

Interview with Prof. Prabhat Patnaik on the Developments in Turkey

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1-Public riot against the brutal state terror is being interpreted as “Turkish Spring”, specially by some European newspapers. Do you approve to liken the process experienced in the Middle East and called “Arab Spring” with the events happening in Turkey? Which aspects are similar and which are different? In this framework how do you evaluate the developments in Turkey, especially comparing to Egypt? How did the people of Middle East nations evaluate the revolt in Turkey? Can we say that the moderate Islam project is coming to an end after the events in Turkey and Egypt?

The media in advanced countries suffixes the word “spring” to every uprising of the people to portray it in a specific way, as a striving for a liberal bourgeois regime, and to gloss over the anger against inequality, deprivation, unemployment and hunger resulting from the pursuit of neo-liberal policies that inform these uprisings. The Tunisian uprising which started the so-called “Arab Spring” for instance was sparked off by the self-immolation of Mohammed who was protesting against hunger and unemployment. Since portraying an event in a specific way is also a means of intervening in it, the Western newspapers’ description of these uprisings as “Arab Spring” or “Turkish Spring”, with the specific liberal bourgeois connotation that underlies such description, is something I totally reject.

There is a difference between the Arab uprisings against Ben Ali or Mubarak and the Turkish uprising. The former were against corrupt dictatorships which were not based on free elections and their demand was for basic democratic rights; the latter is against a regime that is apparently democratically elected, and has a degree of popular support, albeit based on a religious appeal, but is pursuing policies to the detriment of the people. The latter therefore is far more difficult; it has to address the task of weaning people away from supporting the current regime, by putting forward their material and secular demands, which the Islamicists, currently enjoying their support, never do. The uprising therefore has to be far more organized and must put before the people an alternative concrete agenda. It is not enough in the Turkish case to demonstrate against the brutality of the regime. What worked against a Mubarak or a Ben Ali will not work against an Erdogan.

The “moderate Islam project” to my mind is a misnomer. We have to look at this project from the point of view not of Islam but of imperialism. Imperialism has been trying for some time to reach an understanding with Islamicist elements. It has not yet succeeded in Iran, but Turkey is its first success story and it would like to extend that “model” to other countries where the Islamicists are in power. The fall of the Morsy regime in Egypt, which appears to some as a failure of the “moderate Islam project”, is not a setback for imperialism at all, for it brings back the army and some of the old Mubarakists to power. Imperialism now does not have to negotiate with any Islamicists. Hence if “moderate Islam project” is seen as part of imperialist strategy, it’s becoming unnecessary in some countries because of the fall of the Islamicists still represents a victory for imperialism.

2- As you know, insurgence in Turkey broke out when the police brutally attacked a group of people who were trying to prevent the trees in Gezi Park (in Taksim Square) from being cut and prevent the park from being transformed to a shopping mall and artillery barracks. Can this event that caused a breakout of insurgence be evaluated as an indication of the fact that the struggle for nature is never independent from struggle against capitalism? In

other words, how can this insurgence be evaluated in the framework of a new revolutionary socialist perspective?

There is much to be enthused about in the Turkish uprising, and its integrating the struggle against the spoliation of nature with a struggle for societal change is one such enthusing element. At the same time however its limitations should also be faced. While the demands it puts forward are of great importance, unless they are woven into an overall charter of demands, an overall agenda that seeks to unite large masses of the people, it will remain essentially an urban, largely middle class, protest. Its silence over the question of imperialism, in particular its lack of formulation of an alternative economic trajectory to the neo-liberal one imposed by international finance capital, and its silence over the distress of the rural population, which everywhere has increased under the neo-liberal regime, are its major lacunae. And the weaknesses of the uprising arising from its amorphous, disorganized character are to my mind intimately linked to these silences. Its spontaneous urban character which account for its above-mentioned silences, deprive it in other words of any system-transcending capacity. Revolutionary socialists, while participating in it, must aim to carry it forward. They must avoid losing their independence of initiative, getting submerged within it and hence disarming themselves theoretically and ideologically.

3- Insurgence in Turkey, rather than having a Subject concretely defined, is generally evaluated as “people’s uprising” and we can say it has a strong “middle class” character. However, same “middle class” is now subjected to many analyses evaluating these events in the context of “new proletariat”, “proletarianization of the petit bourgeoisie” and so on. When considered the uprisings in Middle East, in Washington, in Brazil, in Egypt, in Turkey how do you evaluate the “subjects” of these insurgences?

I do not agree with the view that the middle class has now become an agency that can lead a system-transcending change. On the contrary what has happened in Egypt clearly demonstrates the limitations of this agency. Precisely because of its lack of a revolutionary theory, its lack of organization, its lack of a programme, and its lack of any sense of strategy and tactics, it has ended up facilitating a military coup that is mercilessly killing hundreds of ordinary people. The class limitations of the “middle class”, consisting of urban professionals and educated youth, prevent it on the one hand from making common cause with the peasants and petty producers, and on the other from understanding the nature of contemporary imperialism. It is not in a position therefore to formulate what Lenin had called “transitional demands” for carrying forward the struggle.

In India for instance there have been large middle class protests against “corruption” which have demanded in effect a “corruption-free capitalism”. Since a “corruption-free capitalism” is an impossibility, this could have been the basis for transitional demands leading towards a system-transcending change. But the demand for “corruption-free capitalism” on the part of these middle-class-led movements has taken the form of demanding institutions and legislations which would end up only strengthening the bourgeois State.

I have been hearing of this idea of the “new proletariat” since my own student days four decades ago; but in my view attributing to the middle class, as a class, a potentially revolutionary socialist character, of the sort that Marx had seen in the proletariat, is without any substance. This does not mean that the Left should not take these middle-class-led uprisings seriously. But it should engage with them without getting hegemonized by them, with full awareness of their limitations.

4- There're two approaches in the evaluation of Marxist "primitive accumulation": In the first one "primitive accumulation" is taken as a stock accumulation that had already realized before Capitalist system was founded. Second approach asserts that primitive accumulation is an intrinsic and sustainable element in capitalism. Do you think that the insurgences in Turkey and other countries support the second understanding?

In my view the process of primitive accumulation accompanies capitalism throughout its entire history, a point originally made by Rosa Luxemburg which anyone familiar with the experience of the third world will readily appreciate. What is more, this process of primitive accumulation, which I have elsewhere called "accumulation through encroachment" (to cover a wider range of phenomena than Marx had originally in mind, such as the privatization of public sector assets), even though it accompanies capitalism throughout its history, acquires greater prominence in the current era of globalization, compared to the preceding period of the so-called "Golden Age of Capitalism" after the second world war.

There are two aspects of this process of accumulation through encroachment. One is a "flow" aspect, i.e. extracting a flow of surplus from the victims of such accumulation (such as what the colonial taxation system did); and the other is a "stock" aspect, i.e. outright expropriation by the capitalists of non-capitalist property. The first of these two aspects of course prepares the ground for the second; for example the peasants squeezed to a degree where agriculture is no longer profitable may be induced to part with their land "for a song".

The principal victims of this "accumulation through encroachment" are the peasants and petty producers in the third world, though it affects other segments of the working population too. The problem with the middle-class-led uprisings that I was talking about above is that they do not unite all the segments affected by such "primitive accumulation", especially the peasants and petty producers, who are often left to the Islamicists to mobilize.

5-For a long time, Turkey has been presented as a model country for the Middle East countries under the name "moderate Islam project." What could you say about this project, if you think the revolt in Turkey and Egypt? Do you think "moderate Islam" is a right definition?

I have already discussed this question earlier but would just like to add a further word. We should remember that countries which today witness major Islamicist movements were once in the forefront of Left and secular nationalist struggles. Imperialism either used Islam against the Communist and secular nationalist "threat"; and even when it did not do so directly, the Islamicists remained as the only oppositional force because of the decimation of the progressive elements that imperialism carried out. Indonesia which had the third largest Communist Party in the world witnessed a massacre of Communists when the Suharto regime took power with imperialist backing. In Iran the Mossadegh government was overthrown with the help of Islamicist support, and so relentless was the anti-Communist pogrom of the regime of the Shah which was installed, that the only surviving oppositional political force in that country was Islamic fundamentalism. Likewise in Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan, Left and secular nationalist forces were systematically decimated by imperialism. Islamism for which imperialism thus created the space, then emerged as the Frankenstein's monster to threaten imperialism itself.

The "moderate Islam project" is an attempt to tame Islamism into becoming imperialism's camp-follower, and Turkey has been the "success story" in this respect. Progressive opposition to Islamism must take the form of reviving the secular nationalist project and building a broad class alliance for this purpose by uniting all the victims of "globalization". The world capitalist crisis which has brought in its train "austerity" at the expense of the

people, provides an opportunity for this. The middle-class-led movements are incapable of doing so, but the Left must intervene in these movements to carry them forward towards this end.

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