

THE INCALCULABLE

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The most revolutionary aspect of the current wave of revolutions in the Middle East is the absence of traditional revolutionary politics. If the future is to be at all calculable, argues Faisal Devji, it is necessary to look beyond violence, militancy and all inherited forms of politics: the limits of these mechanisms have been exposed by the 'Arab spring'.

While commentary on the Middle East's season of revolts and revolutions constantly refers to their radically unforeseen character, the analyses pro-pounded don't cease gesturing towards precedents and models that might make them historically comprehensible. If it isn't a regional history of Arab rebellion against authority that is invoked, then we are offered an international one having to do with anti-monarchism, anti-colonialism or anti-capitalism. And in all this our initial surprise at these extraordinary events is shunted aside as indicating nothing more than a deficit of knowledge about the societies and peoples involved in such uprisings. At most the previously unimaginable and therefore incalculable element in the Middle Eastern revolutions is reduced to a "spark" that, in the acts of a Tunisian suicide or his Egyptian and other mimics, ended up setting the region on fire.

However accurate the genealogies proffered by analysts to make sense of these revolts, surely their surprise was due not to a lack of knowledge but its irrelevance. For the events still unfolding before us



Protest on Tahrir

Flickr: Floris Van Cauwelaert

in North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East are revolutionary not in any conventional sense, involving political parties, ideologies and historical utopias, but precisely because they lack such traditional political forms. Indeed those most surprised by this revolutionary wave appear to have been the very people who made it possible. So if there is one sentiment that these men and women voice over and over again, it is wonder at their own transformation. Most revolutionary about these events, in other words, might be the sudden fearlessness that took the Middle East's protestors aback. And such fearlessness, I want to suggest, may have something to do with the absence there of a revolutionary politics in its traditional sense.

Of course it is true that revolutions in other times and places have also been marked by a sense of wonder, but the meaning and possibilities of its surprise have rarely been examined. Instead commentary on the Left as much as the Right is dominated by the "logic" of history, whose narrative of precedents and genealogies makes events calculable after the fact.



2011 Egypt protests: graffiti on military vehicle

Flickr user mnadi offers the following translations: "Down with Mubarak", "No Mubarak", "Mubarak the tyrant has fallen" and "30 years stealing and unfairness.. enough is enough.. leave.. NOW"

Flickr: monasosh

And yet this appeal to history often ends up denying the change that is its essence, as when analysts of one political hue see in the rebellions only another anti-imperialist movement, one that is opposed by imperialism in the form of coalition forces bombarding Libya. Isn't this explanation similar in some ways to the avowedly unhistorical one that would make the movement entirely dependent on the West, whether in the form of democratic desire or social media? At least the latter explanation doesn't make of today's events merely the latest instance of a struggle that has been going on for some three centuries now.

The absent militant

In their still ambiguous and unformed reality, the region's revolutions probably belong to a number of possible genealogies, of which one is surely provided



Tahrir Square: February 9, 2011
Flickr: Jonathan Rashad 

by global Islam and its militant form in particular. In the wake of Arab nationalism and Marxism, after all, what other movement has possessed such a pan-Arab dimension? Add to this a decentralized and media-informed politics, though one with neither a party nor ideology to back it, and the comparison is complete. The Left in Europe and America has kept this comparison at bay, seeing it as being characteristic of a fear-mongering Right. But my point in drawing it is not to claim that militancy remains a possibility in these rebellions, but instead to demonstrate that it has been overcome. What else do the protestors' imitations of sacrificial and even suicidal practices across the region signify if not the occupation and indeed conquest of militant forms?

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Even the inability or unwillingness of Islamists to dominate protests wherever they occur in the

Middle East may be attributed to global militancy more than to a resurgence of secularism. For not only has Al-Qaeda provided the revolutions with their individualistic modes of organization and dissemination, it had already displaced the centralized parties and ideologies of old-fashioned Islamism at the forefront of Muslim protest globally. But Al-Qaeda had ceased to represent a popular cause in the Middle East well before the Tunisian revolution, as indicated by the sudden loss of interest in militant web forums. This surprising decline caused some anxiety to Western intelligence agencies, which were interested in monitoring and tracking such discussion rather than shutting it down, and now we know where at least some of these energies were transferred. Having little if anything to do with the “success” of the War on Terror, this rapid transformation offers us yet another example of the incalculable in politics.

With almost all of Al-Qaeda’s “near enemies” in the Middle East toppled or threatened, militancy’s self-proclaimed task is in the process of being fulfilled by the region’s revolutions, and so the war against the “far enemies” of the West has become irrelevant for the moment. If anything these latter have to find themselves a new role and place in a Middle East they were incapable of remaking of their own accord. It is global militancy, then, that has contributed to the establishment of a post-Islamist Arab world, though in this respect as in so many others Iran led the way. Despite its temporary lack of success, the Green Movement of 2009 set the seal on Iran’s Islamic Revolution, which in its own day had initiated the Islamist moment in Middle Eastern history. Characterized by many of the same themes and practices as the Arab revolutions, the

Green Movement nevertheless differed from its successors in being a post-revolutionary phenomenon, given Iran’s achievement in overthrowing the regime of a dictatorial Western ally in 1979.

Abandoned politics

The Green Movement’s post-revolutionary credentials were made evident in its ability to lay claim to the Islamic Revolution itself, having, after all, inherited the extraordinarily nonviolent forms of protest that had characterized its predecessor before the establishment of the Islamic Republic. And apart from Libya, where an opposition forced by a dictator into violence has made Western intervention possible, the revolutions of the Arab world have been marked by nonviolence. Interesting in this respect have been the many references not to any model provided by the West, but to the kind of civil disobedience represented by Gandhi, whose portrait can sometimes be seen borne aloft by crowds of demonstrators in places like Bahrain. The thing about nonviolence, of course, is that its practices cannot be confined to the institutional politics that characterizes parties and states, but always spills out to remake society at every level. And to my mind what is important about the nonviolence of these revolutions is not simply their tautological lack of violence, but instead the abandonment and transformation of politics itself.

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Demonstrations throughout the region have been marked by efforts to take back the state and re-ap-



Khaled Said
by Kimo Nour. ©

appropriate its symbols. This was particularly the case in Egypt, with flags, anthems and slogans abundantly deployed by the protestors. But in the process these symbols of nation and state were also evacuated of their political content and joined up with explicitly civilian forms of celebration. Thus the sloganeering and revelry in Tahrir Square borrowed freely from the chants and other practices of football fans, including dancing and face painting. And indeed what could the old-fashioned words



This banner says: idiots needs one push
Flickr: Kodak Agfa ©

“people” or “revolution” mean in a post-Cold War global arena? The relatively superficial use made of such terms in the protests, then, might well suggest their attenuation as political categories. Such an interpretation becomes more convincing when we consider the remarkable forms of self-organization and indeed self-rule that suddenly emerged in the square after decades of centralized and oppressive government, none of which bore any similarity to traditional political forms.

By taking them over, the revolutions have in some ways given the old categories of Middle Eastern politics a new reality. So, for instance, the revolts imitating each other across the region have made Pan-Arabism into a popular reality for the first time, but only in a negative way, without any ideology to match. Even the solicitude for the nation displayed by Egyptians eager to do things like clean the streets of Cairo, absorbs such categories of the state into everyday practices and non-political forms. Similar

are the creation of new relations between rich and poor, Christians and Muslims, even the people and the army – which was after all being seduced from its duty and in fact from the state by the protestors in Tahrir Square. Of course none of these extraordinary phenomena may survive what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, but even so they illustrate both the power and the possibilities of nonviolence beyond the limits of our inherited politics. And I believe that it is precisely beyond these limits that we all need to look in order to make an incalculable future possible for ourselves.