of 1917. Only these can organise millions and trump the Islamists' mosque and charitable mass organisations.

Within any mass movement of councils, the question of political leadership is at once posed. The revolutionary intelligentsia and the workers' militant activists must come together in a revolutionary party whose aim is workers' power and a socialist country, region and world. Such a party must be a disciplined cadre party, fighting for leadership in every mass organisation. It must popularise its programme in easily understood main slogans that the masses can grasp on the basis of their own needs and experience.

A party of this type should not be confused with small socialist, ideological currents. It must be a mass party of the workers and youth, drawing together all the best fighters. To win this it will no doubt be necessary to pass through an intermediate stage such as a broad workers' party formed by the militant unions or a unification of existing socialist parties. With or without such stages, the goal to which all efforts must work is to create a party that can turn the democratic revolution to a socialist revolution. It must, in short, be a party modelled on the Russian Bolsheviks, still to this day the only party to have led a democratic seizure of power by the working class.

Where the working class is weak, or made up largely of migrant labour, the ruling classes can use oil revenues, tribal and religious-communal differences to mobilise sufficient armed force to wage a bloody civil war against the people as in Libya, Syria and Yemen. International support by revolutionaries in countries where victories have been won, to those in countries still under heavy repression, is not simply a moral obligation but vital to the survival of the revolution

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