

# Lessons from Egypt

## Palestine and the Revolution

*Mustafa Barghouti*

The rush and tumult of events makes it hard, sometimes, to draw the most important general conclusions from their significance. This said, the revolutionary tidal wave, which began in Tunisia and Algeria, reached its crest in Egypt and is currently sweeping other countries such as Libya and Bahrain, offers a unique opportunity to watch how people can reshape history as they reconstruct their fates and futures. It also offers a rare scientific window to observe the birth of the new from the old and to study a moment of qualitative transformation that culminated from a long process of quantitative accumulation and that manifests the dialectical laws of social dynamics with utmost clarity.

What happened in Tunisia and then in Egypt, and what will certainly follow in other places, cannot be produced or fabricated by a political party, movement or force, domestic or otherwise. The uprisings are the product of a long cumulative evolution, lasting years, decades or perhaps even centuries in some areas, that eventually erupted into millions-strong grassroots protest movements of a magnitude unprecedented in the modern history of the Arab world, and perhaps in its entire history. Perhaps the only moment of similar size, scope and breadth is the first popular Palestinian Intifada, in its first year (1987-88). Sadly, the Oslo Accords undermined the magnificent initial results of this uprising and destroyed a historic opportunity to end the Israeli occupation. We should add that this Palestinian revolutionary moment was never sufficiently documented, first due to the differences in size and strategic

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importance compared to the Egyptian case, and second due to the lack of media coverage and unprecedented sophistication in communications technology that was available to Egypt today.

The events in Egypt today – as was the case in Tunisia and in all great revolutions, such as the French and Russian revolutions – epitomise what sociologists call a ‘revolutionary moment’. Such a moment occurs when the governed refuse to be ruled as they had been and when the rulers can no longer govern in the same manner. It is a momentous event. It is one that political parties, movements and forces, and intellectuals and spontaneous popular action can prepare for. But it is far bigger than anyone could have expected, planned for or attempted to produce. Great revolutions cannot be made. They erupt, like volcanoes, atop of the mounting force of huge and long-suppressed social and political contradictions.

It is precisely because these contradictions have been pent up for so long, prevented from expressing themselves and unable to vent their anger, that the moment of explosion is too powerful to cap or control. Therefore, political parties and forces should be careful not to overrate their own size, role and/or abilities with respect to this condition. They might be akin to a midwife who is there to help with a safe delivery, but they did not produce the embryo or induce the birth, and they are not the mother (the people), or even the surrogate mother.

Rather than blaming themselves for their actions in the past, political forces should focus on their role at present, which is to ensure the safety of the birth and the health of the infant, and to safeguard it against any attempts on the part of the old order to abort, kill or stunt it. The revolution, or the eruption, may produce a newborn, but it cannot guarantee its survival and wellbeing. This is one of the tasks of an organised and aware intellectual vanguard.

The phenomenon that is unfolding before our eyes today is not restricted to Egypt; it has its roots in the state of the Arab world as a whole. That Tunisia was the first country to react is due to the fact that it was the weakest link in the chain of an interconnected order, whose profound internal contradictions, some of which are old and others of which are relatively new, have long needed to be resolved.

### **The system of governance**

The system of governance and the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in the Arab world remains so at odds with the democratic transformations that have taken place elsewhere in the world as to appear

not only far behind but outside the course of human history. People around the world can no longer tolerate systems of authoritarian despotism that are essentially totalitarian in substance, that rely on unrestrained security apparatuses as their chief instruments of control, that survive by means of repression, suppression and the denigration of human dignity, and whose form of government centres around the exclusive group or single state party.

Many bigger and more powerful regimes than the ones we have in our region ultimately proved unable to withstand the winds of change. The most salient example is the Soviet Union, whose successes in protecting itself and the world against the spread of Nazism and in defeating Nazi Germany, and whose economic feat of transforming Russia from a feudal to a modern economy, could not prevent it from rapid and resounding collapse when the soviet peoples decided that they could no longer tolerate totalitarian rule. After decades in which the soviet ruling elite controlled everything – national wealth and resources, the military and security agencies, the economy and all aspects of political life, and all organisations and associations connected with healthcare, education and culture – and sustained a suffocating stranglehold on public space and civil society, there came a point when the people said ‘enough!’

Another prominent example is to be found in the Latin American dictatorships, which the US had long fostered, backed and financed while fighting the popular revolutions, such as that in Nicaragua, in order to maintain its strategic dominance. But then came the critical moment when the Cold War ended and the primary propaganda stay of that entire constellation collapsed. Suddenly, one dictatorship after the other toppled as Latin American countries finally entered the expanses of pluralism and democracy and began to forge their way to real development and to win major victories over poverty and unemployment. Brazil is a prime example of a nation whose successive elected leaders represented socio-political movements that advocated a blend of political and social democracy, and whose policies enabled their country to progress by leaps and bounds, socially and economically.

In this regard, it should be born in mind that political democracy is not an ideal form of government. It still has plenty of room for improvement, to which testify some major inconsistencies in leading democratic nations. In the US, for example, the difficulties in challenging the alliance between money and the media pose an enormous challenge, which will probably entail breaking the near total monopoly of the two mammoth parties over the political realm.

Democracy has evolved at the hands of different peoples and cultures across history since its first beginnings in ancient Greece. The evolutionary process is still ongoing, the most salient indication of which is the general acceptance of the notion that democracy is deficient if it is restricted to purely political domain and fails to include a socioeconomic dimension. The evolution of democracy has not been solely the province of the Western world, as some might claim or imagine. In fact, some of the healthiest signs of progress were manifested in developing nations. Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) was the first country to elect a woman head of state, preceding long-established democracies such as Britain by decades in this regard.

Yet, with all its imperfections, democracy is immeasurably superior to the horrors of totalitarianism. Its components are universally applicable and appropriate, and consist of free and fair periodic elections, the separation between the executive, legislative and judicial authorities with an equitable system of checks and balances between them, and the subordination of the army to elected executive and legislative authorities. It also rests on a broad range of essential principles and civic liberties, notably freedom of opinion and the press, political plurality and the right to associate and form political parties, an open civic space, and the rule of law and equality before the law.

From this perspective, the chief task that lies before the Egyptian people at this juncture is to remove all obstacles to the establishment of a true democratic order and to proper democratic practices. The emergency law must be lifted, the fraudulent parliament dissolved and all the constitutional and legal impediments to the people's right to freely elect their officials, from the president down to the members of the smallest municipal council, must be eliminated. All officials must also be subject to a clear system of responsibility and accountability while there should be no restrictions to the right to contest incumbents through free and fair elections held at their appointed times. In short, the Egyptian people need to put in place the institutional and legal edifice to guarantee the peaceful rotation of authority in accordance with the will of the people.

### **The conflict between traditionalism and modernism**

The mounting conflict between traditional forms of totalitarian rule and the influences of modernism was another factor that fed the Egyptian revolution. It is impossible, here, to discuss the question of globalisation and its positive and negative impacts, or the attempts of capitalism to monopolise it as a means to secure global dominance. Suffice it to say that

globalisation, like the Industrial Revolution and the invention of the steam engine, is a fact of life and stage in technological development. Its consequences are contingent upon how it is used, for it can be used for good or for bad.

What matters in this context, however, is that globalisation brought three concurrent revolutions: the unstoppable and irrepressible revolution in information technology, as exemplified by electronic communications and social networking media such as the Internet, Facebook, blogging sites and Twitter; the communications revolution as powered by mobile phones and similar devices, of which billions are bought every year; and the media revolution in which satellite television channels are spearheading forward bound mass media, just as radio broadcasting had in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the press had in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Conventional means of authoritarian control could not, nor cannot, halt the impact of these revolutions. They have given people access to information that their governments tried to conceal from them. They have furnished unprecedented means to establish contact, to remain in communication, and to organise and mobilise. They have broken the monopoly of dictatorial governments on communications and the media, creating what we might term a media democracy in advance of the emergence of political democracy, serving as a means for opposition forces to spread calls to rally and demand change.

The impact of this quantum leap forward in media, communications and information technology not only shook the foundations of the conventional structures of totalitarian societies. It had a similar impact on the countries of the modern industrialised West, where government monopolies over confidential information and diplomatic cables have been severely dented. What better illustrations have we than the famous WikiLeaks revelations, which probably mark only the beginning of what is yet to come? It is no longer possible in our age to conceal information from the public for any length of time, as had once been the case with such dealings as the Sykes-Picot agreement.

At the same time, the growing pressure of the IT and communications revolutions are forcefully propelling us towards modernisation and modernism. This dynamic is affecting many traditional systems and structures in our region. Even such heated divides as that which plagues the Palestinian arena are being exposed as conflicts between two facets of the same traditional structure, which resists modernisation and modernity, and espouses exclusionist dominance and one party rule, as opposed to political plurality and equal opportunity.

Arab youth was naturally poised to assume the vanguard of the drive to change. They are the most adept at using and taking advantage of the modern technologies, and they have the least to lose from an overthrow of the old traditional order and are simultaneously the most open to modernist development. Contrary to what some might think, this does not imply that our young are willing to sacrifice their heritage and history. Indeed, they are probably keener on protecting this heritage and reinforcing this history in contemporary terms, much in the manner of the Muslims and Arabs of the Middle Ages, who pioneered the fields of science and knowledge, and built the finest universities and research centres while Europe was still shrouded in medieval darkness.

Arab youth and the Palestinian youth among them have long been the victims of marginalisation, neglect, lack of opportunity, unemployment and the ills of nepotism, discrimination and petty corruption. Yet, people under 30 constitute the overwhelming majority of the Arab population. The UNDP Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR) diagnosed these problems and cautioned against their repercussions. Sadly, the series was stopped and its lessons and recommendations remained unheeded. Incidentally, the AHDR series shed considerable light on the structural deficiencies derived from the marginalisation of the role and status of women.

Given all the foregoing factors, young Arab men and women house an enormous revolutionary energy aimed at development and modernisation. They should not only assume participatory roles, but also effective leadership roles in all domains.

### **Economic monopolisation, corruption and poverty**

The Arab national liberation movements achieved national liberation and founded revolutionary systems of a predominantly militaristic character, the army being the best organised controlling power. Initially, at least, these regimes scored major inroads towards development. The Nasserist regime, for example, put an end to feudalism and set Egypt on the road to industrialisation and agricultural modernisation. Some of these regimes espoused a socialist outlook. However, by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, three major factors asserted themselves.

One was the oil boom and the enormous influx of money that poured into the hands of traditional conservative regimes, which started to expand their influence in the region. The second was Israel's repeated attacks against neighbouring countries, such as Syria and Egypt, with the aim of curbing their influence and their role as beacons of national liberation,

which had been a source of considerable anxiety to governments in Africa and the developing world in general. The third factor was the lack of political democracy, which deprived the leaderships of these regimes of one of their mainstays of support: the people in whose name they were ruling.

In tandem with these factors there was significant economic development. The overthrow of the capitalist and feudal order in these societies left a vacuum. Rushing to fill this were portions of the new middle class that monopolised the hold on the state bureaucracy and used its power to create what we might term a parasitic bourgeoisie that eventually fused with the comprador bourgeoisie. Therefore, it would not take long for a country such as Egypt to take a 180-degree turn. The process was led by president Anwar El-Sadat who reoriented his country towards the control of these parasitic groups, the Camp David Accords, and the establishment of a repressive system of control against the people for whom the 1952 Revolution had originally been waged.

Although there are certainly shades of difference between one country and the next, the rise of the parasitic bourgeoisie and their hold over the state bureaucracy enabled them to control all the resources of the economy in both the public and private sector. Through a combination of repression, bribery, kickbacks, expropriation and outright theft they accumulated unimaginable fortunes without creating a base of production that would permit for a simultaneous growth in society at large. The result was a rapidly broadening gap between the rich and poor and an increasing concentration of wealth. When the sources of wealth began to dry up, privatisation and the sale of state-owned property, businesses and factories became the next avenue for corrupt enrichment at the expense of the poor. In the face of that conspicuous ill-gotten wealth, the oppressed and impoverished peoples could no longer tolerate their daily privation and they rebelled.

The story of Mohamed Bouazizi encapsulated that blend of poverty, hardship and degradation at the hands of the Tunisian security forces that drove the Tunisian people to rebel. Other examples are to be found in the stories of the torture and persecution of thousands of equally deprived young men and women in Egypt, and in the stories of other tens of thousands of people who have reached the autumn of their lives without being able to afford the costs of marriage.

The triad of corrupt and parasitic economic monopolisation, widespread and mounting poverty, and brutal repression was the great engine of the unprecedented revolutionary upheaval in the Arab world. When one

contemplates this fact one is struck not by the surprise that these revolutions happened but by the surprise that it took them so long in coming.

### **The revolution of dignity**

It was no coincidence that the events in Tunisia and in Egypt were often described as the 'Dignity Revolution'. Arab people have suffered degradation on a daily basis. They were routinely humiliated by their own repressive regimes or by those in the neighbouring countries they visited. Perhaps it was the offence to dignity caused by the deprivation of citizenship rights that sparked the wrath of the middle class. Its members may not have suffered poverty, but they would have suffered from the lack of equal opportunity, from the degradation inflicted by theft, by means of forged elections, of their right to choose, and from the larger affront of being marginalised in their own country by a totalitarian order and its coterie of opportunists who closed the doors of opportunity and advancement to others.

In Egypt, the deprivation of the right to dignified citizenship reached a new peak with the blatant forgery of the last People's Assembly elections in November 2010. That farce was one of the major triggers of the anger of the middle class and its younger members in particular who, because of modern telecommunications and media, were fully aware of what they were being deprived of.

### **The revolution and Palestine**

There remains another factor that we should not overlook and that has a direct bearing on Palestine in particular. The defeat of the Arabs in the Palestine war of 1948 and the defective weapons scandal that exposed the corruption of the Egyptian monarchy played a major part in fuelling the 1952 Revolution, which was also a revolution against the humiliation inflicted upon the Egyptian army. In the 1980s, 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the national dignity of every Arab nation suffered a stream of offences primarily at Israel's hands.

Arab people and especially the people of Egypt which, from Salaheddin Al-Ayoubi to Gamal Abdel-Nasser, had become accustomed to being at the forefront of the Arab national defence, watched in fury at the atrocities it perpetrated against the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples, from the invasion of Lebanon and siege against the Palestine Liberation Organisation in 1982, through the suppression of the Palestinian Intifada and further attacks against Lebanon, to the brutal incursion into Palestinian



territories and siege against the Palestinian leadership in 2002 and the massacres in Lebanon in 2006.

The latest chapter in Israeli belligerency and brutality was its invasion of Gaza, which was weak, defenceless and under economic blockade. The Egyptian people watched this crime unfold in its full horror right next to their country's borders amidst accusations against their government for complicity in the blockade. Such outrages must offend the national dignity of every Arab citizen, all the more so when, as is the case with Egypt, that citizen's country is bound by an inequitable treaty with Israel that restricts its ability to act in solidarity with the oppressed.

The US-led invasion, occupation and destruction of Iraq aggravated the Arabs' sense of fury and compounded their thirst to avenge their national humiliation. This factor cannot be excluded in any attempt to understand the force and scope of the eruption that took place in Egypt. Many wonder how the current revolutionary wave will affect the Palestinian struggle. I do not believe it is premature or wishful thinking to claim that there has already been a positive effect.

First, the Arab world will no longer remain a passive agent as regional and international forces fight it out on Arab territory. Henceforth, the Arabs will be proactive agents in these conflicts, which in itself is a positive development.

Second, the victory of the Egyptian revolution will strengthen the status and the role of Egypt, if it establishes a solid democratic government. This can only help to readjust the balance of power in favour of the Palestinian cause, for a democratic Egypt can only be a supporter of the Palestinian people, rather than a mere mediator.

Third, the victory of democracy in Egypt, Tunisia and hopefully elsewhere will fling open the doors to popular solidarity with the Palestinian people. People who have been longing to demonstrate their support for Palestine will now be able to do so in powerful and effective ways. The Arabs will once again be able to take the lead in the campaign to boycott and impose sanctions on Israel, which is a major feature of the Palestinian national strategy for altering the balance of power.

Fourth, we can already see the effect of the Egyptian and Tunisian victories on the Palestinian morale. Thousands of Palestinian youth are re-emerging from the doldrums of frustration, despair and marginalisation, and displaying a renewed desire to take part and act. The immediate effect of this can be seen in the Palestinian demonstrations in support of the people of Egypt, as well as in support of the campaign to end the internal rift among Palestinians and demand democracy and civil rights. In the mid

to long range, we can expect the resurgence of a broad-based youth and people's resistance movement against the occupation, the Separation Wall and apartheid.

If the first Palestinian Intifada was the prelude to the Arab popular uprisings of today, the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia serve to remind the Palestinian people of their latent force and of the power of large-scale peaceful grassroots resistance.

Fifth, certainly the Palestinians harbour the hope that one of the first actions of the new Egypt will be to lift the boycott against Gaza and thereby neutralise the criminal Israeli stranglehold on a million and a half people living in what can only be called the largest prison in modern history.

Whatever happens next, Israel remains a major source of concern. Its arrogance, racism and aggressiveness have remained unchecked by neighbouring regimes, whose weakness it had long exploited in order to give full sail to its dreams of political, military and economic hegemony over the region. Finally, however, the voice of the Egyptian people reminded Israel of the words of immortal Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: 'a serpent's eggs do not hatch eagles.' There are limits to power and they are defined by the forces of history, civilisation and human grit. The rule of tyranny in the age of despair must recede before the revival of human will.

### **A new age**

We have entered a new era in every sense of the word. Some of us may have had the fortune to have experienced the global youth revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and then to witness this new youth revolution. What a relief we feel after that long interval of stagnation and decay, when humanitarian values collapsed, despair and frustration prevailed, and many of the old revolutionaries and pioneers were turned into worthless statues, while intellectuals became sycophants in royal courts and consciences were reduced to commodities to be bought and sold. Today, a new and promising age has arisen in the Arab world. For the moment, it is taking its first tentative steps and it might totter like an infant. However, it will grow and it will become stronger.

Therefore, our most crucial task today is to tend to this infant, to take its hand and help guide it to a full and robust democratic system that derives its authority from the will of the people. Nothing is more important than protecting this newborn from Israeli or imperialist attempts to stunt it solely in order to perpetuate Israeli hegemony and the interests vested in this hegemony. Nothing is more important than to keep the doors open to

the winds of change so that they can gather speed and spread, and break down more barriers.

Perhaps what we see today in the Arab world marks the beginning of a universal transformation whose time must inevitably come, because the current system of global hegemony and the globalisation of dominance is rife with contradictions that can only be resolved by revolutionary transformations on a global scale. In this turbulent world, we – the Palestinians – stand on the right side of history: the side that is fighting for freedom and human dignity. Our allies are the Arab and international forces of progress and change. As for those who are waging their bets on the adversary, they will reap nothing but disappointment.

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## Setting Out

They are half-prepared for the demanding trail,  
equipped with trekking poles and boots well-worn,  
to walk the walk, two pensioners in Palestine.  
Awkwardly, systematically, they hike around  
Isca's rough outskirts, circling the whole city  
by way of bridle paths, green lanes, fields, marshy ground,  
marking the traces of that place they thought they knew.

But such new knowledge is best learned on foot. So you  
and I, as *bien-pensants* maybe, stick to our trawl,  
map the small items of love's psychogeography.  
Stray faces, trees or stones, facets of treasure found –  
what dreams recalled! Seems like it's never too late  
to mend old fences nor confront that fearful Wall,  
years ago so remote, now looming in plain view.

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