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# The Arab world is on fire

Dialogue with a Syrian anarchist

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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**It seems that all of a sudden massive waves of protests are shaking the foundations of long standing oppressive regimes in the Arab world... were there any signs that these protests could happen?**

That is one of the interesting things about this revolutionary wave spreading in the Arab world, it struck exactly when almost no one was expecting it. Few days only before the mass demonstrations in Egypt, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, declared the Egyptian government to be stable, and now nothing is stable in the area: the masses are on revolt and everywhere the repressive regimes are expecting the worst. There are things in common to these big incidents, which went unnoticed to the regimes, the statesmen and even the intellectuals, such as the anger which was there, hidden, silenced by the repression of the States, the poverty and unemployment that were on the rise everywhere... but the governments, local and western alike, thought that this anger could be kept under control... we now know how wrong they were.

**What's the significance of the flight of Ben Ali in Tunisia?**

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It is only the first step of the cascade to follow. It meant that people, revolting people, can defy the repression and win. It is very early to talk about the final solution yet, it is still all too complex now, but the people got to know their real power and are still in the streets, so the struggle is still open to many possibilities.

**Where is the revolt spreading to? What countries are now facing massive rebellions?**

Now we can say with confidence that anywhere could be next. Maybe Algeria, Yemen and Jordan are hot spots for revolt, but we have to keep in mind that an Egyptian revolution would have a great impact everywhere, beyond the worst expectations of all the dictators and their supporters anywhere.

**What's the actual implication of a revolution in Egypt, the second largest recipient of US military aid in the world?**

Egypt is the biggest country in the Middle East and its strategic role is very important. It is one of the main pillars of the US Middle East policy. Even if the old regime could survive for some time or even if the new regime would be pro-American, the pressure of the masses will be always there from now on. In a word, the US, the main supporter of the current regime, will suffer badly due to the revolt of the Egyptian masses.

**What's been the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in these protests? What's been the role of the old guard of the left?**

One thing that is very important about these demonstrations and rebellions is that they were totally spontaneous and initiated by the masses. It is true that different political parties joined later, but the whole struggle was to a great extent a manifestation of the autonomous action of the masses. That is true also for the Islamist political groups. Maybe these groups think now that any election could bring them to power, but with revolting masses in the streets this is difficult, I think that the masses will actively refuse to submit again to any repressive power, but even if this could happen, people will not accept this time to be just subjects, most of all with fresh euphoric memories of the peak of freedom they won by their own

struggle. No power could that easily force them to submit again to any kind of repressive regime.

Another thing you have to keep in mind is that with revolutions people will be more open to libertarian and anarchist ideas, and liberty will be the hegemonic idea of the time, not authoritarianism. Some of the Stalinist groups just represent the ugly face of authoritarian socialism... for example, the ex-Tunisian Communist Party participated alongside the ruling party of Ben Ali in the government that was formed after the overthrow of Ben Ali himself! Another authoritarian group, the Tunisian Workers Communist Party, participated actively in the demonstrations, but could only expose its contradictions: it called at the very moment of Ben Ali's escape to form local councils or committees to defend the revolt, just to retract very soon and call for a new assembly and government. In Egypt it is almost the same happening, there are reformist left groups, such as the National Progressive Unionist Party (or *Tagammu*), and some other groups of revolutionary authoritarian leftists.

I cannot tell exactly about the role of anarchists and other libertarians — there is a growing council communist tendency beside our anarchist one — due to lack of communication with our comrades there, but I have to stress what I've said before: that these revolutions were made mainly by the masses themselves. In Tunisia, the strong local trade unions played a big role in the late stages of the revolt.

I want to talk in more detail about the local committees formed by the masses, which are one of the most interesting manifestations of its revolutionary action. In the face of the looting started mostly by the ex-secret police, people formed these committees as really democratic institutions, a real competition to the power of the ruling elite and its authoritarian institutions... in Egypt now there are two governments; the local committees and the Mubarak government that is hidden behind the tanks and the rifles of its soldiers. This is happening in a region that is used to dictatorships

and authoritarianism... that is the great thing about revolutions, that they transform the world so fast. That doesn't mean that the struggle has been won; on the contrary, this means that the real struggle has just started.

**To summarize, what's your view on the current events? what do you think they simbolize?**

This is the start of a new era, the masses are rising, and their freedom is at stake, the tyrannies are shaken, it is for sure the start of a new world.