An Arab Springtime?

by Samir Amin *(June 2, 2011)*

SAMIR AMIN is director of the Third World Forum in Dakar, Senegal and author of *The Liberal Virus* (Monthly Review Press, 2004), *The World We Wish to See* (Monthly Review Press, 2008), and most recently *The Law of Worldwide Value* (Monthly Review Press, 2010). This article was translated by Shane Henry Mage.

The year 2011 began with a series of shattering, wrathful, explosions from the Arab peoples. Is this springtime the inception of a second "awakening of the Arab world?" Or will these revolts bog down and finally prove abortive—as was the case with the first episode of that awakening, which was evoked in my book *L'éveil du Sud* (Paris: Le temps des cerises, 2008). If the first hypothesis is confirmed, the forward movement of the Arab world will necessarily become part of the movement to go beyond imperialist capitalism on the world scale. Failure would keep the Arab world in its current status as a submissive periphery, prohibiting its elevation to the rank of an active participant in shaping the world.

It is always dangerous to generalize about the "Arab world," thus ignoring the diversity of objective conditions characterizing each country of that world. So I will concentrate the following reflections on Egypt, which is easily recognized as playing and having always played a major role in the general evolution of its region.

Egypt was the first country in the periphery of globalized capitalism that tried to "emerge." Even at the start of the 19th century, well before Japan and China, the Viceroy Mohammed Ali had conceived and undertaken a program of renovation for Egypt and its near neighbors in the Arab *Mashreq* [Mashreq means "East," *i.e.*, eastern North Africa and the Levant, ed.]. That vigorous experiment took up two-thirds of the 19th century and only belatedly ran out of breath in the 1870's, during the second half of the reign of the Khedive Ismail. The analysis of its failure cannot ignore the violence of the foreign aggression by Great Britain, the foremost power of industrial capitalism during that period. Twice, in [the naval campaign of] 1840 and then by taking control of the Khedive's finances during the 1870's, and then finally by military occupation in 1882, England fiercely pursued its objective: to make sure that a modern Egypt would fail to emerge. Certainly the Egyptian project was subject to the limitations of its time since it manifestly envisaged emergence within and through capitalism, unlike Egypt's second attempt at emergence—which we will discuss further on. That project's own social contradictions, like its underlying political, cultural, and ideological presuppositions, undoubtedly had their share of

responsibility for its failure. The fact remains that without imperialist aggression those contradictions would probably have been overcome, as they were in Japan.

Beaten, emergent Egypt was forced to undergo nearly forty years (1880-1920) as a servile periphery, whose institutions were refashioned in service to that period's model of capitalist/imperialist accumulation. That imposed retrogression struck, over and beyond its productive system, the country's political and social institutions. It operated systematically to reinforce all the reactionary and medievalistical cultural and ideological conceptions that were useful for keeping the country in its subordinate position.

The Egyptian nation—its people, its elites—never accepted that position. This stubborn refusal in turn gave rise to a second wave of rising movements which unfolded during the next half-century (1919-1967). Indeed, I see that period as a continuous series of struggles and major forward movements. It had a triple objective: democracy, national independence, social progress. Three objectives—however limited and sometimes confused were their formulations—inseparable one from the other. An inseparability identical to the expression of the effects of modern Egypt's integration into the globalized capitalist/imperialist system of that period. In this reading, the chapter (1955-1967) of Nasserist systematization is nothing but the final chapter of that long series of advancing struggles, which began with the revolution of 1919-1920.

The first moment of that half-century of rising emancipation struggles in Egypt had put its emphasis—with the formation of the *Wafd* in 1919—on political modernization through adoption (in 1923) of a bourgeois form of constitutional democracy (limited monarchy) and on the reconquest of independence. The form of democracy envisaged allowed progressive secularization—if not secularism in the radical sense of that term—whose symbol was the flag linking cross and crescent (a flag that reappeared in the demonstrations of January and February 2011). "Normal" elections then allowed, without the least problem, not merely for Copts to be elected by Muslim majorities but for those very Copts to hold high positions in the State.

The British put their full power, supported actively by the reactionary bloc comprising the monarchy, the great landlords, and the rich peasants, into undoing the democratic progress made by Egypt under Wafdist leadership. In the 1930's the dictatorship of Sedki Pasha, abolishing the democratic 1923 constitution, clashed with the student movement then spearheading the democratic anti-imperialist struggles. It was not by chance that, to counter this threat, the British Embassy and the Royal Palace actively supported the formation in 1927 of the Muslim Brotherhood, inspired by "Islamist" thought in its most backward "Salafist" version

of Wahhabism as formulated by Rachid Reda—the most reactionary version, antidemocratic and against social progress, of the newborn "political Islam."

The conquest of Ethiopia undertaken by Mussolini, with world war looming, forced London to make some concessions to the democratic forces. In 1936 the Wafd, having learned its lesson, was allowed to return to power and a new Anglo-Egyptian treaty was signed. The Second World War necessarily constituted a sort of parenthesis. But a rising tide of struggles resumed already on February 21, 1946 with the formation of the "worker-student bloc," reinforced in its radicalization by the entry on stage of the communists and of the working-class movement. Once again the Egyptian reactionaries, supported by London, responded with violence and to this end mobilized the Muslim Brotherhood behind a second dictatorship by Sedki Pasha—without, however, being able to silence the protest movement. Elections had to be held in 1950 and the Wafd returned to power. Its repudiation of the 1936 Treaty and the inception of guerrilla actions in the Suez Canal Zone were defeated only by setting fire to Cairo (January 1952), an operation in which the Muslim Brotherhood was deeply involved.

A first coup d'état in 1952 by the "Free Officers," and above all a second coup in 1954 by which Nasser took control, was taken by some to "crown" the continual flow of struggles and by others to put it to an end. Rejecting the view of the Egyptian awakening advanced above, Nasserism put forth an ideological discourse that wiped out the whole history of the years from 1919 to 1952 in order to push the start of the "Egyptian Revolution" to July 1952. At that time many among the communists had denounced this discourse and analyzed the coups d'état of 1952 and 1954 as aimed at putting an end to the radicalization of the democratic movement. They were not wrong, since Nasserism only took the shape of an anti-imperialist project after the Bandung Conference of April 1955. Nasserism then contributed all it had to give: a resolutely anti-imperialist international posture (in association with the pan-Arab and pan-African movements) and some progressive (but not "socialist") social reforms. The whole thing done from above, not only "without democracy" (the popular masses being denied any right to organize by and for themselves) but even by "abolishing" any form of political life. This was an invitation to political Islam to fill the vacuum thus created. In only ten short years (1955-1965) the Nasserist project used up its progressive potential. Its exhaustion offered imperialism, henceforward led by the United States, the chance to break the movement by mobilizing to that end its regional military instrument: Israel. The 1967 defeat marked the end of the tide that had flowed for a half-century. Its reflux was initiated by Nasser himself who chose the path of concessions to the Right (the *infitah* or "opening," an opening to capitalist globalization of course) rather than the radicalization called for by, among others, the student movement (which held the stage briefly in 1970, shortly before

and then after the death of Nasser). His successor, Sadat, intensified and extended the rightward turn and integrated the Muslim Brotherhood into his new autocratic system. Mubarak continued along the same path.

The following period of retreat lasted, in its turn, almost another half-century. Egypt, submissive to the demands of globalized liberalism and to U.S. strategy, simply ceased to exist as an active factor in regional or global politics. In its region the major US allies—Saudi Arabia and Israel—occupied the foreground. Israel was then able to pursue the course of expanding its colonization of occupied Palestine with the tacit complicity of Egypt and the Gulf countries.

Under Nasser Egypt had set up an economic and social system that, though subject to criticism, was at least coherent. Nasser wagered on industrialization as the way out of the colonial international specialization which was confining the country in the role of cotton exporter. His system maintained a division of incomes that favored the expanding middle classes without impoverishing the popular masses. Sadat and Mubarak dismantled the Egyptian productive system, putting in its place a completely incoherent system based exclusively on the profitability of firms most of which were mere subcontractors for the imperialist monopolies. Supposed high rates of economic growth, much praised for thirty years by the World Bank, were completely meaningless. Egyptian growth was extremely vulnerable. Moreover, such growth was accompanied by an incredible rise in inequality and by unemployment afflicting the majority of the country's youth. This was an explosive situation. It exploded.

The apparent "stability of the regime," boasted of by successive U.S. officials like Hillary Clinton, was based on a monstrous police apparatus counting 1.200,000 men (the army numbering a mere 500,000) free to carry out daily acts of criminal abuse. The imperialist powers claimed that this regime was "protecting" Egypt from the threat of Islamism. This was nothing but a clumsy lie. In reality the regime had perfectly integrated reactionary political Islam (on the Wahhabite model of the Gulf) into its power structure by giving it control of education, of the courts, and of the major media (especially television). The sole permitted public speech was that of the Salafist mosques, allowing the Islamists, to boot, to pretend to make up "the opposition." The cynical duplicity of the US establishment's speeches (Obama no less than Bush) was perfectly adapted to its aims. The *de facto* support for political Islam destroyed the capacity of Egyptian society to confront the challenges of the modern world (bringing about a catastrophic decline in education and research), while by occasionally denouncing its "abuses" (like assassinations of Copts) Washington could legitimize its military interventions as actions in its self-styled "war against terrorism." The regime could still appear "tolerable" as long as it had the safety valve

provided by mass emigration of poor and middle-class workers to the oil-producing countries. The exhaustion of that system (Asian immigrants replacing those from Arabic countries) brought with it the rebirth of opposition movements. The workers' strikes in 2007 (the strongest strikes on the African continent in the past fifty years), the stubborn resistance of small farmers threatened with expropriation by agrarian capital, and the formation of democratic protest groups among the middle classes (like the "Kefaya" and "April 6" movements) foretold the inevitable explosion—expected by Egyptians but startling to "foreign observers." And thus began a new phase in the tide of emancipation struggles, whose directions and opportunities for development we are now called on to analyze.

The components of the democratic movement

The "Egyptian Revolution" now underway shows that it possible to foresee an end to the neoliberal system, shaken in all its political, economic, and social dimensions. This gigantic movement of the Egyptian people links three active components: youth "repoliticized" by their own will in "modern" forms that they themselves have invented; the forces of the radical left; and the forces of the democratic middle classes.

Youth (about one million activists) spearheaded the movement. They were immediately joined by the radical left and the democratic middle classes. The Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders had called for a boycott of the demonstrations during their first four days (sure, as they were, that the demonstrators would be routed by the repressive apparatus) only accepted the movement belatedly once its appeal, heard by the entire Egyptian people, was producing gigantic mobilizations of 15 million demonstrators.

The youth and the radical left sought in common three objectives: restoration of democracy (ending the police/military regime), the undertaking of a new economic and social policy favorable to the popular masses (breaking with the submission to demands of globalized liberalism), and an independent foreign policy (breaking with the submission to the requirements of U.S. hegemony and the extension of U.S. military control over the whole planet). The democratic revolution for which they call is a democratic social and anti-imperialist revolution.

Although the youth movement is diversified in its social composition and in its political and ideological expressions, it places itself as a whole "on the left." Its strong and spontaneous expressions of sympathy with the radical left testify to that.

The middle classes as a whole rally around only the democratic objective, without necessarily objecting thoroughly to the "market" (such as it is) or to Egypt's international alignment. Not to be neglected is the role of a group of bloggers who take part, consciously or not, in a veritable conspiracy organized by the CIA. Its animators are usually young people from the wealthy classes, extremely "americanized," who nevertheless present themselves as opponents of the established dictatorships. The theme of democracy, in the version required for its manipulation by Washington, is uppermost in their discourse on the "net." That fact makes them active participants in the chain of counterrevolutions, orchestrated by Washington, disguised as "democratic revolutions" on the model of the East European "color revolutions." But it would be wrong to think that this conspiracy is behind the popular revolts. What the CIA is seeking is to reverse the direction of the movement, to distance its activists from their aim of progressive social transformation and to shunt them onto different tracks. The scheme will have a good chance to succeed if the movement fails in bringing together its diverse components, identifying common strategic objectives, and inventing effective forms of organization and action. Examples of such failure are well known—look at Indonesia and the Philippines. It is worthy of note that those bloggers—writing in English rather than Arabic(!)—setting out to defend "American-style democracy," in Egypt often present arguments serving to legitimize the Muslim Brotherhood.

The call for demonstrations enunciated by the three active components of the movement was quickly heeded by the whole Egyptian people. Repression, extremely violent during the first days (more than a thousand deaths), did not discourage those youths and their allies (who at no time, unlike in some other places, called on the Western Powers for any help). Their courage was decisive in drawing 15 million Egyptians from all the districts of big and small cities, and even villages, into demonstrations of protest lasting days (and sometimes nights) on end. Their overwhelming political victory had as its effect that fear switched sides. Obama and Hillary Clinton discovered that they had to dump Mubarak, whom they had hitherto supported, while the army leaders ended their silence and refused to take over the task of repression—thus protecting their image—and wound up deposing Mubarak and several of his more important henchmen.

The generalization of the movement among the whole Egyptian people represents in itself a positive challenge. For this people, like any other, are far from making up a "homogeneous bloc." Some of its major components are without any doubt a source of strength for the perspective of radicalization. The 5-million-strong working class's entry into the battle could be decisive. The combative workers, through numerous strikes, have advanced further in constructing the organizations they began in 2007. There are already more than fifty independent unions. The stubborn resistance of

small farmers against the expropriations permitted by abolition of the agrarian reform laws (the Muslim Brotherhood cast its votes in parliament in favor of that vicious legislation on the pretext that private property was "sacred" to Islam and that the agrarian reform had been inspired by the Devil, a communist!) is another radicalizing factor for the movement. What is more, a vast mass of "the poor" took active part in the demonstrations of February 2011 and often are participating in neighborhood popular committees "in defense of the revolution." The beards, the veils, the dress-styles of these "poor folk" might give the impression that in its depths Egyptian society is "Islamic," even that it is mobilized by the Muslim Brotherhood. In reality, they erupted onto the stage and the leaders of that organization had no choice but to go along. A race is thus underway: who—the Brotherhood and its (Salafist) Islamist associates or the democratic alliance—will succeed in forming effective alliances with the still-confused masses and even to (a term I reject) "get them under discipline"?

Conspicuous progress in constructing the united front of workers and democratic forces is happening in Egypt. In April 2011 five socialist-oriented parties (the Egyptian Socialist Party, the Popular Democratic Alliance—made up of a majority of the membership of the former "loyal-left" Tagammu party, the Democratic Labor Party, the trotskyist Socialist Revolutionary Party, and the Egyptian Communist Party—which had been a component of Tagammu) established an Alliance of Socialist Forces through which they committed themselves to carry out their struggles in common. In parallel, a National Council (*Maglis Watany*) was established by all the active political and social forces of the movement (the socialist-oriented parties, the divers democratic parties, the independent unions, the peasant organizations, the networks of young people, numerous social associations). The Council has about 150 members, the Muslim Brotherhood and the right-wing parties refusing to participate and thus reaffirming their well-known opposition to continuation of the revolutionary movement.

Confronting the democratic movement: the reactionary bloc

Just as in past periods of rising struggle, the democratic social and anti-imperialist movement in Egypt is up against a powerful reactionary bloc. This bloc can perhaps be identified in terms of its social composition (its component classes, of course) but it is just as important to define it in terms of its means of political intervention and the ideological discourse serving its politics.

In social terms, the reactionary bloc is led by the Egyptian bourgeoisie taken as a whole. The forms of dependent accumulation operative over the past forty years

brought about the rise of a rich bourgeoisie, the sole beneficiary of the scandalous inequality accompanying that "globalized liberal" model. They are some tens of thousands—not of "innovating entrepreneurs" as the World Bank likes to call them but of millionaires and billionaires all owing their fortunes to collusion with the political apparatus (corruption being an organic part of their system). This is a comprador bourgeoisie (in the political language current in Egypt the people term them "corrupt parasites"). They make up the active support for Egypt's placement in contemporary imperialist globalization as an unconditional ally of the United States. Within its ranks this bourgeoisie counts numerous military and police generals, "civilians" with connections to the state and to the dominant National Democratic party created by Sadat and Mubarak, and of religious personalities—the whole leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and the leading sheikhs of the Al Azhar University are all of them "billionaires." Certainly there still exists a bourgeoisie of active small-and-medium entrepreneurs. But they are the victims of the racketeering system put in place by the comprador bourgeoisie, usually reduced to the status of subordinate subcontractors for the local monopolists, themselves mere transmission belts for the foreign monopolies. In the construction industry this system is the general rule: the "greats" snap up the state contracts and then subcontract the work to the "smalls." That authentically entrepreneurial bourgeoisie is in sympathy with the democratic movement.

The rural side of the reactionary bloc has no less importance. It is made up of rich peasants who were the main beneficiaries of Nasser's agrarian reform, replacing the former class of wealthy landlords. The agricultural cooperatives set up by the Nasser regime included both rich and poor peasants and so they mainly worked for the benefit of the rich. But the regime also had measures to limit possible abuse of the poor peasants. Once those measures had been abandoned, on the advice of the World Bank, by Sadat and Mubarak, the rural rich went to work to hasten the elimination of the poor peasants. In modern Egypt the rural rich have always constituted a reactionary class, now more so than ever. They are likewise the main sponsors of conservative Islam in the countryside and, through their close (often family) relationships with the officials of the state and religious apparatuses (in Egypt the Al Azhar university has a status equivalent to an organized Muslim Church) they dominate rural social life. What is more, a large part of the urban middle classes (especially the army and police officers but likewise the technocrats and medical/legal professionals) stem directly from the rural rich.

This reactionary bloc has strong political instruments in its service: the military and police forces, the state institutions, the privileged National Democratic political party (a *de facto* single party) that was created by Sadat, the religious apparatus (Al Azhar), and the factions of political Islam (the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists). The

military assistance (amounting to some $1.5 billion annually) extended by the US to the Egyptian Army never went toward the country's defensive capacity. On the contrary. its effect was dangerously destructive through the systematic corruption that, with the greatest cynicism, was not merely known and tolerated but actively promoted. That "aid" allowed the highest ranks to take over for themselves some important parts of the Egyptian comprador economy, to the point that "Army Incorporated" (*Sharika al geish*) became a commonplace term. The High Command, who made themselves responsible for directing the Transition, is thus not at all "neutral" despite its effort to appear so by distancing itself from the acts of repression. The "civilian" government chosen by and obedient to it, made up largely of the less-conspicuous men from the former regime, has taken a series of completely reactionary measures aimed at blocking any radicalization of the movement. Among those measures are a vicious antistrike law (on the pretext of economic revival), and a law placing severe restrictions on the formation of political parties, aimed at confining the electoral game to the tendencies of political Islam (especially the Muslim Brotherhood), which are already well organized thanks to their systematic support by the former regime. Nevertheless, despite all that, the attitude of the army remains, at bottom, unforeseeable. In spite of the corruption of its cadres (the rank and file are conscripts, the officers professionals) nationalist sentiment has still not disappeared entirely. Moreover, the army resents having in practice lost most of its power to the police. In these circumstances, and because the movement has forcefully expressed its will to exclude the army from political leadership of the country, it is very likely that the High Command will seek in the future to remain behind the scenes rather than to present its own candidates in the coming elections.

Though it is clear that the police apparatus has remained intact (their prosecution is not contemplated) like the state apparatus in general (the new rulers all being veteran regime figures), the National Democratic Party vanished in the tempest and its legal dissolution has been ordered. But we can be certain that the Egyptian bourgeoisie will make sure that its party is reborn under a different label or labels.

Political Islam

The Muslim Brotherhood makes up the only political force whose existence was not merely tolerated but actively promoted by the former regime. Sadat and Mubarak turned over to them control over three basic institutions: education, the courts, and television. The Muslim Brotherhood have never been and can never be "moderate," let alone "democratic." Their leader—the *murchid* (Arabic word for "guide"—*Führer*) is self-appointed and its organization is based on the principle of disciplined execution of the leaders' orders without any sort of discussion. Its top leadership is made up entirely of extremely wealthy men (thanks, in part, to financing by Saudi

Arabia—which is to say, by Washington), its secondary leadership of men from the obscurantist layers of the middle classes, its rank-and-file by lower-class people recruited through the charitable services run by the Brotherhood (likewise financed by the Saudis), while its enforcement arm is made up of militias (the *baltaguis*) recruited among the criminal element.

The Muslim Brotherhood are committed to a market-based economic system of complete external dependence. They are in reality a component of the comprador bourgeoisie. They have taken their stand against large strikes by the working class and against the struggles of poor peasants to hold on to their lands. So the Muslim Brotherhood are "moderate" only in the double sense that they refuse to present any sort of economic and social program, thus in fact accepting without question reactionary neoliberal policies, and that they are submissive *de facto* to the enforcement of U.S, control over the region and the world. They thus are useful allies for Washington (and does the U.S. have a better ally than their patron, the Saudis?) which now vouches for their "democratic credentials."

Nevertheless, the United States cannot admit that its strategic aim is to establish "Islamic" regimes in the region. It needs to maintain the pretense that "we are afraid of this." In this way it legitimizes its "permanent war against terrorism" which in reality has quite different objectives: military control over the whole planet in order to guarantee that the US-Europe-Japan triad retains exclusive access to its resources. Another benefit of that duplicity is that it allows it to mobilize the "Islamophobic" aspects of public opinion. Europe, as is well known, has no strategy of its own in the region and is content from day to day to go along with the decisions of Washington. More than ever it is necessary to point out clearly this true duplicity in U.S. strategy, which has quite effectively manipulated its deceived public's opinions. The United States (with Europe going along) fears more than anything a really democratic Egypt that would certainly turn its back to its alignments with economic liberalism and with the aggressive strategy of NATO and the United States. They will do all they can to prevent a democratic Egypt, and to that end will give full support (hypocritically disguised) to the false Muslim Brotherhood alternative which has been shown to be only a minority within the movement of the Egyptian people for real change.

The collusion between the imperialist powers and political Islam is, of course, neither new nor particular to Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood, from its foundation in 1927 up to the present, has always been a useful ally for imperialism and for the local reactionary bloc. It has always been a fierce enemy of the Egyptian democratic movements. And the multibillionaires currently leading the Brotherhood are not destined to go over to the democratic cause! Political Islam throughout the Muslim world is quite assuredly a strategic ally of the United States and its NATO minority

partners. Washington armed and financed the Taliban, who they called “Freedom Fighters,” in their war against the national/popular regime (termed “communist”) in Afghanistan before, during, and after the Soviet intervention. When the Taliban shut the girls’ schools created by the “communists” there were “democrats” and even “feminists” at hand to claim that it was necessary to “respect traditions!”

In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood are now supported by the “traditionalist” Salafist tendency, who also are generously financed by the Gulf States. The Salafists (fanatical Wahhabites, intolerant of any other interpretation of Islam) make no bones about their extremism, and they are behind a systematic murder campaign against Copts. It is scarcely conceivable that such operations could be carried out without the tacit support (and sometimes even greater complicity) of the state apparatus, especially of the courts which had mainly been turned over to the Muslim Brotherhood. This strange division of labor allows the Muslim Brotherhood to appear moderate: which is what Washington pretends to believe. Nevertheless, violent clashes among the Islamist religious groups in Egypt are to be expected. That is on account of the fact that Egyptian Islam has historically mainly been Sufist, the Sufi brotherhoods even now grouping 15 million Egyptian muslims. Sufism represents an open, tolerant, Islam—insisting on the importance of individual beliefs rather than on ritual practices (they say “there are as many paths to God as there are individuals”). The state powers have always been deeply suspicious of Sufism although, using both the carrot and the stick, they have been careful not to declare open war against it. The Wahhabi Islam of the Gulf States is at the opposite pole from Sufism: it is archaic, ritualist, conformist, declared enemy of any interpretation other than repetition of its own chosen texts, enemy of any critical spirit—which is, for it, nothing but the Devil at work. Wahhabite Islam considers itself at war with, and seeks to obliterate, Sufism, counting on support for this from the authorities in power. In response, contemporary Sufis are secularistic, even secular; they call for the separation of religion and politics (the state power and the religious authorities of Al Azhar recognized by it). The Sufis are allies of the democratic movement. The introduction of Wahhabite Islam into Egypt was begun by Rachid Reda in the 1920’s and carried on by the Muslim Brotherhood after 1927. But it only gained real vigor after the Second World War, when the oil rents of the Gulf States, supported by the United States as allies in its conflict with the wave of popular national liberation struggles in the ’60s, allowed a multiplication of their financial wherewithal.

U.S. Strategy: The Pakistan model

The three powers that dominated the Middle East stage during the period of ebb tide (1967-2011) were the United States, boss of the system, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Three very close allies, all sharing the same dread that a democratic Egypt would

emerge. Such an Egypt could only be anti-imperialist and welfarist. It would depart from globalized liberalism, would render insignificant the Gulf States and the Saudis, would reawaken popular Arab solidarity and force Israel to recognize a Palestinian state.

Egypt is a cornerstone in the U.S. strategy for worldwide control. The single aim of Washington and its allies Israel and Saudi Arabia is to abort the Egyptian democratic movement, and to that end they want to impose an "Islamic regime" under the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood—the only way for them to perpetuate the submission of Egypt. The "democratic speeches" of Obama are there only to deceive a naïve public opinion, primarily that of the United States and Europe.

There is much talk of the Turkish example in order to legitimize a government by the Muslim Brotherhood ("converted to democracy!"). But that is just a smokescreen. For the Turkish Army is always there behind the scene, and though scarcely democratic and certainly a faithful ally of NATO it remains the guarantor of "secularism" in Turkey. Washington's project, openly expressed by Hillary Clinton, Obama, and the think tanks at their service, is inspired by the Pakistan model: an "Islamic" army behind the scene, a "civilian" government run by one or more "elected" Islamic parties. Plainly, under that hypothesis, the "Islamic" Egyptian government would be recompensed for its submission on the essential points (perpetuation of economic liberalism and of the self-styled "peace treaties" permitting Israel to get on with its policy of territorial expansion) and enabled, as demagogic compensation, to pursue its projects of "Islamization of the state and of politics" and of assassinating Copts! Such a beautiful democracy has Washington designed for Egypt! Obviously, Saudi Arabia supports the accomplishment of that project with all its (financial) resources. Riyadh knows perfectly well that its regional hegemony (in the Arab and Muslim worlds) requires that Egypt be reduced to insignificance. Which is to be done through "Islamization of the state and of politics"; in reality, a Wahhabite Islamization with all its effects, including anti-Copt pogroms and the denial of equal rights to women.

Is such a form of Islamization possible? Perhaps, but at the price of extreme violence. The battlefield is Article 2 of the overthrown regime's constitution. This article stipulating that "sharia is the origin of law" was a novelty in the political history of Egypt. Neither the 1923 constitution nor that of Nasser contained anything of the sort. It was Sadat who put it into his new constitution with the triple support of Washington ("traditions are to be respected"!), of Riyadh ("the Koran is all the constitution needed"), and of Tel Aviv ("Israel is a Jewish State").

The project of the Muslim Brotherhood remains the establishment of a theocratic state, as is shown by its attachment to Article 2 of the Sadat/Mubarak Constitution. What is more, the organization's most recent program further reinforces that medievalistical outlook by proposing to set up a "Council of Ulemas" empowered to assure that any proposed legislation be in conformity with the requirements of sharia. Such a Religious Constitutional Council would be analogous to the one that, in Iran, is supreme over the "elected" government. It is the regime of a religious single superparty, all parties standing for secularism becoming "illegal." Their members, like non-Muslims (Copts), would thus be excluded from political life. Despite all that, the authorities in Washington and Europe talk as though the recent opportunist and disingenuous declaration by the Brotherhood that it was giving up its theocratic project (its program staying unchanged) should be taken seriously. Are the CIA experts, then, unable to read Arabic? The conclusion is inescapable: Washington would see the Brotherhood in power, guaranteeing that Egypt remain in its grip and that of liberal globalization, rather than that power be held by democrats who would be very likely to challenge the subaltern status of Egypt. The recently created Party of Freedom and Justice, explicitly on the Turkish model, is nothing but an instrument of the Brotherhood. It offers to admit Copts (!) which signifies that they have to accept the theocratic Muslim state enshrined in the Brotherhood's program if they want the right to "participate" in their country's political life. Going on the offensive, the Brotherhood is setting up "unions" and "peasant organizations" and a rigamarole of diversely named "political parties," whose sole objective is foment division in the now-forming united fronts of workers. peasants. and democrats—to the advantage, of course, of the counterrevolutionary bloc.

Will the Egyptian democratic movement be able to strike that Article from the forthcoming new constitution? The question can be answered only through going back to an examination of the political, ideological, and cultural debates that have unfolded during the history of modern Egypt.

In fact, we can see that the periods of rising tide were characterized by a diversity of openly expressed opinions, leaving religion (always present in society) in the background. It was that way during the first two-thirds of the 19th century (from Mohamed Ali to Khedive Ismail). Modernization themes (in the form of enlightened despotism rather than democracy) held the stage. It was the same from 1920 through 1970: open confrontation of views among "bourgeois democrats" and "communists" staying in the foreground until the rise of Nasserism. Nasser shut down the debate, replacing it with a populist pan-Arab, though also "modernizing", discourse. The contradictions of this system opened the way for a return of political Islam. It is to be recognized, contrariwise, that in the ebb-tide phases such diversity of opinion vanished, leaving the space free for medievalism, presented as Islamic thought, that

arrogates to itself a monopoly over government-authorized speech. From 1880 to 1920 the British built that diversion channel in various ways, notably by exiling (mainly to Nubia) all modernist Egyptian thinkers and actors who had been educated since the time of Mohamed Ali. But it is also to be noted that the "opposition" to British occupation also placed itself within that medievalistical consensus. The *Nadha* (begun by Afghani and continued by Mohamed Abdou) was part of that deviation, linked to the Ottomanist delusion advocated by the new Nationalist Party of Moustapha Kamil and Mohammad Farid. There should be no surprise that toward the end of that epoch this deviation led to the ultra-reactionary writings of Rachid Reda, which were then taken up by Hassan el Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.

It was the same again in the ebb-tide years 1970-2010. The official discourse (of Sadat and Mubarak), perfectly Islamist (as proven by their insertion of sharia into the constitution and their yielding essential powers to the Muslim Brotherhood), was equally that of the false opposition, alone tolerated, which was sermonizing in the Mosque. Because of this that Article 2 might seem solidly anchored in "general opinion" (the "street" as American pundits like to call it). The devastating effects of the depolarization systematically enforced during the ebb-tide periods is not to be underestimated. The slope can never easily be reascended. But it is not impossible. The current debates in Egypt are centered, explicitly or implicitly, on the supposed "cultural" (actually, Islamic) dimensions of this challenge. And there are signposts pointing in a positive direction: the movement making free debate unavoidable—only a few weeks sufficed for the Brotherhood's slogan "Islam is the Solution" to disappear from all the demonstrations, leaving only specific demands about concretely transforming society (freedom to express opinions and to form unions, political parties, and other social organizations; improved wages and workplace rights; access to landownership, to schools, to health services; rejection of privatizations and calls for nationalizations, etc.). A signal that does not mislead: in April elections to the student organization, where five years ago (when its discourse was the only permitted form of supposed opposition) the Brotherhood's candidates had obtained a crushing 80% majority, their share of the vote fell to 20%! Yet the other side likewise sees ways to parry the "democracy danger." Insignificant changes to the Mubarak constitution (continuing in force), proposed by a committee made up exclusively of Islamists chosen by the army high command and approved in a hurried April referendum (an official 23% negative vote but a big affirmative vote imposed through electoral fraud and heavy blackmail by the mosques) obviously left Article 2 in place. Presidential and Legislative elections under that constitution are scheduled for September/October 2011. The democratic movement contends for a longer "democratic transition," which would allow its discourse actually to reach those big layers of the muslim lower classes still at a loss to understand the events. But as soon

as the uprising began Obama made his choice: a short, orderly (that is to say without any threat to the governing apparatus) transition, and elections that would result in victory for the Islamists. As is well known, “elections” in Egypt, as elsewhere in the world, are not the best way to establish democracy but often are the best way to set a limit to democratic progress.

Finally. some words about “corruption.” Most speech from the “transition regime” concentrates on denouncing it and threatening prosecution (Mubarak, his wife, and some others arrested, but what will actually happen remaining to be seen). This discourse is certainly well received, especially by the major part of naïve public opinion. But they take care not to analyze its deeper causes and to teach that “corruption” (presented in the moralizing style of American speech as individual immorality) is an organic and necessary component in the formation of the bourgeoisie. And not merely in the case of Egypt and of the Southern countries in general, where if a comprador bourgeoisie is to be formed the sole way for that to take place is in association with the state apparatus. I maintain that at the stage of generalized monopoly capitalism corruption has become a basic organic component in the reproduction of its accumulation model: rent-seeking monopolies require the active complicity of the State. Its ideological discourse (the “liberal virus”) proclaims “state hands off the economy” while its practice is “state in service to the monopolies.”

The storm zone

Mao was not wrong when he affirmed that really existing (which is to say, naturally imperialist) capitalism had nothing to offer to the peoples of the three continents (the periphery made up of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—a “minority” counting 85% of world population!) and that the South was a “storm zone,” a zone of repeated revolts potentially (but only potentially) pregnant with revolutionary advances toward socialist transcendence of capitalism.

The “Arab spring” is enlisted in that reality. The case is one of social revolts potentially pregnant with concrete alternatives that in the long run can register within a socialist perspective. Which is why the capitalist system, monopoly capital dominant at the world level, cannot tolerate the development of these movements. It will mobilize all possible means of destabilization, from economic and financial pressures up to military threats. It will support, according to circumstances, either fascist and fascistic false alternatives or the imposition of military dictatorships. Not a word from Obama’s mouth is to be believed. Obama is Bush with a different style of speech. Duplicity is built into the speech of all the leaders of the imperialist triad (United States, Western Europe, Japan).

I do not intend in this article to examine in as much detail each of the ongoing movements in the Arab world (Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, et.al.) The components of the movement differ from one country to the other, just like the forms of their integration into imperialist globalization and the structures of their established regimes.

The Tunisian revolt sounded the starting gun, and surely it strongly encouraged the Egyptians. Moreover, the Tunisian movement has one definite advantage: the semi-secularism introduced by Bourguiba can certainly not be called into question by Islamists returning from their exile in England. But at the same time the Tunisian movement seems unable to challenge the extraverted development model inherent in liberal capitalist globalization.

Libya is neither Tunisia nor Egypt. The ruling group (Khaddafi) and the forces fighting it are in no way analogous to their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts. Khaddafi has never been anything but a buffoon, the emptiness of whose thought was reflected in his notorious "Green Book." Operating in a still-archaic society Khaddafi could indulge himself in successive "nationalist and socialist" speeches with little bearing on reality, and the next day proclaim himself a "liberal." He did so to "please the West!" as though the choice for liberalism would have no social effects. But it had and, as is commonplace, it worsened living conditions for the majority of Libyans. Those conditions then gave rise to the well-known explosion, of which the country's regionalists and political Islamists took immediate advantage. For Libya has never truly existed as a nation. It is a geographical region separating the Arab West from the Arab East (the *Maghreb* from the *Mashreq*). The boundary between the two goes right through the middle of Libya. Cyrenaica was historically Greek and Hellenistic, then it became Mashreqian. Tripolitania, for its part, was Roman and became Maghrebian. Because of this, regionalism has always been strong in the country. Nobody knows who the members of the National Transition Council in Benghazi really are. There may be democrats among them, but there are certainly Islamists, some among the worst of the breed, as well as regionalists. From its outset "the movement" took in Libya the form of an armed revolt fighting the army rather than a wave of civilian demonstrations. And right away that armed revolt called NATO to its aid. Thus a chance for military intervention was offered to the imperialist powers. Their aim is surely neither "protecting civilians" nor "democracy" but control over oilfields and acquisition of a major military base in the country. Of course, ever since Khaddafi embraced liberalism the Western oil companies had control over Libyan oil. But with Khaddafi nobody could be sure of anything. Suppose he were to switch sides tomorrow and start to play ball with the Indians and the Chinese? But there is something else more important. In 1969 Khaddafi had demanded that the British and Americans leave the bases they had kept in the

country since World War II. Currently the United States needs to find a place in Africa for its Africom (the US military command for Africa, an important part of its alignment for military control over the world but which still has to be based in Stuttgart!). The African Union refusing to accept it, until now no African country has dared to do so. A lackey emplaced at Tripoli (or Benghazi) would surely comply with all the demands of Washington and its NATO lieutenants.

The components of the Syrian revolt have yet to make their programs known. Undoubtedly, the rightward drift of the Baathist regime, gone over to neoliberalism and singularly passive with regard to the Israeli occupation of the Golan, is behind the popular explosion. But CIA intervention cannot be excluded: there is talk of groups penetrating into Diraa across the neighboring Jordanian frontier. The mobilization of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been behind earlier revolts in Hama and Homs, is perhaps part of Washington's scheme seeking an eventual end to the Syria/Iran alliance that gives essential support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

In Yemen the country was united through the defeat of progressive forces that had governed independent South Yemen. Will the movement mark a return to life of those forces? That uncertainty explains the hesitant stance of Washington and the Gulf States.

In Bahrein the revolt was crushed at birth by massacres and intervention by the Saudi army, without the dominant media (including Al Jazeera) having much to say about it. As always, the double standard.

The "Arab revolt," though its most recent expression, is not the only example showing the inherent instability of the "storm zone."

A first wave of revolutions, if that is what they are to be called, had swept away some dictatorships in Asia (the Philippines, Indonesia) and Africa (Mali) which had been installed by imperialism and the local reactionary blocs. But there the United States and Europe succeeded in aborting the potential of those popular movements, which had sometimes aroused gigantic mobilizations. The United States and Europe seek in the Arab world a repetition of what happened in Mali, Indonesia, and the Philippines: "to change everything in order that nothing changes!" There, after the popular movements had gotten rid of their dictators, the imperialist powers undertook to preserve their essential interests by setting up governments aligned with their foreign-policy interests and with neoliberalism. It is noteworthy that in the Muslim countries (Mali, Indonesia) they mobilized political Islam to that end.

In contrast, the wave of emancipation movements that swept over South America allowed real advances in three directions: democratization of state and society; adoption of consistent anti-imperialist positions; and entry onto the path of progressive social reform

The prevailing media discourse compares the “democratic revolts” of the third world to those that put an end to East-European “socialism” following the fall of the “Berlin Wall.” This is nothing but a fraud, pure and simple. Whatever the reasons (and they were understandable) for those revolts, they signed on to the perspective of an annexation of the region by the imperialist powers of Western Europe (primarily to the profit of Germany). In fact, reduced thenceforward to a status as one of developed capitalist Europe’s peripheries, the countries of Eastern Europe are still on the eve of experiencing their own authentic revolts. There are already signs foretelling this, especially in the former Yugoslavia.

Revolts, potentially pregnant with revolutionary advances, are foreseeable nearly everywhere on those three continents which more than ever remain the storm zone, by that fact refuting all the cloying discourse on “eternal capitalism” and the stability, the peace, the democratic progress attributed to it. But those revolts, to become revolutionary advances, will have to overcome many obstacles: on the one hand they will have to overcome the weaknesses of the movement, arrive at positive convergence of its components, formulate and implement effective strategies; on the other they will have to turn back the interventions (including military interventions) of the imperialist triad. Any military intervention of the United States and NATO in the affairs of the Southern countries must be prohibited no matter its pretext, even seemingly benign “humanitarian” intervention. Imperialism seeks to permit neither democracy nor social progress to those countries. Once it has won the battle, the lackeys whom it sets up to rule will still be enemies of democracy. One can only regret profoundly that the European “left,” even when its claims to be radical, has lost all understanding of what imperialism really is.

The discourse currently prevailing calls for the implementation of “international law” authorizing, in principle, intervention whenever the fundamental rights of a people are being trampled. But the necessary conditions allowing for movement in that direction are just not there. The “international community” does not exist. It amounts to the U.S. embassy, followed automatically by those of Europe. No need to enumerate the long list of such worse-that-unfortunate interventions (Iraq, for example) with criminal outcomes. Nor to cite the “double standard” common to them all (obviously one thinks of the trampled rights of the Palestinians and the unconditional support of Israel, of the innumerable dictatorships still being supported in Africa).

Springtime for the people of the South and autumn for capitalism

The “springtime” of the Arab peoples, like that which the peoples of Latin America are experiencing for two decades now and which I refer to as the second wave of awakening of the Southern peoples—the first having unfolded in the 20th century until the counteroffensive unleashed by neoliberal capitalism/imperialism—takes on various forms, running from explosions aimed against precisely those autocracies participating in the neoliberal ranks to challenges by “emerging countries” to the international order. These springtimes thus coincide with the “autumn of capitalism,” the decline of the capitalism of globalized, financialized, generalized, monopolies. These movements begin, like those of the preceding century, with peoples and states of the system’s periphery regaining their independence, retaking the initiative in transforming the world. They are thus above all anti-imperialist movements and so are only potentially anti-capitalist. Should these movements succeed in converging with the other necessary reawakening, that of the workers in the imperialist core, a truly socialist perspective could be opened for the whole human race. But that is in no way a predestined “historical necessity.” The decline of capitalism might open the way for a long transition toward socialism, but it might equally well put humanity on the road to generalized barbarism. The ongoing U.S. project of military control over the planet by its armed forces, supported by their NATO lieutenants, the erosion of democracy in the imperialist core countries, and the medievalistical rejection of democracy within Southern countries in revolt (taking the form of “fundamentalist” semi-religious delusions disseminated by political Islam, political Hinduism, political Buddhism) all work together toward that dreadful outcome. At the current time the struggle for secularist democratization is crucial for the perspective of popular emancipation, crucial for opposition to the perspective of generalized barbarism.