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Egypt, Tunisia and the Arab Revolts: How They Came to an Impasse and How to Get Out of It

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Author's foreword

I began writing the following article in early 2013. An earlier version (“The Arab Spring at an impasse – is there a way out?”) was released, posted and distributed in March 2013 in English (in Egypt) and French (in Tunisia). Since then the Arab-speaking countries and the world have witnessed dramatic developments, some questions and dynamics have become clearer, certain ideas have been tested in practice and my own understanding has advanced. This revised and expanded version was produced thanks to exchanges with people in these countries and especially comments and suggestions by the editors of *Demarcations*.

The article is in two parts. The first examines the issues and arguments that arose in these countries and elsewhere, and focuses on experience and conditions in Egypt. The second is a more general analysis of what socialist revolution would look like in such a country, and how revolutionary communists could begin to make this vision a living and concrete force among the people.

Egypt and Tunisia are foregrounded because they are the only countries where mass uprisings toppled regimes. That didn't happen in Libya (where Western military intervention played the decisive role), Yemen (the old regime stayed basically intact), or Syria, Bahrain or the other Arab countries where the old order has been challenged since 2011. The victory of these two rebellions brought out the fundamental issues at stake all the more clearly, despite the big differences between these countries. This is especially true of Egypt, where, without predicting the future, we can say that a stage has come to a close.

PART ONE

From the People United to the People Divided

Ash-shab /yurid / isqat an-nizam – “The people / they want / the regime to fall!” These words expressed a unity of purpose that history seldom sees and always remembers, when people in their millions suddenly stand up and what seemed eternal suddenly crumbles. Two regimes – seemingly as sturdy as they were brutal – came crashing down, and the shock waves encompassed the globe.

But the spontaneous revolts against hated despots that seemed to unite the people, or at least the most active sections of the people, gave rise to more complex and contradictory phenomena. Now the people are anything but united in Egypt and Tunisia. They are being pulled between two reactionary gangs under the warring banners of political Islam and Western imperialist-sponsored capitalist democracy.

These two trends have long been at work in Tunisia and Egypt, including from the moment when hundreds of thousands of people in the street brought about the ouster of Ben Ali and Mubarak. But back then the people were relatively united and had the initiative, forcing the military in both countries to retreat and abandon strongmen once seen as pillars of stability. Tongues held silent by repression, tradition and the division of

society into classes began to speak, people listened to everything, minds opened wide, and their revolt – the power and depth of their dissatisfaction with the existing order – seemed invincible.

Now the people are not only influenced by these trends, but to a large extent they are flocking to join one or the other rival camp headed by representatives of a reactionary order and enemies of the best aspirations people once fought and died for as they chanted “Dignity” and “Bread, freedom and social justice.” The worst problem is that so many people have been convinced that there is no alternative except one or the other form of reactionary rule.

On one side stand the liberal proponents of the Western values marketed as “freedom,” especially the “free market” that has crushed the vast majority of people in every country, and the corresponding belief in Western-style capitalist democracy and its system of elections that have never brought basic change anywhere. They have nothing but contempt and repression to offer the impoverished urban masses and most of the vast population in the rural areas.

In Egypt, the liberals dropped their rhetoric about majority rule, political rights and the rule of law and reached out to “the nation’s armed forces” that, despite the claims of many so-called Marxists in Egypt, have never been “the armed forces of the people and the nation.” The military has always been a central pillar of the imperialist-dependent Egyptian ruling exploiter classes, and spoon-fed and led by the nose by the U.S. for the last four decades.

The armed forces could not have stepped in so easily if they had not received the mass support organized by the liberals and “leftists,” including the youth organizations who mobilized demonstrations in Tahrir and other squares on June 30, 2013 to beckon the generals to save them from Islamist rule and then to give legitimacy to the July 3rd coup. In those months some of those now trying to disassociate themselves from the army’s crimes were chanting, “The people and the army are one hand.”¹

This slogan, which arose in the uprising against Mubarak and reached a crescendo when the military deserted him, all but faded out later that year when the army shot down Christians, youth and others demonstrating against it. At that time, the Islamists courted the army instead of opposing that violent repression. The military later gave them its consent to form a government, although it never gave up the key ministries and other positions, or its veto power. Now that chant represents more than an illusion. In the face of today’s difficult and frightening disorder, it is a program for restoring the old order and worse. There cannot be a “reset” so that the same game can be played over.

On the other side stand the Islamists, who claim to represent freedom from Western domination, hypocrisy and humiliation while institutionalizing the backward economic and social relations and thinking that have helped keep Egypt weak and vulnerable to the domination of foreign capital. Their project is to combine exploitation, oppression and inequality with the false solace of religion, the hypocritical charity of the mosque and the suffocating solidarity of “the community of the faithful” that abolishes critical thinking.

They do not seek to liberate the nation, let alone make possible the flourishing of the people’s creativity and the positive aspects of their culture as a liberated part of the whole of humanity, able to draw on all human achievements. Their most central principle – “Islam is the solution” – precludes uniting the vast majority of people. Instead, they want to rally those willing to submit to them out of their particular religious belief and force acceptance on the rest. This excludes Christians, followers of other varieties of Islam (such as Sufis and other Sunni practices common in Egypt, not to mention Shias), observant Sunni Muslims who reject theocracy, agnostics and atheists, or in other words, a large percentage of the population. Their solution to Western-induced “disorder” is state enforcement of religious authority and the relations between people dictated by patriarchy. This is central to their sought-for social and moral order.

“The People” Can’t Be United by Wishful Thinking

Even if some of the features of the events of July and August 2013 resemble those of 2011, such as the huge crowds continuing to fill the streets, they have a different character. In fact, the words “the people” don’t mean the same thing now.

Does the fact that Islamist governments were elected in Tunisia and Egypt and that Islamists can still rally huge numbers in both countries, or conversely, that Egypt’s generals could bring out millions to support their coup – does this cancel out the even more basic fact that both sides represent the enslavement of the vast majority,

whether people understand that right now or not? The crowds in Tahrir Square, Alexandria and other cities demanding Mubarak's resignation in January 2011, were a minority of the population, but they represented the interests of the people. The crowds on June 30, 2013, and afterwards in support of the coup – as well as those backing the Muslim Brotherhood – did not, no matter how big.

Yet after the fall of Mubarak, most of the Egyptian self-described left and youth organizations that spearheaded the anti-Mubarak movement went from pillar to post between these two reactionary alternatives.

For instance, the Egyptian Trotskyist organization Revolutionary Socialists backed the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi in the presidential elections with the argument that his victory would be a blow against old regime forces.² Then, having suddenly discovered that Islamists act like Islamists – and when popular support for the Brotherhood government shrank – they helped organize the demonstrations in favor of the army and blessed the coup, calling Morsi's removal “the democracy of the popular revolution, direct democracy creating revolutionary legitimacy.” After that, when the reactionary military acted like a reactionary military – using snipers, bird shot, armored cars, plainclothes thugs and everything else they had employed against the Tahrir Square rebels throughout 2011 – and especially after even Mohamed ElBaradei and other leading liberals found it necessary to disassociate themselves from the massacres and the alliance with the junta began to tear, then the Revolutionary Socialists followed them out the door.

Despite their claim that “never for one day” had they supported either the Brotherhood or the military, in fact the so-called Revolutionary Socialists have supported both. Nor is it true that any of those who now dominate the political stage, the military, leading liberal politicians or Islamists, have suddenly “betrayed the revolution.” Events have shown that there has been no revolution, and that these ruling class forces have always served reactionary interests, never changing their nature and goals as they maneuvered amid complex and evolving situations. Any genuine revolutionary movement should not only understand that itself but do its best to bring that understanding to as many people as possible, instead of tailing various combinations of bourgeois-democratic, pro-Western and religious illusions that both now-warring sides have propagated among the masses of people and from which the people have suffered all along.

The ideas theorized by this group, which is neither revolutionary nor socialist, crystallize notions that are much more widespread in a less self-conscious form, and this is what makes them important to refute: “The number of people who demonstrated on that legendary day [June 30] is estimated to exceed 17 million citizens, an unprecedented occurrence in history. This surpasses in significance any participation by old regime remnants, or the apparent support of the army and police. Mass demonstrations of millions are exceedingly rare events in human history, and their effect on the consciousness and confidence of the populace in themselves and in their power to change the course of history transcend the limitations of the slogans raised and the political alternatives put forward.”³

Really? This logic – the numbers of people supporting something is more important than what it stands for – is what brought the RS to support the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists for years, backing the very Morsi government whose overthrow they now hail. With this logic, since the Tunisian Islamists can hold much bigger (and livelier) rallies than the deflated “left” and the liberal politicians, then “revolutionaries” should still support the Ennahda party. Continuing with this logic, one would have to conclude that the appearance of multitudes at Nazi mass rallies at Nuremberg (about a million in 1938) “transcend[ed] the limitations of the slogans raised and the political alternatives put forward” and marked an “exceedingly rare” leap in the “consciousness and confidence of the populace in themselves and in their power to change the course of history.” And the people who come out to support the Pope – probably the world's biggest mass events in the last decades, with three million in Rio in July 2013 – must be “exceedingly” advanced. This latter comparison is particularly relevant, because the excuse the RS gives for tailing Islamism is that most Egyptians believe in religion – as if they could never reach any other understanding but were doomed to benighted backwardness.

The June and July pro-army rallies in Egypt were not Nazi-like – they were confused and misguided, but they had an exceedingly harmful result: not only did they make it possible for the military to step in and rule directly, they surrendered the initiative to the generals and made possible the creation of an unfavorable – horrible – situation. This was not only a tremendous setback for a movement that started out demanding “Bread, freedom and social justice;” it represented a reversal of course and a huge loss of “the consciousness and confidence of the populace in themselves and in their power to change the course of history.”

This Trotskyist group's summation, to quote Lenin, is like wishing people many happy returns of the day at a funeral. What it celebrates is exactly what was most tragic about those demonstrations and the situation since

then: millions of people rallying around slogans and political alternatives – on both sides, and not just one – that represent a dead end and reflect a widespread and potentially fatal confusion that real revolutionaries have to overcome themselves and criticize if the millions awakened to political life are not to be bludgeoned back to sleep.

Yes, mass participation in political life can present opportunities for revolutionary advance, especially at times such as Mubarak's ouster when people were questioning the old order and willing to sacrifice to upend it. But tailing what is perceived to be the majority was always a mistake, even before it led to the shameful extreme of a justification for reaching out to the military to kick out the Muslim Brotherhood government and then calling the coup – a prelude to a bloodbath – a victory for the people. It is an example of the harm done by what has been called "populist epistemology," truth being determined by what people think, rather than scientific epistemology, truth being determined by a thoroughly materialist understanding of reality in its workings, motion and underlying dynamics.⁴

What people think matters. It is up to the communists, those equipped with a scientific understanding of reality, to work to bring forward that understanding – that consciousness – among the masses of people themselves, whose spontaneous understanding cannot escape the shackles of the ideas of the ruling classes – the dominant ideology – and the conditions of life created by systems of exploitation that breed and forcibly impose ignorance. This is a basic point of the revolutionary communist understanding of revolution and a dividing line between those whose goal is to eliminate all the material and ideological obstacles to a future where human beings, collectively and as individuals, are free to consciously transform the world and themselves, and those "condescending saviors" (to quote the *Internationale*, the anthem of the communists, and the oppressed and the exploited) who cannot conceive of such a world and for whom the masses of people are livestock.

Yes, revolutionaries must work to unite the vast masses of people through the march of events, but any solid unity must be on the basis of a real – scientific, not wishfully-based – revolutionary alternative. In fact, these "socialists" and others are contributing to the division of the people along reactionary lines. There will always be a polarization of people around different ideological and political poles – and what is needed is a repolarization where one of the poles actually represents a revolutionary solution, not a reactionary polarization between two reactionary solutions.

Whereas people of all social classes were mainly united, although far from completely, in bringing about the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, today the political polarization is unfavorable from the point of view of revolution. In both Egypt and Tunisia, the lower classes of the rural areas and the slums and the urban middle classes are divided among and against each other. This situation is bad enough, but it holds the potential for even worse: a bloody disaster in which the people fight not for their real common interests but against those interests and each other, as in Syria, taking revenge for their particular oppression on their fellow oppressed. It may seem inconceivable that Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries could go down that path, and it's true that Egypt, Tunisia and Syria are very different, but two years ago, it was inconceivable to most Syrians that their country could end up where it is today.

It is worth comparing today's dire situation in Syria to the history of World War One, not to equate today's situation with world war but to emphasize what can be done with a theoretical analysis that, if true, recognizes a revolutionary alternative that "common sense" does not. At the time of the world war, almost all European "socialists," with the very notable exception of Lenin and the Bolshevik party in Russia, ended up supporting their respective ruling classes in the mutual slaughter. There was an all but universally accepted belief that the only choice for the masses was which ruling class would win the war, or what the terms of such a victory would be. With great prescience, Lenin stressed that a war that began as an imperialist war need not *finish* as an imperialist war, but could be transformed into a different kind of revolutionary civil war, a proletarian revolution. And this is exactly what he led the Bolsheviks and revolutionary masses in Russia in doing.

The factors that make the current situation in Arab countries so dangerous and terrifying cannot be wished away – but the people must be liberated from the confines of the deadly "choices" presented to them today. These same factors for dislocation and horror also bear within them the possibilities for a rapid and more favorable realignment in society and the emergence of a genuine revolutionary alternative. But this can only come about if at least a beginning force representing and fighting for the people's real, revolutionary common interests and responsibilities begins to emerge and take hold. In this way a revolutionary alternative can start to become a real material factor in society, challenging the reactionary alternatives people feel they have to choose between – by becoming a movement that fights to establish a revolutionary state against these alternatives.

Revolts and Revolution

The splits in the ruling classes that kept the Tunisian and Egyptian armies from decisively intervening to save the old regime provided an opening for the rebellions. But these splits are also a source of wishful thinking – about the neutrality of the army, the interests and intentions of the U.S. and its allies, and the power of a spontaneous movement.

Overthrowing a tyrant is not the same thing as overthrowing a system. There have been regime changes but not yet a revolution in this scientific sense. Moreover, the old order is striking back as competing new and old representatives of the prevailing economic and social relations battle to impose an end to the chaos on their own reactionary terms and for their own reactionary interests.

Not only has the Egyptian military always been the backbone of the state, as is invariably the case under both electoral democracy and open tyranny, but moreover, this specific military never gave up key positions. Mohamed Morsi was allowed to become president under a deal in which he guaranteed that the armed forces would directly control the ministry of defense (with complete immunity from civilian oversight) and the ministry of the interior (the police and the various gangs of thugs organized by Mubarak), and enjoy veto power over foreign policy.⁵

This is not to say that there were no profound differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and the armed forces, as we'll discuss later, nor to deny the importance of the political changes General Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi is trying to impose. But the essence of the question is not that one form of bourgeois dictatorship – electoral democracy – was replaced by another, more or less open military rule, at least temporarily, although elections are promised. It is that the U.S. and the ruling classes of Egypt associated with it will use every combination of violence and subterfuge to maintain their grasp on Egypt, no matter who fills government offices.

Still, this whole chain of events has not shown the invincibility of American power. Just the opposite – the U.S. has constantly been trying to turn things to its interests amid an unpredictable and often uncontrollable situation. That is the dilemma Washington policy-makers face in Egypt, Tunisia and some other Arab countries: with the Islamists or against them, the situation is extremely complicated and dangerous for U.S. imperialism.

It would be tragic not to recognize the continuing favorable factors for revolution in the region. The profound economic, political, social and ideological contradictions that gave rise to the Arab Spring have not been resolved; in most of these countries things cannot go back to the way they were before. People have awoken to political life, become more confident in their own power and each other, displayed a capacity for enormous courage and self-sacrifice and gained a sense that even long-standing and deeply entrenched regimes can be toppled. Also, the world situation does not favor long-term local stability, especially in such a strategic and contested area as the Middle East.

But it would also be wrong and tragic to count on a favorable resolution to these contradictions through the spontaneous unfolding of events. That would mean leaving the future in the hands of the various contending reactionary forces – and whatever happens, we can be sure *that* future will be ugly. This is not what so many people sacrificed to bring about.

How Revolutionary Communist Leadership Could Be a “Game Changer”

At this moment, in all of the Arab countries, and generally in the world for that matter, revolutionary communists have not been able to mobilize the people, most especially the impoverished sections of the masses, into a political force for bringing about the kind of radical change that their conditions, the liberation of the oppressed countries and the emancipation of humanity require. That is a central part of the problem that revolutionary-minded youth and others have not been able to solve on the basis of practice alone, despite their heroic struggle and sacrifice. It is a key part of what anyone seeking real revolutionary change has to work to transform.

What was best in the movements against Ben Ali and Mubarak can't flourish today without a new leadership that can correctly identify the real, fundamental interests of the people, and on that basis distinguish friends and enemies and begin to unite and mobilize broad sections of the masses of different strata to defeat those enemies and seize and wield state power to transform the country and its people and ultimately the world.

What's needed is a true "game changer," a core of women and men guided by the most revolutionary goals and scientific theory – revolutionary communists – who can lead thousands and then millions and bring about a resolution of these contradictions that would be in the interests of the great majority of people in the region and the whole world.

That requires the coming together of a group of people with that vision, a plan to make it real and a scientifically-based daring and determination to overcome obstacles and accomplish very difficult tasks. There is, in today's world, the revolutionary communist theory that can be applied to make this possible: the new synthesis of revolutionary communism that has been brought forward by Bob Avakian.⁶ This method, approach and body of work needs to be deeply studied, fiercely debated and mercilessly compared and contrasted with the wrong political strategies and underlying ideas that are an obstacle to seizing the possibilities for revolution in Egypt, Tunisia and other countries.

Emphasizing and developing an insight expressed by Marx, Avakian has pointed out that "In fact the actual breakdown of the existing system is impossible in practice if it has not been done first in theory, that is to say, in the understanding of many people."⁷ This may seem counter-intuitive in a political environment where some people believe that the truth and the goal lies with the biggest demonstrations – the majority. It brings us back to the point made in the polemic against the Revolutionary Socialists: without a scientific understanding of reality, the possibility of revolution is invisible. It cannot be detected by the naked eye, without the aid of a correct – true – theoretical framework.

Concretely, a crucial factor lacking in the Arab revolts is a correct understanding of the *alternative* to the world as it is and how particular countries can be economically and politically transformed to become a springboard for that future. A scientifically-based vision could start to become a material force as growing numbers of people come to oppose the non-solutions represented by the Islamists and the liberals and fight with the goal of achieving revolutionary political power. This is the only way that the people can begin to throw off their mental shackles, overcome the divisions among them and unite for the emancipation of humanity from all forms of exploitation and oppression. As hard as that may be, any other solution is an illusion.

Rival – and Mutually Reinforcing – "Outmodeds"

To a far-too-great extent, the political situation in the Arab world is characterized by the clash between rival representatives of the status quo, each preaching enslaving ideologies. This is part of a global phenomenon. In *Bringing Forward Another Way*, (*Revolution* no. 82, March 18, 2007), Avakian analyzed, "What we see in contention here with Jihad on the one hand and McWorld/McCrusade on the other hand, are historically outmoded strata among colonized and oppressed humanity up against historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system. These two reactionary poles **reinforce** each other, even while opposing each other. If you side with either of these 'outmodeds,' you end up strengthening both.

"While this is a very important formulation and is crucial to understanding much of the dynamics driving things in the world in this period, at the same time we do have to be clear about which of these 'historically outmodeds' has done the greater damage and poses the greater threat to humanity: It is the 'historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system,' and in particular the U.S. Imperialists."

Today that path-breaking insight is even more important in terms of understanding the situation in the Arab world (and beyond) today, where both jihadis waging war with the West and Islamists seeking Western political acceptance are flourishing precisely because, on the one hand, of economic changes and the weakening and discrediting of the old power structures and official ideologies, and on the other, a reaction against the bloody force used to prop up the existing state. The banning of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is not going to settle the question.

Islamic fundamentalism is not the continuation of an age-old religiosity. It crystallized in the 1920s, at a time when the Western big powers were carving up the Middle East among themselves following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Salaf refers to ancestors and Salafism seeks a return to the supposed lifestyle of the Prophet and his companions. It was during a time of great change that this vision became the basis of a political program and movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. Arising first in Egypt, it soon became associated with the House of Saud and later Saudi Arabia, a tribal regime fathered by Britain that, with the discovery of oil in 1938, was to become tightly connected to the U.S. The question was not how to return to a bygone semi-nomadic

existence but how to establish regimes and societies that could fit Western interests while adopting an ideology that could preserve the reactionary social order and provide new rulers with legitimacy.

In some countries these Islamists began as representatives of traditional exploiting classes, although this has been modified by their relations with imperialist capital, as in Iran. In other countries – Egypt is an outstanding example – the success of the Muslim Brotherhood is associated with the flourishing of new capitalists outside of the old state-connected ruling circles.⁸ It is important to examine how they arose and the conditions under which they turned to Islamism. Here we'll mention two major factors, without trying to go further than the author's current understanding and data at hand permit. In general, what comes through is an incomplete, distorted and disarticulated development of capitalism and the persisting influence of present and historic feudal and other pre-capitalist modes of production.

In the Sa'id, along the upper Nile, the social pyramid is still dominated by traditional aristocratic families who claim descent from the Prophet and other descendants of the Arab invaders, with the *fellahin* (peasants) at the bottom. In the Nile Delta, Coptic Christian and Muslim landlord families maneuvered to preserve large landholdings despite Nasser's extensive agrarian reform and overall efforts to break the power of the feudals linked to Britain. The agrarian "counter-reform" under Mubarak and the rise of capital-intensive production for the world market along with a deliberate policy of crushing family subsistence holdings⁹ was marked by a comeback of former feudal families whose power was never merely economic, and today's capitalist agriculture bears those birthmarks. As we will discuss later, not only does more than half of the population live – most often barely – in rural areas, the countryside has come to the city in the form of a vast number of immigrant city-dwellers kept economically, socially and culturally marginalized from modern life.

Further, in Egypt, as in other countries, the enormous growth in the number of university students and university-trained professionals has been conditioned both by the country's traditional class structure and the fact that there is no suitable employment for them in their country. More than a few come from the families of present or former landlords and other members of the traditional rural elite. Many millions of Egyptian technicians, engineers and other experts, as well as skilled workers and people from the lower classes, have worked elsewhere in the region. In fact, students often chose their profession with the idea of making their fortunes abroad. During the last several decades, some three million Egyptians from the lower and middle classes went to work in the Gulf countries, where many acquired capital along with an enthusiasm for Wahabi (Salafi) Islam and particularly backward customs and modes of religious expression previously unknown in Egypt, like the niqab (veil, including when referred to as full covering of head and face).

When it comes to influencing the population, the many satellite TV channels featuring murder-mouth Salafi preachers far surpass the Internet social networks. Qatar has channeled piles of money into the Brotherhood apparatus, and the Saudis have done the same for the Salafists. But in addition to the training and the funding, the model provided by the Gulf monarchies is powerful: rich countries with all modern comforts and the latest consumer goods, ruled by medieval political structures and ideology.

As will be discussed later, another major factor is the ideological effect of the end of the first stage of socialist revolution, especially the fall of revolutionary China and restoration of capitalism there, and the collapse of almost all the revolutionary and nationalist movements that more or less looked to China in the Arab-speaking countries (such as among the Palestinians). It should be made clear that this means the absence of the projection of a revolutionary alternative to imperialism and its universalizing ideology, and not just or mainly the organizational weakness of the "left." The argument that the well-organized Islamists have profited from the weakness of the traditional "left" begs the question of why formerly influential parties lost their relevance.¹⁰

These factors may shed light on why the Brotherhood has dominated major professional associations (such as engineers, doctors and dentists) and Cairo University, although some of those who most fear their rule are also concentrated in these same professions. But the Islamist base among these strata has to be considered in relation to the other end of the "social ladder" as well – the many millions of Egyptians who live in traditional ways in the countryside and the millions driven off the land and into the cities where they are denied any dignified place in what is called modern society. During its crackdown after the coup, the military shut down the north-south railroads carrying thousands of rural people to support the Brotherhood's Cairo sit-in. Pro-Brotherhood rallies and clashes were reported in places south of Cairo like Faiyum and Middle and Upper Egypt not often known for political activity.

Many scholars have pointed out that the Brotherhood's social and economic policies are entirely consistent with the model imposed by the IMF and World Bank. Whether bitterly critical of the West or hoping for

acceptance, such forces have no program for overcoming their countries' dependency on the world market and imperialist capital.

But some of these same scholars, like many other people, have made the mistake of concluding that there is no real conflict between imperialism and these and other Islamists. Islamism is a political and ideological movement that challenges not only the political and much of the ideological superstructure the West has imposed on these countries but the universal validity of the values proclaimed by the West – and proposes another, equally universalizing outlook. This is related to its opposition, if not to capitalism in general, at least to some features of the current imperialist world order, even while basically seeking a place within the imperialist system, that is, the domination of the world and the organization of its economy by – and for the benefit of – the monopoly capitalist ruling classes of the imperialist countries.

The U.S. did not prefer that the Egyptian Brotherhood or Ennahda in Tunisia come to power, but given the delegitimization and dismembering of the old power structures, accepting the entry of Islamists into the state structure was seen as Washington's best available option. The imperialists and their advisors were quite capable of imagining the disaster that might have unfurled if the army had been called upon to carry out a massacre to save Mubarak in 2011, rather than waiting to depose Morsi in 2013. Up until the 2013 coup, the U.S. continued to finance Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government to the same extent as it did Mubarak, while the bulk of its aid continued to go to the Egyptian military. Similarly, the U.S. has, for now, found the Ennahda government in Tunisia tolerable.

Yet the provisional fit between the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda, etc. and Western interests is only one side of the question. Islamism has its own logic. While the Brotherhood and Ennahda say they have evolved away from their original Salafist fundamentalism, once religion is taken as the ultimate source of moral right and political legitimacy, then the borders between the varieties of Islamism become more porous. Even in Turkey, supposedly a model of "moderate" political Islam, this has spurred and not stopped the rise of more "extreme" forms inside and outside the governing AKP. The AKP's economic "success" – presiding over Turkey's further integration into global capitalism – has made the enforced Islamization of Turkish society even more necessary to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's project, while at the same time fueling a sharper conflict between Islamist and secular political forces on the other. What used to be called Erdogan's "Islamism lite" has not proved sustainable because of inherent contradictions at work.

Islamism in general seeks political power to implement an all-encompassing vision and ideology that appeals to the most backward aspects of a tradition and social relations being undercut by imperialist-dominated capitalist development. There are real ideological dynamics at work in the cohesion of these organizations and within the Islamist movement as a whole. The influence of fundamentalist and jihadi forms of Islamism has soared under "moderate" Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia.

The biggest division among Sunni Islamists is not the scope of their religious project and has little to do with "moderates" versus "militants." It is the relationship they wish to have with the U.S. and the West. For example, while certainly not "moderate in its Salafism, the Saudi state gave refuge to the relatively secular Ben Ali and supported Mubarak and the coup against the Brotherhood. The country is a tribal-based monarchy, not a theocracy, and the royal family fears being denounced as apostates by Saudi religious authorities because of their close ties with the U.S. To give another example, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's heir as head of Al Qaeda, came out of the same Egyptian Brotherhood that said it sought good relations with the U.S. The two currents overlap and interact – historically the Brotherhood and Ennahda have encompassed both.

Further, there is an inherent contradiction between the U.S.'s willingness to call on Islamic legitimacy to shore up its regional domination, and the role of Israel as the most reliable enforcer of that domination. Again, to take the example of Turkey, it is not so easy for any Islamist government to celebrate good relations with Israel and still keep its legitimacy. This became evident in the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, when the Turkish government, at that time considered Israel's best friend in the Middle East, first allowed a flotilla to try to break the Israeli blockade and bring aid to Gaza, and then, when Israel attacked the lead ship and killed nine people, roared in impotent rage but did nothing.

The Brotherhood sought to straddle this contradiction. It promised to protect Israel but also strengthened Hamas, an offshoot of the Egyptian Brotherhood. Whatever the Brotherhood's intentions, under its government armed tribal Islamists blossomed in the Sinai desert, to the great alarm of the U.S. and its Zionist junior partner. Protecting Israel seems to have been a major factor in both the U.S.'s acceptance of the Brotherhood

government when the army seemed unable to forcibly impose social order in Egypt, and U.S. eagerness to dump the Brotherhood while continuing its uninterrupted embrace of the Egyptian armed forces.

Mechanical Pseudo-Marxism Versus Dialectical Materialism

Among many people who call themselves Marxists there has been a serious misunderstanding of Islamic fundamentalism arising from a mechanical, unscientifically-founded “class analysis.” This methodological approach is linked to and reinforces political views that tend to tail one or another of the “outmoded,” Islamism or Western imperialism and its Arab political representatives, the pro-Western liberal political parties. Making a one-to-one equation between class and ideology actually goes against Marxism’s dialectical and materialist understanding.¹¹

On the one hand, there is the view that can only see what it claims is the class composition of the Islamist movement. The Trotskyist theoretician Chris Harman made a widely influential analysis that calls “radical Islam... a ‘utopia’ emanating from an impoverished section of the new middle class.”¹² This account does not see the real role of religion as more than simply the “opium of the people”, a source of dulling consolation. It does not perceive religion as an ideology, a world outlook, a coherent set of ideas that reflects and reinforces – embodies – earthly, human relations of oppression and exploitation.

Even the idea that Islamic fundamentalism “emanates” from poverty flattens and distorts complex social structures. It doesn’t explain why the profound dissatisfaction of the masses of people is taking this particular form, including among social groups once attracted to communism (such as urban Shia communities in Iraq, for example), or why religious fundamentalism has become such a major force at this point in the world’s development, and not previously, when there was even more absolute poverty and backwardness. Why does it thrive in the oil-rich Gulf states – and among very different social classes? Why do some members of the same strata (whether high and low) back one or another Islamism while others reject it ferociously? Why does the emir of Qatar both host American military bases and support the Egyptian Brotherhood, while the U.S.-dependent United Arab Emirates and the Saudi monarchy hate the Brotherhood? These phenomena do not seem to “emanate” directly from class positions.

Sides never line up neatly on a class basis, and mechanical materialism in the guise of “economic analysis” can’t give us a clue.

On the other hand, there is another widespread analysis of Islamic fundamentalism that uses a similar one-to-one equation of class and ideology, a falsely “Marxist” method, to arrive at the opposite conclusion: that its rise is mainly due to the support of U.S. imperialism and its allies because it “hides class contradictions” and is an obstacle to the development of a national liberation movement. One of the most influential proponents of this view is the Franco-Egyptian economist and political thinker Samir Amin,¹³ who has given theoretical expression to what many Egyptian and other Arab secular intellectuals consider common sense.

Avakian analyses the relationship between religion and economics in a very different way. Scrutinizing Christian religious fundamentalism but using the method he applied to Islamic fundamentalism as well, he wrote, “Some people coming from a kind of narrow economist, social-democratic point of view have fallen into insisting that all this ‘social conservatism,’ or religious fundamentalism, is just a diversion to keep people from actually acting on their own economic interests. This is a serious error and involves failing to grasp the way in which these superstructural things, in particular this whole religious fundamentalism, while it has an *ultimate basis* in economic changes in society and social changes in society, takes on a relative life of its own, has a relative autonomy as an ideological expression... It is being approached, by these social-democrats and bourgeois-democratic progressives, in a way that underestimates the relative autonomy of the superstructure and the way that this, in turn, reacts back upon things in the economic base and in the social relations...”

“There is not a direct one-to-one crude mechanical correspondence between what happens to people economically and how they conceive of that, as refracted through all the different social relations – as it is bent, if you will, when it enters into the whole superstructural realm of ideas and culture, and so on. These ideas and this culture, including reactionary Christian fundamentalism, find ultimate determination in the underlying economic base, but that is its ultimate determination. We have to grasp the dialectics of this, and crude, mechanical materialism will not help.”¹⁴

Religious fundamentalism is not external to the societies where it is flourishing or basically a trick the capitalists

have foisted on the ignorant masses. Its rise owes a great deal to Saudi money, Israeli covert operations and backing from the U.S. and other Western powers aimed at countering both Soviet influence and genuine revolutionary movements – this needs to be pointed out and exposed in detail again and again.¹⁵ But this does not explain the global reception of Islamism today. That reception is in large part due to latter-day imperialism, not because of any plot (the imperialists are always plotting), but the blind workings of the system itself, especially the deep-going and continuing transformations imperialism has brought about in the countries it dominates, and the effects of its crimes within this situation.

As Avakian has explained, “Among the most distinguishing features of today’s situation are the leaps that are occurring in globalization, linked to an accelerating process of capitalist accumulation in a world dominated by the capitalist-imperialist system. This has led to significant, and often dramatic, changes in the lives of huge numbers of people, often undermining traditional relations and customs... [and] contributed to the current growth of religious fundamentalism...”

“Throughout the Third World people are being driven in the millions each year away from the farmlands, where they have lived and tried to eke out an existence under very oppressive conditions but now can no longer do even that: they are being thrown into the urban areas, most often into the sprawling shantytowns, ring after ring of slums, that surround the core of the cities. For the first time in history, it is now the case that half of the world’s population lives in urban areas, including these massive and ever-growing shantytowns.

“Being uprooted from their traditional conditions – and the traditional forms in which they have been exploited and oppressed – they are being hurled into a very insecure and unstable existence, unable to be integrated, in any kind of ‘articulated way,’ into the economic and social fabric and functioning of society. In many of these Third World countries, a majority of the people in the urban areas work in the *informal* economy – for example, as small-scale peddlers or traders, of various kinds, or in underground and illegal activity. To a significant degree because of this, many people are turning to religious fundamentalism to try to give them an anchor, in the midst of all this dislocation and upheaval.

“An additional factor in all this is that, in the Third World, these massive and rapid changes and dislocations are occurring in the context of domination and exploitation by foreign imperialists – and this is associated with ‘local’ ruling classes which are economically and politically dependent on and subordinate to imperialism, and are broadly seen as the corrupt agents of an alien power, who also promote the ‘decadent culture of the West.’ This, in the short run, can strengthen the hand of fundamentalist religious forces and leaders who frame opposition to the ‘corruption’ and ‘Western decadence’ of the local ruling classes, and the imperialists to which they are beholden, in terms of returning to, and enforcing with a vengeance, traditional relations, customs, ideas and values which themselves are rooted in the past and embody extreme forms of exploitation and oppression...”

“But the rise of fundamentalism is also owing to major political changes, and conscious policy and actions on the part of the imperialists in the political arena, which have had a profound impact on the situation in many countries in the Third World, including in the Middle East. As one key dimension of this, it is very important not to overlook or to underestimate the impact of the developments in China since the death of Mao Tsetung and the complete change in that country, from one that was advancing on the road of socialism to one where in fact capitalism has been restored and the orientation of promoting and supporting revolution, in China and throughout the world, has been replaced by one of seeking to establish for China a stronger position within the framework of world power politics dominated by imperialism. This has had a profound effect – negatively – in undermining, in the shorter term, the sense among many oppressed people, throughout the world, that socialist revolution offered the way out of their misery and in creating more ground for those, and in particular religious fundamentalists, who seek to rally people behind something which in certain ways is opposing the dominant oppressive power in the world but which itself represents a reactionary worldview and program...”

“Many of the same youths and others who are, for the time being, drawn toward Islamic and other religious fundamentalisms, would instead have been drawn toward the radically different, revolutionary pole of communism. And this phenomenon has been further strengthened by the demise of the Soviet Union and the ‘socialist camp’ that it headed...”

“All this – and, in relation to it, a relentless ideological offensive by the imperialists and their intellectual camp followers – has led to the notion, widely propagated and propagandized, of the defeat and demise of communism and, for the time being, the discrediting of communism among broad sections of people, including among

those restlessly searching for a way to fight back against imperialist domination, oppression, and degradation.

“But it is not only communism that the imperialists have worked to defeat and discredit. They have also targeted other secular forces and governments which, to one degree or another, have opposed, or objectively constituted obstacles to, the interests and aims of the imperialists, particularly in parts of the world that they have regarded as of strategic importance.”¹⁶

A flat, economist view of the relationship between politics and economics cannot explain the existence of regimes that are economically in tune with the global market but politically problematic to the U.S. and/or other imperialists, such as the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran (and, for that matter, such views cannot understand phenomena like imperialist wars, which are not always guided by immediate profit). Such reductionism underestimates the complexity of the relationship between Western imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, and tends to end up allying with one or the other of the “two outmodeds.”

Siding with and reinforcing of one or both “outmodeds” is what the wrong views we have described have in common. It is part of why so many people who view themselves as progressives or revolutionaries can take such reactionary political positions. This thinking has justified the stand taken by most of the historic left and self-identified secularist forces in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere who have come to see the Islamists as their principal enemy and become appendages of the liberal parties. (Or, for some in the case of Syria, appendages to the ruling Baath party, which is much more secularist and economically liberal and even tolerant of a certain “left” than most regimes in the Middle East – again, the relationship between politics and economics is not so simple. Here we can also see the bankruptcy of “left” parties whose vision, at its most radical, is limited to an Assad-like regime.)

A Vicious Cycle of Mutual Reinforcement

The widely-held hope that the coup in Egypt will spell the decline of political Islam is wishful thinking. Exactly because it is the U.S. and other imperialists who dominate and oppress the world, to the degree that people can see no alternative but to take sides between the Islamists and the pro-Western forces, today’s situation in Egypt could ultimately strengthen Islamists everywhere.

Islamists love to point out the blatant hypocrisy and oppressiveness of the values and morality promoted by the Western imperialists. While the U.S. was preaching about human rights, it was supplying instruments of torture, instruction manuals, lists of questions to be asked and even victims to Mubarak and Assad, and backing every crime perpetuated by Israel. They have turned the earth into a hell for most of the planet’s inhabitants and threaten its very survival. They rave about saving Arab women from Arab men and at the same time promote the degradation of women in their own countries by reducing them to objects for men’s sexual gratification.¹⁷ These imperialists and the leading Arab liberal politicians who are their local representatives cannot provide a solution to the frustration and pain that characterizes daily life for most people, nor an alternative to the religious outlook that expresses hopelessness and submission.

The Islamists will have an advantage as long as they can falsely portray the conflict as one between the vast masses of the downtrodden and privileged apologists for Western domination, rather than as a clash between rival enemies of the interests of the vast majority of the people. The attempt to paint secularists as a minority worried mainly about their endangered privileges is aided by liberals who fear the lower classes and barely bother to address their basic needs.

Even if it were possible for Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, to become what the liberals promise, free of corruption or torture but as tightly linked to foreign capital and the international market as they have always been, with all the inevitably resulting impoverishment, backwardness and inequalities for the masses of people – how could that satisfy the demand for “bread, freedom and social justice”?

And what, in the real world, does bourgeois democracy look like? Witness South Africa, with one of the world’s most advanced bourgeois-democratic constitutions, guaranteeing not only political equality but the right of all citizens to housing, health care, sanitation, food and water, and education. This is a country where inequality has increased since the end of apartheid two decades ago, even as the size of the economy has almost tripled, where the black majority are still kept in misery and strikers are shot dead. Or India, the “world’s largest democracy,” where world-class call centers and factories sprout amid the garbage and raw sewage that the masses have to live in, where hi-tech industry brings wealth to some and nearly all have no reliable electricity,

where medical technology is used to detect and destroy female fetuses, a country marked by extreme poverty, extreme corruption, the caste system, and religious and ethnic oppression.

Or look at the U.S. itself, for that matter, the richest bourgeois democracy of all, with a ruling class bloated by global predation and exploitation, where the stench of the remains of the slavery system permeates society, not to mention the crushing of lives and aspirations by the ordinary workings of the market.

Those who claim that what is needed in North Africa and the Middle East is more capitalist development fail to recognize, or admit, that capitalist development – which can only mean, in today's world, a capitalist development subordinated to imperialist capital, an economy whose various parts are tied to the world market and not an articulated national economy – is what has brought these countries to where they are today. Economic growth rates in Egypt and Tunisia over the last decades have been higher than many other countries. Yet in these two countries, as in most of the region, persistent poverty and backwardness weigh heavily on the whole of society, producing a general sense of frustration and humiliation. To return to Avakian's analysis, this is part of the context in which Islamism has become a new major factor in today's world.

As for the liberals' claims in the political sphere, that they represent "freedom," again Islamists love to point out how the imperialist powers these liberals represent invade country after country and generally run much of the world. When the imperialists' chosen local representatives lose out in electoral maneuvering, suddenly they declare that majority rule, constitutional rights, etc., are no longer sacred to them – as in Egypt. Just like for the Islamists, for them elections and parliament are a means to an end to be adopted or discarded as needed – for the preservation of their system of exploitation and oppression. While it is necessary to wage ideological as well as political struggle against religious fundamentalism, it is equally necessary to oppose not only the liberals' economic program but also their ideology of bourgeois democracy, which is no less a poison than religion in the minds of the masses.

To go back to Avakian's discussion of the relationship between politics and economics, "Now, with regard to the question of freedom and democracy, and the rights of the people, a fundamental point is that when the relations of production are such that the masses of people are denied ownership of the means of production – and therefore are dependent, for their very life and livelihood, on a small group, or class, that monopolizes ownership of the means of production – there is, in the very essence of things, a situation in which these masses have been denied the fundamental ability, or 'right' if you will, to exercise essential control even over their own lives, let alone over society... And not only does this economic relationship – in which one class exercises the power of life and death over others – qualitatively limit, in many ways, the ability of those 'others' to take part in and to play any decisive role in determining the direction of society... but this economic relationship is, and can only be, reflected in the superstructure, in particular in the ways that political power is embodied and exercised to reinforce the exploitative economic relations."¹⁸

Even with real elections, parliamentary democracy is perfectly compatible with and often the best form for the dictatorship of the exploiting classes, as can be seen by looking at the social and political reality in countries all over the world where such elections take place. The formal equality of citizens before the law masks and gives full play to the enormous inequalities that characterize every country.

As Avakian put it: "In a world marked by profound class divisions and social inequality, to talk about 'democracy' – without talking about the class nature of that democracy and which class it serves – is meaningless, and worse. So long as society is divided into classes, there can be no 'democracy for all'; one class or another will rule, and it will uphold and promote that kind of democracy which serves its interests and goals. The question is: which class will rule and whether its rule, and its system of democracy, will serve the continuation, or the eventual abolition, of class divisions and the corresponding relations of exploitation, oppression and inequality."¹⁹

Furthermore, in the countries dominated by imperialism such as in North Africa and the Middle East, not only is parliamentary democracy (when practiced) a form of the dictatorship of the exploiting classes where the interests and deepest desires of the people do not bear any weight in basic decisions, as is also the case in the West, it would be doubly empty because local life is ultimately determined by the interests and decisions of the imperialist powers whose twin instruments of subjugation are their military and the global market. These factors, along with severe poverty and the persistence of pre-capitalist social and economic relations, make it difficult to implement the kind of parliamentary democracy the capitalists generally use to rule in the imperialist countries.

The lack of political rights, censorship and a servile press are general features of the democracy practiced in the

countries oppressed by imperialism. There are reasons why governments in countries whose people are kept in despair by an imperialist-dependent ruling class make even more frequent recourse to vicious repression and torture, along with religion and the increasing Islamization of society (which Mubarak and Ben Ali also promoted, even while trying to keep a lid on the Islamist organizations).

In 1958, Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president after independence, drank a glass of orange juice on TV during Ramadan in an effort to discourage what he considered the economic waste of the country all but grinding to a halt during the month of fasting. That would be inconceivable in any of the Arab countries today, where even Assad, the region's most secular leader, needs all the help he can get from religion. Such is the prevalence of despair and accompanying rise of religion throughout today's world.

When it comes to the imperialists (and their pet pro-Western local politicians) on the one hand, and the Islamists on the other, there is no acceptable choice. In fact, whatever happens, without the emergence of a communist-led revolutionary movement that could change today's political landscape in the Middle East, the people of the region and beyond will suffer from both imperialist dictates and the yoke of religion, and the tensions and conflicts that stem from their interaction.

Why Egypt is the Way it is Today

Imperialism is not just a swear word or a set of policies. It means a system where monopolies and financial institutions control the economies and political structures in their home countries like the U.S. and the "West" in general, and all over the world. The economies – and the lives of people – of the dominated countries are subordinated to the accumulation of capital based in the imperialist countries. As explained in *America in Decline* by Raymond Lotta with Frank Shannon,²⁰ "This is not to say that imperialism simply holds down the oppressed countries, or that it just extracts wealth through unequal trade or naked plunder, although these certainly occur. Imperialist capital can, and in the long run must, develop the economy of these countries. But it must develop them on an imperialist basis – in particular, on a basis favorable to foreign capital – and in contradiction both to the welfare of the broad masses of those countries and to the development of a relatively articulated social formation. Even where capitalist relations have been extensively introduced into these countries, they are not on the road to independent capitalist development." Among other distortions it produces, this kind of capitalist development dispossesses much of the peasantry and other traditional classes but cannot profitably employ them. The result is a "huge under- or permanently unemployed urban 'fringe' population and enormous wasted (unutilizable) labor in the countryside."

These are the characteristics of many Arab countries. It is a chronic situation in Tunisia, which has long legally and "illegally" exported part of its rural population, to take one example, or, to take another, the acute, sudden crisis over the last few years due to Syria's opening to the global market.

As Egypt became more fully integrated into global financial markets during the last several decades, some sections of the economy boomed, but life became even more painful for the majority. In the rural areas, the agricultural "counter-reform" designed to promote modern capitalist agriculture in a countryside characterized by very small landowners turned many *fellahin* into laborers and deliberately drove many more off the land completely. Consequently, cheap labor is so plentiful for the textile mills, clothing plants and other factories located in the Nile Delta that even capitalist China, with its own vast supply of impoverished workers and displaced peasants, has found it advantageous to set up export manufacture there.

Both agriculture and industry remain hobbled because Egypt's insertion in the global imperialist system conditions and sets the limits for its development.²¹ The development that has occurred has often been more speculative or tied to services and consumption rather than basic production.

For instance, although favorable agricultural conditions provided the wealth for one of humanity's earliest civilizations (some irrigated land can yield three crops a year), Egypt has become increasingly dependent on imports from the U.S., along with other countries, for basic foodstuffs like maize and wheat.²² Much of its agricultural resources are devoted to export crops. This began in the early 1800s, when producing cotton became Egypt's assigned place in the "international economic division of labor" – a code word for capitalist and imperialist exploitation.

To take another example, Egypt imports refined petroleum products, even though it is a major oil and gas producer. While its pipelines have carried natural gas to Israel (at a very friendly price), many Egyptians

have been forced to lug heavy and unsafe butane canisters up the stairs to cook for lack of local gas pipes and infrastructure. The butane is imported. So are diesel fuel and gasoline. Government price-fixing just means that these things are often unavailable through official channels and people have to spend time dealing with the black market.

The Suez Canal, built by the forced labor of peasants and later seized back from the British who stole it, is an important source of revenue and employment, especially for skilled workers, but it, too, is basically an export and contributes little to the country's development.

As a consequence of all this, a large part of the population, in the cities and countryside, has been displaced from their traditional lives but not integrated into the formal economy. The persistence of this situation over more than half a century is proof that the problem is not development, but what kind of development.²³

Cairo is one of the world's most sophisticated cities, but the lack of stable jobs, dependence on feudalistic, clan/tribal and other personal relationships of obligation in order to survive, the often improvised and precarious living conditions of many of its inhabitants and even its unsustainable size are conditions very much related to the way that all-sided economic and social development is thwarted by the country's subordination to capital based in the imperialist countries. Vast numbers of people work as replacements for machines (in construction for instance, where a back is cheaper than a crane), or as doormen, guards, helpers and so on. This is a criminal waste of human potential.

At the same time, thanks to television and the Net, American and European living standards and life styles are very familiar to millions of youth who have little plumbing, limited access to schools and no hope of being admitted into that kind of modernity. This situation exists throughout much of the Arab world.

A striking example of the hollow character of the country's development, seen from the perspective of the interests of the people, is Egypt's medical system. Almost everyone is theoretically within a short distance of clinics and hospitals dispensing free treatment. But the bribes required to obtain health care are far beyond the reach of many people. Despite its modern medical facilities, Egypt has a high infant mortality rate, a signal of the real health situation. At the same time, while Egyptian medical schools churn out doctors, many of them go abroad, not only because of the money, but also because as individuals there is little they can do to change this situation. Large amounts of social resources and individual effort that go into the university education are wasted when the person ends up as a chauffeur in London or running a food truck in New York.

The uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere cannot be explained by economic deprivation alone, since that is not new. There is a general feeling throughout these societies that people's lives and the country have come to a dead end.²⁴ These are the conditions that set the stage for both the political crisis that brought down Ben Ali and Mubarak and the rise of Islamism.

Is There a Middle Way between Capitalism and Socialism?

There are some people who try to distance themselves from both the liberals and the Islamists, although they tend to fall into the liberal camp because they hope that a "democratic space" can allow gradual change. They put forward variations on the idea of a "transitional" political and economic structure where capitalism would function in a different way. They call for the state to intervene to force investors into compliance with national and social goals.

For instance, in a spring 2013 article featured on the World Social Forum Web site, Samir Amin outlines a series of concrete steps which, he argues, could avoid both the "crony capitalism" of Mubarak, in which a handful of people tied to the regime and especially Mubarak and his family could thrive (much like in Ben Ali's Tunisia and the Assad family in Syria), and the "liberal" (unrestricted free market) capitalism espoused both by the liberals and the Muslim Brotherhood. We want to examine his proposals not only because of Amin's influence but also because his points are specific, whereas the economic programs of the so-called leftists in the liberals' National Salvation Front, particularly the most prominent among them, the former presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi whom Amin supported, have been so deliberately vague. Amin's ideas crystallize the explicit or implicit program of most of the "left" in Egypt and Tunisia.

1) Put an end to "crony capitalism" by forcing those who were allowed to buy state property at bargain prices to pay for the real value of their holdings. (2) Raise the minimum wage and adopt a salary ceiling. (3) Set up a tripartite commission between the unions (including independent unions not currently recognized by law),

the employers and the state to negotiate rights and benefits. (4) Suppression of state subsidies for monopoly corporations. (5) Higher taxes for large and foreign-owned businesses, lower taxes for small enterprises. (6) The allocation of the resulting budget surplus to health care and other public services. (7) The centralization of credit under a central bank. (8) For small farmers, improvement of agricultural methods, state credits for inputs, distribution cooperatives, the freezing of land rent and new laws making it more difficult to evict peasants from their land.²⁵

The enormity of the country's problems stands in sharp contrast to the paltriness of these proposed solutions. Let's examine just three of the fundamental flaws in this argument.

First, it exaggerates the difference between "crony capitalism" and "liberal" capitalism. In fact, Amin's first point, insisting that capitalists pay the "fair" value (which can only be the market value) for past and present acquisitions is exactly what free market theorists (liberals in the historical sense) advocate.

Capitalism, crony or otherwise, must seek the highest rate of profit. For instance, take agriculture, which Amin admits is the thorniest problem on his list, one that many on the left avoid completely. It is more profitable to concentrate capital in relatively big farms producing a handful of export crops like cotton, import food and let the rest of agriculture stagnate, than to encourage all-around development and diversification.

Further, the resulting huge numbers of people deprived of viable land and desperate for other work is exactly the reason why there has been state and foreign investment in factory production, again, mainly cotton goods for export. What else would attract foreign capital to Egypt? As long as any economy is based on the capitalist principle of production for profit, it must submit to the dictates of the world market.

Second, this approach carries an implicit underlying assumption that the state is neutral and can be used against the capitalist ruling class, whereas in fact it represents that class. Anyone familiar with Egypt's power structure, for instance, would find it hard to deny that the armed forces and security organs are the state's core. This is not just because of the military's commanding role in the economy. The same applies in Tunisia, where the armed forces are much smaller and do not enjoy the same major economic role. The whole state apparatus, including the judiciary and bureaucracy from top to bottom, serves that class's interests. These organs have remained almost untouched despite Mubarak and Ben Ali's coerced resignations, continuing to enforce the economic and social system. Indeed the role of the state as the enforcer of the predominant ensemble of economic and social relations, in this case capitalism and imperialism, is a central tenet of Marxism, a scientific and materialist understanding and approach to society, which our "Marxist" theoreticians would be well advised to remember.

Third, this approach is also based on another, unstated but basic assumption: That genuine revolution is not possible in Egypt (or any other country, really), and that what is required is a long period of economic development to bring the requisite conditions into being. This assumption is disproved by the experience of Russia and China, which were far less economically developed at the time of their revolutions than Egypt today. We have already discussed the disarticulated development in the countries oppressed by imperialism and how, under these conditions, economic growth creates new problems instead of providing a solution – it is that growth that has brought Egypt and Tunisia to where they are today. Whether because of Amin's developmental theory, or because of his own understanding of the socialist experiences in the Soviet Union and China, the implicit starting point for this line of argument is that revolution and socialism are not an option.

There is another major problem with Amin's program, one that, to be fair, is shared by almost all of those who call themselves leftists or socialists in general: no mention of half of society, women. Both everyday life and the goals of political Islam have made women's status and treatment one of the sharpest immediate issues facing Egyptians, Tunisians and the Arab revolts as a whole. Yet most of the traditional left and secularists in these countries try to avoid the issue.

For instance, in Tunisia and Egypt, the supposed secularists allowed Islamists to use both legal means and violence to ban the film *Persepolis*, the story of a girl seeking to flourish as a person under the Islamic Republic of Iran. To take another very well known and telling example, in Tunisia, Amina Sboui, a high school student, posted a picture of herself topless on the Net, declaring "My body belongs to me and is not a source of honor for anyone." At that time she was associated with the European Femen group (women who bare their breasts to display slogans against religion and patriarchy) and was sentenced to four months in prison for writing the word Femen on a cemetery wall. As a Tunisian author put it, Amina Sboui did what no one else had been able to do since Ben Ali: unite the whole political spectrum and official society – against her.²⁶ Earlier, when a young Egyptian woman posted a nude picture of herself for similar reasons, the April 6 Youth Movement,

the most prominent of the “revolutionary youth” organizations in bringing about Mubarak’s ouster, not only denounced her behavior but said she couldn’t possibly be a member of their organization because she was an atheist.²⁷

These would be mere anecdotes if they were not revealing of the implicit stance of the left and even many middle class people who want to live a secular lifestyle themselves while acknowledging the authority of religion to determine public life and the lives of others. This is not just a hypocrisy worse than piety; it is a symptom of an acceptance of the legitimacy of the rules of patriarchy, at the core of the rotten social relations and thinking that enslave the Arab world, where transgressive behavior by women really does defy the whole social and ideological order in a very immediate way, and the whole world order more generally.²⁸

A particularly grim example is this: Egypt is undergoing an epidemic of rape and public (and publicly tolerated) sexual abuse. The rival bands of brothers – the bearded Muslim preachers and the braided generals – have both explicitly justified, undeniably provided the climate for and perhaps organized the Tahrir Square rape of women demonstrators.²⁹ This is a horrendous manifestation of what Avakian analyzes as the effects produced by the fundamental contradiction of capitalism in today’s imperialist world, between socialized production and private appropriation. On the one hand, capitalist development breaks down old social relations and pulls women into public life, while on the other traditional values and privileges reassert themselves and are violently reinforced – not only in the Arab countries but globally.

To be sure, there are some differences between different kinds of societies. The Islamists seek to codify into law and intensify an already existing and worsening situation. But even at best, most of the “secular” forces who call for rights for women do not boldly challenge them on this, even if the legal equality of women happens to be a part of their program. This is especially striking because of the way that liberals in the West often use the medieval forms of oppression in the oppressed countries in order to promote Western imperialism’s interests and political programs, while obfuscating the more modern forms of women’s oppression.

Here there are two main points. One is that women are oppressed in every country worldwide. “While they may appear very different, the burkha enforced by fanatical Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and the ‘thong,’ widely advertised and promoted as ‘sexy underwear’ for women, in ‘modern’ capitalist society, on the other hand, are both hideous symbols and embodiments of the degradation of women.”³⁰ The Islamists argue that a woman’s body is like a piece of chocolate: isn’t it better to keep it wrapped up, fresh and safe away from covetous eyes? The prevalent answer in the West is: chocolate sells better when it makes men drool – the display of women’s bodies enhances their market value. Where – in what society on today’s earth – can a woman be a person and not a piece of candy?

The second point is that to the degree that women do have more choices in the imperialist countries, and that some rights do exist – that it’s “easier to be a woman” in London or New York than in Cairo or Delhi – this is not due to the supposed superiority of Western culture but to the fact that imperialist development – the accumulation of capital in the imperialist countries and the kind of development forced on the countries they oppress – is what makes this possible, although these rights are relative and right now violently contested.³¹

Despite widespread participation of women in the anti-regime struggles, nowhere amid these Arab revolts has the emancipation of women become the broad rallying cry it needs to be. The oppression of women is decisively intertwined with radical challenges to the whole system of social relations. A movement with the emancipation of women as a core part of its identity could actually confront both “outmodeds,” including in areas and among social strata that are now Islamic fundamentalist strongholds, bring forward a force of women and men and begin to transform the political landscape. An approach exemplified by the slogan “Unleash the fury of women as a mighty force for revolution” could help bust through the stranglehold of the “two outmodeds” on politics and too many people’s thinking.

PART TWO

What Would a Real Revolution Look Like?

As we discussed above, the causes for the Arab Spring are deep and multiple, and they have fueled sharply contradictory movements, currents of thinking and complex contradictions. But underneath all of this is a basic reality that the people of these countries find the organization of society extremely unjust, that their countries are trapped in backwardness and dictated to by reactionary cliques at home and neocolonial foreign

powers, and that the existing conditions of life are intolerable. Hundreds of thousands and even millions have shown they are willing to struggle and sacrifice to end this state of affairs. But this wellspring of desire for revolutionary change will be ultimately hemmed in or even perverted unless it becomes linked to a true understanding of why these societies are the way they are and, most importantly, what can be done to transform them in a truly liberating way.

In this sense, while the upsurge of struggle has been a long-overdue and welcome factor in the world, the basic situation of the people in the Middle East and North Africa and their need for a wholly different society is hardly unique to this section of the globe. Everywhere the question is whether it is possible for the oppressed people to rise up against the existing social conditions and defeat the exploiters who alone benefit from these conditions and the governments and armies backing them up. And whether on the basis of defeating these enemies it is possible to build a really liberatory society that will not only meet the material needs of the people but be able to open a whole new horizon in human history. In fact, there has been a whole century of struggle in which people have fought to bring about this revolution, the communist revolution.

We cannot review the whole history of this revolution here.³² There were tremendous achievements, especially the new states representing the rule of the masses of people that came out of the revolutions in Russia and China, a whole different type of economy not based on exploitation, and huge steps forward in changing the way people relate to each other. This process was full of fury and drama and had pinnacles of success as well as low and even tragic moments in the course of its overall positive history. It should not be surprising that the rulers of the contemporary world, the capitalist-imperialist ruling class and other exploiters and reactionaries associated with them, would consider this experience a “horror” for humanity and do their best to slander it and distort and cover over the real history. This is why Avakian’s summation of the experience of the first stage of communist revolution is of such crucial importance to the oppressed people and everyone who is looking for a way forward to a completely different kind of society. This new synthesis is based on the real experience of the great and overwhelmingly positive efforts of making revolution in the 20th century, while also taking into account the serious shortcomings and real criticism of these efforts and incorporating further understanding from other spheres of human endeavor such as science, culture and intellectual pursuits. The result is a new synthesis of communism that puts the proletarian revolution on a more scientific basis, making this revolution both more realizable and more desirable.

The most important thing about socialism is that along with the profound improvements in the life of the people, it is a transition toward a whole new epoch in human history:

“Communism [is] a world where people work and struggle for the common good.... Where everyone contributes whatever they can to society and gets back what they need to live a life worthy of human beings... Where there are no more divisions among people in which some rule over and oppress others, robbing them not only of the means to a decent life but also of knowledge and a means for really understanding, and acting to change, the world.”³³

The opponents of revolution have tried to make everyone believe that the communist goal is worse than an impossible dream. They argue that attempting to move society in that direction can only result in tyranny and begin to stomp out all individuality. But a thorough study of the actual history of revolution has shown that this is a lie. It has been possible to build socialist societies that not only increasingly met the basic needs of the people but also began to change the way people looked at each other. Instead of the capitalist watchword of “Me first,” the slogan “Serve the People” became the standard which inspired millions, as we saw in revolutionary China. There is no “unchangeable human nature” but rather the possibility for humanity to transform conditions and to transform itself. Avakian’s new synthesis of communism shows how we can do even better in the next stage of making proletarian revolution by learning from and avoiding errors and shortcomings that marked the experiences of the first socialist states.

To take one crucial sphere, Avakian’s new synthesis involves a different conception of the importance of not only allowing but encouraging dissent and intellectual ferment in the socialist society, a rejection of the idea of an “official ideology” to be imposed on the whole society, and a recognition of the importance of the struggle for truth, which, in many ways, is a different approach toward the step-by-step elimination of classes and the differences between mental and manual labor on which classes are based.

The revolution must have at its core and driving force that section of the population, the proletariat and other oppressed, who are the victims of exploitation and reaction and who are most burning for revolutionary change. But this revolution must not be about revenge, or simply replacing the power of the former exploiters with the

power of those who suffered. It is about leading society through a whole complex historical world process until the communist goal can be achieved.

Today we are in a situation where the past efforts of proletarian revolution have been defeated but the need for revolution is greater than ever and the underlying forces pushing people toward revolution continue to operate. But for the possibility and desire for revolution to lead to successful revolution, there must also be a revolution in theory, in ideology, through which there emerges a dynamic core of revolutionary communists determined and capable of leading the masses in seizing power and embarking on the long process of transforming society. This is the importance of what Avakian has been doing, and this is why it can in a certain sense be compared to Marx's theoretical breakthroughs that laid the basis for the successful revolutionary battles and the formation of socialist states in the 20th century. Learning this science as it has developed today, taking a firm hold of it, and wielding it to examine and answer the problems of how to make revolution, is the task for those everywhere who want to fight for a new world.

The new synthesis of communism provides the basic approach, a scaffolding, for addressing the problems of society in the Arab countries and working out the plan for their solution through revolution.

In broad strokes it is possible to see two major and closely related features of revolutionary transformation that need to be at the center of any genuine revolutionary program. First, there is the whole spiderweb of connections to the world imperialist system that keeps these societies economically, militarily, politically and culturally entrapped and dependent. A real revolution cannot just try to tinker with these chains, or even worse, try to figure out how to somehow "use" this or that connection to the imperialist world system as some kind of leverage or advantage. The modern imperialist-centered petroleum industry, to take one clear example involving a number of countries in the region, is a major chain on the people and the whole society and most definitely not a potential vehicle for "national liberation."³⁴ After all, is oil-rich Algeria any closer to breaking free of French domination, not to mention a reversal of the status and conditions of the masses of people, than it was a few decades ago? The same goes for Tunisian programs that propose stepping up the export of potash and other minerals, setting up more dead-end call centers, exporting more cash crops, developing the demeaning, mind-dulling and polluting tourism "industry," or any other way of looting a country's resources and the people's abilities and talents for the sake of fattening foreign capital, consequently worsening the horrendous inequalities that already enslave humanity.

The other immediate objective of the revolution is to unleash a whole process of social transformation which will begin to sweep away the reactionary, patriarchal and backward social relations that continue to downpress the masses of people and the whole society. These two tasks can only be achieved together, because social transformation is impossible without national liberation and only the thorough transformation of these societies can really free them from their foreign yoke. Regardless of the stages that might be involved, this means taking the path to socialist revolution.

"First, socialism is a new form of political power in which the formerly oppressed and exploited, in alliance with the middle classes and professionals and the great majority of society, rule over society with the leadership of a visionary, vanguard party. This new form of state power keeps old and new exploiters in check. It makes possible a democracy that a) unleashes the creativity and initiative of people in all kinds of directions and b) gives the masses of people the right and ability to change the world and to engage in meaningful decision-making, that promotes the most far-reaching debate, and that protects the rights of the individual. This new socialist state... is a launching pad for revolution elsewhere in the world.

"Second, socialism is a new economic system where the resources and productive capacities of society are socially owned through the coordination of the socialist state, where production is consciously organized and planned to meet social need and to overcome the inequalities of capitalist class society...

"Third, socialism is a *historical period of transition*, between capitalism and communism, a period of revolutionary struggle and experimentation to transform all the economic structures, all the social institutions and arrangements, and all the ideas and values that perpetuate the division of society into classes."³⁵

This kind of state and this revolution are not about "nationalizing" the dependent, distorted and disarticulated economy that presently exists and not about finding "our place" in the global division of labor. Seizing all of the capital and assets belonging to the foreign imperialists is a giant and necessary step that must be taken for a revolution to take place. But it is only that, a step, and it will be a big challenge, no doubt, to build a new and viable economy that is stepping outside the world imperialist system. Yet without aiming for that the game is

lost in advance.

There are great resources in the Arab countries that in a different socio-economic system can play a different, positive and dynamic role. The agriculture that is failing to feed the people under conditions of imperialist domination can not only do that, but also provide a basis for a different type of national economy.

The key problem is not “underdevelopment” but the way that production for profit rather than human needs and the supremacy of the world market have guided development in some areas of the economy and dictated stagnation and abandonment in others. This has led to an irrational and soul-destroying accentuation of pre-existing regional inequalities – for instance, between Upper and Lower Egypt, the Nile Valley and Cairo versus governates like Faiyum, and in Tunisia, the extreme differences between the coastal areas and the interior.³⁷

As exciting and sophisticated as Cairo is, the city’s size alone – not to mention its chaotic, unplanned, misery-producing and, literally as well as figuratively, choking form of development – reflects the oppression and enforced backwardness that afflicts so much of the rest of the country, from which youth could only seek to flee. This is only an extreme example of the situation in many Arab countries. These disparities are to a large extent the product of these countries’ subjugation to whatever happens to be profitable for imperialist capital and the market. They are unsustainable in human as well as ecological terms.

A real revolution will make it possible to mobilize the people from these backward regions and to build a new economy where there is a dynamic relationship between overall state planning on a national level, which must have as one of its aims the overcoming of regional inequalities and economic imbalances, and the building up of initiative and self-reliance at the local and regional levels as well. It would take agriculture as the key to breaking with the world market and enabling all-around socialist development, with the emphasis on feeding people. There has to be a commitment and planning, including new forms of collaboration and innovation among different sections of the people – from experts to common people – so as to put an end to today’s situation where the more a country like Egypt or Tunisia develops its agriculture, the less able it is to feed its people. These two countries once produced food in abundance. Today they have to import food because water, land and rural people have been assigned to production for the world market. They export cotton, wheat and out-of-season fruit and vegetables while millions of people eat bread made with half-rotten grain and not much else, and those who cannot produce profit for the world market do not get to work at all. This is not so much an economy as a prison, where what determines the lives of the inmates is the need to export and in other ways acquire foreign currency to pay for things that could have been produced locally in the first place, to the benefit of the people and the planet.

Egypt has had the good fortune to have the Nile River, with its seemingly inexhaustible flowing waters. Not every country has similar resources, but we could consider this situation as a negative example of how the profit system turns advantages into their opposite: How much water farmers get is determined by capital and power relations that crush them and prevent their land from being fully productive. Irrigation as now practiced can be a source of wealth but also brings about the destruction of the soil (through the accumulation of salt, for example). Millions who spend their days knee-deep in water suffer from horrible water-borne diseases that revolutionary China eradicated a half century ago. Their children die because they can’t get water fit to drink. There is little economic incentive to stop the vast leaking of irrigation canals and other forms of wasting water; much of this water is effectively “exported” because it is used to farm water-intensive exports like flowers. Finally, the development of irrigated agriculture in Egypt has come at the expense of potential agricultural development in the other countries along the Nile and its sources, and thus is a continuation of the oppressive relations colonialism imposed over the region.

In light of all this, even one of Nasser’s proudest achievements, the building of the Aswan High Dam, has to be seen as problematic,³⁷ an example of the path that a socialist Egypt would not take. Nasser sought to make the Nile and its fertile land a source of wealth equivalent to oil in countries like Algeria. In a paradoxical way this has come true: dictated by the laws of capitalism, like Algeria’s oil, the way the Nile valley has been handled has led to a crippling economic dependence, a greater polarization of wealth and unbearable lives for the vast majority.

A radically different and environmentally sustainable economy needs to be built which will: 1) Not be based on exploitation and provide the material conditions for advancing toward classless society. 2) Meet the needs of the people, help overcome the regional imbalances, the conflicts between industry and agriculture, stand up to imperialism and be self-reliant. 3) Serve as a model and a practical base for further revolutionary advances in the region and in the world as a whole. The whole idea of what constitutes “development” will take on a

radically new and different meaning when “progress” is no longer judged in accordance with the criteria of the world imperialist system and the rules set by its institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. In this kind of a revolutionary society state ownership and state planning become central tools for fulfilling revolutionary goals and social transformation.

This would mean rethinking urban development and the relationship between the countryside and big cities in light of what is most needed, from the point of view of rational, long-term and integrated development in human terms and in terms of the environment, and not just what is most profitable.

The State

In most of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, the state can best be described as neo-colonial. The whole state, not only the government but the military and security forces and the administrative bureaucracy, has been directly and indirectly created, shaped and tutored by the world imperialist system and powers such as France, Britain and, of course, the U.S. These states are completely beholden to and serve the domestic and foreign ruling classes. They enforce the dominant property relations to guarantee the “most favorable investment climate” for international and local exploiters. It is the state that must carry out imperialist-ordered programs such as IMF austerity and it is the state that is ready to use brutal violence to suppress the people. The reactionary state can never be decisively severed from the imperialist body to which it is joined. The experience of the past decades in the Arab countries as well as the world as a whole, from Nasser to Muammar Qaddafi to Hafez Assad, has shown again that a state apparatus organized to protect an exploitative system cannot be the vehicle for thorough revolutionary transformation.

Because the state is both the concentration of the socio-economic system and its main pillar, the destruction of the capitalist state must be the goal of any real revolution. In the place of such a reactionary state a completely different kind of state must be created, from top to bottom, in which the formerly exploited led by a genuine communist vanguard can unite around itself the great majority of the population. Such a state can only be a form of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* appropriate to a given country.

Once a revolutionary state based on the formerly exploited and oppressed has been established, whole new vistas can be opened up for social transformation, which will both *require and make possible* a state – and a society – which are vigorously resisting and opposing the current imperialist-dominated world order. For example, once the power and ownership of the landed elites and the stranglehold of the profit system over inputs and distribution have been broken by revolution, self-sufficiency in agriculture can be achieved rapidly by relying on the masses of people and the country will be in a much better position to resist food blackmail and other forms of pressure.

The so-called “models” that some are promoting – such as the Venezuelan regime under Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro – are all different variations of leaving the old state fundamentally intact and hoping to find a means of accommodation with world imperialism, for example through the sale of oil in the case of Venezuela and Ecuador. The results are that these societies are not fundamentally transformed and remain susceptible to all sorts of pressures. These two great tasks of the revolution – rupturing with the existing network of the oppression of nations by imperialism and unleashing a process of social transformation – are inextricably linked together.

Many will object that what we are arguing is an impossible dream. It is a difficult, very difficult path, that will require tremendous struggle and sacrifice and ultimately require the victory of the proletarian revolution on a global scale. But the truth is *there is no other path to genuine social emancipation and the end of the oppression and inequalities of nations*. What is really impossible, and what has been shown again and again to be so, are the wishes and schemes of those who argue that there is some path forward without shattering the existing reactionary set-up.

Women as a Driving Force for Revolution

The question of the role of women in today’s society, and a vision and program for how this should change, is at the very center of the questions that have been posed by the emergence of the Arab Spring and at the very heart of what kind of revolution is needed and what kind of society is desirable and possible.

The woman question has emerged as perhaps the sharpest fault line in the Arab countries. The fact that the subjugation of women is so thoroughly built into the reactionary and oppressive structures and the whole system of exploitation makes the fight against the oppression of women a driving force that must be at the center of any real revolutionary change. Here we can see not only why real revolution is so necessary but how profoundly revolution can transform society even in its initial stages, and how the fight for the complete emancipation of women will also be crucial for advancing the revolution as well.

Once the old state and its apparatus of repression has been dismantled and new organs of revolutionary power established, many of the most egregious crimes against women can be very rapidly stopped cold. For example, mass mobilization of women and men backed up by the authority of the state can very quickly end the scourge of female genital mutilation, the rape epidemic, and wide-scale prostitution. The brave and vital initiatives taken by women's groups and others to protect women in Tahrir Square during demonstrations and more generally in downtown Cairo have revealed a felt demand for such actions and provide valuable experience with how they can be carried out in a way that unites even some initially backward people against anti-woman violence. But these actions also demonstrate the limited effect – like scooping water out of a leaking boat – if such efforts are not part of building an overall revolutionary movement aiming to set up a new and liberating state power that can dig up the social and ideological foundations underlying this criminal behavior, transforming society and the people.

With a revolutionary state complete legal equality regarding marriage, divorce, property and inheritance rights – never achieved under Bourguiba or Mubarak, despite their undeserved reputations to the contrary – can be quickly achieved and enforced. Full access to birth control and abortion must be guaranteed to all in fact as well as in law. In revolutionary China, for example, prostitution was basically eradicated within a few years of victory and the stigma lifted from the women who had been driven by poverty and reactionary social relations into this practice, and they were provided meaningful ways to take part in building the new society. Carrying this out means mobilizing people to challenge the reactionary ideas and value systems that have kept women down. It will involve a revolution in culture and thinking as well.

These kinds of changes alone could propel countries of the Middle East and North Africa far ahead of the situation of women in the most “advanced” imperialist countries. But far more importantly is how the long term fight to overcome the millennial oppression of women can be a central and driving factor in the struggle for humanity to get beyond oppression, exploitation and classes once and for all. It will be a real struggle to transform the family and ensure that marriage is based on love and mutual respect. The traditional family is currently a bastion of patriarchy and backwardness, and this needs to be subjected to criticism and radically transformed. Conventional gender roles and the conception of what it means to be a man or a woman will be a battleground in the culture and among the oppressed themselves. These struggles and debates among the people and social experimentation are not only necessary to keep the revolution from being dragged backward – even more importantly, they must be part of the motor driving it forward.

The fight over the role of women in society will concentrate and characterize the future socialist society as a revolutionary transition to a wholly different society.

Neither the imperialists nor the Islamic fundamentalists can offer the millions of women a real way out. But the revolution does, which is why rebel women, especially the youth, can be drawn to a liberating vision and program of revolutionary communism.

Mobilizing the Positive Forces

Each country will have its own situation and needs, but everywhere revolution faces the same sort of problems. Everywhere you look in today's world, there is enormous and terrible waste – people whose abilities are thwarted and beaten down; a whole gender held back; land and other resources misused; and technology that cannot fully play its role as a positive factor unless it is used according to socialist principles and not for the accumulation of capital.

The potential for transforming society in the Arab countries comes from within them – the most important resource for producing and further revolutionizing these societies is the millions of exploited and downtrodden themselves. This is a vast force for revolution, for change, for working collectively in the interests of the whole society, but it is a force that is stifled, held back, and stunted by imperialism and reaction, or to put it another way, by the “two outmodeds.” We could see the glimmer of this potential power in the upsurges that swept

away Ben Ali and Mubarak. But when political power is actually in the hands of the people led by a genuine vanguard revolutionary party, then this transformative potential can really be unlocked.

The desperation of unemployed and underemployed youth was a central factor fueling the Arab Spring. Hopelessness can be transformed into hope, and the formerly frustrated youth can enjoy the immense satisfaction that comes with laboring and struggling in common for the benefit of all society. But this requires a completely different type of socio-economic system.

And it is not only those who are now on the bottom of society who have a crucial role to play in building up a wholly different, liberating society. Today there are a great many young women and men who have been educated in the arts and sciences who find insufficient productive outlets for their energies and creativity. A revolutionary society can do far more than just provide employment for the educated youth who are now driven abroad in search of a livelihood, often wasting their talents and training. Building a revolutionary socialist society will require more than just skill sets and technical education. The long-term goal of reaching the classless society of communism means breaking down the terrible divide between mental and manual work, so that the people as a whole will acquire the great fruits of the common culture of humanity, learn the scientific method of understanding both the physical world and society in order to transform them, and be full of wonder at the world, not out of superstitious belief and the fog of ignorance but because of the challenge and excitement of being part of society's ever-expanding knowledge of the actual world in all of its complexity and grandeur.

The intellectuals and educated youth will have a vital role to play in this process and will also find personal fulfillment and an outlet for their individuality and creativity, which is smothered in today's society. And it will be done not by reinforcing a privileged status for a relative few but as part of taking the whole of society forward to a far-better place.

Dissent

One of the features that the people find intolerable and played such a central role in the demands of the Arab Spring has been the lack of rights and any meaningful participation in political life. This is not mainly a question of elections, whether "sham" or "real," which have never been the vehicle for effecting fundamental change. One of the things that electrified the world was that Avenue Bourguiba and Tahrir Square were not only focal points of resistance, but also "free zones" full of debate over the direction of the movement and society as a whole. All sorts of people, women as well as men, including people brought up to keep silent in the face of the educated classes, spoke up to debate and criticize anything and anyone felt to be standing in the way.

Under the reactionary rule this kind of activity was met with police charges, thugs on camel-back, television blackouts and secret informers. In the socialist society of the future this kind of ferment will not only be "tolerated," it must be welcomed and fostered by the leaders of the society and its revolutionary institutions. Protest and mass upheaval, a spirit of daring to think, to re-evaluate, to criticize, will exist on a scale rarely seen and involve the masses of people normally locked out of intellectual and political life as well as the intellectuals who will continue to have a crucial role to play in the conditions of the new society.

The state power will protect the rights of the people to carry out these kinds of struggles. Opposition to socialism can be expressed as long as these opponents do not try to actually overthrow the system by illegal means. Avakian's vision of socialism is one where controversy, dissent, struggle over right and wrong, and mass debate are woven into the fabric of the society, not the exception. Resources (publications, Web sites, television stations, meeting halls and so forth) must be made available so that these rights are real and meaningful, unlike in bourgeois democracy where money, connections and ownership empties "free speech" of most of its meaning.

This orientation is not a pious wish to be cast aside at the first difficulty. In the future socialist societies there will certainly be vicious enemies at home and abroad that will do everything to bring back the reactionary system, but all too often the real existence of such enemies and the need to combat them has been seen as a reason to resort to heavy-handed methods rather than to rely on and bring forward the masses of people.

The new socialist societies of the 21st century must be marked by an unprecedented expansion of individual rights throughout the population. The state itself will be qualitatively different from existing states today in that the socialist state will be a result of the revolution of the masses. But this will not change the fact that there

will still be contradictions between the socialist state and the people as long as it is still necessary to have any state at all. The democracy that will flourish and the guarantee of individual rights will be part of the struggle to keep the social transformation moving forward and will create more favorable conditions for the advance of the revolution.

Take, for example, the important question of the fight for a scientific world outlook and opposition to religious outlooks that haunt the thinking of the masses. In basically all of the Arab countries, whether by law or just the weight of family and tradition, the media and sometimes thugs, people are not encouraged to explore and debate alternative outlooks, and those who don't believe are often cowed into silence. There must be a strict separation between religion and the state. The educational system must treat religion according to the same scientific standard used to examine all other social phenomena.

A radically different socialist society will handle the discussion over religion much differently. We know that for a long time many people will reject the scientific world view of communism and cling to religion. Freedom of religion will be respected and no one will be pressured to pretend to be something they are not. On the other hand, the communists will not back away from the struggle over religion and world outlook more generally, because it will be impossible to achieve a communist society until people look at the world as it actually is and on that basis transform it. This struggle in the sphere of thinking between believers and revolutionary communists can be a real and exciting school where millions can participate, learn and transform.

What's Missing: Revolutionary Communists

The central element missing in the Arab countries today is an organized core of revolutionary communists. This has nothing to do with the fossilized "left" parties or other tendencies that have, in their own way, whether young or old in their membership, become institutions of the old society. It is not even about making a radical critique of the society. It is about the emergence of a force in society that firmly grasps the need to lead the masses in an actual revolutionary overthrow of the existing state(s) and has the determination and scientific understanding necessary to build the type of radically different society we have been discussing.

The possibility of real change can be glimpsed and then lost sight of. People's activism, initiative and courage are related to whether or not they believe that their sacrifices may lead to results that are worth it. When the ruling classes can no longer rule in the old way because they are divided and in disarray and their power structure has lost its legitimacy, this crisis is not automatically resolved in the interests of the people and the new order can be as bad or worse.

This is the kind of situation Avakian addresses in his message to the Egyptian people after the fall of Mubarak. "In Russia, in February 1917, another brutal despot, the Czar (absolute monarch), was overthrown by the uprising of the people. Here again, the U.S., British, and other imperialists, and the Russian capitalists, tried to continue the oppression of the Russian people in a new form, using the mechanisms of 'democratic rule' and elections which, while allowing for some broader participation of different parties, would still be totally controlled by the exploiters of the people and would ensure their continuing rule, and the continued suffering of the masses of people. In this case, however, the masses of people were enabled to see through these maneuvers and manipulations, to carry forward their revolutionary rising, through many different twists and turns and, in October 1917, to sweep aside and dismantle the institutions and mechanisms of bourgeois dictatorship and to establish a new political and economic system, **socialism**, which for several decades continued to advance in the direction of abolishing relations of exploitation and oppression, as part of the struggle throughout the world toward the final goal of communism. **The crucial difference was that, in the uprisings in Russia, there was a core of leadership, communist leadership, that had a clear, scientifically grounded, understanding of the nature of not just this or that ruthless despot but of the whole oppressive system – and of the need to continue the revolutionary struggle not just to force a particular ruler from office but to abolish that whole system and replace it with one that would really embody and give life to the freedom and the most fundamental interests of the people, in striving to abolish all oppression and exploitation.**

"Even though the revolution in Russia was ultimately reversed, with capitalism restored there in the 1950s, and today Russia no longer seeks to disguise the fact that it is a capitalist-imperialist power, the lessons of the Russian Revolution of 1917 hold valuable, indeed decisive lessons for today. And the most decisive lesson is this: When people in their masses, in their millions, finally break free of the constraints that have kept them from rising up against their oppressors and tormentors, then whether or not their heroic struggle and sacrifice

will really lead to a fundamental change, moving toward the abolition of all exploitation and oppression, **depends on whether or not there is a leadership**, communist leadership, that has the necessary scientific understanding and method, and on that basis can develop the necessary strategic approach and the influence and organized ties among growing numbers of the people, in order to lead the uprising of the people, through all the twists and turns, to the goal of a real, revolutionary transformation of society, in accordance with the fundamental interests of the people. And, in turn, when people massively break with the ‘normal routine’ and the tightly woven chains of oppressive relations in which they are usually entrapped and by which they are heavily weighed down – when they break through and rise up in their millions – that is a crucial time for communist organization to further develop its ties with those masses, strengthening its ranks and its ability to lead.

“Or, if such communist organization does not yet exist, or exists only in isolated fragments, this is a crucial time for communist organization to be forged and developed, to take up the challenge of studying and applying communist theory, in a living way, in the midst of this tumultuous situation, and to strive to continually develop ties with, to influence and to ultimately lead growing numbers of the masses in the direction of the revolution that represents their fundamental and highest interests, the communist revolution.

... To all who truly want to see the heroic struggle of the oppressed masses develop, with the necessary leadership, in the direction of real revolutionary transformation of society and genuine liberation: engage with and take up the emancipating viewpoint and goals of communism, and the challenge of giving this organized expression and a growing influence and presence among the struggling masses.”³⁸

What Will Come Out of the Arab Revolts?

The last few years have provided rich lessons, positive and negative, about the powerful impact a relatively small minority can play in relation to the rest of society. When generally aligned with the basic interests of the people, the persistence of youth and others was a mood-creating factor throughout Egyptian and Tunisian society. If they had waited for the masses in general, or for the majority, to consciously decide on the need, possibility, modality and timing of social change, Mubarak and Ben Ali would still be sitting in their palaces and most people would still be thinking there was no alternative. But this period has also provided grievous lessons.

A revolutionary crisis cannot become a real possibility of making revolution without the work of a revolutionary party and the emergence of a revolutionary communist movement among the masses – a movement guided by communism as a science and as a goal, one that even if small seeks every opportunity to have a major impact on all of society and build strength so that when conditions are ripe it can win power. Events in 2013 have brought out the urgency for such a movement: the period of turmoil opened up by the Arab Spring will ultimately be resolved, and without the emergence of a different leadership and direction, without revolutionary communist leadership, there will be a reactionary resolution, as we see taking shape and being tested in different forms today.

The history of the 1979 revolution against the Shah of Iran and its aftermath is very relevant now. Comrades from Iran who went through this experience of a revolution that was hijacked, perverted and defeated have summed up these bitter lessons. Egyptians, Tunisians and others who have illusions about Islamist forces, as well as those who are willing to put themselves in the hands of the pro-imperialist militaries to prevent the afflictions suffered by the Iranian people since then, should take heed.³⁹

But if a revolutionary movement were to arise with sufficient force to begin to break the hammerlock of the “two outmodeds,” and even more if there were a revolution in any country, this would produce a real and much-needed change in today’s difficult regional and world situation. It could help advances in making revolution in other countries that could in turn reverberate back onto the situation where the breakthrough first occurred. After all, if what started in Sidi Bouzid, an isolated town in a small country, could sweep across the region and impact people around the world, think of what could happen if something truly revolutionary emerged, a movement fighting for a way out in opposition to the horrors most people now think are the only possibilities.

There is the argument that if liberals, reformists and revisionist “communists” cannot get a hearing in society there is no way that revolutionary communism could connect with masses. But trying to have a capitalism without vicious exploitation and oppression of nations or a “humanist” Islamic rule without the oppression

of women – these are the solutions that are unrealizable and the sooner a section of potential leaders and activists are won to understand and act on this reality the better. Trying to avoid controversy will not fool people or appease their religious prejudices, and will only guarantee that much of their thinking, shaped by the prevailing economic and social relationships, will always remain in contradiction to their deepest aspirations and fundamental interests.

The great advantage is that a fundamental framework exists in the world, the new synthesis of revolutionary communism developed by Avakian, which can enable revolutionaries in every country to see, in a basic way, the kind of revolutionary transformation that the world needs and that is possible. Anyone who wants to fight for the liberation of the masses must engage with the most advanced scientific understanding that has come forward. Because the revolutionary communist outlook, method and analysis corresponds to reality, it can provide answers to the problems that have impelled people into motion.

The revolutionary communist current must establish itself and take root among a growing number of people, from the bottom and throughout society, who take up this cause and play the conscious, active role in changing the world that no other outlook and movement can offer them. If so many people have been willing to sacrifice their lives without a clear vision of what sacrifice could bring about, imagine what could happen if a scientific vision of a possible new and liberating society were to motivate a growing number of people and become a force in the struggles around all of the problems and issues facing everyone in society that, in the wake of the Arab upsurge, millions are discussing and debating.

The intensification of history that is a hallmark of profound societal crises can rapidly bring millions of people to a basic understanding of what needs to be done. But this can happen if and only if a political force emerges that can fight to shed a true, that is, scientific light on the nature of the problem and its revolutionary solution, raising peoples' sights to a vision of a different world, one that is viable and desirable, and pointing to how to get there. Under conditions as they now exist in the Arab countries, even small groups of people with a revolutionary communist understanding could begin to move people very broadly. Handfuls today can become thousands leading millions.

This makes the task of engaging with and grasping the new synthesis of communism a crucial and urgent task, especially in the cauldron of revolutionary aspirations and intensified dangers that is the Middle East and North Africa. ■

Footnotes

(All website references listed in the footnotes have been retrieved as of January 6, 2014)

1 The Egyptian army has enjoyed a certain prestige among the people because of its historical role. The 1952 military coup overthrew the British-dominated monarchy and in the following years under Gamal al-Nasser stripped the pro-British feudals of much of their land and power. But Nasser always relied on foreign capital and military protection from one or the other great power amid a changing and complex world situation, marked by intense rivalry between the weakened British and French imperialists on the one hand and the immensely strengthened U.S. imperialism on the other, and the emergence of the USSR as an imperialist power following the restoration of capitalism there in the form of “socialist” state capitalism. Nasser’s successor, General Anwar Sadat, was more successful than Nasser in dealing the Zionist invaders a setback, in 1973, but the Egyptian military used that as the occasion to negotiate its surrender to Zionist demands and U.S. tutelage. This process culminated in the 1979 peace accords with Israel that included the formal relinquishing of major aspects of Egyptian sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula and the Canal and initiated a de facto alliance with Israel against the Palestinian movement. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that “Israel and the Egyptian army are one hand”. When the generals led by Abdul-Fattah Al-Sisi stepped back in to rule directly on July 3, 2013, the Israeli ambassador to Egypt said, “Al-Sisi is not a national hero for Egypt, but for all Jews in Israel...” (Cited by Ray Bush in the editorial of the August 2013 “virtual issue” of the *Review of African Political Economy*, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/spissue/crea-si.pdf>).

2 Starting in the late Mubarak years and through the 2012 election of Morsi, the Revolutionary Socialists argued that the Brotherhood should be supported (“Sometimes with the Brotherhood, never with the state”), an analysis that reduced the state to Mubarak and the generals most closely identified with him. Then, after the military coup, they complained, “Mohamed Morsi and the Brotherhood betrayed the revolution. They did not implement even one of the demands of the revolution for social justice, freedom, human dignity or retribution for the martyrs of the revolution.” (Sameh Naguib, “Egypt: Four days that shook the world,” July 3, 2013, <http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/33815/Egypt%3A+Four+days+that+shook+the+world>). *International Socialist Review* editor Ahmed Shawki hailed the army takeover as “an acknowledgement of the fact that the popular will of Egypt will not tolerate the Morsi government anymore.” (Ahmed Shawki, “All of Egypt is Tahrir,” July 5, 2013, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/05/all-of-egypt-is-tahrir>)

Then switching sides again, long after leading liberals and many others who demonstrated for Morsi's removal began to distance themselves from the military's massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, they finally denounced "military rule," while also awakening to the fact that the Brotherhood was "sectarian" (condemning the Islamist-led burning of Christian churches in the wake of the coup). Yet they continued to maintain that Morsi's removal was the result of the "revolutionary wave of June 30" – which cleared the path for the coup. ("The military's reign of terror in Cairo," August 14, 2003, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/08/15/the-militarys-reign-of-terror>) In short, if the RS's political positions have been inconsistent, it has consistently endeavored to ride on the shifting political tides and justify these switchbacks as "Marxist" (in reality, Trotskyist) political tactics.

Meanwhile, in a more sober mood not long after the initial intoxication with the "success" of the pro-coup demonstrations, Naguib concluded that because the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates backed Morsi's ouster and are promising to bankroll the new Egyptian government, revolution will not be possible in Egypt until the fall of these regimes. This probably means never, since conditions for Egypt, with its vast downtrodden masses in the countryside and cities, are far more favorable to revolution than in those countries whose particular feature is the lack of such conditions. Naguib complains that the other factor impeding revolution in Egypt is the weight of the countryside and especially southern Egypt, "where the Islamist movement has most of its support." ("The Egyptian Revolution must spread to win," July 16, 2013, <http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/33902/The+Egyptian+Revolution+must+spread+to+win>. Also see "Revolutionary Socialists' Letter to Supporters, August 15, 2013, <http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/34144/Egyptian+Revolutionary+Socialists+letter+to+supporters>.)

We'll look more at the question of Islamism and poverty further on, but here we'll pose two questions: Is it true that poverty and lack of "development" has been nothing but an obstacle to revolution? And if it is true that Islamism (not just in the countryside, in reality, but throughout society) is a problem, why haven't the Revolutionary Socialists opposed it – to this day?

The Revolutionary Socialists have always followed the tactics of opposing whatever they determined to be "the main enemy" at any one moment. But what strategy – what goals – were these brilliant tacticians trying to accomplish, other than "an unmissable opportunity to grow," as Naguib describes the situation today? Isn't that the very definition of opportunism?

3 Naguib, "Egypt: Four days that shook the world."

4 "The assumption and argument is that because the masses in their millions are acting, whatever they are doing must be righteous, just, and ultimately in their interests... This populist epistemology is an approach where truth is determined by what people think, that is, by public opinion. It does not apply science to understand objective reality in its underlying workings and dynamics; it does not challenge, refute, and transform people's false ideas and ways of thinking that are out of sync with objective reality; and therein ultimately leaves the world 'as is'." "Millions of people can be wrong – the coup in Egypt is not a people's revolution," *Revolution*, #312, voice of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, no. 312.

The figures of 17 million (or 33 million people, as many claim) on the Egyptian streets beckoning the generals to step in is pure fantasy, seeking refuge from today's difficult political situation by appealing to the idea that millions can't be wrong and exaggerating the number of millions many times over, and ignoring the millions supporting the Muslim Brotherhood (the wrong millions). This has been a problem all along. Tahrir Square can't hold even a million people. The claim about "millions" that were raised in January 2011 to counter Mubarak regime arguments that he had the support of the "silent majority" was an early sign of a wrong understanding (the idea that political legitimacy comes from a majority support) that has left many revolutionary-minded people totally disoriented. This is especially now that the people are so bitterly divided.

5 Some people have raised the concept of a "deep state," meaning a cabal of die-hard reactionaries encrusted in the armed forces and security services. This tends to see the state as split between an elected part, which can be changed to serve the people's interests, and an unelected part, which represents reactionary interests and resists change. The state apparatus as a whole is an instrument of the dictatorship of the ruling classes over the people, and elections are designed to serve that dictatorship, including by setting the terms in which the people can participate in the political process. (We'll have more to say about the question of elections later.) There is a distinction between the state apparatus and the government of the day, but any government that does not meet the interests of the ruling class is not going to last – Morsi, for example. Ironically, Morsi facilitated the changes in the armed forces command that brought into place the line-up of generals who overthrew him. Complaints that Morsi left untouched the armed forces, police, judiciary and other structures developed under Mubarak are "unfair," in the sense that he never had that option. But it is also important to recognize that the Muslim Brotherhood sought to share power with the old regime forces and was allowed – or rather maneuvered – into government on the bet that this would help restore the legitimacy of a state millions of Egyptians could no longer accept.

6 Bob Avakian has been the chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA since its formation in 1975. Avakian played a decisive role in analyzing the counter-revolution that took place in China after Mao's death in 1976 and in rallying communists around the world to carry forward Mao's revolutionary heritage. For the past several decades he has been scientifically examining the whole experience of building socialism in the USSR and China, in addition to other developments in human knowledge such as the sciences, history and culture. On this basis, he has developed the new

synthesis of communism.

As he wrote, “This new synthesis involves a recasting and recombining of the positive aspects of the experience so far of the communist movement and of socialist society, while learning from the negative aspects of this experience, in the philosophical and ideological as well as the political dimensions, so as to have a more deeply and firmly rooted scientific orientation, method and approach with regard not only to making revolution and seizing power but then, yes, to meeting the material requirements of society and the needs of the masses of people, in an increasingly expanding way, in socialist society – overcoming the deep scars of the past and continuing the revolutionary transformation of society, while at the same time actively supporting the world revolutionary struggle and acting on the recognition that the world arena and the world struggle are most fundamental and important, in an overall sense – *together with* opening up qualitatively more space to give expression to the intellectual and cultural needs of the people, broadly understood, and enabling a more diverse and rich process of exploration and experimentation in the realms of science, art and culture, and intellectual life overall, with increasing scope for the contention of different ideas and schools of thought and for individual initiative and creativity and protection of individual rights, including space for individuals to interact in “civil society” independently of the state – all within an overall cooperative and collective framework and at the same time as state power is maintained and further developed as a *revolutionary* state power serving the interests of the proletarian revolution, in the particular country and worldwide, with this state being the leading and central element in the economy and in the overall direction of society, while the state itself is being continually transformed into something radically different from all previous states, as a crucial part of the advance toward the eventual abolition of the state with the achievement of communism on a world scale.” (Bob Avakian, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” *Revolution* no. 105, October 21, 2007).

7 Bob Avakian, “There Is No ‘Permanent Necessity’ for Things to be This Way – A Radically Different and Better World Can be Brought Into Being Through Revolution,” *Revolution* no. 195, March 17, 2010.

8 “By the mid-2000s, Islamic banks operating in Egypt controlled around 10 per cent of the commercial deposits in the country’s banking system... eight of the twenty richest families in Egypt throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with vast and interconnected equity stakes across the private sector, had direct links to either the Muslim Brotherhood or other Salafist groups. More recently, Islamic mortgaging has emerged as the key player in one of the country’s most strategic and growing industries. By the 2000s, Islamism was establishing itself at the high end of the Egyptian social ladder.” Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010, pp. 109-110.

9 As many as ten million people, former tenant farmers and their families, were forced off the land over the last two decades. This is out of a population of about 90 million. (Bush, editorial, *Review of African Political Economy*, August 2013.)

10 This argument is made by Gilbert Achcar in *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Saqi Books, London, 2013, pp. 250-261.

11 “According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Therefore if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various components of the superstructure... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their form in particular.” (Friedrich Engels, “Letter to J. Bloch,” September 21-22, 1890, *Historical Materialism (Marx, Engels, Lenin)*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1972, p. 294).

12 Chris Harman, *The Prophet and the Proletariat, Islamic Fundamentalism, Class and Revolution*, Socialist Workers Party, London, 1999. Also available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/islam.htm>. This is the theoretical basis for the support for Islamists that is the calling card of the International Socialist trend, although such thinking is hardly confined to Trotskyists.

13 Samir Amin has been one of the most prominent theorists among opponents of imperialism for decades and a guiding light of the World Social Forum. Yet he backed the French invasion of Mali and the coup in Egypt with the argument that since Islamism keeps countries weak, a military move against the Islamists is a blow to U.S. domination. This should be called out as a betrayal from someone like Amin who considers himself a Marxist, but unfortunately it is considered common sense by many Egyptians and others. (For Amin’s writings on Islamism over the years, see the Monthly Review web site. For similar writings and his position on Mali, pambazuka.org; on the coup, “The Egyptian nation and its army,” <http://www.ahewar.org/eng/show.art.asp?aid=1791>.)

This position is related to Amin’s views on imperialism and capitalist development. He was associated with Andre Gundar Frank whose book *The Development of Underdevelopment* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1966) put forward the thesis that imperialism prevents the economic development of countries like Brazil, a kind of inside-out version of the classical reactionary developmental theory which held that economic development would provide the answer to such countries’ problems. Neither theory holds up well in light of Brazil’s situation today.

The wrong idea that imperialism precludes development influenced Amin’s view of the Chinese revolution, where he saw economic development as the key issue and failed to properly notice the difference between Mao’s project of balanced and articulated development in the service of overcoming class society and Deng Hsiao-ping’s project of development

at any price. Although Amin associated himself with Maoism, he ended up backing the “capitalist roaders” whose coup overthrew socialism and reversed the direction in which Mao led China.

In lending his prestige to the military coup in Egypt, Amin wrote that it was carried out by “the Egyptian nation and its army.” The imperialist-dependent Egyptian *ruling classes* have an army; its job has nothing to do with the interests of the masses of Egyptian people or the Egyptian nation. Its weapons are for killing Egyptians or for show, like its second-rate American-supplied aircraft stripped of technology potentially useful against Israel, or maybe to be unleashed against other, weaker neighbors. Egypt’s army is specifically organized not to fight against a border state that has invaded it repeatedly and is the only real foreign threat. As for the idea that there is something special about the Egyptian army because most of its members are conscripts, with that argument the U.S. forces in Vietnam could also have been called a “people’s army.”

14 Bob Avakian, “Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom,” revcom.us/bob_avakian/views.

15 For instance, see Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil’s Game, How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2005. The effects of the crushing of the secular Palestinian liberation movement, including Israel’s systematic murder of Palestinian intellectuals, are still painfully felt in the Arab countries today.

16 Bob Avakian, *Away with All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World*, Insight Press, Chicago, pp. 101-106. In the following pages, Avakian goes on to discuss Iran, the PLO and Nasser.

17 For one of many examples of this “anti-imperialist” Islamist discourse about the social destruction caused by the free market and the uprooting of the peasantry, the corruption brought by the West and the hypocrisy of its ideals and practices, the ravaging of the environment and the “wretched” conditions for women under “modernity,” see the writings of the Moroccan sheik Abdessalam Yassine, such as the pamphlet “The Believing Woman in a Turbulent World” (no publisher given but informally circulating) translated into English from a longer book written in 1993. This position has acquired legitimacy among some people who consider themselves feminists and anti-colonialists.

18 Avakian, “Views on Socialism and Communism.”

19 As quoted in the *Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, 2008 (quote originally published 2004).

20 Raymond Lotta with Frank Shannon, *America in Decline*, Banner Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 103.

21 A landmark investigation and analysis of the relationship between Egypt’s internal economic and class structure and its insertion into the global imperialist economy was written by two Egyptian authors writing under the pseudonym Mahmoud Hussein, who were then very influenced by Maoism as they understood it. They developed the thesis that Egypt was marked by an incomplete transition to capitalism, with both elements of highly developed monopoly capitalism subordinated to imperialism and the persistence of feudal and other pre-capitalist features, with both aspects working to perpetuate backward social relations, political institutions, customs and ideas. They also argue that the country’s notable religiosity reflected that objective situation. *Class Conflict in Egypt 1945-1971*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974.

22 “The crisis of rural society is one of contemporary Egypt’s many paradoxes. While Egyptian agriculture is one of the most productive and intensive in the world, its peasants are among the poorest. Some 50-80 percent, according to various analysts, live below the poverty line. Further, while Egypt has become one of the world’s biggest exporters of agricultural products, it remains one of the world’s biggest importers of agricultural foodstuffs.” *La crise de la société rurale en Egypte*, Habib Ayeb, Editions Karthala, Paris, 2010.

23 “Egypt’s economy has grown by about 5 percent in real terms each year since 1980. It is the ambition of all developing countries to achieve such a level of growth, especially where it outstrips the increase in population. Yet sustained economic growth singularly failed to deliver employment and poverty reduction. The NDP [Mubarak’s ruling party] robber barons were successful in rewarding themselves – real estate, land, cement and steel, and of course the military too – after all, did not the military get its ‘toys for the boys’ to a value of U.S. \$1.3 billion per annum from the United States, as well as guarantees for its own enormous business ventures in land, real estate and manufacturing? But urban and rural poverty – the abjection of the majority of Egyptians from the wealth that they have produced – is the biggest indictment of the last 30 years. At best, Egypt has developed but Egyptians have not! Unemployment levels might be as high as 50 percent, food inflation of 20% accelerates poverty and child hunger, and bread riots around the bakeries of Cairo in 2008 were an early indicator of tipping points to come.” (Ray Bush, “Egypt: a permanent revolution?,” *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 38, No. 128, June 2011.)

24 One of the most vivid expressions of that has been in literature. The last decade saw the emergence of a genre called the house novel. The most famous, Alaa Al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building*, was the Arab world’s best-selling novel for two years (2002-03) before being made into a film and then a television series. Hamdi Abu Golayyel’s *Thieves in Retirement* appeared the same year. Both use an apartment building and its inhabitants as a metaphor for Egyptian society. Al-Aswany presents a panorama of all of the country’s social classes in connection with a building in downtown Cairo, while Abu Golayyel focuses on Bedouin immigrants in the poor southern suburb Helwan, once touted as an example of the paternalistic concern of the Nasser regime for the welfare of the working class. Both authors deliver an implacable portrait of a society where the doors and windows have been nailed shut and the suffocating stench of rot fills every room from top to bottom. The cruelty and corruption of the regime has poisoned every aspect of life, even, and perhaps

most painfully, the most ordinary relations between people. (Published in English by Harper Perennial [New York] and American University in Cairo Press, respectively.)

25 Rephrased and condensed from the article “Liberal Capitalism, Crony Capitalism and Lumpen Development,” an article originally published in *Pambazuka* no. 607, November 11, 2012 (<http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/85513>) reposted on fsm2013.org.

26 Hele Beji, “Amina, L’histoire en marche,” *Le Monde*, June 15, 2013 (http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/06/15/amina-l-histoire-en-marche_3430135_3232.html). It should be added that in all of today’s male-dominated societies, including Tunisia and France, two countries where the Femen have been active, public nudity can’t usually escape the “male gaze” and the objectification of women, so it can’t be a general tactic for women’s liberation.

27 Cairo Journal, “Nude Blogger Riles Egyptians of All Stripes,” By Liam Stack and David D. Kirkpatrick, *New York Times*, November 17, 2011. Also, see the interview with Aliaa Magda el-Mahdy reprinted in Smain Laacher’s *Insurrections arabes*, Libella, Paris, 2013.

28 See the chapter “La haine du corps des femmes” in Laacher’s *Insurrections arabes*. This Algerian-born French sociologist is a champion of the Enlightenment, but has the consistency to point out that Diderot, for example, fully shared the Islamic view that women are “complementary” and not equal to men. Saying that even the most reputedly nationalist and secular Arab leaders such as Nasser and Boumediene (or Bourguiba) were unabashed supporters of patriarchy, tribalism and Islam (p. 142), he criticizes today’s revolts for not yet going from opposition to “tyrants” and “modes of government” to the kind of “radical challenge to the social order” that would seek an end to men’s tyranny over women in every aspect of life. He also condemns Western cultural relativists for not judging Arab social movements by whether they are revolutionary or counter-revolutionary in regard to women (pp. 279-281). He vehemently denounces the cultural relativist claim that one should avoid the allegedly “Western gaze” on the question of women’s liberation in the neo-colonial world – oppression is oppression no matter who is looking at it. Why is it that an avowed democrat can take such a stand, while so many self-proclaimed “socialists,” “Marxists” and “communists” fail that test?

29 You might think that after the coup they helped bring about, the police would end their strike against protecting women from abuse and rape in the streets. This hasn’t happened. As crowds filled downtown Cairo streets from wall to wall during the Eid festival marking the end of Ramadan, many women and girl children were subjected to sexual violence, often by very young boys. A member of one of several groups working to stop this horror said, “People now feel like it is their right to commit harassment. If you steal someone’s mobile phone, you run straight off because you know you are a criminal. Now when people harass, they don’t run away any more. They just stand there.” Many people, especially women, are volunteering to join the anti-sexual violence patrols. But the authorities are still standing aside. (*Egypt Daily News*, August 14, 2013. <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/08/14/i-saw-harassment-eid-patrols-show-worrying-trends-in-a-national-problem/>)

30 “A Declaration: For Women’s Liberation and the Emancipation of All Humanity,” *Revolution*, no. 159, March 8, 2009.

31 “Capitalism has not brought about the emancipation of women, nor can it. Capitalism has merely changed the forms in which women are oppressed and has masked the structural nature of this by allowing women, like men, to see themselves as isolated individuals – thereby obscuring the systematic and systematic subjugation they, and others who are oppressed, face. While the fight for equality for women is an absolutely essential part of liberating women, by itself it is not nearly radical enough. If the fight for equality is restricted to the narrow horizons of the capitalist world, and if the system of capitalism itself is left intact, women can become, ‘at best,’ the ‘owners’ of themselves as commodities, or they can gain control over others, treating them in effect as commodities – but they can never break out of the narrow and constricting confines of this exploitative set-up.” Ibid.

32 See “You Don’t Know What You Think You ‘Know’ About ... The Communist Revolution and the REAL Path to Emancipation: Its History and Our Future,” *Revolution*, No. 323, Special Issue, November 24, 2013. See *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto by the Revolutionary Communist Party* (RCP Publications, Chicago, 2009). See revcom.us/Manifesto/Manifesto.html. Also, “Set the Record Straight” at thisiscommunism.org. Finally, Bob Avakian, “The Cultural Revolution in China... Art and Culture... Dissent and Ferment... and Carrying Forward the Revolution Toward Communism,” in *Demarcations, A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic*, No. 2, Summer-Fall 2012, demarcations-journal.org.

33 “The Revolution We Need... The Leadership We Have, A Message, and a Call, from the Revolutionary Communist Party,” *Revolution* no. 170, July 19, 2009.

34 Raymond Lotta, “Hugo Chavez Has an Oil Strategy...But Can This Lead to Liberation,” *Revolution* no. 94, July 1, 2007.

35 Raymond Lotta, “North Korea Is Not a Socialist Society,” *Revolution* no. 301, April 14, 2013.

36 In his article “Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution” in the August 2013 edition of the *Review of African Political Economy* cited above, Habib Ayeub uses the metaphorical comparison between Sidi Bouzid, the desperate city in the interior where Mohamed Bouaziz set himself on fire and ignited the Tunisian revolt, and Sidi Boussaid, a wealthy area north of Tunis, to explore the monstrous disparities between the country’s exported-oriented, coastal north-east, and landlocked south, central and western Tunisia. He links the diversion of water for the

production of dates and olive oil for export and for tourism, with the crushing of the small-scale farmers who used to feed themselves and the country. While few countries enjoy the agricultural potential of Egypt, Ayeb demonstrates that Tunisia's dependence on food imports is not the inevitable result of geography and climate.

37 The question of water resources and their economic, social and environmental implications in Egypt is discussed at length in Ayeb's *La crise de la société rurale en Egypte*.

Ayeb also draws up a brief balance sheet on the failures of Nasserism to bring fundamental change (p. 135): no real industrialization much less overall economic development, no full employment, no improvement in the standard of living of the peasantry despite extensive attempts at agrarian reform, Israel seized and occupied the Sinai peninsula after the devastating defeat in the 1967 war that spelled the beginning of the end of Nasserism, and the liberation of Palestine was abandoned. The previously cited *Class Conflict in Egypt 1945-1971* gives a more theoretical analysis of Nasserism. Avakian discusses scientific and incorrect summations of Nasser in *Away with All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World*, Insight Press, Chicago, 2008, pp. 107-109.

38 "Egypt 2011: Millions Have Heroically Stood Up... The Future Remains to Be Written," *Revolution* no. 224, February 11, 2011.

39 *From Iran to Our Revolutionary Comrades in the Middle East and North Africa*, a statement from the Communist Party of Iran (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) on May First 2011. It points out that in Iran, "The revolutionary crisis that had gripped the society was solved negatively and brought three decades of catastrophe for the working class and the people of Iran and had tremendous negative impact on the trend of revolution in the Middle East as well as the world and enhanced the counter-revolutionary atmosphere." It also explains, "If the people lack a revolutionary communist movement that could push forward the answer for 'what do we want' from the position of the proletariat and other oppressed and exploited of the society and lead the masses to fight for that goal; if we lack that, the reactionary classes and their representatives will impose their own agenda on the masses and tell them 'what they should want'..."

"These are two radically different roads. If the second road wins out, undoubtedly the face of this region and the world will radically change in favor of the peoples of this region as well as the world over. But to make the second road win out, millions of people should come to know what a real revolution is and what is the character of the society they need and want and what kind of class leadership can lead the way towards reaching it. Without millions becoming conscious in this way and getting organized to fight for this goal, the enemies can sell anything to people in the name of 'revolution.' This we saw in the case of the Iranian revolution of 1979. As a result in Iran, basically the same situation remained and even became worse." (For the entire document, see sarbedaran.org and click on "other languages". <http://sarbedaran.org/language/khatabEn.htm>)