

# **The Arab Spring and the Changing Dynamics of Global Struggle**

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*This essay highlights the changing dynamics of global struggle, especially compared to armed national liberation struggles of the 1960s. It also proposes that the rise of the developing world and the relative decline of U.S. and Western power and the changing racial demographics caused by global migration are the two big world trends shaping U.S. politics.*

The Arab Spring, the Japanese nuclear accident, the progressive/labor motion in response to the rightwing attacks in Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest, and the demographic changes reflected in the 2010 U.S. census, are reshaping the U.S. and global political terrain.

These events are not immediately connected and each has its own particular dynamics. But together they advance and aggravate the two big world trends that are shaping U.S. politics: the global rise of the developing world and the relative decline of U.S. and Western power as well as the intense struggle within the U.S. as to how to navigate that global sea change together with the impending people of color majority. Indeed, the International Monetary Fund recently announced its estimate that according to one key indicator China will surpass the U.S. as the world's largest economy by 2016.

These notes address some of the new dynamics underscored and advanced by the Arab Spring, including its implications for U.S. politics.

## **Changing Dynamics of Struggle in Developing World**

The Arab Spring was completely unpredictable in its timing, form, rapidity, politics and Arab-wide form, and it remains to be seen what its outcomes will be.

At another level, however, it was completely predictable. Much of the developing world, including the Arab world, has gone through dramatic economic development in the last thirty years. The corresponding socio-economic transformation has given rise to new social forces that the old repressive regimes, most of more than thirty years duration, proved unable to incorporate or suppress.

At different paces and in different forms, mass struggles sparked by new social forces against reactionary regimes--whether Kings, military or military-backed strongmen or former revolutionaries turned dictators—have swept Asia (1990s—e.g. Philippines, Indonesia, S. Korea), Latin America (2000s—mainly through leftwing electoral victories), parts of Africa (esp. southern and sub-Saharan Africa),

and now the Arab world. One might even include the demise of the former socialist camp and the recent “color revolutions” in former Soviet republics in this context.

These uprisings are notably diverse according to national and regional particularities. But they are also remarkably different from earlier mass struggles in the developing world: they have focused on turning out local dictators as opposed to focusing primarily on anti-colonial or anti-U.S. aims. The Arab Spring has thus far not even targeted Israel.

These movements have been mass democratic struggles as opposed to mass anti-imperialist struggles. Of course, democracy and anti-imperialism are very often intertwined in the developing world. But the leading element seems to have switched to internal democratic struggles compared to the mass national liberation movements of the 1910s through the 1980s.

Indeed, a number of the revolutionary nationalist leaders of the 1960s and 1970s degenerated into undemocratic regimes and are now the targets of democratic uprisings--Mugabe, Gaddafi and Assad. And it is also they who are among the most violent defenders of their regimes.

The democratic uprisings in the developing world of the last twenty years have also been notable for their largely peaceful strategies compared to the mostly armed national liberation movements of the 1920s to the 1980s. Indeed, that wave of revolutionary nationalism, like Marxist-Leninist socialism (and European social democracy), was eclipsed in that latter decade. Most movements since then have different dynamics and different leadership.

Indeed, the Middle East, led by Nasser in Egypt but also the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party (including Hafez al-Assad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq), was one of the world centers of the revolutionary nationalist, socialist motion of the 1950s to the 1980s. Although these regimes made powerful social progress in their early years, they or their successors eventually degenerated into narrow dictatorships and even allied with the U.S. In the 1990s radical Islamism emerged as the main rallying center of anti-imperialist sentiment.

In this context, the emergence of the Arab Spring is a welcome mass democratic counterpoint to Islamic terrorism. There are, of course, radical differences between mass-based Islamic political groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas compared to narrowly terrorist groups like al-Qaeda whose targets are often civilians. Nonetheless the Arab Spring’s mainly peaceful, mass driven and secular democratic flavor is a powerful development that seems to be eclipsing the al-Qaeda-like approach and having much more positive impact. Perhaps this will be strengthened in the wake of the U.S. assassination of Osama bin Laden.

Finally, as a result of the much higher level of economic development of the developing world compared to the past, these movements are largely urban-based rather than rural based, and extremely diverse and complicated in their social composition and political orientations. They cannot be fit into simplistic or outdated categories or theories. Instead they must be studied and interacted with based on a concrete analysis of each movement in its own terms.

## **The Developing World and the Intensification of the Fight for Energy**

While primarily local democratic uprisings, the Arab Spring events, like the fights in Asia and Latin America, are reconfiguring global economic and political power. Many countries are rapidly gaining new economic power and are strengthening the economic ties among themselves, independent of the West.

The BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) are most notable in this respect. The IMF recently announced that it expects the Chinese economy to replace the U.S. as the world's largest by 2016. And China has replaced the U.S. as burgeoning Brazil's main trading partner: economic interaction among developing countries has exploded.

Fast on the heels of the BRIC are the Next 11 (the "N11": Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Korea, Turkey and Vietnam). South Korea is the first former colony to become an advanced capitalist country. No less an imperial leader than Goldman Sachs predicts that by 2050 only the U.S. of the current G8 will rank among the top eight economies of the world.

The rapid economic development of the Global South is creating massive new demand for energy, just as peak oil is reached. And, whatever the exact outcomes of the Arab Spring, oil political expert Michael Klare believes that with it the "old oil order is dying, and with its demise we will see the end of cheap and readily accessible petroleum—forever."

Meanwhile the Fukushima disaster shows the pitfalls of turning to nuclear energy to fill the gap. Along with climate change, these developments underscore the importance of moving away from fossil fuels and toward renewable and safe energy sources.

## **Changing Politics of the Middle East**

The Arab Spring is a turning point of global importance because oil has been central to world economic development and politics since WWII. Over that time, the U.S. has spared little expense or scruple to cobble together a reactionary alliance of Arab police states with Israel to safeguard its interests. The formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the 1960s was a critical

turning point in world economic history, but the West managed to reconstruct a web of power. Now the Arab people are disrupting that arrangement.

Although the struggles are still intense and the outcomes not at all clear, the genie is out of the bottle for the old regimes. Some new level of democracy is likely in many of the countries, and that by itself is enough to disrupt the old straight up imperialist/authoritarian alliance. This has been duly noted by the Obama administration and outraged the U.S. rightwing.

Unlike previous U.S. regimes that routinely, and often brutally, backed their allied dictators throughout the world, the Obama administration has addressed the Arab Spring with halting but nuanced steps in a new direction. Its aim remains the same: to advance U.S. imperial interests. However, Obama's actions also represent an understanding of new limits on U.S. power.

Washington surprised many by early on calling for Egypt's Mubarak to step down, despite the fact that Mubarak was a lynchpin of U.S. power. Indeed, his regime was the second largest recipient of U.S. aid (after Israel) for three decades, to the tune of \$30 billion. Faced with the Egyptian Revolution, Washington backed an orderly electoral transition only to see Mubarak unceremoniously thrown out by the people.

In Libya Obama eschewed traditional U.S. unilateral military action in favor of multilateral action, indeed multilateral action spearheaded by France and the U.K., not the U.S. He clearly hopes to circumscribe the U.S. effort rather than to be drawn into another long and likely failed war. I do not back his policy, but still take note of its new characteristics. Indeed, it is optimistic to think that the Libyan attack will lead to any stability in the short run, and Obama runs the risk of having his administration defined by Afghan and Libyan quagmires.

Meanwhile Israel, the Saudi Kings, and the U.S. Republicans hew to the hard line and hope to salvage the old alliances against the Arab masses and Iran (whose influence has risen with the U.S. stalemates in Iraq and Afghanistan and alongside the Arab Spring) by using whatever force is necessary. The Republicans rail against Obama taking a back seat to France and want all out war in Libya, and cannot imagine peace with the Palestinians. The U.S. rightwing and the Israeli rightwing are lockstep.

Indeed, Israel is a dangerous wild card. Fearing the loss of its main allies in the region—Turkey and Egypt—it is faced with the potential of having to choose between making substantial peace with the Arab world, starting with the Palestinians, or an even more dangerous war stance including a possible attack on Iran. Such an attack would loose entirely unpredictable forces into a Middle East already wrought by U.S. invasions and mass uprisings.

The recent unity agreement between Hamas and Fatah is a major development that accelerates and deepens the Arab Spring and the various conflicts it involves. It was brokered by the caretaker Egyptian government ushered in by the overthrow of Mubarak, demonstrating the regional, indeed global, significance of the political shift underway in Egypt.

The new unity has been denounced by Israel--and the U.S. rightwing--who may now face a united Palestinian front for the first time in decades, one that includes Hamas which the entire Western establishment has labeled "terrorist." Palestine is once again at the center of Middle Eastern and world politics.

### **The Pivot of Politics**

The Arab Spring is the latest demonstration of the drive of the people of the developing world to democratize their governments and empower themselves. It also highlights the complicated, multi-layered process of struggle in the developing world.

The tremendous variance in politics of the developing world gives the U.S. and the West significant room to maneuver and divide. Yet there is little doubt that, overall, this motion is increasingly limiting the power of the U.S. and is ushering out the brutal phase of history characterized by Western colonialism and imperialist domination.

The fight over the shape and pace of this inexorable process is the main battleground of history in our time, shaping both world and U.S. politics.

The varying responses of different political forces in the U.S., both within the ruling circles and within the population as a whole, lie at the root of the sharp polarization of politics in this country.

International competition is one of the root causes of the rightward motion of the economic elite over the past forty years and its attacks on the living standards of working and poor people, especially people of color, in this country. Fear of the loss of U.S. supremacy is also fundamental to the powerful rise of far-right populism in that same period, especially its latest incarnation, the Tea Party. The attempt to reassert U.S. supremacy has given rise to the gigantic increase in U.S. military spending—which has more than doubled since 2000—and murderous military adventures.

The polarization between those who are determined to reassert U.S. dominance by any means necessary—an inherently racialized notion--and those that understand that such a policy is dangerous, destructive and/or unrealistic is the pivotal dividing line in U.S. politics today. The racialization of politics is particularly pronounced

due to the tremendous growth of people of color in the U.S. and their clear leftward politics. The right cannot win without isolating people of color and the left cannot win without mobilizing them.

To be sure there are important divisions on the center/right, between reactionary Tea Partyists and old-line Republican conservatives, and on the center/left between realistic elitists and genuine progressives. I would argue that the building of a powerful progressive trend inside and outside the Democratic Party is key to exposing, splitting, and defeating the right.

However, as we undertake to build that powerful force, we must try to avoid letting the right split us from moderate allies and thereby prevail. This will be complex given the right's momentum and the elite realists (and affluent centrists) tendency to collaborate with the right in attacking progressive-leaning social sectors even as they do battle with the right electorally and otherwise.

Only a progressive bloc that is far stronger, more combative, flexible and strategic than what we have now will have a chance to navigate this terrain. Still, the old adage, "unite the left, win over the middle, and isolate the right" was never more relevant.

The stakes are enormous for the people of the world as we enter into the 2012 political season.