"Our Revolution Is Civil": An Interview with Asef Bayat on Revolt and Change in the Arab World

This interview is a revised version of an interview conducted by Özgür Gökmen for the Turkish monthly journal of socialist culture Birikim *268–269 (August–September 2011). An edited version of the Gökmen interview will appear as the introduction to* İslamı Demokratikleştirmek *(İletişim Yayınları, 2011), the Turkish translation of the Asef Bayat's* Making Islam Democratic *(Stanford University Press, 2007).*

The uprisings in the Arab world came as a surprise, even to Middle East specialists. How do we explain these uprisings, especially given the long-standing economic problems and political repression in the region, including in Tunisia and Egypt?

It is too early to explain the uprisings with a reasonable degree of confidence. We need thorough research to shed light on the developments in the region. The key is to explain in the first place the Tunisian revolution. The rest are probably easier to make judgments about than Tunisia. At this point, all I can say is that these political upheavals did not occur in a vacuum. Certain structural changes have been happening in most Middle Eastern countries in the past three decades that have produced some new claims and actors. The most basic are growing urbanization, demographic change (the youth bulge), and the expansion of higher education, which has caused a rapid growth in the size of the educated classes. And these have coincided with the implementation of neoliberal policies and the increasing footprints of globalization since the 1990s in most of these countries.

A crucial outcome has been the creation of new political actors—ones that are basically different from the traditional Arab nationalist or Islamist political classes. So, you

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Left: Cairo, Egypt. 4 February 2011.

have the growth of increasingly educated classes, many of whom, under inequality-generating neoliberal policies, experience a lower-class economic life. Many others, like the laboring classes and state employees, are losing their traditional perks and privileges, like job guarantees, long-term employment contracts, and the social provisions of the state. They are prone to become deeply discontented. (In Tunisia, according to Béatrice Hibou in *The Force of Obedience*, a semblance of economic protection, cooptation, a myth of an impending "economic miracle," and widespread corruption had produced a kind of "obedience" until it was suddenly broken by Bouazizi [the street vendor whose self-immolation set off the revolution].) Even though such discontent has been there for some time in the Arab world, it was largely absorbed by the prevailing Islamist and nationalist politics in the 1990s. However, with the crisis of Islamism, the ineffectiveness of Arab nationalist politics, and the sudden emergence of new avenues for political mobilization and expressions—through Al Jazeera, the internet, and social media—since the mid-2000s, a new kind of politics, with the language of human rights, democracy, dignity, and civility, has come to life. A new Arab public has emerged.

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The rest of the story, that is, the story of how things unfolded in Tunisia and then other countries, belongs to a different type of analysis; it belongs to the intriguing dynamics of revolutions per se—a trigger, a collective outrage, popular courage, a regime's violent responses, re-mobilization, the rapid spread of sentiments through the media nationally and globally, transnational influences, international pressure, cracks in the governing body, submission of a dictator, then subsequent demonstration effects (the idea that "if it happened in Egypt, why not in Syria, or in Jordan, or in Yemen…?"), and so on. Tunisia was marked by a mix of a very educated population with a most repressive police state that had driven the political class into apathy; in Tunisia it was primarily the marginalized people from the central and southern provinces who, aided by the organizational skill of the unionized workers, began the uprising, with the subsequent involvement of the professionals, notably lawyers, the protests assumed a national character. The social network activism of youth offered an essential axis that connected and combined all these different and disparate protests together. Finally, the fact that these countries are all Arab is extremely crucial. The common language and proximate political culture make possible an unfettered travel of ideas, codes, and modes of struggle across national borders, especially in this age of electronic communication, and cross-border Arab activist links. That monumental slogan "al-Sha'b Yorid Esqat al-Nizam" [people want the down fall of the regime] was chanted first in Tunisia, but then traveled to Egypt, and from there to the rest of the Arab world. Such slogans, anecdotes, or revolutionary songs are all understood and internalized by Arabs, but they stop when they reach, say Turkish borders, because Turks do not speak Arabic.

Let me follow up first on the economic issue. You have written elsewhere of "the new proletariat of the Middle East" or the "middle-class poor." How important has the growing expectation for a middle-class life been to the uprisings?

I think the "middle-class poor" have been a key player in these uprisings. But the character of this class is more complicated than simply a desire for a middle-class life. In a way, the economy generated an educated middle class with high awareness and expectations, but then failed to materialize those expectations for a big segment of this class. We need only to bear in mind that once upon a time in the postcolonial period—the 1960s through the 1980s—the modern "middle classes" (those segments of the working people with educational capital, college degrees, white-collar work, and middle-class taste and consumption style) were the key beneficiaries of postcolonial states and were considered the "builders" of these new nations. These classes were the product of "welfarism" or the distributive "socialism" (for example, free education at all levels) of these postcolonial states, some of which enjoyed handsome income from the rise in oil prices since the mid-1970s. Many members of these middle classes strived to work in the privileged and prestigious state sector—as professionals, technocrats, and bureaucrats of public enterprises.

Things began to change when the welfare state faced a crisis of sustainability, and when the gradual but growing privatization began to frame a mindset that privileged the private enterprises over the public sector. So, the public sector began to decline in income and status, even though many of the old perks, such as job security, remained. But with the implementation of neoliberal policies since the late 1990s, those traditional perks began to dwindle and social inequality grew further. Some in the highly globalized sectors of the economy, like the high-tech, entertainment, and import-export businesses, thrived, while others, for instance, in agriculture, trade, law, social sciences, humanities, and such, failed to get proper jobs. Many of them were then pushed into precarious economic existence and marginality. Recently in Tunis, a qualified historian told me that until two years ago, he had remained unemployed for nine years! What can these educated unemployed do to make a living? Often they end up in the informal sector of the economy and face the humiliation of residing in slums and squatter settlements. So, while these middle classes continue to get proletarianized, the expansion of new media makes them doubly aware of their own deprivation. I suspect that they turn highly political, even explosive.

It seems that this phenomenon is not peculiar to the Middle East. We see, to a lesser extent, somewhat similar processes these days in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Britain. Reports give accounts of ex-managers who have lost their homes in this housing crisis and turned homeless. We still need to investigate further about this phenomenon; we still need to establish how viable it is as a social category. We need to know if the "middle-class poor" class is a permanent happening or a transitory one. My impression so far is that this class has been there for quite a while, since the 1980s or so, and may not go away very soon. It reminds me of Marx's "reserve army of labor," which was supposed to be temporary, but continues to persist.

It has been reported that the people of the Ashwaiyyat, the slum areas of Cairo, did not participate in the Tahrir Square protests. Why not?

I am not sure if the claim about the absence of the Ashwaiyyat from Tahrir is entirely correct. In fact, walking into the depth of districts like Imbaba (an Ashwaii community) in the heart of Cairo in April, I could see numerous signs, including murals, slogans, and images of martyrs, of the revolutions on the walls of the buildings. We know that local young activists in these poor neighborhoods got involved in mobilizing, demonstrating in the streets, and battling with the police who tried to stop them. Many of the organized soccer fans (Ultras) who were mobilized to fight back the violent regime thugs and the police in Tahrir square were residents of such districts and so were some of those educated strategic organizers. The fact is that the Ashwaiyyat, or Egypt's informal communities or slums, house not merely the illiterate, rural, and abject poor, but also segments of the urbanites—government employees, newly married educated couples, certain professionals, such as lawyers, teachers, and the like—who cannot afford to secure housing in the formal market, and thus are pushed to live in the informal communities. So, at least segments of the young and educated residents of the Ashwaiyyat seemed to be present in Tahrir.

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The rural migrants and the very poor in Cairo, just like in Tehran or elsewhere, often show reluctance to spearhead public protests of such magnitude and nature. Many of them are not clear about the dynamics, the aims, and especially the outcomes of such political upheavals. So, they prefer to wait and see what happens. For most of the illiterate and very poor, revolutions remain events too abstract to be incorporated into their precarious daily lives. They tend to be involved in the more concrete and local struggles—those that are meaningful and manageable for them. However, postrevolutionary times are the times when these very reluctant poor get mobilized. Confident of the absence of the oppressors and within the new free space, they do show interest in organizing and activism, especially around issues connected to their immediate habitat. In Egypt, not long after the departure of Mubarak, the people of the Ashwaiyyat communities began to organize themselves at the community level, and began to demand the immediate dismissal of old governors and mayors. In Tunis, the poor have taken advantage of the absence of police control to virtually occupy multiple streets in the intersection of the new and the old city, the Medina, to spread their merchandise and advance their business. In a sense the poor are carrying out their own "revolution."

Although Mubarak is now standing trial, the political structure in Egypt seems to have remained almost intact. And the prospects for liberty and greater economic equity in the Arab world more broadly do not appear good. Will this era be remembered for revolts resulting in partial reforms?

Even though the primary focus of these revolts has been representative and democratic governance, the demand for social justice and respect for people's dignity have remained central. As I mentioned earlier, the negative impact of neoliberal economics has contributed significantly to the current popular discontent in the Arab world. So, equity is likely to be a chief concern of many people in any of these postrevolutionary conditions. Indeed, a failure, post-revolution, to fulfill people's economic demands can be a real danger to the democratic future of these countries, simply because economic hardships can be exploited by demagogic populists or "fundamentalists" to ward off the appeal of a democratic polity. "Bread" becomes more urgent than "freedom," so to speak. At the same time, it is also clear that political change can take place much quicker than economic shifts toward greater equality. So, here lies the challenge. The fact remains that redistributive measures will not come automatically; they are likely to be pushed by mobilization and organization of subaltern groups in society. The hope is that with more open political space, room for social struggles and movements to make social justice claims will be available. Postrevolutionary times do not end social struggles. Rather, they are times when new claims are made to which measured and manageable solutions must be negotiated.

In mid-March, some three hundred thousand people took to the streets in Lisbon, Porto, and other cities in Portugal to protest the lack of job opportunities and falling living standards. The initiative was launched on the social media site Facebook. In May, similar Facebook-organized protests took place in Madrid. Do these share a connection to the Arab uprisings?

I think the reality of the "middle-class poor" can give a new intensity and herald some new forms of political mobilization both in the global south as well as in crisis-stricken countries of the north, such as Spain, Greece, and Portugal. Before the advent of new communications technology, these actors would probably engage in more or less individualized strategies of survival, as in the image of the old "privatized white collar" workers—something that distinguished them from the organized, unionized working people. But the new technologies, like social media and blogs, have offered a technologically savvy generation remarkable organizational possibilities. So they get involved in often diffuse, decentralized, ad-hoc coordination that can enjoy effective transnational linkages; they deploy art, imagery, and music as tools for mobilization and dissent, in the public sphere—in the media, and through social media—as well as in public space, notably the streets. The Iranian and Arab insurgencies have pioneered the use of such avenues of political contention. They have already inspired movements among subaltern groups in different parts of the world. Yet, a more durable inspiration would depend on how successful these social upheavals will be.

One of the prominent slogans of the protestors in Cairo's Tahrir Square was "Our revolution is civil, neither violent nor religious!" How would you describe the character of the people's movements?

Well, as I stressed in my article "The Post-Islamist Revolutions" in *Foreign Affairs* (April 26, 2011), these revolts are not inspired by religion, by Islam, or by an urge to bring these nations and states under the diktat of Sharia. So far there is no strong evidence to support such a claim, except perhaps a large gathering of Salafi groups in Egypt (many of whom opposed the revolution) in Tahrir a while ago when they shouted slogans demanding Sharia. At any rate, of course large groups of devoted and pious populations have participated in these upheavals, as have a large number of seculars, liberals, and leftists. But in almost all of these revolts, the language of religion is basically absent. There has been little evidence of religious chants and slogans in the uprisings. In Tunisia, indeed, sympathizers of the al-Nahda party (led by Rashid al-Ghannushi and banned by the Ben Ali regime) were present, but the key demand of the revolutionaries has been democracy and rule of law. Egyptian protestors were more concerned about undoing the regime of Mubarak, achieving social justice, and individual dignity than Islamic rule. Qaddafi's claim that the revolutionary opposition to his rule comes from Al Qaeda has little bearing in reality, even though there are some ex-*jihadis* in the rebel organization, the Transitional National Council. The Syrian revolt is carried out not by religiously motivated activists, but largely by lay (religious as well as secular) citizens who together demand a democratic order. In fact, in Syria, the key Islamic group, the Muslim Brotherhood, had long been suppressed, while the conservative *ulema* have largely sided with the Ba'athist regime. The same story is true, more or less, of Bahrain and Yemen. Even though Al Qaeda is reportedly active in Yemen, it does not seem to play any major role in the democratic movement against President Saleh's regime.

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So, what is unfolding currently in the Arab world are not Islamic revolutions. Rather, they seem to pursue a post-Islamist trajectory, in that the protestors wish to have accountable governments, free elections, and democratic freedoms, with a fair degree of social justice. At the same time, many of them want to build such a polity within a largely pious and moral society.

What do you mean by a post-Islamist trajectory?

Let me give three examples. Turkey's Islamism—represented since the early 1970s first by the *Millî Görüş* (National View) movement and then by a series of political parties adopting the National View ideology, such as the *Millî Nizam* (National Order), *Millî Selamet* (National Salvation), *Refah* (Welfare), and *Fazilet* (Virtue)—was transformed by the late 1990s into adopting a post-Islamist trajectory embodied in the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party). In this trajectory Islam is to leave the state to civil and democratic institutions that do not privilege any particular religion, but Islam is to play a role in the social realm as the frame for creating a pious society. The key factors behind the rise of post-Islamism in Turkey included the resilience of secular sen-

sibilities in Turkish society, the strong mistrust of the secularist Army, and the exigencies of joining the European Union (EU). In a way these critical sensibilities compelled the Islamists to change their ideas and their political course in order to gain political office. With the ideological transformation, the social basis of the party also began to shift—AKP's interest in the EU and neoliberal economic policies inevitably influenced the character of its social support. There was a tendency to cultivate support among propertied groups of both traditional Anatolian and globalized (that is, globally well-connected) character.

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There are some parallels here with the post-Islamist trajectory in post-revolution Iran. Iranian post-Islamism, which was initially represented by the reform movement and then the reform government of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2004) and currently by the Green Movement, also emerged as a response to the excesses of authoritarian Islamist politics—violating human rights and ignoring democratic, civil, and individual liberties. Post-Islamism emerged as a frame to make Islamic sensibilities compatible with a democratic polity and to recognize some civil rights. These were the concerns that were frequently expressed by the various social (non-)movements of women, students, intelligentsia, and others.

The Egyptian experience was more complex. In *Making Islam Democratic*, which covers the events to the end of the Reform era in Iran in 2004 and the beginning of the "new dawn," or democracy movement in Egypt in 2004, I was more hopeful about democratic change in Iran than in Egypt. Iran at the time enjoyed a much stronger societal movement for democracy than Egypt. But things began to change rapidly in Egypt after the Kefaya movement (or Egyptian Movement for Change) emerged in 2004. Various groups, including secular, liberal, human rights, labor, and women's organizations, as well as the youths of the Muslim Brotherhood, began to organize, often through the newly developed social media. By this time, they all espoused a new politics—one that was post-ideological and, above all, post-Islamist. The key slogan of Tahrir during the revolution—"Our revolution is civil, neither violent nor religious!"—reflects, in a way, this new politics. It represents Egypt's post-Islamism.

In brief, you argue that a post-Islamist movement upholds religion, on the one hand, and highlights citizens' rights, on the other—aspiring to a pious society within a democratic state. The AKP, one of your post-Islamist examples, does not quite fit into this picture when it comes to citizens' rights and the requirements for a democratic state. If a post-Islamist government could provide key public goods and maintain a minimum social care policy, could it not then sidestep democracy?

Just to be clear, post-Islamism implies a tendency among often ex-Islamists to transform their idea of a religious state—in which Sharia is the key source of law—and uphold instead a civil and democratic governance. Religion remains cherished as a value among individuals and is to be present in the public sphere. Of course, a tricky issue in this formulation is the question of "what is democracy?"—the extent of democratic practices, their depth, and their coverage. Is democracy simply a method of governance—like free elections, representative government, separation of powers, etc.—or is it also a more fundamental value—the exercise of popular power, truly free expression, protection of dissenters, and even economic equity? Now, in the case of post-Islamists, democracy is still quite a new experiment for them. They have a very short history and are still in the process of trial and error. In fact, in most cases, post-Islamism remains at the level of vision and movement. Only a handful of these movements have had a chance to take governmental power, such as the AKP in Turkey and the Reform government of Khatami in Iran.

At any rate, I see a considerable difference between the vision and practice of post-Islamists in governance and that of the Islamists. In Turkey or in Indonesia, there is a good degree of competition between political groupings for power; religious parties are not to be privileged over other parties. There is a good degree of orderly and free elections. Democracy as a method has largely been accepted. But there is no denying that under such post-Islamist governments, certain basic human rights have been violated; restrictions on expression occur. We know, for example, that under the current AKP a number of journalists have been incarcerated simply for publishing oppositional articles in newspapers. In addition, post-Islamists are yet to resolve their problems with (not economic, but social) liberalism, with the extent to which individual liberties, communities of faiths, and life-styles are to be tolerated. But I want to stress that such restrictions and violations are not necessarily restricted to post-Islamist governments. Secular governance can also produce such violations. The challenge is to devise legal and institutional mechanisms to diminish this danger. Democracy, after all, has historically been a site of intense struggle to extend its depth and spread; it has been a site where democrats have constantly been engaged in making democracy democratic.

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