

Bright Sky over North Africa

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Quick Notes on the Unfolding Revolt—By Christopher Z. Hobson

The sky is bright over northern Africa, not only because of the burning government buildings and police stations, but because of the new dawn of mass struggle and potential liberation. Since Jan. 14, less than three weeks ago, the Ben Ali dictatorship in Tunisia has fallen and its successor regime has been shaken up several times, the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt has suffered a mighty blow from ever-growing protests seeking the president's downfall, and more restrained demonstrations have started against the Saleh dictatorship in Yemen. The situation changes hour by hour and people all over the world hope for the protesters' success. Here are a few notes in summary form. (Note 2 and part of Note 3 are by Ron Tabor, with a separate comment below.)

1. It Can Be Done. No one would have said in December that the people would rise up, destroy one dictatorship, and threaten a second. The Tunisian overturn started with the protest by suicide of a single street vendor. Tens of thousands of ordinary people—workers, students and graduates, neighborhood residents, caravans from provincial cities—brought the government down within a month. Ordinary working and poor people, invisible and despised in “normal” times, are in fact the decisive force in history. Without their actions all reforms turn out empty. When they act, they can shake heaven. And they can win.

2. The Nature of the Regimes. All these regimes have some trappings of democracy but are actually brutal dictatorships. In Egypt, for example, there are some carefully monitored “opposition” parties while most opposition groups are banned. The army and its intelligence apparatus dominate and those who dare to oppose the regime are routinely arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed. People suffer from massive unemployment (including and in particular young college graduates, such as engineers), severe shortage of affordable housing, and the callousness of a government bureaucracy that is viciously corrupt at all levels.

Meanwhile, the ruling elite, Mubarak and his family and allies, enrich themselves at the people's expense. These regimes are every bit as brutal and undemocratic as the Islamic regime in Iran, but because they are allies of the United States and key props of U.S. strategic interests, such as control of oil, of the sea lanes, and the Suez Canal, and support to Israel, the U.S. accepts and covers for their violence, lack of democracy, and violations of human rights. The U.S. provides \$1.3 billion in aid to Mubarak's regime, most for military purposes, and has particularly close ties with the military and the intelligence apparatus.

3. The Broadest Demands Are the Best. The demands in Tunisia and Egypt are for the end of the regime, for democratic freedoms, for elections, no repression of opposition, rule of law, an open society. In the present moment opening up these closed regimes to create a civil society with universal human rights is a decisive step forward. This demand can—and should—unite nearly everyone.

At the same time, while the immediate goal is to get rid of the regimes and to win democratic freedoms, the movement should not limit itself to these goals. Under the lack of rights is the lack of opportunity. Joblessness, oppression, and a deaf officialdom are all reasons why Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. Jobs, aid for the poor, affordable housing, education, cutting government bureaucracy and the military, freedom of migration, freedom to work and trade are all broad demands that the protests should adopt.

4. The Broadest Organization Is Best. The protests began without much organization and spread by cellphone, Facebook, and Twitter. The lack of “vertical” organization—hierarchical

organizations with leaders and chains of command—is a shield against repression and means the militancy can spread at ground level.

But the “horizontal” networks between people and groups have to communicate, organize themselves, debate demands and goals, reach out to other sectors of the population and to other countries, and constitute the beginnings of a real civil society. To even get to free elections—much less to a truly free society—people will have to create professional organizations, neighborhood organizations, factory floor organizations, organizations of the poor, organizations in the armed forces, religious organizations, and of course political organizations of every stripe from anarchist to Islamist.

As part of this, working and poor people need their own organizations which will be different from organizations of the professionals and political parties, who have different interests. If everyone is organized, the chances of the present regime or a successor regime solidifying power are lessened.

5. Win Over the Soldiers, Bring Out the Neighborhoods and Factories, Involve the Unions. To win and continue the revolution all these groups are crucial. After a collapse of police power in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and elsewhere, and some fraternizing between soldiers and demonstrators, today’s reports (Jan. 30) are that Mubarak’s elite troops are reinforcing the capital, and no doubt other cities. Major confrontations are ahead. The maximum presence of workers, neighborhood residents, and civil, labor, and religious organizations will be necessary to win the battle for the soldiers’ loyalty.

6. Continue the Mobilization. In Tunisia when Ben Ali fled, his prime minister took over. Then he included a few opposition leaders in the “government”—in reality not a government but a clique trying to become one if the people would go home. They didn’t, and kept up the pressure. Now all Ben Ali’s ministers are gone except the ex-prime minister himself. In Tunisia and in Egypt if Mubarak is driven out, the remnants of the old regime will attempt to resolidify power and continuing mobilization is needed to prevent this.

At the same time, revolutionaries shouldn’t disregard or oppose calls for future elections but should join in the calls and welcome elections even if a new elite government results. If there are civil liberties and the civil organizations to back them up, there will be more room for revolutionaries to organize. There will be a struggle in the future to hold onto the rights won in battle and for this, too, continuing mobilization will be needed.

7. Don’t Trust the Opposition; Don’t Fear It Either. Existing opposition groups are only too anxious to get into office, as in Tunisia, and create a democratic-appearing system in which they share power. The moment they take government office, they separate themselves from the people. At the same time, the West is raising the specter of Islamic fundamentalism and its disregard of civil, women’s, and religious freedoms, as a reason to fear truly open democracy. There is always a danger that if the popular tide recedes, a disciplined elite will gain power. But the answer to both threats is organization, more organization, and yet more organization. If large-scale organizations of citizens are built and remain vigilant, these threats can be defeated.

8. A Word on Islam. The mass of the people are not Islamic fundamentalists. But in their vast majority they are devout Muslims. There are no more stirring photographs from these events than those showing massed hundreds bent in prayer confronting the tanks of the dictators.

9. The United States Under Obama Remains the United States. U.S. Secretary of State Clinton insulted the people of Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen in calling for “stability” when so many have died for a greater goal, freedom, and U.S. President Obama insulted them again in his speech

of Jan. 28 in reiterating that the U.S. “has a close partnership with Egypt” (that is a threat as well as a promise!) and that he is still working through Mubarak and asking Mubarak for “concrete steps” to a “better” democracy. In reality the United States has been the best friend of all three countries’ dictators and their police states.

The U.S. talks democracy but hates and fears real democracy. It hates and fears a truly open political process that could reduce its own control and could challenge its economic interests. As slippery as an eel, the U.S. will use both trickery and false promises to back up dictators, switch sides when inevitable, get behind a new government and make sure it serves the U.S. and not its people. The U.S. will be glad, not sorry, if a new regime with a democratic front and a strong secret police solidifies power. Continuing mobilization is also the way to defend national independence against the U.S.

10. The “Northern Crescent” and the “Southern Crescent.” Israel uses these terms to refer to Iran, Syria, and Lebanon on its north, and the pro-U.S. dictatorships in Arabia and across northern Africa on its south. Today the “southern crescent” is shaking. If revolutions can succeed there, the people will also be emboldened in the “northern crescent.” And without strong pro-U.S. regimes to provide cover and assistance, Israel’s continued occupation of the West Bank and its domination over Palestinians in Israel will be less secure.

I don’t know where all this will end—with broader rights or new regimes in Iran or Syria, with a two-state compromise, a binational state, or a nonsectarian democracy in what are now the truncated Palestinian lands and Israel. Maybe nothing at all will happen, but I think change in Tunisia and Egypt opens the way to change all across the region.

11. Why Not Here? My friend Nicholas Powers recently wrote a fictional counter-history of the last two years, “The History of a Dream,” for the Brooklyn-based newspaper *The Independent* (www.independent.org/2011/01/20/the-history-of-a-dream). In it, those who favored universal health care began a countermobilization in 2009 as soon as the right began fighting Obama’s health plan. By 2011, these mobilizations had grown into a mass movement threatening Wall Street.

Why not? No one is imagining a revolution in the U.S. today. But we can stop waiting for a falsely liberal government to bring reforms to us and can mobilize to seek them ourselves. Everybody knows the things working and poor people in the U.S. need. *It can be done.*

12. About Anarchism. Revolutionary anarchists have our own aims and hopes. We hope for working and poor people and all other insulted and oppressed people to organize and remain organized, to remove all elites from power, and to self-govern society without a repressive state. We don’t favor what is falsely termed democracy, a representative government with a consensus for class oppression and a well-organized police, bureaucracy, military, and prisons. But we don’t fear these things either. I believe that with our hopes held high we should favor every step toward a civil society with rights for all. If real freedoms and genuinely open elections come, these will provide the best possibility of spreading anarchist ideas.

13. Tomorrow’s Sky Is Bright. *The Utopian* No. 2, in 2001, under the heading “Who We Are,” wrote, “This is a good time to publish a journal dedicated to utopianism and revolutionary anarchism.” The article summarized several reasons why—the development of some popular struggles, a decline in influence of the Marxist left, new recognition of women’s, homosexual, and Native rights, and others. It was a good article and we have reprinted it in each issue since.

But one thing was missing to realize the vision: the self-empowered, broad-scale, ground-level radical and revolutionary organization of poor and working people, such as has now begun in at

least one corner of our teeming earth. Without this only preliminary work is possible and with it anything is possible, though scarcely assured. Tomorrow's sky is bright.

Comments on Chris's Theses—By Ron Tabor

I agree with most of what Chris writes, but my perspective goes further.

To me, one of the things that is so striking about the current situation in Egypt is the contrast between the radicalism of the acts and methods of struggle of the protesters and the narrowness of their vision: aside from general calls for freedom, the protesters are mainly concerned to get rid of Mubarak and his family. As a result, a major part of what we, and other conscious anarchists, need to do is to broaden and deepen the people's vision. My overall strategic conception is similar to Leon Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, except that whereas Marxism's ultimate goal, the establishment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (in fact, to be exercised by a Marxist party), represents a narrowing of democracy (explicitly, the exclusion of middle-class and other "non-proletarian" elements; implicitly, the exclusion of the workers themselves), my conception represents a continual broadening and deepening of democracy.

To put it differently, I would say that the mass movement in Egypt is anarchistic in its methods of organization and struggle, e.g., in its horizontal nature and lack of defined leaders and rigid organizational structures. But it needs to become anarchist in consciousness; it needs to see its ultimate goal as the overthrow of the entire political, social, and economic system in Egypt and its replacement by a truly open, democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian society controlled directly by the people.

As a result, we need to radicalize people's vision. While the immediate goal is to get rid of Mubarak, his family and stooges, and to win democratic freedoms, we should stress that the movement should not limit itself to these goals. It needs to broaden and deepen itself, to reach out to the rural population and to other sectors not currently involved in the struggle. To the degree it can, the movement also needs to seize control of the means of communication (the "hard" apparatus of cellphone connections and the internet) and transportation, to occupy factories and other workplaces, to set up neighborhood committees and militias to protect their communities (this is already happening), to seize the headquarters of government agencies, particularly the apparatus of oppression and control, the Interior Ministry, the headquarters of the army and the police, and begin to dismantle these structures. The movement should also raise explicit demands that address the concrete needs of the people, for jobs, affordable housing, and education for all. Above all, it needs to start setting up a network of popular councils that can provide the means through the Egyptian people can control their revolution and whatever social conquests they manage to achieve. This broadening and deepening is definitely possible; the demonstrations have already eliminated the police as an effective force while going some way toward neutralizing the army, if not yet winning the soldiers over to actively opposing the regime. Protesters have already tried to storm the headquarters of the Ministry of the Interior (in charge of the brutal and vicious police and the domestic surveillance apparatus), although I do not know the outcome of the attempt. The protesters have also begun to set up neighborhood militias to protect their communities.

We should also emphasize that the movement should see itself as the cutting edge of a multi-national, pan-Arab and pan-Middle East (including Iran and Turkey) revolution. Get rid of all

the cynical, brutal, and corrupt governments—monarchies and so-called republics alike—that pretend to defend the people’s interests but actually sell them out to the goals and interests of US imperialism and their local stooges! The people need to recognize that the United States is not their friend or ally but their enemy, the chief prop of the regimes that have oppressed them for so long and the chief backer of the Zionist occupation of Palestine. While, at the moment, most of the protesters are demanding that the United States support them in getting rid of Mubarak and seem genuinely puzzled that President Obama has not come down on their side, there are elements of the population who are more politically astute. Today, I heard an Egyptian man being interviewed on CNN who stated that the United States and the European countries support Mubarak 100% because they are afraid of a revolution that will not stop until it has destroyed Israel and ended the imperialist occupation of Palestine. We should be in solidarity with and support people like him.

Finally, we should warn the protesters that this broadening and deepening will be necessary even to win and secure its more limited demands. The US ruling class does not trust the Egyptian people (and the Arab peoples, in general), and certainly not Arab people in the process of carrying out a revolution. It really believes that the only viable alternatives in North Africa and the Middle East are pro-US Mubarak-style regimes or radical anti-US Islamic theocracies. The US’s hegemony over the region, particularly its access to oil, its control over the Suez Canal and its support of Israel, as the major instrument of this hegemony, is more important to it than the democratic rights, or even the lives, of Egyptians. As a result, the United States will continue to support Mubarak until it is no longer politically feasible to do so. And if it turns out that Mubarak is ousted, the US government will do its utmost to ensure the eventual re-establishment of a Mubarak-style government (that is, a government ruled by a strongman and backed by the military—though slightly more formally democratic and less violent and corrupt than Mubarak’s—without Mubarak himself. The only way to prevent the return of that type of regime is to make the current Egyptian revolution as radical as possible; the people need to seize and hold on to as much direct popular power as they can.

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