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The Arab Uprisings through an Agrarian Lens

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On the eve of the Arab Spring uprisings, the AW was itself in the throes of an inextricable agrarian crisis. The chronic and profound Arab food insecurity had been exposed by the global food crisis of 2008. The stripping of entitlements from the agrarians had created a massive migration to urban centres and resulted in the largest rate of youth unemployment in the world. The mining of the landscapes, especially its soils, water and biodiversity components, had created an environmental catastrophe. The AW was ripe for insurrections. The Tunisian spark set motion to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and now Iraq. The remaining countries felt the tremors and experienced their share of instability.

Five years later, in 2015, the AW is struggling to extract itself from the tumult. In countries where a precarious peace has prevailed, such as Tunisia and Egypt, transitional governments are struggling with plans to re-establish economic growth and social stability. All eyes are turned towards the cities where the seism had climaxed, forgetting the agrarian world where the true epicentre of the uprising lies.

This chapter is in two parts. In the first section, I use a political ecology approach to link the convulsions that have been shaking the AW for the past five years to the Arab agrarian question. In the second part, I will critically explore some of options available to transitional governments for addressing what may be their main existential challenge: the Arab agrarian question.

1. The road to the uprisings

In this chapter, I argue that the roots of the Arab uprisings may be found in the radical agrarian transformations that have affected people, land and food since the early modern period. I further contend that the

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violent amalgam of colonialism, imperialism, neoliberalism and populist dictatorships, exerted over a meagre ecological endowment, has created an agrarian question of cataclysmic proportions,[1] that has left tens of millions of Arabs unemployed, landless, disenfranchised and desperate (Amin, 2012). I further surmise that the agrarian question cannot be resolved solely by massive urbanisation and disinvestment from farming, and reliance on industrial farming and market forces, as is often suggested, but that a solution that conserves agrarian culture and society is necessary in order to construct a just and humane AW.

In order to understand the Arab agrarian question, a good understanding of the biophysical milieu in which it unfolds is necessary. In Subsection 1.1, I will present relevant environmental information using a political ecology approach that recognises the role of power relations in the access and use of the environment and its resources (Neumann, 2009, p. 228).

1.1 An agonising landscape

Extending from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, the AW covers today a total area of nearly 13 million km^2. As of 2010 (Mirkin, 2010, p. 5), the Arab population numbered 359 million and was growing at a rate of 2.1 per cent, which is higher than the average for developing nations. The region is characterised by accelerated environmental degradation coupled with intensive exploitation of natural resources essential for farming and food production: soils, water and biodiversity (Saab, 2012, p. 19). Some of the damage is due to the limiting ecological endowment and to climatic uncertainty. However, environmental pressures cannot alone bear the responsibility for the prevalent rates of degradation. Over the course of history, power in its various forms has left profound scars on the Arab landscape (see, for instance, Bonine (2009, p. 82) and articles in Davis and Burke III (2011)). As a result, Arab countries suffer various degrees of water scarcity, desertification, loss of arable lands, soil erosion, ecosystem imbalance, loss of biodiversity and increasing pollution. These affect mostly the rural areas and strongly impinge on the lives of agrarians.

The availability of fresh water continues to be the most limiting factor to human and natural well-being, growth and prosperity. Per capita share of fresh water in the AW is just 10 per cent that of the rest of the world. Fifteen countries rank below the poverty level of 1000 m^3/year of water (FAO, 2013). Iraq, Mauritania, Egypt, Syria and Sudan depend on surface water originating in other countries for at least 70 per cent of their needs (UNEP, 2013, p. 62). The recent bid by ISIS militias for control of major rivers and dams is clear evidence of the potential power

of water as a weapon of war (Vidal, 2014). The geopolitics of water holds the Arabs by their throats.

Rainfall is sparse and erratic: 52 per cent of the region receives less than 100 mm/year, and only 18 per cent receives more than 400 mm/year (ACSAD, 1997, p. 522) (which is below the minimum requirement for rain-fed wheat production (FAO, 2013)). Droughts are common and can be prolonged, and often result in ecological, social and political tragedies. Interseasonal variability of rainfall is also frequent, leading to figures for effective rainfall (precipitation that can effectively be used by plants) that are commonly far below those of the cumulative rainfall. Anthropic climate change poses an extra stress as the region is expected to be one of the hardest hit in the world in the future, with expected declines in rainfall, and increased drought frequencies (AFED, 2008, p. 129). Rural people are also extremely vulnerable to economic and climatic fluctuations. The protracted drought in Syria, from 2008 to 2011, has caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of families and is widely acknowledged to have been a catalyst for the armed violence of the past years (William, 2013).

Aridity or hyper-aridity affects nearly 90 per cent of the Arab lands. Of these, 52 per cent are deserts and 33 per cent steppic range lands (UNEP, 2013, p. 10), locally known as *al Badia*. Their productivity is generally low and intensified, and increasingly settled animal production requires additional feed inputs, which are commonly imported. Arable land is potentially 15 per cent of the total area, but farmland covers only 4 per cent of the AW. The amount of arable land per capita has also decreased by over half since 1980. In 2005, it was less than 1 ha/capita of rain-fed land and less than a half-hectare for irrigated land (CeDARE, UNEP, LAS, 2010, p. 71). Five per cent of the total land area in the Arab region is devoted to agriculture, as opposed to a worldwide average of 11.9 per cent.

Irrigation is essential for increasing agricultural productivity. Irrigated farming on 20 per cent of the arable land produces 70 per cent of the Arab agricultural output. Although the agricultural sector's contribution to GDP is just 12 per cent, it is where most of the water is used: up to 89 per cent of the water resources (Breisinger et al., 2010, p. 15), with an efficiency of 40 per cent. This figure is expected to decline to 60 per cent in 2050 (AFED, 2011, p. 33).

1.2 The emergence of the Arab agrarian question: Land and water issues

Land and associated resources are essential for the livelihoods of agrarians. When land and water are taken away, the people's decline is

inevitable. Securing access to sufficient land is possibly the most important determinant of rural poverty. Landlessness has been accurately described as a curse in the AW (Forni, 2003, p. 10).

Issawi (1965), writing on foreign affairs, traces the emergence of landlessness among the peasantry to the breakdown of the communal systems of land tenure (*masha'*, *dira*), which provided, under subsistence farming, a large degree of equity due to its periodic redistribution among farmers. Industrialisation, population growth and, most importantly, the shift to cash cropping and to market rule, caused the disintegration of agrarian communities. It also paved the way to dispossession and appropriation by powerful elite. To this, one must add the introduction of Western land laws, which served to reinforce the hold of the powerful.

As a result, land distribution in the AW is one of the most unequal on Earth, although that point is rarely addressed in documents' treatment of issues concerning Arab food security and rural development. The GINI Index for land in the Middle East, a measure of the inequality in distribution, is among the highest worldwide (FAOSTAT, 2010); the GINI Coefficients stand at 69 per cent for Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia, 81 per cent for Jordan and 62 per cent for Morocco. (GINI Index figures were unavailable for Yemen, Syria, Libya, Bahrain and other Gulf countries). Few countries in the world show higher land inequality figures as a group. Arab land inequality is characterised by a 'bifurcation in the patterns of landholdings': the little land accessible to small and medium-sized farmers is increasingly subdivided into smaller parcels, primarily due to inheritance, until it becomes uneconomical to farm. Conversely, the property of the rich remains relatively intact. This special kind of land inequality has been proposed as one of the principal causes of political violence in the Middle East (Midlarsky, 1988, p. 504).

Control over land was accompanied by a set of policies on water that has profoundly altered resource access and governance. The politics of water in the Arab countries have been essentially demand driven and also based on engineering approaches for addressing water scarcity. Due to their historic water thirst, Arab states have sought to establish their legitimacies through grandiose hydraulic missions. Saudi Arabia tapped its fossil groundwater to exhaustion for the state-subsidised vanity farms of the ruling families (Rivlin, 2009, p. 235), while Egypt constructed the Nasser Dam, and Syria the Assad Dam. As a result, water has become even scarcer as Arab countries use today 85 per cent of renewable water resources in agriculture (AFED, 2011, p. 20), compared with values of between 1 per cent and 30 per cent for other regions (World Bank,

2009, p. 7). Public finances were used to subsidise irrigation water. Studies show that blanket water subsidies served mainly large landowners (Mohamed et al., 2009, p. 68), who increased their hold and control over resources. Poor maintenance is another shared characteristic of large Arab hydraulic projects (AFED, 2011, p. 20), which affects distribution and irrigation efficiency. To this, one must add the uncontrolled tapping of groundwater (itself associated with access to capital, finance drilling, and pump installation and operation), as well as the political power to do so in contravention of the legal framework.

An examination of the relationship between power and access to entitlements in the AW cannot be complete without a mention of the occupation and war that continue to be imposed on the Arab people. Many countries in the Arab region are forcibly occupied, as is the case of Palestine and, until recently, Iraq. War, conflict and occupation compound the impact of the Arab agrarian debacle (Zurayk, 2011, p. 119). Access to land, water, seeds and markets in Palestine has been forcibly appropriated by the Israeli settler state, which has pulverised agrarian livelihoods in the process (Sansour and Tartir, 2014). The war in Syria has led to millions of refugees and displaced people, mostly from rural areas (Zurayk, 2014, p. 9). A full examination of the contribution of war and occupations to the agrarian question is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it must be noted that, as of time of writing in July 2014, the Israeli offensive on Gaza is in full swing and will certainly contribute to further dispossession of the Palestinian agrarians (Zurayk and Gough, 2013, p. 19).

1.3 The human dimension of the agrarian question: The road to the Arab uprisings

Arab endorsement of structural adjustment policies since the 1980s stimulated the rolling out of the state from the agrarian world, and the decline of state agricultural sector investments.[2] It also favoured private exploitation of land over communal/governmental responsibility. With the integration in the global food regime came the precedence of the exchange value of the landscape over its production value. Speculations flourished, and land became a perfect vehicle for absorbing and channelling oil rent and other forms of remittances. This deepened the inequality in land access, and estranged land further from its initial food production use.

The result has been a strong rural–urban migration especially among the working-age groups, and fast-paced urbanisation, ranging from 33 per cent (Yemen) to 85 per cent (Lebanon). However, half of Arabs still

live in rural areas (UN-ESCWA, 2008, p. 12). While this proportion is in steady decline, it only reaches negative growth in some areas.

Rural poverty runs deep. Depending on the poverty line used, 60–70 per cent of the poor live in rural areas, and 40–70 per cent of the 130 million Arabs living in rural areas are considered poor (Ben Jelili, 2010, p. 9). The rural–urban poverty divide is highest in Tunisia (4.9), followed by Morocco (3.0), Egypt (2.9) and Yemen (1.9) (Abou Ismail and Al Jondi, 2011, p. 7).

Concurrently, the Arab states withdrew their investments in agriculture: from USD 6.1 billion in 1986–1990 to USD 1.9 billion in 1996–2000 (IFAD, 2007, p. 19). In Tunisia, for example, where agriculture composes a sizeable section of the GDP at 11 per cent, 20 per cent of the labour force depends on agriculture for their livelihoods. Despite this, agriculture was barely subsidised under the Ben Ali regime and the sector received only 7 per cent of FDI between 2000 and 2007 (Lamboley, 2012).

Other indicators of human development of the Arab agrarians are equally dismal: only 62 per cent have access to safe drinking water (world: 83 per cent) and 51 per cent to sanitation facilities (world: 59 per cent), with very large disparities between rural and urban, especially in Morocco, Yemen and Sudan (IFAD, 2007, p. 31). These figures echo those for malnutrition and access to health care and education.

2. The morning after: Transitional regimes and the agrarian questions

Transitional regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen have largely failed to address the popular demands for bread, jobs and social justice, and the demands of those who caused the revolutions.[3] On the contrary, they have persisted in approaching the agrarian question using the same set of neoliberal fixes as their predecessors. By doing so, they brought their countries one step closer to agrarian disaster.

After a major MB fiasco, during which deposed President Morsi attempted to curb wheat imports in what was described as a 'Quixotic attempt at making Egypt self-sufficient' (Reuters, 2013), while signalling to the IMF that he was ready to do business, the Sisi regime safely put Egypt back on the ultra-liberalisation track. No mention is made of amending 'Law 96 of 1992', which liberated land rent and caused millions to become landless (Bush, 2007, p. 1601). Workers strikes are still forcefully repressed and there are no indications that the dynamic of large-scale land reclamation and investment, such as the

corruption-tainted Toshka project, is subsiding, or that state support to smallholders is increasing.

However, one of the outcomes of the regime changes has been the strengthening of civil society. A popular movement has recently emerged, and modest interaction between civil society in rural and urban settings has been noted. The movement was able to obtain the mention of food sovereignty in the new constitution. There has also been contestation movements against expropriation and land rental to investors for cash crops (grapes) in the southern regions of Nag' Hammadi, Al Qanatir and Al Fayyum, where the name of former minister Yousef Wali has been associated with corruption and land grabbing (Masrawi, 2012).

The elections in Tunisia, similar to those in Egypt, brought Islamists to power. Their failure to address popular demands in the rural areas explains the popularity loss they experienced. It is also connected to the rise in armed violence in the poorest regions of the countries, where the insurrection against the Ben Ali regime started (Byrne, 2014).

The demands of Tunisian farmers for investment in small-scale agriculture and sustainable agricultural practices (Lamboley, 2012) were not met. The country has experienced violent repression of workers as a result of farmworkers' strikes. Al-Nahda (the main Islamist party in power) infiltrated and co-opted farmers' unions. This has led to the amplification of social protest and to collective organised action. The Tunisian countryside witnessed attacks on over 100 privatised state farms, some which were occupied in a direct challenge to the state privatisation policy and to the land tenure laws dating back to the French mandate. The agrarians may be able to exert political pressure on the state if they are able to organise as an autonomous force (Gana, 2013, p. 210).

2.1 What is to be done?

Can the Arab regimes continue to ignore their agrarian question? Can the fire that is devouring the Arab lands ever be put out without addressing the fate of the rural world? In view of the evidence presented, this is very doubtful. Change is badly needed. It can take two forms: reform or revolution.

2.2 What can be done?

With goodwill and adequate expertise there is quite a lot that can be achieved by the transitional regimes without directly challenging liberal economic principles, capitalism or globalisation. Reform options

can vary, from redistributing oil and financial rents in order to ensure political stability (Gulf countries, Algeria (see Bessaoud, 2013, p. 26)), to addressing the problems of rural poverty and unemployment through standard solutions that involve mainly treating food as a commodity, and farming as a regular economic sector. This latter solution would involve *some* attention being given to *some* farmers, who can show enterprise and are capitalised in one way or another, as well as: improving agricultural technology to sustainably enhance productivity (this includes improving water efficiency), enhancing rural education, investing in infrastructure, making markets work for the less fortunate, building safety nets, refocusing subsidies to serve the needed, involving civil society and including gender dimensions in development planning, promoting dietary shifts and reducing wastage. For example, a recent International Food Policy Research Institute- (IFPRI-)ESCWA food security conference on 'Food Secure Arab World' in Beirut on 6–7 February 2012 (IFPRI, 2012) returned the following policy recommendations:

- Building economic free zones on the coastline of Arab countries to absorb rural migrants.
- Exporting solar energy production.
- Switching from cereal production to export-oriented cash crops like vegetables. The rationale here is that cash cropping is more labour intensive and provides more jobs.
- Creating relevant vocational education programmes that build on manufacturing-led economic growth.
- Improving trade and market integration by unleashing the power of small businesses and improving access to financing.

While many of these conventional conclusions are appropriate, they seek to induce 'growth' and remedy poverty without asking why people are poor. In this classically liberal approach, to quote Averbeck, 'injustice is a product of misunderstanding, the result of faceless processes that no one really benefits from' (Averbeck, 2014). Indeed, only a tiny minority of 'expert reports' and policy guidance documents make mention of the role of power in maintaining the poor in poverty, of the causes of landlessness, and of the processes of dispossession and marginalisation (Breisinger et al., 2011). Rather, whenever the term 'resources allocation' is used, it is tainted with undertones of cultural deficiencies. For instance, the IFPRI report, *Beyond the Arab Awakening*, mentions resource allocation in reference to gender differences in access to food and entitlements within households. There is no mention of the number of landless farmers in the AW or of the violence perpetrated by power to

reproduce itself and maintain control over access resources. Economic conditions appear to be isolated from the political context.

2.3 Can the system be changed? Food sovereignty and the agrarian question

'Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations' (Rahmanian and Pimbert, 2014). Essentially, food sovereignty is opposed to capitalism and neoliberalism, and calls for land reforms to redistribute resources to landless peasants and to smallholders. It also promotes a 'peasant way' and an agro-ecological approach to farming, in the interest of preserving social, cultural and ecological integrity. In a nutshell, food sovereignty appears to hold the solution to the Arab agrarian question, or, rather, to the world's agrarian questions, as suggested by economist Samir Amin (2012, p. 21).

The concept of food sovereignty has gained strength over the past two decades as a response to the impacts of the global food regime on people, land and food. It is championed by a cluster of national and transnational social movements and civil society organisations that generally go under the name of 'Food Movement'. The core of the food sovereignty movement is organised around the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, which includes, among its members, La Via Campesina, an international movement that brings together 164 farmers' organisations from 73 countries.

Although much has been written in the past few years on food sovereignty, more recently in academic environments, such as the September 2013 conference convened by Yale University (Bernstein, 2013) titled ' Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue' – jointly sponsored by the Program in Agrarian Studies and the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, it has become difficult to detect the ideological thread that links different members of the movement. It has been criticised from all sides of the spectrum. Aerni accuses it of containing 'too much old left-wing ideology and too little creative thinking . . . ' (Aerni, 2011, p. 23). Bernstein (2013) offered a sceptic view on the concept from the other side of the ideological fence, and pointed at its obvious limitation: the difficulty of extracting farmers from commodity relations. Inputs need to be obtained, and crops sold. Bernstein (2013) also points to limitations in the ability of the movement to establish mutually positive synergies

between those who are peasants and those who are not. The urban poor may not be able to see the benefit from the implementation of food sovereignty agendas.

Another issue is the automatic association of the peasantry with 'goodness', as there is no conclusive evidence that smallholders exploit farmworkers any less than large capitalist production units. There is also an underlying assumption that smallholders want to remain in farming. In the current conditions, and in the absence of large-scale infrastructural investments in rural areas, it is doubtful that they do. A post-uprising study of the 1,000 Villages project in Egypt confirmed that the principal goal of farmworkers, male and female, was to exit farming as quickly as possible (Elmenofi and El-Shenawy, 2013, p. 24).

Another issue that describes well the predicament of the food sovereignty movement is the lack of an ideological basis: the movement is forced to operate within a bounded rationality; it has to perceive the world in terms of food. Without denying the importance of food, one must realise that it will take more than a sectorial approach to resolve the agrarian predicament. Can food be really isolated from the political economy at regional, national and global levels? This is very doubtful. For instance, the viability of the food sovereignty movement is highly unlikely in the context of the geopolitical struggle around water or oil. Farmers may be free to grow what they want, but the control of Turkey over the Tigris and Euphrates headwaters must be taken into account.

In summary, food sovereignty is based on radical and revolutionary thought, although it may not have the means to walk the talk. Nevertheless, it serves to bring together and strengthen movements that have been historically marginalised. However, in order to show tangible and sustainable achievements, it will need to establish broad-based coalitions involving agrarians rather than their intellectual representatives, in which all agree on the principle of altering existing power relations using the necessary means. We are still far from this point.

3. Conclusion

On the eve of the uprisings, Arab regimes ruled by a combination of dispossession, redistribution and repression. The agrarian world was in the process of being dismantled, its landscapes seized by the ruling class and its people forced into exodus. Farmland was being grabbed for wealth accumulation, either through capitalist agricultural production or through real estate speculations. The ruling elites controlled land and water through political power. The state coffers were used to dissipate

the nefarious effects of this process by employing rural migrants in the public sector or in the army. The oligarchy accumulated wealth by extracting the natural resources to produce export commodities and by importing food as local agents of multinational corporations. The state, run by urbanised elites, had dealt a deadly blow to mobile pastoralism, once a major source of food. The *Badia*, the Arabian steppe, was turned into vast dump of waste and badlands, with occasional vanity farms tapping the non-renewable groundwater. These conditions precipitated the eruption of the Arab uprisings. The events in 2010 and 2011 filled Arab hearts with hope. Today, gloom reigns over the AW. What happened in-between?

Aside from the geopolitical dimensions, which I do not directly address in this chapter, transitional regimes have failed to live up to the expectations of the people, especially the agrarian community, which is historically disenfranchised and excluded. It does appear that the only toolbox at the regime's disposal originates from the Bretton Woods fellowship. Governments have wavered between doing nothing and moving deeper into outrageous neoliberalism. And in spite of the Abbasid poet Abu Nuwas' famous aphorism 'cure it with what was the illness', it is difficult to foresee a solution to the Arab agrarian question coming from the policy bundle that has created it.

Access to entitlements, especially land, in a region where landlessness is a curse and where the inequality of access to land is among the highest in the world, is the elephant in the room. Without some form of land and water justice, it is unlikely that the AW will experience social and political stability, especially given the predominance of rent economies. But land reform is a political taboo, and will not happen without a mass social and political movement. There are signs that such a movement may be forming. It must be noted, however, that neoliberalism is an ideological position, and it can only be countered with an adequate ideological framework. This is what is still lacking in the civil society movements that proclaim their commitment to agrarian justice.

Notes

1. The agrarian question represents concern over the fate of smallholder farmers confronted with the foray of capital into the agrarian world. Samir Amin foresees its outcome as a disaster of genocidal proportions (Amin, 2012, p. 14).
2. For a good overview of the conditions under which agrarians live, refer to IFAD (2007).
3. A summary analysis of the specific agrarian conditions leading to the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria can be found in Zurayk and Gough (2014, p. 107).

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