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Part.2: What does it mean to be an Arab leftist today?

LSE Ideas

By Maher Sharif (with introduction and translation by Neil Ketchley)

We do not yet know into what shape events in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere will sediment. We know these events do not yet constitute revolutions. We have not seen the kind of radical change in how power is organised to justify that label. As such, they remain, as described in the Arabic-language press, popular uprisings or *intifadas*. What is increasingly apparent is that these uprisings have developed largely outside of the existing oppositional hierarchies. Islamists especially have been noticeable by their absence (although are assumed to be waiting on the sidelines). Mobilisations appear increasingly spontaneous and are framed around demands for popular participation in the political process, an end to monarchical-like presidencies, more jobs, lowering the cost of essential goods, and an end to corruption. In Egypt today we heard the call by organised labour to unite in a general strike.

Whilst the political present looks increasingly contested, it seems especially salient to listen to the voices in the Arabic-speaking world and the alternatives they offer. With this in mind, Maher Charif concludes his two-part piece by asking, *What does it mean to be an Arab leftist today?* Originally published as an op-ed in the Syrian communist weekly, *Al-Nur*, and re-written for LSE IDEAS, Charif outlines his analysis of the Arab Left, its shortcomings and how it might be rejuvenated.

Read Part.1, [here](#)

“Deepening multi-dimensional democracy

The most important task for the Arab Left is its struggle for democracy; one based on the separation of powers, free and regular elections, public freedoms, individualism, and the peaceful circulation of power. But the Left is not content solely with these dimensions of democratisation. The Arab Left struggles for a deeper kind of democracy, one composed of social and economic dimensions, too. Political democracy remains incomplete if not linked to social progress. At the same time, any social gains which are not linked to the attainment of political democracy will be lost over time; as many of the experiments in several Arab countries have testified.

The problem of nationalism

The Arab Left is struggling with two elements: first, the national element which comes from the necessary struggle against imperialism and Zionism; and a second, democratic element. The struggle against imperialism and Zionism will not succeed if it does not relate organically with the struggle for democratic change and the guarantee of popular participation. Simultaneously, it is the internal weaknesses of Arab societies that helps facilitate the foreign intervention in Arab affairs. A free and sovereign homeland requires a free citizen, one who feels he is the master of his own country.

The national struggle is not limited to a just solution of the Palestinian issue, the liberation of occupied Arab lands, and the realisation of a permanent regional peace. It also includes the elimination of the foreign military presence in the Arab countries, the popular control of the natural Arab wealth, and for the basis of a democratic union between Arab states.

The attitude towards the religious problem

Historically, Arab Leftists, and among them communists, have expressed a respect for religious beliefs. Nevertheless, in the present circumstances, distinguished by the instrumentalisation of religion in politics and the mixing of the sacred and the profane, compels us to confront and understand religion as a social phenomenon that confirms the need for a secular, modern state.

In reality, the Left, and in particular the Marxist Left, when addressing religion, have tended to perpetuate a false interpretation based on selective quotations from Marx, taken out of their historical context. If one goes back to the Marxist heritage, one finds that Marx himself sensed the contradictory character of the religious phenomenon, and its tendency to confer legitimacy on systems of exploitation, whilst also having a proven revolutionary potential in confronting those same systems of exploitation. See, for example, Rosa Luxemburg, who employed the social liberatory traditions of Christianity in the labour movement struggle. She considered, *pace* the conservative clerics, socialists more faithful to the original principles of Christianity. Ditto the work of Antonia Gramsci, who grasped the role of religion in the production of hegemonic discourses and the shaping of popular audiences.

Marxism: in the scientific and philosophic domain, critical and liberatory.

Marxism continues to retain its vivacity and remains a reference for the Left. Not as a dry doctrine, but as a philosophical and scientific domain; that is, as both critical and liberatory. Karl Marx opened a field that after more than a century and half of contributions has revealed the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation, whilst outlining the basis for a new society. And this field remains open to new contributions, reflecting both the continuous development of human existence and the new phenomena that the world continues to witness. With the acceleration of globalisation, we have seen new forms of domination, i.e. financial dependence spread via debt, profound transformations in the structure of the working classes with the entrance of science as a direct power in production, and new forms of information technology. And yet, the Marxist field is not limited to the study of just these phenomena. It has to reach and approach the methodology of dialectical materialism itself. Marx's methodology, developed through his study of the capitalist social formation and its contradictions, assumes that his methodology was not separate from his theory. I argue a contrarian position that states that any scientific methodology is not immune from broader historical developments and the introduction of new sources of knowledge itself, thus making it approximate and partial.

The activation of political work

To be a Leftist today is to defend the political sphere and make people care about politics. The party remains the principle frame through which the Arab Left can stimulate political activity in today's societies. However, it will not succeed without greater participation from the young and the enhancing of democratic mechanisms within the parties themselves. Further, Arab Left parties must expand into the rural areas and not remain centralised in the cities, whilst at the same time, increasing the participation of women and end the male monopolisation of political space. Finally, we must rebuild the links between the intelligentsia, who are historically the carriers of political work in Arab society."

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