

# **What kind of democracy for the Arab world?**

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In a previous article, I said that the events shaking the Arab world today are as relevant as those that shook the world in 1989<sup>1</sup>. Not only can parallels be made on the extent and depth of discontent over a vast geographical area, but also because this whirlwind of popular fury places a question mark over a particular geopolitical architecture that was hitherto believed to be as strong as steel. In this case, these long-standing dictatorships were fed, promoted and installed by the geo-strategic interests of the USA (and its junior partner, the EU) in an area of critical concern as far as oil is concerned. In 1989 the political consequences of the demonstrations were deep and long-lasting – the fall of “real socialist” regimes not only meant the fall of a few unpleasant bureaucratic dictatorships, but because of the relative weakness of a truly libertarian and revolutionary Left, represented the fall of a set of political values and horizons that were incorrectly associated with the Soviet bloc, and the overwhelming rise of neo-liberalism as the unquestioned system in the economic, political, values and ideological field.

It was the end of history, according to quite a few crusty apologists of the “New World Order”. But history did continue to be written, as was dramatically demonstrated by the anti-globalization protests in Seattle in 1999. And if further demonstration was needed, there was the cycle of open struggles between 2000 and 2005 in South America, which challenged the foundations of the model, with the people, the oppressed and the exploited classes as the protagonists of history.

The events in the Arab world which have kept us holding our breath during the past two months, have shaken the New World Order at one of its strongest links – among the dictatorships that have for decades been maintained by the “free world” to ensure the uninterrupted flow of oil and keep a military foothold in an area of enormous economic and geostrategic importance for the empire. These mobilizations are taking place in the very heart of global capitalism, where the oil flows that keeps international trade and industry afloat. It is happening in countries which are all close allies of Washington, hence the anti-imperialist content of all these demonstrations (even the Libyan dictator, Qaddafi, had become a close partner of the USA and EU, in the era of the “War on Terrorism”). They are all countries which are corroded by serious internal contradictions, where hunger coexists with macro-economic growth and the opulence of the leading families. But there is something more – they are at the same time they are challenging and shaking the political foundations of the system. Those calling for “democracy” have sparked off an acute political debate on a global level over the political content of such a flexible term as “democracy”. Above all because the “democracy” that liberals in suits and ties in the corridors of power talk about is not the same democracy that the people on the streets have in mind.

## **Two antagonistic concepts of democracy**

The spectre of the mob taking a leading role in politics is the worst nightmare of the ruling class for whom “democracy” means maintaining the legal and economic structure that underpins its exclusive privileges. It is no coincidence therefore that the capitalist media have been reporting calls for “stability” and “order”, together with the formal support for the need for democracy in Arab countries (“forgetting” their traditional support for regional autocracies). In “El Mercurio” (11 February), for example, David Gallagher writes a typical note: *“You cannot govern a country from the street, despite all illusions to the contrary held by some intellectuals of direct democracy of*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

*an extreme, participatory kind*". Opinions like this have been expressed in a wholesale fashion throughout the official media.

It is interesting to mention government from the street, since it shows the limits of formal, bourgeois democracy. Let us clarify some of the concepts he employs: when he speaks of the street, what he does is to equate it with the people. When he says that democracy cannot be of an "extreme", participatory kind, he means that the working class (the "extreme" as opposed to the class he represents) should be excluded from the democratic game. For the very reason that in his concept of democracy, we must exclude the poor, the workers, from any direct involvement in their affairs, that they must necessarily take on an air of "seriousness" and "respectability" in order to disguise the class interests behind this vision.

In an article on the Arab uprisings, the Uruguayan writer Raúl Zibechi hits the nail on the head when he states:

*"The system is demonstrating only too well that it can live with any State authority, even the most "radical" or "anti-system", but cannot tolerate people on the streets, revolt, ongoing rebellion. We can say that the people on the street are the spanner in the works of the accumulation of capital, so one of the first "measures" taken by the military after Mubarak withdrew to his retirement home, was to the demand that the people leave the streets and return to work."*<sup>2</sup>

The street is the place par excellence where power is expressed from below. It is the symbolic space where the people fight their battle to the death with those on high. This is where experimenting with alternative ways of handling the "res publica", public affairs. Whenever the people have burst onto the stage of history through protest, have always — through the exercise of direct democracy — established their own institutions outside and in opposition to the official institutions, the State. This has been the case since the French Revolution, when in 1792 the proletariat formed the first commune of Paris and the people set up the bodies of budding direct democracy, only to see them taken over, changed out of recognition and finally crushed at the hands of the Jacobin bourgeoisie in its struggle against the Ancien Régime.

Democracy always has limits and the bourgeoisie knows this — the problem is who sets those limits. In classical Greece, where the concept was born, democratic rights were the privilege of only the "citizens", a minority of the population that lived off the labour of the enslaved majority. In Western democracies, for a long time, democracy was denied to the colonies that fed the cities or to the local workers who were without property or education. In Israel, the "only democracy in the Middle East" as the famous cliché has it, the Palestinians are completely excluded from the delights of democracy. In the USA itself, the most "democratic" country in the world (according to themselves), despite the election of a black president, one out of every four African American men languishes in the ubiquitous US prison complex, many of them on death row. The others live in the vast majority of cases in ghettos, while the two-party system works like a charm for the military-industrial elite. Let us take for example any Western democracy, those so-called "representative" democracies: make a simple survey of the social class and gender to which the majority of parliamentarians belong. The result is overwhelmingly: males of the capitalist class. Entrepreneurs make up a tiny minority of society, but almost all parliamentarians are entrepreneurs. You will also notice that oppressed ethnic or national groups are also

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<sup>2</sup> alainet.org

underrepresented. Who then is the democracy representative of? The capitalists, the rich, the powerful. The whole electoral and institutional engine is protected by a thousand and one tricks to prevent popular participation.

By contrast, the concept of participatory or direct democracy is the polar opposite of the concept of representative democracy as advocated by the capitalist class and their hangers-on. Its limits are set by the mobilized people, who during the process of the struggle acquire a new awareness of their abilities and their own existence. Direct democracy in the French Revolution, in the period 1792–1793, placed limits on the speculators, and momentarily consolidated the fight against them. All the various experiences of people power and direct democracy that have occurred throughout history have excluded the notion of economic exploitation. The direct participation of each and every member of society, the collective exercise of power, drowns the capitalist minority in the ocean of the people's interests that are freely and directly expressed. It is no coincidence that direct democracy ignores the distinction between the political and the economic (horror of horrors for the capitalists) and tends towards the socialization of property. The street is an important symbolic space. But it is not enough in itself. Gradually, the people always end up realizing that "democracy", their direct democracy built in the struggle, also includes the socialization of businesses, mines, land, factories and offices.

When the people take charge of their own affairs, we see clearly that there can be no political equality without economic equality.

## **Direct democracy in the popular committees**

In Egypt, as elsewhere in the Arab world, popular committees have emerged that have demonstrated the political capacity of the working classes. Gallagher is wrong when he says that a country cannot be governed from the street. In fact, for several weeks in Egypt and Tunisia, the "street" was the only place of government.

There are numerous witnesses to how direct democracy works in the popular committees of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, which we know about thanks to the good offices of certain international correspondents. Let me quote one from the "commune" of Tahrir Square in Cairo, which I think is fairly representative:

*"Egyptians of all social strata have voluntarily taken to street cleaning; directing mid-day traffic; coordinating neighboring patrols amidst early outbreaks of looting; and even organizing self-defense committees during the sporadic February 2<sup>nd</sup> clashes with the baltagiyya (thugs), fully equipped with security checkpoints, look-out posts, and makeshift hospitals to treat the wounded (...) People have not hesitated to share or willingly give away for free what little they possess in the way of food or drink.*

*Overcoming a long legacy of mutual hostility and suspicion along traditional sectarian lines, there is an Egypt for everyone in Tahrir Square: men and women, young and old, Muslim and Christian. Lively and vigorous debate — free and full of meaning, for once — have filled all four corners of Tahrir Square, conveying by loudspeaker the full array of diverse political views and opinions present. Any formal adoption of proposals has been decided democratically by clear majority-vote (...)*

*The people of Tahrir Square actually held a vote at one point about whether or not to elect representatives to make key executive decisions on behalf of the protest movement; they overwhelmingly and decisively voted ‘no’.*<sup>3</sup>

This testimony is consistent with others that have circulated regarding these committees, which are reminiscent of the proliferation of direct democratic institutions in Argentina after the crisis and the popular uprising in December 2001. Even the conservative newspaper “The Economist” (5–11 March 2011, p.41) says, without explicitly mentioning the popular committees in Libya, but referring to organization in the “liberated zones” that:

*“In areas in rebel hands, a feared descent into chaos has not materialised. Despite a dearth of policemen, crime has not risen. Female students attending celebrations have not reported harassment. For almost two weeks, restaurateurs have been offering free tea and sandwiches. To display their new-found sense of fraternity, businessmen have helped sweep the streets.”*<sup>4</sup>

Of course, direct democracy won in the street, alone, is not a panacea to magically resolve the problems facing the Arab peoples. Neither unemployment nor the exasperating inequality, nor the high prices of food have gone. Clashes between Christians and Muslims in Egypt this week show that corrosive sectarianism has not been entirely overcome. But direct democracy creates public spaces in which the people’s demands can become devastating whirlwind, a collective leadership that seeks to promote equality and socialization.

## **Revolution in the Arab world — not just an end to the dictatorships**

While the USA and its local puppets bring up the spectre of Al Qaeda in order to create distrust among Westerners of their rebellious Arab brothers and sisters, the rebellion in the Arab countries has managed to reach unexpected levels of vitality, going far beyond the narrow demands to replace a government. The journalist Michael Jansen, writing in “The Irish Times” (4 March 2011), gives us a quick look at the profound changes within Egyptian society that are coming about under the transitional government and how the winds of change have not left anyone indifferent:

*“Secondary school students have formed a movement calling for revision of the Egyptian educational system. Women’s organisations are demanding equal rights and full representation in government and civil society. Journalists are calling for an end to restrictions on the media and removal of editors and board members who toed the government line under the Mubarak regime.*

*Scholars, preachers and students at Egypt’s ancient educational institution al-Azhar University call for its liberation from 1,000 years of government control. The turbaned*

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<sup>3</sup> [www.socialistproject.ca](http://www.socialistproject.ca)

<sup>4</sup> [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

*revolutionaries insist that Sheikh al-Azhar, the university's rector and the world's leading Sunni jurist, and other senior figures should be elected for fixed terms rather than appointed for life. (...)*

*Teachers, civil servants, university professors, lawyers, judges and workers in the country's public and privatised industries are venting their fury at officials, inept managers and rampant corruption. Tens of thousands of workers in the textile industry, communications firms, iron and steel plants, hospitals, universities, military industries and the Suez Canal have gone out on strike, first to support the democracy movement and then to claim higher wages and better working conditions. Workers are calling for the dissolution of the government's Egyptian Trade Union Federation. On Wednesday several unions established an independent association.”<sup>5</sup>*

Like Pandora's Box, the Arab revolution has opened the door to all these demands and these complaints which had been repressed for decades, if not centuries. The masses have created a unique historical moment, a historical hinge that will shape the future. And the people have proved to be a tough player, despite their youth and relative inexperience. Those forging the young Arab direct democracy are preparing to make a qualitative leap in their revolution, to turn it into a formidable social revolution in the mid-term.

That is why both the local ruling classes and the agents of the former regime, together with their imperial masters, set as their first task the containment of direct democracy through the process of “transition”, of “institutionalization” and of “democratic reforms” that are altering the participatory content of these rebellions, channelling it into a safe and harmless “representative democracy”. It is the *raison d'être* for all civil or military transitional governments – to be the friendly face of the counter-revolution.

## **The challenges ahead: spreading and rooting the revolution**

The USA knows what is at stake in their backyard. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, admits that there have been rapid changes in the region and that they are trying not only to keep up with events but to influence things in the direction they want according to their particular interests<sup>6</sup>. They will be helped in this regard by the “transitional” governments and dictators who, still clinging to power, offer cosmetic reforms. But they still have an arduous task ahead, as it does not seem that the Arab masses have even the slightest appreciation or enthusiasm for the “American Way of Life.” Furthermore, resentment against the Americans, a mainstay of the regional tyrannies, is crucial to understanding the protests in the Arab countries. Decades of complicity with Israel and collaboration with the US imperial escapades in the region have undoubtedly helped to erode the legitimacy of these regimes<sup>7</sup>. This is what we meant by the undeniable anti-imperialist content of all these demonstrations, something even the Yemeni

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<sup>5</sup> [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com)

<sup>6</sup> [english.peopledaily.com.cn](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn)

<sup>7</sup> The antics of the Libyan dictator, who until recently was the West's best friends and a role model according to the former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, have turned him into little more than a pro-American clown in the eyes of his people. Moreover, in countries to which the USA was, objectively, interested in extending the protest such as Syria and Iran, the protests have been or very weak or non-existent. This confirms that we are talking about different dynamics.

dictator himself, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has noticed. Recently, in a fit of demagoguery and appalling hypocrisy at a conference in the capital Sana'a, he said that all these events were nothing more than a Tel Aviv operation to destabilize the Arab world, that everything was being "controlled by the White House"<sup>8</sup>. He said it because he knows the deep resentment in the region to his US ally and was cynically trying to exploit it – while pocketing the tidy sum of US\$300 million a year from the White House for his contribution to the "War on Terrorism". Nobody in the Arab world was impressed by this clumsy demagogy, even though it seems that outside the Arab world, it has had some effect among some sectors of the left, particularly given the events in Libya<sup>9</sup>.

The revolution in the Arab countries is not over, not even in Tunisia or Egypt. Indeed, maybe even less so in those two countries. The revolution, this gigantic awakening of the Arab peoples, has just begun, as evidenced by the protests that in recent weeks have forced the resignation of two recently-appointed prime ministers – the Tunisian, Mohammed Ghannouchi (along with five members of his cabinet), Ahmed Shafik in Egypt. Popular protests are continuing to force the removal of all elements of the old regime and dismantle its security apparatus and implement a very long list of popular demands.

As the experience of Argentina reminds us, these periods of open crisis are pretty fluid, political changeovers are common, and if the people's alternative does not win out, then alternative of the powerful will soon do so and regain the ground it had lost. What is unsustainable is any long-term political crisis. And that is where we should remember the words of our Syrian comrade Mazen Kamalmaz, who said that the "*People's Committees should be the foundation of a new life, not just an interim measure*".<sup>10</sup>

These committees are the basis of a new democracy of the people that is direct, participatory, assembly-based and built by men and women day by day in the Arab revolutions.

But the challenges are by no means easy. How are we to project these experiences over time so that they can be something more than a sporadic episode in the struggle, the germ of the new society? How are we to ensure that uncoordinated, sectoral proposals can mature into an alternative social project? The Arab masses have the potential to deepen and radicalize the movement, as well as to project beyond the current crisis. They are wary of the cosmetic reforms of these "transitional governments" that they know are, ultimately, only a way to contain the masses. Only time will show how to solve the crisis/crises, but what is clear is that however it turns out, nothing will be the same for the Arab peoples for or the rest of the world.

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<sup>8</sup> The Economist, 5–11 March 2011, p.45. [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

<sup>9</sup> I refer here to an excellent article by Roland Astarita, who summarizes some of the debates in the Latin-American left in this regard. Even if you do not agree with everything in it, it is a sharp and insightful article and, at least in spirit, I believe mostly correct. "La izquierda y Libia" [rolandoastarita.wordpress.com](http://rolandoastarita.wordpress.com) and a reply to critiques of the article, [rolandoastarita.wordpress.com](http://rolandoastarita.wordpress.com)

<sup>10</sup> [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)



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