Towards Progressive Politics in the Middle East

written by Gilbert Achcar, Abbas Shahrabi Farahani | March 24, 2016

Recent mass movements in Middle Eastern and North African countries, despite their defeats and failures, showed prospects and possibilities of a progressive change or a progressive mass organization in the region. Fulfillment of these possibilities requires concentrating on attaining a comprehensive, critical knowledge of the region's social, political, economic and cultural mechanisms and relations. To achieve these initial goals, Problematica has started a series of interviews with progressive or leftist Middle Eastern and North African intellectuals, activist and MENA scholars. In this interview over Skype, we have put some questions to Gilbert Achcar, Marxist intellectual and scholar of Middle East Studies and Professor of Development Studies at SOAS, University of London. He has published in 2013 The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. A sequel will be coming out soon under the title of* Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*.*

Abbas Shahrabi: How do you define "Left" and "Leftist Politics"? What are the main theoretical elements of a leftist politics?

Gilbert Achcar: Well, I think properly understood "progressive" politics – let me use the term "progressive" rather than "left" here – is one that upholds the whole set of the values that define modernity and historical progress since the revolutions in the eighteenth century with an emphasis on the key value of social justice and equality. So, I would define as left-wing or progressive politics any politics that truly sticks to this full range of values.

AS: What about leftist politics or as you said progressive politics in the Middle East? How can we reconstruct the Left in the Middle East and North Africa according to the values you mentioned?

GA: I reject the view that the Middle East or Muslim countries must have different values. The values I mentioned are universal human values and rights that should be upheld everywhere. They actually include separation of religion from state: freedom and democracy require this separation, because no state that is based on religion, no state that claims to be inspired by divine scriptures, can be free and democratic, since religious institutions will want to impose what they see as their interpretation of the rule of God's law, instead of the rule of democratic human-made law. So, likewise you have a whole range of emancipatory issues related to separating religion from state. One of them is women's emancipation, which is a major component of any truly progressive program anywhere – and the Middle East is no exception. On the contrary, it is actually one of the most important issues in the Middle East, because the region is so backward from that angle. We are far behind most of the world when it comes to women's emancipation. Likewise, of course, the rights of all the oppressed groups in society, including national, ethnic, and gender groups, are a crucial

component of progressive politics. Progressive politics should be dedicated to the full emancipation of human beings, men and women, as well as social justice and equality.

AS: How about political organization and social mobilization? What are the main challenges and opportunities with which leftist activists are confronted in the way of organization and mobilization?

GA: I think that the issue of organization is an issue that evolves with time and technology. You cannot stick today to the same conception of organization that prevailed fifty years ago. As everyone saw, modern communication technology played a key role in mass movements and uprisings of recent years in the Middle East. But these experiences also show us that it is not enough to use modern technology, the social media in particular, in order to win. Because, if you live under a regime that controls a centralized state apparatus, there is no way you could beat it just by using social media and the internet. You need an actual organization on the ground. But this can no longer be in the form of centralized political machines as we had in previous historical times. These were specific to countries living under repressive conditions, but the fact is that it has become no longer possible to build such machines under repressive regimes, because the regimes themselves take advantage of modern technologies in the surveillance of their populations. It would be very difficult to build any significant organization under modern surveillance and repression. So this shows here a key difficulty. In repressive countries, the role of social media can be decisive indeed in the initial moment when the masses go to the streets, i.e. in the beginning of an uprising. But as soon as freedom is imposed on the streets, it becomes crucial to organize as quickly as possible on the ground, in actual networks rather than purely virtual ones. Otherwise, the risk of setback and defeats as we have seen in recent experiences in the Middle East is very big indeed.

AS: What about leftist traditions (Marxist or Non-Marxist) in the case of organization and mobilization? What we can learn from Lenin, Luxemburg or Trotsky in this case?

GA: Well, I believe that these are mostly old debates of another time. Those who stick to Lenin's conception of organization are like businessmen or factory owners who would want to organize their factory nowadays in the same way factories were organized one century ago. This would not succeed today. We live in different times, and modern technologies allow for a type of organization that is much more democratic, much more horizontal, built on networks rather than on a centralist pyramidal model. But of course, organization needs to be adapted to the conditions in each country. There is no universal model of organization. The tragedy was that after the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks generalized the model they had built in Russia under the specific conditions of the fight against Czarism and then during the civil war. They wanted to impose this model on the whole world, but it didn't work. You must take into account the conditions under which you are fighting, the degree of freedom that exists in your country, the type of political regime which you are confronting. All these issues are part of the problem and there is no magical solution that applies everywhere. So, as I said, if you live under very repressive conditions, the electronic social media can help you considerably to overcome disadvantages in setting the conditions for an initial phase of mass movement, uprising and revolt. But thereafter, as soon as you have the possibility of organizing more or less freely, you must seize it immediately and start building a broad network of people committed to a common goal. That is why it is very important to create a consensus among progressives, among young activists in particular since most of those who are committed to the fight for progressive goals are generally young people. It is important to build up a consensus on the goals, a common freedom charter, and as soon as possible to organize around those goals in order to take the situation to a further stage.

AS: Another controversial problem in the history of leftist thought and strategies is the problem of coalitions. What do you think about coalitions that a Middle Eastern Left can form in its political struggles? Do you propose a pure proletarian or "workerist" strategy, or can we think of multiclass

coalitions? Other than class coalitions, with which political groups and ideologies can the Middle Eastern Left build a coalition?

GA: This depends primarily on the issues that you are facing. If you are in a country where you still need to achieve basic democratic freedoms, you will need a broad coalition and should be able to build one, because there are a lot of social and political groups who share an interest in freedom. But if you live in a free country where your main fight is for socialism, you will have a much narrower kind of coalition, a coalition of like-minded people sharing the goal of socialist change on which there is less consensus than on the fight for democracy and freedom. So, again, these issues are not matters of general principles. There are no general recipes. What is crucial in everything that relates to organizational and tactical matters is to base oneself on "the concrete analysis of the concrete situation" as Lenin used to say, which is the best principle to retain from his views on these matters.

AS: You mentioned the relation of democracy with socialism and the value of democracy for socialism. But I want you to explain more about the relation of socialism with democracy and of course secularism. If there is a positive relation between these three, of which kind of democracy and secularism are we speaking?

GA: I tried to explain how secularism is connected to democracy in responding to your first questions. There can be no democracy without secularism in the sense of the separation of religion and state. Religion should be a matter of strict individual freedom. The state should not be based on religion and should not interfere in the beliefs and private lives of people. This is a major principle. Likewise, religious institutions should not interfere in running the state, nor should the state interfere in running them. The state is based on the sovereignty of the people. This is the cornerstone of democracy. And democracy is a key prerequisite for anything that could be properly called socialism, if it is to function. That is because with public ownership of the social means of production, if a society is not democratic, this means inevitably the reproduction of social inequality in a different form. Instead of being based on private property, social inequality can be based on bureaucratic privileges. So, to sum up, true democracy needs secularism, and true socialism needs democracy.

AS: What is the role of imperialism and colonialism in the region's backwardness? How can the Middle Eastern Left balance between the fight against despotism and the fight against imperialism?

GA: The problem that you are hinting at emerges only when you have a despotic regime that is hostile to Western imperialism. If you are facing a despotism that is supported by imperialism, there is no problem whatsoever in fighting both at the same time. For instance, if you are fighting against the Saudi monarchy and since the United States is the protector of the kingdom, you are fighting against both the regime and its protector. Likewise, if you were fighting in Iran at the time of the Shah, you would be fighting against both the Shah and US imperialism as the power behind him. But when you face a despotic regime that is hostile to Western imperialism or having tense relations with it, the problem can rise. The key point here is that, for the mass movement, the fight for its basic rights is its absolute priority; and that fight clashes with despotism. But, at the same time, this fight should be waged without any illusions about imperialism, any reliance on imperialism. Because if faced with a genuinely progressive fight, imperialism will prefer despotism, even if that despotism is unfriendly to its interests. It is always better for imperialism to deal with despotism, than with progressive revolutions. In the Middle East, the United States and its allies prefer to deal with the despotic regimes, instead of revolutions. At the time of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the United States' main concern was to prevent them from radicalizing, to keep them within narrow limits, and to keep the states in place. This applies to all uprisings, including the Syrian one. The Syrian regime had tense relations with the United States. It was not "anti-imperialist", but it had tense relations.

Nevertheless, the United States did not want the regime to fall – otherwise, it would have been overthrown with U.S. help five years ago. Washington refused to provide the Syrian opposition with the defensive weapons that it needed most crucially, i.e. anti-aircraft weapons. It acted like that because it did not want the regime to fall: it only wants some changes within the regime, keeping the state in place. Those who took part in the Syrian uprising with illusions about U.S. intervention on their behalf have been very bitterly disillusioned.

AS: You've taught Development Studies for many years. Of course, there are differences between MENA countries, but from a general viewpoint, what is the proper development strategy for these countries? What are the main problems and challenges in the way of their development? What is the role of the governments in this development?

GA: All the governments in the region are inspired by a neoliberal conception of development. They all regard the private sector as the one that should be leading the economy. This strategy, however, has failed miserably in a region where private capital has no confidence in the future, and is therefore little inclined to undertake the kind of long-term investments that are needed for real sustained development. Private capitalism in the Middle East is overwhelmingly a capitalism that seeks quick profit and speculation, not a capitalism of the kind that industrialized Europe in the 19th century. It is a total illusion to believe that this could be repeated in the present Middle East. That is why the only path to development is one in which the state plays the major role. This is all the truer because this is a region endowed with huge oil resources, which generate a state income that should be injected into long-term development. Now, the issue becomes what kind of development? Here we get back to democracy. Because, if there is no democracy in society and the state collects important oil revenues, the result is extreme waste and extreme corruption, which are most detrimental to development.

AS: Do you consider a positive role for private capital in the development process of MENA countries under a socialist government? What should the relation between private capital and the state be? More generally, what should the relation between civil society, private capital and the state be?

GA: The lesson of past collectivist experiences is that it is a serious mistake to eradicate private enterprise brutally as was done in the Soviet Union starting in the late 1920s. The socialization of the means of production should be a gradual process and public property should take control only where and inasmuch as it can be more efficient under the prevailing conditions. The state should encourage the capitalists who are willing to invest in productive and useful activities, those which the public sector does not have the human and know-how resources to run efficiently, while respecting taxation and labor laws. Under such conditions, the state should give to private investment, whether local or foreign, full guarantees of fair compensation in case of future collectivization. As for society at large, what you probably mean by "civil society", it should be able to exert control on both private capital and the state itself. A truly socialist government is one that is truly and fully a "government of the people, by the people, for the people", where "by the people" is not limited to the election of representatives but involves the involvement of grass-root bodies in the control of government.

AS: Let us turn to more specific events and phenomena in the region. We can start from one of the oldest: the Palestinian question. What position should the Middle Eastern Left take on the Palestinian question? What are the main problems in Israel-Palestine's unequal war?

GA: I think that the key issue is the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. The Palestinian people have been oppressed by the state of Israel since its creation. Since then, most of the Palestinian people have been deprived of their land and turned into refugees. Part of those and

another part of Palestinians fell under occupation close to fifty years ago, in 1967. So this is an accumulation of tragedies, which should be all addressed. The main issue here is the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination; that is, their ability to decide whether they want to return to the land from where they or their parents have been expelled, or want to live in an independent state in the 1967 territories, or else in the countries where they have settled in which they should be entitled to complete equal political rights. This applies to countries like Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon where Palestinian refugees are oppressed. That is also a key part of the Palestinian issue, because the oppressor of the Palestinian people is not only Israel. Of course the Zionist state is the Palestinian's main oppressor. That much is obvious. But there are also other oppressors against whom the struggle should be waged likewise.

AS: What is the relation between the Palestinian fight for democracy and the fight against Israeli occupation? What position should the Left and progressive groups take on Islamist resistance groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad?

GA: If you take the region as a whole, there has been a shift since the 1970s, from a time when the main forces fighting imperialism, Zionism, and despotic regimes were left-wing forces, to a time where Islamic fundamentalist forces took over and became dominant in claiming this fight. This shift happened at various times from the 1970s onward depending on the country. If you take the Palestinian case, the emergence of Hamas started from the end of the 80s. Before that, the Left was playing a much more important role as a radical force, than Hamas. But then Hamas started growing and the Left went into crisis, as the global Left also went into crisis in connection with the collapse of the Soviet Union which was identified with the Left, however wrong this might be. The result has been the growth of Islamic fundamentalist organizations. However, they play very different roles in different countries. In a country like Palestine or even a country like Lebanon – if you think of Hezbollah – when it was under Israeli occupation, these forces played an important role in fighting the occupation. In such cases, if you are an anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist like every progressive should be, then you must support anyone waging a just struggle against imperialism or Zionism. But, here again, this should be done without any illusions. If you are fighting against a so-called anti-imperialist despotic regime, you should do it without any illusions about imperialism. And if you are fighting against imperialism, you should do it without any illusion about despotic Islamic fundamentalist forces that are fighting imperialism or claiming to be anti-imperialist, because you must keep in mind that these forces are as much anti-left as they are anti-imperialist, if not more. They are actually much more opposed to radical democracy, to socialism, to women emancipation, than they are opposed to imperialism or Zionism. So, even when you are supporting them in a clash with Zionism or imperialism, you should remain very critical of what they represent and you should not lose sight of these fundamental differences with them.

AS: Can we say that an organization is progressive on an issue and reactionary on another issue? If we look at organizations as totalities, we may not be able to draw such separation. The Tudeh Party of Iran followed such path in the wake of the 1979 Revolution in supporting Islamic hardliners, and actually helped the consolidation of Islamist power. I understand that there is a dilemma: We have a reactionary, anti-occupation organization on one side, and Zionist occupation forces on the other side. But how can the secular, progressive resistance groups become hegemonic against the Islamist resistance in the fight against Zionist occupation, so that progressive organizations can advance both anti-occupation struggles and progressive, democratic, anti-Islamist struggles?

GA: This is indeed the crux of the matter. The rules to be respected are well-known rules of joint action with any groups with which we don't have much in common beyond a common enemy. They have been summarized by a Russian revolutionary over a century ago, and I like to repeat them: "1) Do not merge organisations. March separately but strike together. 2) Do not abandon our own political demands. 3) Do not conceal divergences of interest. 4) Pay attention to our ally as we would

pay attention to an enemy. 5) Concern ourselves more with using the situation created by the struggle than with keeping an ally." If these rules are observed, then what remains is for the progressives to prove to the masses that they are as much dedicated to the struggle against the common enemy than the fundamentalists, while resolutely defending the interests of workers, women and all exploited and oppressed categories in direct contrast with the fundamentalists and, often, in opposition to them.

AS: I will turn back to the question of Islamism and political Islam in the next question. But before that I want to ask about the so-called Arab Spring. How do you explain the rise of these events? What was the role of leftist groups in the so-called Arab Spring? If we accept that the Arab Spring – at least temporarily – has been defeated, whether by dictatorships or by reactionary Islamist parties, what are the prospects for the future?

GA: First of all, I did not call it "Arab Spring". The idea behind this designation was that during that "spring", i.e. a short period of time, you will have something like the Eastern European revolutions in which a few months were enough to overturn everything. I never believed that, because I knew how difficult the Arab regimes are to overthrow, much more than what you had in Eastern Europe, because they are willing to kill millions of people to remain in power. So, it is a much more difficult situation. That is why I have used the term "uprising" instead of "spring", and have described these events from the beginning as a long-term revolutionary process. What started in 2011 in Arabic-speaking countries is a long-term process that will last for many years and decades. It is a historical, protracted revolutionary process, in which there will be ups and downs, phases of revolution and counter-revolution, and no durable stability for a long time. Indeed, as long as the key issues, which are the social, economic problems that led to the explosion, are not solved, there will be no stability in the region. There were a lot of illusions at the beginning and I was warning people not to be too optimistic, because I knew how difficult it would be and could expect phases of counter-revolution to be coming. Indeed, you had the first revolutionary wave, a revolutionary phase of some two years, and then you had a backlash. Since 2013, the region entered into a counter-revolutionary phase in which we are still. The Left and progressive forces in Arab countries failed in taking durably the lead during the first phase. They failed in building an independent, progressive force. What they did basically was to switch alliances: they allied once with old regime forces, and once with the Islamic fundamentalists; they allied with Islamic fundamentalists against the old regime, and then with the latter against the Islamic fundamentalists when they become dominant. This game proved to be a complete failure. The Left has been marginalized as a result, although it played a major role in the early uprisings. Today what prevails is not a clash between revolution and counter-revolution, but one between counter-revolution and counter-revolution. There are two counter-revolutionary forces: one is the old regime, the other is Islamic fundamentalist. These forces are clashing militarily in Syria, in Libya, in Yemen and politically elsewhere like in Egypt. This is a tragic situation, but it is not the end of the story, because as I said, there will be no stability as long as the real problems are not solved. And the real problems, rather than being solved, are getting worse and worse and worse, because the situation itself is creating bigger economic problems which lead to more social tensions. Therefore, the revolutionary process will continue, we will see new uprisings as we have seen recently in Tunisia where there was a local uprising on the issue of unemployment. This is an indication of what will be coming. We will see more uprisings, more social explosions, and the situation will carry on like this. The key issue for the future is the ability or inability of the progressive forces to organize themselves as independent forces capable of leading their countries to real progressive change. If this does not happen, then the future of the region will be very dark, quite frightening. When you think of the big hopes that arose in 2011, and then look at the situation today, the contrast is terrible. But this happened in five years, and in five more years the situation can again change completely. We have to keep this in mind. It is crucial for the progressive forces to build a progressive alternative to the two counter-revolutionary camps that exist in the region.

AS: And finally two questions about Iran. The first one is about the 1979 Revolution. You belong to a Marxist current that strongly criticizes political Islam and its expressions like the 1979 Revolution. What are the main pillars and elements of your critique of political Islam and especially the 1979 Revolution? How do you explain these phenomena?

GA: First of all, there are different sorts of Marxism. Marxism is a general, methodological approach and a general conception of history, but there are many different uses of it. People who call themselves Marxists may have many different views on the same issue. I remember well the year 1979, when there was a big debate among Marxists. Many saw the Iranian Revolution as a progressive revolution, believing that Iran's was like other revolutions, some kind of national-democratic revolution. I stressed at that time that those who are saying this do not understand the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the Iranian Revolution. It is true that the Iranian Revolution started on a national-democratic ground, but due to the weakness of the Left, the national-democratic revolution was hijacked by an Islamic fundamentalist leadership. This leadership stood on the ground of the national-democratic revolution and, from there, it took the revolution in a very different direction. Instead of following a national-democratic path, it went into a reactionary path inspired by an Islamic fundamentalist perspective. This created all the ambiguity of a revolution that overthrew the Shah and was strongly anti-Western, but at the same time had a social perspective that was very reactionary regarding women rights, the Left, political and cultural freedom, etc. Even if Islamic fundamentalism can play objectively a role which can be seen as progressive in the fight against Zionism, imperialism and a despotic regime such as the Shah's, it does not change its fundamental reactionary character. All religious fundamentalisms, whether Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or whatever, are reactionary by definition, by essence. The essence of fundamentalism is the will to impose religion on society and base the state on religion. Whatever the religion is, fundamentalism is reactionary, anti-democratic, and oppressive.

AS: How do you see the future possibilities of progressive, leftist politics in Iran, after the nuclear deal between the Islamic Republic and Western Powers? Can we see some visible and meaningful political, social changes after the deal? What are the implications of this deal for the Middle East?

GA: The nuclear deal is a good thing, because anything that can contribute to defusing regional tensions is good. Fundamentalist hardliners need tensions to sustain their ideological control of society. They control society in the name of the fight against the "Great Satan". In that sense, the reduction of the tension is positive. We can see now its result in the recent elections in Iran, with the rise of the so-called reformists. Whatever the limitation of these elections, they remain a positive sign that the Iranian society wants change. People do not have the freedom to choose what they really want, because who runs in the elections is selected by the regime, so they chose therefore what they see as the lesser evil as a way of showing their discontent. More generally, Iran's situation is difficult, because it is a country with two states: normal institutions of army and the rest, and a parallel state represented by unconventional military institutions, which have been set up by the Islamic fundamentalist leadership. This creates a very complicated and difficult situation. In the long-run, as everywhere else in the region, the main problem for the victory of the revolution will be its ability to win a major part of the armed forces over to the side of the revolutionaries. This is how the revolution of 1979 won, because a large section of the army abandoned the Shah. If the army had engaged in a large-scale bloody repression of the movement in order to defend the Shah's regime, the revolution might have been defeated. This is a crucial point: the ability to win over a major section of the armed forces, especially the rank-and-file.

AS: Thank you very much, Gilbert for the time you devoted to this interview.

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