

Egypt and Tunisia

Revolutions at the crossroads

Starting in Tunisia, a wave of revolutions and protests swept the Middle East and North Africa followed Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate act of self-immolation against poverty and oppression. These movements have now reached turning points.

As protesters in Egypt call for a 'second revolution' ROBERT BECHERT from the Committee for a Workers' International, the socialist world organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated, looks at the latest revolutionary, and counter-revolutionary, reverberations. On the right is an eye-witness report from Tunisia

Despite the heroic mass revolts it seems that in Tunisia and Egypt, notwithstanding the ousting of the old dictators, the bulk of the old elite are still in power, while in other countries the regimes are holding on.

Spiegel, the German news weekly, summed this up: "The Arab revolution has come to a standstill, and all the signs point to the restoration of the status quo".

At the same time, under a 'humanitarian' banner, the US and the European powers are directly intervening, whether it be to help install a pro-western regime in Libya or to help their friends in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, etc, avoid revolutionary upheavals.

Real revolutions are marked by the entry of the broad masses onto the stage of struggle and mass activity. This is certainly what we have seen in country after country. Revolutions do not develop in a straight line; there are ups and downs, advances and retreats.

But through events and experiences the broad masses learn and draw conclusions, something seen already in the growing opposition to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that took power in Egypt after Mubarak resigned.

A vivid sign of the continuing radicalisation in Egypt was seen on 27 May. Just over four months since the first mass protest against Mubarak on 25 January, tens of thousands gathered in cities across the country in a "Second Day of Rage" to call for a "second revolution". Despite opposition and warnings from Egypt's military rulers and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and other Islamic forces, around 100,000 gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

The demands were varied and included quick trials of Mubarak, release of all political detainees arrested since Mubarak's fall and the replacement of the military SCAF by a presidential council to run the country until elections are held.

Above all there was a feeling that the old elite was still in power, summed up by some protesters saying that they "haven't felt the change" since Mubarak had gone.

Two-sided victories

On the one hand there have been big changes, especially the experience of mass movements undermining dictators and the confidence this has given to many workers and youth.

However the big initial victories, Ben Ali's flight from Tunisia and Mubarak's forced resignation, had two, contrasting, sides. They were great victories for the mass movements but at the same time they were also sacrifices made by the Tunisian and Egyptian ruling classes so that they could continue in control. Egypt's military tops made this abundantly clear when they, in reality, put themselves in power by staging a 'cold coup'.

The SCAF made some gestures, formally charging Mubarak and allowing

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a limited opening of the Rafah crossing into Gaza, just before 27 May. But at the same time one of its advisers was arguing that the military should have a "special status" in the new constitution and parliament should not openly discuss military matters.

Initially, the generals' cold coup was not clear to the millions who celebrated Mubarak's departure. Since then, many have begun to understand that, despite the welcome changes, the fundamental structure of Egypt has not fundamentally altered. This is the background to the 27 May protests.

Corrupt regimes

In practically all North African and Middle Eastern countries, overwhelmingly young populations face corrupt dictatorial, or at best authoritarian, regimes presiding over large-scale unemployment and poverty, now being worsened by inflation. The revolution was made not simply to remove such cliques but to open the way to transform lives.

Inevitably the ruling class, and especially those associated with the old regimes, attempted to stabilise their position, seeking to control mass protests and limit movements.

In these revolutions there was the potential to fundamentally change society, there was a tremendous desire to sweep away the old order, but there was no clarity on what should replace it and what concretely could be done.

A combination of decades of repression, limited independent workers' organisations and the weakness of genuine socialist forces meant that there was no sizeable organisation that could argue for concrete action to implement a programme to secure democratic rights, break the local elite's power and begin the transformation of society.

This is why the huge elemental movements in Tunisia and Egypt have not, so far, resulted in the overthrow of the old ruling class. This is despite the fact that, at their initial peak, these revolutionary struggles of workers and youth could potentially have swept aside all obstacles to transforming society if they had been fully aware of their power.

Especially in Tunisia the leadership of the official trade unions, most of whom were tied to the previous regime, played an important role in helping to hold back the revolution's scope. While in Egypt the old official trade unions had far less standing among workers, already before the revolution, pro-capitalist trade union leaders from Europe and the USA were attempting to influence the leaders of the newly emerging independent trade unions.

While sections of workers and others are using the new, more open situation to press forward their demands there is a growing understanding that elements of the old order are reasserting themselves. This has produced the repeated protests in Tunisia as workers and youth try to resist attempts to 'end' the revolution



before all their demands are met, something seen previously in many other revolutions.

Objectively, in today's world dominated by imperialism, these societies cannot develop on the basis of capitalism. In fact, given the relative weakness of capitalism in many of these countries, the ruling classes cannot tolerate for long the existence of real democratic rights, especially the right to organise and struggle.

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This is why the question of building a movement that can bring to power a workers' and poor farmers' government is so essential. Only on this basis can the grip of capitalism and landlordism be broken, democratic rights guaranteed and a start made to the democratic planning of the use of society's resources.

Unfortunately, many of the emerging left forces in these countries either do not agree with this analysis or fail to make this idea the basis of their day-to-day activity.

Instead, pointing to the current consciousness of many of the workers and youth, they limit their programme to one that fundamentally attempts to work within capitalism. Not arguing that the government which is needed to complete the revolution is one formed by workers and the poor, opens the door to supporting, directly or indirectly, a pro-capitalist government.

It was through this kind of transitional approach that the Bolsheviks were able to link together immediate slogans like "Bread, Peace, Land" with the idea of overthrowing capitalism in Russia. They

were able to build the mass movement that led to the 1917 October revolution when workers took power. Today this means building a movement that fights on both the immediate economic, social and political issues and for the overthrow of capitalism.

Inevitably there is a competition to build support and in both Tunisia and Egypt Islamic forces have also been gaining. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood leadership has striven to gain the confidence of the military rulers, opposing the 27 May rally and praising the generals' role.

Partly this growth stems from their roots in society and existing organisation as well as the relative weakness of genuine socialist forces. They also campaign on the questions of poverty and corruption while exploiting the disappointment with the failure of other more secular nationalist and left forces, some of which once had mass support, to develop society and their subsequent degeneration.

But these Islamic forces are not immune from broader developments. Immediately after the 27 May protests the MB leadership attacked their youth wing for participating in the protests and at the same time sacked the editor of the MB's website for writing, amongst other things, that there was a "low turnout" at the protests. A skilful and principled approach by the workers' movement could win over many of those currently looking towards the MB and other such forces.

However, the recent religious clashes in Egypt between Salafist mobilised Muslims and Coptic Christians are a warning of how deep sectarian divisions could develop in the absence of a strong united workers' movement able to defend mi-

norities while showing a socialist way out of society's crisis.

The current weakness of socialist forces has also shaped the development of the revolution more generally. The situations that have unfolded in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen, while all having their own individual features, have shown the limits of simply demonstrating or occupying open spaces.

Working class

It should be recalled that there were moments in Egypt before Mubarak's departure when it was not clear whether or not the revolution had lost momentum and vital questions of what to do next, including appealing to the armed forces' rank and file and taking initiatives to oust the Mubarak regime, were posed. The mobilisation of the working class hastened the international and military pressure on Mubarak to go.

Events will not develop in a straight line, as already seen in many countries. But they will test all political forces, including those of political Islam, and provide opportunities for socialists to build support for the programme of breaking with capitalism.

If, on this basis, the working class is able to build sizeable forces of its own, especially a mass party, it will have the opportunity to reach out to the rest of the oppressed and also those seeking fundamental change to create a workers' and poor farmers' government.

Then there would be the opportunity for the revolution in North Africa and the Middle East to not only set an example of struggle but start to create a socialist model that can inspire working people around the world that there is an alternative to oppression and the dictates of capitalism.

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Tunisia: Decisive working class action urgently needed

CWI reporter

Four months after former president Ben Ali was ousted there is still an atmosphere of revolution and mass politicisation in Tunisia. Suspicious moves from remnants of the old elite face immediate reaction from the streets. But the joy and optimism of the initial stages have partially been overshadowed by growing dissatisfaction that little has actually changed in the country.

At first, the revolutionary heat was powerful enough to bring down two transitional governments; to topple a number of local 'bosses' in Ben Ali's RCD party as well as corrupt bosses in the private and state sectors; to impose the dismantling of the RCD; and to organise the first elections for a Constituent Assembly. Thanks to a surge in social protests and strike action, some important social gains, such as wage rises, were also conceded.

However, the revolution did not bring down the backbone of the dictatorship's powerful state apparatus. Nor did it change the economic relations upon which the old hated regime flourished.

In the first weeks of May, a brutal police crackdown reminded many Tunisians that the counter-revolution is determined not to give up without a merciless fight.

Despite the official claims, the political police, as well as its networks of snitches, spies, plain clothes cops and provocateurs have not disappeared from the scene.

Tension

Some ex-high ranking RCD officials have been organising through new political parties, registered legally under new names. Meanwhile there has been no serious effort to judge Ben Ali, along with his family and cronies, for their crimes, or to seize their colossal fortunes.

No moves have been taken against most of the torturers or those who opened fire on demonstrators during the uprising. Acts of violence are being encouraged by police thugs and counter-revolutionary militias. Their aim is to create tension that could 'justify' the return to authoritarian methods.

For weeks the government has been campaigning to restore the confidence in the 'profitability' of Tunisia among imperialist countries. The daily demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins are

increasingly targeted as an obstacle to the country's development and a threat to national security.

The provisional government of Caïd Essebsi is increasingly exploiting the weaknesses of the revolutionary camp to reaffirm the authority of the state and capitalist rule over the economy. While the majority of the population is struggling to keep its head above water, the government continues to pay back the billions of external debt contracted by Ben Ali's ruling clan. At the same time Essebsi has threatened to withhold civil servants' wages if strikes and sit-ins continue.

United struggle needed

In a situation of mounting social marginalisation and explosive levels of unemployment, all sorts of divisions can develop. Reactionary forces will try to capitalise on this. Deadly tribal clashes have taken place in the region of Gafsa. Elsewhere some unemployed, in desperation, are invading workplaces to dislodge workers and take their place.

These are warning examples of what could develop if a bold lead is not given to unify the different layers of the working and downtrodden masses in a common struggle against capitalism, imperialism and landlordism.

Ennahda, the Islamist party, although it did not take any active part in the revolution, enjoys rising popularity and organisational strength. Its convoys of humanitarian aid sent to the poorest regions of the country contribute to this process.

This is of growing concern to many left activists. However, it is only by building working class unity around a programme addressing the deep social needs of the masses, as well as the aspirations for real democratic rights, and by unveiling the real increasingly

pro-big business and divisive character of Ennahda and other Islamist forces, that their impact can be seriously undermined.

A recent initiative, a broad Front of Progress and Modernity adds further confusion and obfuscation. Worryingly this initiative involves large parts of the left in an alliance with discredited pro-capitalist forces. It is supposedly aimed at challenging Ennahda's growing

influence. However, disconnected from the social and economic concerns of the majority, it instead contributes only in polarising the whole debate around the place of religion in society, and is used by right wing forces to mask their pro-capitalist agenda.

A new political party called the Party of Tunisian Work (PTT) has recently been launched by some trade union leaders. However, the PTT's programme seems to be weak. Indeed, businessmen and notoriously corrupt high-ranking UGTT union bureaucrats are part of the PTT leadership.

The CWI is in favour of resurrecting the idea of a mass party fighting for the interests of the working class and all the poor masses. But such a party should be democratically built from below, bringing together all the genuine revolutionary activists. It must openly challenge the compromised leadership of the UGTT trade union congress to avoid becoming a 'left refuge' for union careerists and for bosses 'praising the virtue of class collaboration'.

What direction?

As long as the revolution has not accomplished its fundamental aims, and the counter-revolutionary threat remains alive, all the local rank-and-file revolutionary committees and collective bodies of defence, that emerged in the initial stage of the revolution, must be maintained.

They must also be consolidated, structured, and extended in all workplaces and communities. This is vital to prevent the dislocation of the revolutionary movement, and to coordinate discussions and actions on a mass scale.

Such committees could also discuss the contents of the new constitution and the future of the country, exercising a real control over the electoral process.

The majority of ordinary Tunisian people share common objectives: to clear out the spectre of the dictatorship once and for all, to get rid of poverty and unemployment, and to achieve real social and democratic freedom for all.

To fulfil these tasks, the revolutionary movement will have to break the power of the minority of rich capitalists and foreign imperialist vultures who perpetuate their control over Tunisia's major companies, banks and big land properties. It must bring these resources into public ownership, to be run democratically by and for the majority.

As the international repercussions of the Tunisian revolution have already shown, such a decisive breakthrough would soon be emulated by millions across the region.

See socialistworld.net for a longer version of these articles and www.paulmurphymep.eu for reports from the Irish Socialist Party MEP's recent visit to Tunisia.

