

Call for Solidarity with Uprisings in the Middle East & North Africa

December 16, 2019



This is a critical moment in the Middle East and North Africa. In 2019, uprisings have emerged in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran. All have opposed authoritarianism, neoliberalism, poverty, corruption, religious fundamentalism and sectarianism. Women have been active participants and often in the forefront. The participants are mostly working-class and unemployed youth. They are not content with the ouster of individual ruling figures but want to change the socioeconomic and political system. For all these reasons, the revolts could mark the beginning of a new progressive and revolutionary chapter for the region as a whole.

Authoritarian rulers and systems however, will not be easily pushed back. In Sudan, the army has struck a deal with the opposition coalition for now. Some success has been achieved as Sudanese transitional authorities recently approved a law to dissolve the former ruling party and repealed a public order law used to regulate women's behavior. In Algeria, the army continues to hold on to power despite ongoing mass protests. In Lebanon, despite prime minister Hariri's resignation, the sectarian and neoliberal political parties still oppose any radical change demanded by large sectors of the protest movement. In Iraq, popular protests in Baghdad and the Shi'a south are being brutally attacked by the Iranian-backed Iraqi government with support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian sponsored Shi'a militia, Hashd al-Sha'bi. Lately, small but increasing expressions of support for the uprising have emerged in majority Sunni and Kurdish areas.

Iranian forces have brutally suppressed the nationwide popular protests that broke out in Iran on November 15 in opposition to a rise in the price of petroleum. According to Amnesty International, at least 208 people were killed by government forces. The *New York Times* reports of up to 450 or more killed in four days of intense protest, with up to 100 killed by the IRGC forces in the city of Mahshahr in one protest alone. Another unconfirmed report from Iranian activists provides a list of 928 people who have been killed. According to the United Nations, at least 7,000 people have been arrested.

In the face of this reality, how can progressives around the world help the recent popular uprisings reach their potential and not be crushed?

First, we cannot have any illusions about the U.S. government or any other international powers or any regional powers coming to their aid. Imperialist powers prevent radical change from below and seek forms of authoritarian stability.

Secondly, progressives have a special responsibility to publicize the cases of those killed and arrested in these uprisings as well as other political prisoners who have been languishing in prisons around the MENA region. In Iran in particular, activists fear that the government would impose another internet blockage and commit mass executions of political prisoners soon. They warn of a scenario similar to 1988 when several thousand political prisoners were executed in a few days and buried in mass graves under an order by Ayatollah Khomeini. Bashar al-Assad's mass executions of political prisoners in Syria is a more recent carnage that has been taking place under Iranian and Russian government backing.

Thirdly, we have a responsibility to give voice to the struggles/demands of feminists, labor activists, progressive and democratic intellectuals, and oppressed minority groups such as the Kurds in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, the Black population of Darfur in Sudan, the Bahais of Iran, and the LGBTQ community in the region.

Publicizing the cases of those who have risen up to take the MENA region out of the hands of authoritarian, religious fundamentalist, exploitative misogynist systems is not only about helping the suffering people in that region. It is a way of participating in an effort to shift the current direction of our world away from hate and toward international humanist solidarity.

Indeed, the current global wave of protests not seen since the 1960s reveals that the global population could be open to a new anti-capitalist direction that is also humanist and affirmative.

At the same time, in the face of these developments, authoritarian rulers and systems are trying to find new ways to strengthen themselves. The Iranian government counts on a recent agreement made with China which offers Iran a \$400 billion investment in oil, gas and other infrastructure development, and 5,000 Chinese security forces to protect Chinese investments in exchange for Iranian oil, gas and petrochemicals at a 30% discount. This agreement which involves additional Chinese investments every five years, commits both parties for 25 years and offers ways to circumvent the U.S. sanctions.

Other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Israel are also turning to China and Russia for arms, investments and strategic partnerships.

Given these realities, will the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa succeed in moving the region in a progressive and revolutionary direction, or will authoritarian regimes simply change face, survive and engage in endless wars?

Which scenario will prevail? Much depends on what progressives around the world do at this critical moment to express their solidarity with these revolts. The current international mobilizations especially of environmental activists and feminists against capitalist exploitation and oppression of humanity and nature are promising. Our destinies are linked.