

The Arab Spring Digital Youth and the Challenge of Work

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The revolutionary spirit in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya was stirring in virtual communities before it spilled out to a wider spectrum of society. In each country the trigger for revolution and determination to confront the status quo and replace the leadership, was the wrenching story of a fellow citizen.

In Tunisia 26 year old Mohammed Bouazizi, dubbed “the father of Arab revolution,” (1) set himself on fire on the sidewalk in front of the local municipal building where he sought, but never received, justice. Bouazizi, who worked in the informal economy as a fruit and vegetable vendor since he was a teen, was continuously harassed, fined, and beaten by police officers including a female officer. One day he simply could not take it any longer and, like Czech hero, Jan Palach in 1968, perpetrated self-immolation.

In Egypt Khaled Said, a 28 year old citizen journalist from Alexandria who was trying to expose police corruption, was dragged out of an internet café by two police officers and allegedly brutally beaten to death in view of witnesses. The “Day of Rage” on January 25, 2011 which triggered the Egyptian revolution, originated from the Facebook page, “We are all Khaled Said.”

In Libya the street protests, which eventually led to a bloody civil war involving NATO bombings and around 40,000 casualties, began in Benghazi on 15 February with the news of the arrest of human rights lawyer, Fethi Terbil. In all cases the tipping point for what would become a mass broad based revolution was the spread of a compelling story of the humiliation, abuse, and flagrant flouting of rights of a fellow citizen. In other words, issues of civic injustice, not economic injustice and labor insecurity, arguably just as great social calamities, seem to have been the issues that have unified broad swathes of the population. Nevertheless, in an interview with the Maltese English language daily, The Times, Abd El Aziz Hegazy, former Egyptian Prime Minister and a key figure in the bid to create a new Egypt, chairing Egypt's National Dialogue, states that the Egyptian revolution concerned three things: freedom, the empowerment of the poor and unemployment. "When the revolutionaries first came, they shouted 'Bread!' Then they called for social justice, democracy and freedom. The revolution," Dr Hegazy insists, "is as much economic as it is political".(2)

Digitally savvy youths who have acted as a generational collectivity and society's conscience, have taken an uncompromising stand against injustice, corruption and abuse of power.(3) The mass upheavals in not only Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya but also in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan and Iraq, are indicative of a democratic ethos sweeping the region. Aided by tools of new media and digital communication tools, youth cultures throughout the Arab, Persian and Muslim-majority societies are developing alternative notions and practices of citizenship. (Foreign-based Libyan youth, for instance, used Twitter, at the start of the revolution, to drum up international support for the protestors inside their country of origin).

The internet generation₍₄₎ has a very firm grip on rights, civic liberties and democratic accountability. In some instances youths in Egypt forged important alliances with Labor; the 6 of April youth movement that formed in 2008 to support the textile workers of El-Mahalla El-Kubra is a prime example of this. But for the most part on-line communities, activist coalitions, and, more recently, citizens joining the revolutionary movements, showed greater adeptness at articulating a way forward for civic and political rights, and are on more shaky footing when it comes to economic rights, fair labor practices, and distributive justice.

To be sure there has been a strong labor presence in Egypt's revolutionary movement. Workers converged on Tahrir Square and other places throughout the country to clamor for better pay and working conditions; the largest union called for a general strike. Pressure is being brought to bear on the military caretaker government in Egypt not only so that it does not renege on its promise of a smooth transition to civilian rule but that it ensures a much more democratically equitable economic system.

Since Mubarak stepped down and parliament was dissolved on February 11, the army has been heavy handed on those groups who are holding out, particularly workers. They were told to go home, get back to work, get the economy churning again. But they are holding their ground. While Tunisia recently held elections and the interim government in Libya, soon after the capture and killing of ousted leader, Muammar Gaddafi and his son, promised free elections in eight months time, the Egyptian military has been accused of dragging its feet in promising elections. And yet Dr Hegazy states that comparisons between Tunisia and Egypt are unfair: "You cannot compare Egypt to Tunisia. We are a country of 85 million, with so many different sects. Tunisia is different. It is much smaller and more uniform."⁽⁵⁾

Earlier on around 4000 workers from the Asiut (Upper Egypt) cement company staged a sit in to demand permanent contracts, a profit-sharing system and an end to the daily-wage system of remuneration for work (14/2/2011). On Feb 25 labor leaders in Egypt established the "Coalition of the 25 January Revolution Workers". But it remains to be seen how the military will respond to a mobilized and organized force and if youth will join workers in larger numbers (larger than 6 of April movement). The two groups, laborers and educated youth, have potentially much to gain in forging a strong coalition on labor issues and workers rights.

Youth unemployment and underemployment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are among the highest in the world. Unemployment looms somewhere around 25%; only Sub-Saharan Africa has higher rates. Unemployment rates are highest among educated youth with high school and university diplomas and even higher for females. Among youth who find employment, the overwhelming majority of them labor in insecure, very precarious circumstances with no fixed contract, benefits, and unlivable salaries. Their inability to secure a livelihood prolongs their dependence on parents, their ability to marry and form families, and also pushes them, especially males, into second and third jobs. High school and college graduates, thus, have a great deal in common with their less educated laboring counterparts when it comes to the insecurities of the job market and degradation of labor rights in a period of late neoliberalism. This is symptomatic of an ever expanding bifurcated working class comprising those with high levels of education who have become *déclassé* and those with little or no formally acquired skills whatsoever – a characteristic of societies elsewhere, including Europe, but writ large in the Southern Mediterranean.

Most of the countries in the region undergoing upheaval are characterized by huge disparities in wealth and unemployment. Issues concerning economic engagement and distribution are at the heart of the struggles involved in most cases, certainly in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases. It remains to be seen whether the democratic changes that are being promised will be deep rooted or simply serve as a cosmetic exercise with other members of the ruling oligarchy simply replacing the man (the rulers have invariably been men) at the helm. There were protests in Tunisia in this regard, before the country went to the polls, and the struggles in Egypt do not augur well, although two former prime ministers and other ministers have been placed behind bars (6). But as one protester on Tahrir Square stated in an interview with one of us, the clamor is for : “an end to the influence of the former regime, through proper prosecution and punishment of all members of the former regime. The prosecution and punishment of every one who has been involved in the killing of innocent protesters. Clear actions from the current government and SCAF towards proper change in the country.” (7)

The call is also for an economy that incorporates large amounts of youth in meaningful employment and which provides greater and meaningful educational expansion at all levels. This economy must be complemented by a greater democratic politics of redistribution that is believed to be capable of addressing the country’s deep rooted social and economic inequalities. One also wonders whether this is a digitally mediated revolution intended to allow a greater middle class sector, extending beyond the present oligarchy, to gain a greater share of the cake. In short, is a country like Egypt having its version of a bourgeois revolution?

In a conversation with Antonio Dall’Olio, the Director of *Pax Christi International* (Italy), a Cairo Professor referred to the fact that the Islamic world lacked a ‘French revolution’ as well as

a Vatican Council II which ushered in a process of renewal in the western world. (8) Is the former occurring right now in specific Arab contexts such as the Egyptian one? To what extent would this larger bourgeoisie connect with the aspirations of a larger social sector including that expanding precariously-living working class that incorporates people with skills and qualifications which were formerly the staple of the middle class, albeit perhaps the petit bourgeoisie?

These economic and social considerations, however, raise further questions: How is digital technology enabling youths to acquire skills for greater participation in a broader and more meaningful labor market? And more to the point, will this generation use their skills for political mobilization and revolutionary change to work in the service of work and redistributive justice?

So while these revolutions pose questions regarding the use of the digitally mediated technology for revolutionary purposes and how digital networking can lead to street and cross-border mobilization, they also raise issues about what the economic future holds in the transition and post-transition contexts. The economic factor is not to be underplayed in these situations given the marginalization of the many for the lavish benefits of the few, for the most part, the traditionally western backed oligarchy (certainly in Egypt and Tunisia); members of the ruling families have, alas, pandered successfully to the whims of even progressive western organizations such as the International Council for Adult Education which made Susanne Mubarak Honorary President for 1994-1998, as period issues of its otherwise very progressive and social justice-oriented journal *Convergence* indicated!

What alternative economic policies are necessary to accommodate these skills? What alternative proposals are being put forward for a different economic approach that counters the situation of

mass unemployment among youth in the area? What role does digital technology play in this regard? Is the increase in use of digital technology contributing to a further brain drain among youth? On the contrary, would a greater democratic liberalization of the country lead to a re-draining of digitally savvy Arab youth who can now work from the comfort of their home in Egypt? They would thus eschew the kind of post-9/11 anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments prevailing in the countries to which they emigrated. Could the democratization of Arab states lead to more digitally mediated cross-border economic ventures involving youths of different Arab countries? We would add that these economic ventures can complement the political digitally mediated ones which, it has been argued, albeit romantically, can give rise to a veritable Pan-Arab youth movement. The jury is still out on the verdict as to whether the protesters constitute a movement, something which applies not just to Egypt and the rest of the Arab world but also the protest movements in Europe. In an interview carried out electronically on 8th July 2011, the protestor at Tahrir Square stated:

What is currently happening in Egypt is not clear. I cannot call it a movement yet. What happened in January [2011] was a whole country saying "That's Enough". Overthrowing the government and the president was a decision we all agreed on. Once that was done, people are not sure how to move and in what direction. In that sense, we are faced with groups of people trying to take advantage of this new freedom by trying to stir people in a certain direction, those are the Muslim Brotherhood, or the salafis, or the SCAF. We can see people taking advantage of the lack of trust in the police forces, and the lack of police forces to begin with, they do so by breaking traffic laws, by attacking the police, by bombing churches and using weapons. We see the former regime trying to create chaos among the protestors, by sneaking thugs in the middle of the protests to start riots and fights, and make people lose trust in the revolution and in the protestors. Finally, we see the majority of the population struck by all this chaos surrounding them, confused by how the values of the 18 days of the revolution have disappeared completely and have been replaced with violence and hatred. A lot of people are trying to get organized into groups and decide on the direction in which to go, but for the most part the majority of the population is frustrated to find that what happened several months ago was as though it never did. People now are divided in how they feel towards this revolution, many are too afraid of the future and of the chaos taking place now, that they feel we should stop

all this nonsense. People are good at judging the actions of others and not taking any action themselves. (9)

Finally, how does one bridge digital inequality with these economic considerations in mind?

Answers to these questions can only emerge gradually as events in this long struggle for democratic and economic renewal in the Arab world continue to unfold, alas at a huge cost in terms of human lives in a number of cases especially the Libyan (a carnage) and the Syrian ones. It still remains to be seen whether the revolutions will be brought to the political conclusion augured by those who took to the streets and shed their blood in the process. As if this is not worrying enough, one wonders what the future holds beyond the change in power structure in terms of addressing important economic issues and ending the cycle of poverty in which many people in the region find themselves (although this was not the case with Libya which among other things offered free education and free health care, as well as grants to newly-wed couples). This is where some of the most formally educated and experienced persons, many of whom appearing on the media abroad, will need to step up to the plate. And Libya provides excellent examples with the person selected as interim prime minister and his rival, both established academics abroad with ground breaking research to their credit.

It is also imperative that foreign imperialist interests be kept in check, which sounds 'wishful thinking' in the case of Libya with the involvement of NATO and key figures such as Hilary

Clinton, David Cameron and, 'first out of the blocks,' Nicolas Sarkozy. The country's oil resources lead to all sorts of conspiracy theories, backed by the fact that similar interventions have not been contemplated elsewhere, also with regard to equally despotic regimes in countries which are main oil suppliers to the USA and other western powers (10). The situations differ from country to country, as well as the resources available. Tunisia has organized political parties which were outlawed by the ousted leader. Others need time to get the representative democratic act together, characterised by 'redistributive justice'.

A short term –and we insist 'short term'- national 'technical' government, as was often the case in Italy (the Dini and Amato governments, and the current Mario Monti government), and is the case in Libya, needs to be formed to set the process of national social and economic reconstruction in place, while the foundation for a long term democratic system is laid. Striking the balance between different tribal and societal interests is crucial in certain contexts both for democratic and economic renewal. Striking a balance between democratic and economic reconstruction will also be key further down the road. Ousting from power, as a result of mass unemployment and economic marginalization, was ultimately that which crooked a beckoning finger to the autocratic leaders in Egypt and Tunisia.

One issue is crucial. Will legacies of free public education and healthcare, as was the case in Libya, be maintained and taken up in other countries? Or will the revolutions, which claimed countless lives, pave the way for the tyranny of the market, as has been the case with Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Berlin Wall? Protesters and the new governing political class, as well as trade unions and other social organizations, would do well to learn from the protests of the *indignados* and those occupying the streets in various cities in North America and

Europe, in ensuring that education and labour market training, as well as healthcare, are safeguarded or developed as public and not be allowed to degenerate into consumption goods.

Notes.

(1) See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/29/egypt-mubarak-tunisia-palestine>.

(2) See interview 'A frozen revolution?', Dr Abd El Aziz Hegazy interviewed by Bertrand Borg in *The Times* (Malta), 15 November, 2011, <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20111115/local/A-frozen-revolution-.393960>. Accessed 16th November 2011.

(3) See Linda Herrera "Egypt's Revolution 2.0: The Facebook Factor" in *Jadaliyya*. February 12, 2011. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/612/egypts-revolution-2.0_the-facebook-factor

(4) See the many contributions to Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (eds.) (2010), *Being young and Muslim. New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(5) See interview 'A frozen revolution?', Dr Abd El Aziz Hegazy interviewed by Bertrand Borg in *The Times* (Malta), 15 November, 2011, <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20111115/local/A-frozen-revolution-.393960>. Accessed 16th November 2011.

(6) *ibid.*

(7) Electronic interview with Tahrir Square protestor carried out 8th July 2011.

(8) See footnote 17 in Peter Mayo (2007), 'Gramsci, The Southern Question and the Mediterranean' in *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 1-17. Available free online: http://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/39379/24_MJES_1222007.pdf Reproduced from an interview with Dall'Olio by Michael Grech in his book, *Knisja tat-Triq (Street Church)*, Malta, 2006.

(9) Electronic interview with Tahrir Square protestor carried out 8th July 2011.

(10) Noam Chomsky (2011) *September 11. Was there an alternative?*

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