historical materialism

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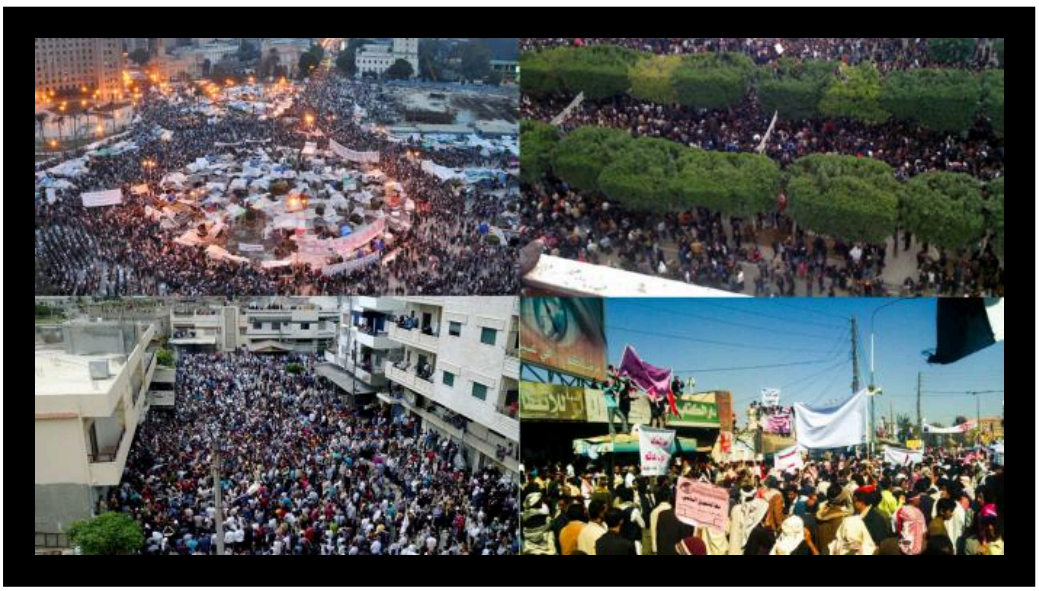
NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY FOR ARAB COUNTRIES: A UTOPIA?



BY HELA YOUSFI

The two main demands of the Arab revolutions chanted from Tunis to Damascus via Bahrain – "The people want the fall of the regime" and "work, freedom, national dignity" – remain, nine years later, unfulfilled. On the ground, people are still struggling to find political, economic and social solutions to these problems, and several endogenous as well as regional explanations have been summoned to explain these difficulties.

The fact that these slogans make the state *both* the target of challenges*and* the provider of solutions, as employer and as guarantor of national sovereignty, further complicates the intelligibility of current dynamics.[1]

One can neither deny nor resolve this paradox. Yet, it has unfortunately produced a number of simplistic theses: one interpretation reduces the revolutionary process to issues of political and economic liberalisation, whilst another one focuses on the role of the state in the management of economic and social problems.

But these theses do not withstand a closer observation of the facts and raise two fundamental questions: what does the return of 'national sovereignty' mean for the political agenda of Arab countries? In a region suffering from wars and neo-liberal reforms, can the state (and what kind of state) still be a relevant subject of analysis? Above all: does the state have the political, economic and symbolic resources to respond to the emancipatory claims of the peoples of the region?

The Arab revolutions of 2011 have revealed that the national economies of the region suffer from the same dysfunctions, namely a dependency on a few economic sectors, unemployment rates that remain among the highest in the world, annuity management of natural resources, and high levels of corruption led and organised by the ruling clan oligarchies. The revolutions have also brought to the forefront a largely underestimated phenomenon, namely, the encounter between neoliberal logics and authoritarian and clientelist networks of power – a hallmark of all post-colonial states in the region.2

For a better understanding of the challenges facing Arab regimes, a twofold perspective can be adopted. On the one hand, the history of state formation in the region cannot be understood without tracing the impact of colonial histories on the movements of people across and within national borders. On the other hand, it is crucial to highlight the impact of the systematic external weakening of states caused by both wars and/or the various structural reforms imposed by international organisations and how these have transformed the political economy of the region. These processes need to be considered simultaneously if a full picture of the changes in the structures of Arab regimes are to be grasped.

In what follows, I will argue that even though the state cannot be the instrument of emancipatory social change, the history of struggles over the state nonetheless influences the balance of power between social classes and shapes the conditions for political action and social transformation in the region.

What does the Arab state stand for?

The state is a concept of European origin born between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries that accompanied the development of capitalism

and the emergence of the bourgeoisie and landholding classes. Whether it corresponds, from a Weberian point of view, to the establishment of an administrative bureaucracy centralising power and monopolising legitimate physical and symbolic violence, or it is treated within the Marxist framework as a social relation formed alongside the development of class rule, these approaches are deeply rooted in a specific European history. Polanyi has eloquently argued that the development of modern market economies was inextricably linked to the development of the modern state in Europe, since the state was needed to enforce changes in social structure and knowledge production that allowed for a competitive capitalist economy.3Even though in Europe the trajectories of state formation have been contradictory processes, rife with conflicts, diversions and tensions, the institutional construction of these highly integrated nation-states by the late-nineteenth century was carried out in an endogenous way and in accordance with a specific political culture and social hierarchies. However, this is not necessarily the case in the Arab states that emerged out of colonial partitioning.

Imposed by the Sykes-Picot agreements of 16th May, 1916, and even more so by the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, national borders in Arab countries correspond less to the emancipatory aspirations of the peoples than to the distribution of influence and natural resources between European colonial powers in the region. This has resulted in heterogeneous and ambiguous state trajectories: integrated states such as Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria; populations without states but seeking to build one (Palestinians, Kurds, and Saharawis of the Polisario Front); or dismantled states such as Lebanon since the start of the civil war in 1975. We can also cite the case of Libya after Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, then in power, launched the Islamic Cultural Revolution on the 16th April 1973 and reorganised his country's institutions in 1977. In doing so, he subjugated the popular revolution to an authoritarian regime in which political, economic, military and diplomatic decisions completely bypassed the political institutions representing the "people". A similar process also took place in Northern Yemen.

Two economic structures have been superimposed on the post-independence Arab States: firstly, the capitalist-type structure, which prevails in the industrial sector after having been introduced by the colonial powers, before being transferred to the new ruling elite; and secondly, a structure characterised by relations of production that classically prevail in the world of the peasantry or handicrafts, regulated by community membership, and located outside the official economy. Thus, capitalist employer-employee relations based on salaried work became intertwined with pre-capitalist social relations organised by local communities. Bureaucratic elites became enmeshed with local, regional

and tribal forms of solidarity that had a considerable influence on the development of rentier practices as well as on the emergence of the informal economy.[4]

These states also inherited the military-bureaucratic model of governance from their respective colonial administrations, maintained by local elites through mimicry in order to establish their dominance over rich regions and to deal with alternative tribal, religious and/or ethnic identities (the Berbers in Morocco, the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the Shiites in Bahrain, etc.). Indeed, these identities were regularly mobilised to challenge the state and question its legitimacy in the absence of a unifying historical narrative.

From this history emerge "fierce" states – to borrow the expression of the political scientist Nazih Ayubi[5] – characterised by the importance of security institutions in the maintaining of strong links between the army, the economically dominant clans and political power, and by a relative separation between local social and economic forces. These states suffer from a distortion inherent to their creation, namely the lack of a founding narrative historically legitimising their connection to society. The regular and instrumental recourse to ideologies such as Arab nationalism or political Islamism bear witness to these difficulties.

This history led to different approaches to state formation in Arab countries. One such perspective treats the state as a disconnected, all-dominating, imported body, an output of the imperialist expansion of the West and/or processes of globalisation. This perspective explores the history of state formation through contingent factors such as culture, religion, or leadership styles[6]. In contrast, within the Marxist framework, the analysis of state formation is based on the specific nature of capitalist accumulation in these societies. In what follows, I will show in echo to Nicos Poulantzas' work, that the state is not simply a "tool" in the hands of the ruling classes[7]. It is a field of conflict, where the strategies of the ruling bloc and its international allies are organised, recomposed, and worked out. The state in the Arab region should no longer be viewed as a monolithic block or a foreign import, but through the diversity of its administrative, legal, cultural, educational, police, and ideological apparatuses as well as through the diversity of processes of resistance process and struggles against these apparatuses.

"Rentier" and "Fierce" States as Key Players in Liberal Reforms

To stay in power, local elites have pursued economic policies based on a rentier logic. These policies are not limited to oil-producing countries. Most states have thus favoured increased consumption at the expense of developmental policies that are necessary for the diversification of the

economy, but entail the risk of creating competitors to the ruling elite. This explains the very low diversification of the Arab economy, which remains highly concentrated in three or four sectors, often associated with the primary sector or manufacturing with low added value. This state of affairs further encourages the development of the informal economy. By way of illustration, Algeria, whose external revenues continue today to depend mainly on hydrocarbons, has even experienced a decline in its manufacturing sector, while agriculture suffered from inconsistent policies that failed to develop its full potential. The recent fall in hydrocarbon prices has caused a budget deficit of 6% of Algeria's GDP in 2020.8

During the 1950s and 1960s, urged by a political elite with Arab nationalist or Soviet allegiances, most post-independence states adopted voluntarist policies directed at developing welfare states and developing public services. The latter became the main employer, thus enabling the ruling elites to maintain a certain "social peace" with the local populations.

The first waves of liberalisation in the 1970s, which became more pronounced towards the end of the 1980s and 1990s with the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), broadly weakened the Arab economies. They undermined many of the achievements of the previous economic model, driving living standards down and poverty levels up, and led to several social movements (for example, Egypt in January 1977, Tunisia in January 1972 and January 1984) challenging the existing authoritarian systems. Moreover, the states of the region have all since signed – bilaterally and without cooperating with each other – free trade agreements (FTAs) with the European Union (EU), which were not in their favour.

The motivation of the Arab governing elites was mainly the search for international political legitimacy, at the risk of economic suffering for their populations and more uneven regional development.9 All this points to the fact that the reforms engineered by international institutions have been used not only to do away with the last remnants of the welfare state in favour of the market, but also to strengthen state elites' intervention on the side of capital.

The consequences soon came to light: social and territorial inequalities widened, the unemployment rate increased, the quality of public services deteriorated, and public employment was limited, thus breaking the social contract that allied authoritarian powers to relatively politically submissive but relatively economically protected populations.10

"National sovereignty" challenged by "free elections, free market and free identities"

The Arab revolutions, calling for "the fall of the regime", not only caused an implosion of this weakened internal social contract between the elites and local population;11 they also broke the neo-colonial pact between the Arab states and their Western allies. The call for statehood by the various social movements has been embodied differently depending on the country: the claim of a secular state in Lebanon, the demand for the unification of the national liberation movement in the Palestinian case, or the demand for public service employment in Tunisia. Thus, on 17th January 2019, the slogan "national sovereignty before wage increases" was adopted by the Tunisian General Labour Union during the general strike in the public service, expressing a radical opposition to the reforms imposed by the IMF. Regardless of these local differences, the objective is clear: overcoming the foreign political and economic dependency maintained by the local political and economic elites.

The aspiration is basically the same everywhere: the reconstruction of a state free of distortions which, while breaking with the authoritarian and clientelist legacy, must be able to redistribute wealth and guarantee political and economic emancipation to the peoples of the region. National Sovereignty is understood, and demanded, as the twin principle that 1) states should be free from external influence and (mainly) western domination, and 2) states should guarantee public services. Rather than a manifestation of state power, these public services are seen as limiting the ruling elite's power. Far from being a favour that the state would do to the people, like in the formula of the "welfare state", these public services are owed by the state and its governors, to the governed.

Yet the only path offered by international institutions is the twinning of "democracy promotion" with neo-liberal economic dictates. Although this is not a new recipe, it echoes the rhetoric adopted by the American President George W. Bush in his speech of the 11th September 2002 (commemorating the attacks of the 11th September 2001 and legitimising the war in Iraq): "We seek peace exactly where repression, resentment and poverty are replaced by the hope for democracy, free market and free trade". Such rhetoric is essentially aimed at exploiting the apparent support for "democracy" to further economic liberalisation such as austerity measures, public private partnerships imposed by the IMF and the WB, or negotiations to extend the EU's free trade policy with Arab countries.12 This does not, of course, exclude the West's continuous support for authoritarian regimes, particularly in Egypt.

The challenge of decentralisation

At the heart of this new neo-liberal offensive, governance decentralisation is taking relatively violent forms, depending on the country. For example, it is radical and imposed by war in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, a political and territorial reconfiguration of space inspired by the Lebanese model has been undertaken, under the principle of *al muhâsasa* – the sharing system of ethno-sectarian quotas.13 In Tunisia, if decentralisation is associated with a rhetoric of combating social inequalities, it is mainly aimed at establishing a direct competition between local communities/authorities for the distribution of resources.14 In both cases, decentralisation is a strategy that raises the possibility of eventual state fragmentation alongside economic liberalisation.

Reactivating the resurgence of ethno-religious identities, state disintegration is accompanied by an unprecedented attack on the very idea of national sovereignty, increasingly vilified as the remnant of a bygone past. At the same time, social struggles waged by the Arab revolutions contesting the hegemony of the ruling class are increasingly challenged by the emergence of new social movements, some of which mobilise individuals less on the question of wealth redistribution or class antagonism than on that of individual freedoms on ethnic, religious or sexual grounds. For instance, Tunisia has witnessed a massive influx of international NGOs, most of them based in the US or in Europe which intervene directly or indirectly by supporting specific struggles such as feminism, anti-racism, multi-culturalism and LGBTQ rights through their financing of the local associative sector. These new international NGOs are competing for political influence not only with the social movements focused on social and economic rights but also with elected bodies such as the Assembly of the People's Representatives.15

These neo-liberal reforms and the focus on identity politics fits well with approaches that have already been adopted by Western countries (what Nancy Fraser calls "progressive neoliberalism),16and have been imposed on the Arab countries by international institutions and the major Western powers with unwavering determination.17 The purpose? To Neutralise the political character of collective identities and collective struggles and bring about the reign of market logics by making the Arab space a free market for goods as well as for identities, while diverting attention away from antagonistic class relations.

The large conglomerates closely linked to the state apparatus and to the ruling families of the Gulf, as much inserted in the circuits of the international economy as disconnected from their populations, are a good illustration of the project advocated for the entire region. As

demonstrated by Adam Hanieh,18 the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain) are important logistics hubs and sites of intermediate supply chains, that have special linkages with global powers including the US, Israel, China and other Arab states.

While this offensive has slowed the reconstruction and liberation process in the Arab world, it does not seem to have halted it. While history shows that these various neo-liberal reforms have needed either violence or the complicity of the state elites in order to penetrate societies, it also proves that the solution to the current crisis must first come from a complete overhaul of the state based on the reaffirmation of national sovereignty. Thus, it becomes urgent for those interested in advancing political and economic emancipatory agendas in the region to envisage the state as "a strategic field", to identify and dig into the cracks which appear across its apparatuses, to reverse the balance of power wherever possible in order to initiate and sustain a radical transformation of the state in a socialist sense.

Far from the reductive opposition that prevails in the West between reactionary nationalism on the one hand and postmodern globalisation on the other, national sovereignty as claimed by the Arab revolutions revives the self-determination and national liberation movements that prevailed in left-wing circles at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Without it being opposed to the struggle against racism and discrimination, the establishment of a new political and economic emancipatory regime and, more generally, the realisation of people's aspirations for social justice, require redefining the national state and rid it of the neo-colonial pact between local elites and their Western counterparts.

Such an undertaking faces a twofold challenge. First, it cannot be solely reduced to the resolution of political and socio-economic issues, but it should be grounded in a socio-cultural approach that not only sees the state as a historical social relationship, but integrates local expectations of what a 'good government' should be, based on a deep understanding of the political and ideological frameworks of the region's social classes. On this depends the legitimacy of the institutions and their adoption by the populations. Second, nation-states in the Arab region must be thought of as interdependent political and economic entities that share – beyond a collective history, culture and language – not only a specific set of economic and political relationships but most importantly a community of common destiny.

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Image:

The original uploader was HonorTheKing atEnglish Wikipedia. – (Original text :*en.wikipedia;*Top left: File:Tahrir Square – February 9, 2011.png Top right:File:Tunisia Unrest – VOA – Tunis 14 Jan 2011 (2).jpg Bottom left:File:(Banyas demonstration) مظاهرات بانياس جمعة الغضب – 29 نيسان 2011.jpg Bottom right:File:Yemen_protest.jpg) CC BY-SA 3.0 File:Infobox collage for MENA protests.PNG Created: 12 April 2011

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