Introduction: East Meets the West?
The Unfinished Project of Contemporary Social Movements in the Middle East and Beyond

Mojtaba Mahdavi
Department of Political Science, University of Alberta
mojtaba.mahdavi@ualberta.ca

Six years after the birth of contemporary social movements (Iran's Green Movement in 2009 and the 2011 Arab Spring) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the region is caught between a number of rocks and many hard places. The interaction of the global power structure and the local socio-political conditions repressed the revolutionary spirit in MENA. The "Quiet Encroachment" of counterrevolutionary forces has largely replaced hope with despair, and excitement with resentment (Bayat 2013a; 2015). The rise of ISIL/ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the predicament of Islamism in power and the subsequent return of a military junta in Egypt, the breakout of proxy/civil war in Syria and Yemen, the suppression of Iran's prodemocracy movement, and the chaos and collapse of the Libyan polity have contributed to the revival of an old discourse of "Middle East Exceptionalism," meaning the Middle East is exceptionally immune to democratic movements, values and institutions. This special issue is an attempt to examine why and how the MENA region is not exceptionally immune to democratic social movements.

"The Old is Dying"

The MENA social movements experience a deep and profound crisis. However, such crisis is not unique to this region; "Almost all post-revolution moments are marked by an ecstatic exhilaration followed by a deep disappointment and demoralization.... The great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg goes so far as to suggest that revolution is the only form of 'war' in which the ultimate victory can be prepared only by a series of defeats" (Bayat 2015). Likewise, Antonio Gramsci (1971: 276) reminds us such "crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

MENA democratic forces are largely repressed but the *repressed* will most likely *return* and recapture its social position. The quest for human dignity,

social justice and freedom will continue to generate new democratic social movements in the region. The genie is out of the bottle because the contemporary MENA social movements signified a deep-seated socio-cultural and structural transformation in the region. The current crisis, argues Bayat (2015) "is hardly a measure of popular consent or compliance. Rather, it is driven by the inner force of life itself, expressed through an urge for self-regulation; it is a technique of survival in rough times." Hence, these movements are rich with the endless and open-ended possibilities; they are unfinished projects.

The East Meets the West?

One should not overlook the profound impact of these movements on post-colonial MENA societies. For some time, they brought together secular and religious individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, and poor and middle class. They transcended ethnic, religious, gender, class and ideological divides in these societies. They symbolized a potential paradigm shift towards a "post-ideological", "post-nationalist" and "post-Islamist" discourse in the region (Dabashi 2012; Bayat 2013a, 2013b; Mahdavi 2011, 2013). These movements were neither religious nor anti-religious. Islamic state/caliphate was not a popular slogan in the MENA streets. The MENA social movements symbolized a popular quest for human dignity, freedom, and social justice, and a backlash against the neoliberal order – the Washington Consensus and the Structural Adjustment Program in the region. The MENA movements challenged the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis (Lewis 1990; Huntington 1996) and nullified the discourse of "Middle East Exceptionalism" (Mahdavi & Knight 2012). The quest for social justice and a reaction to the neo-liberal order, or "McWorld" (Barber 2001) was a common theme in the MENA social movements in the East and the Occupy Movements in the West. Ordinary people in the East and the West shared similar demands in these movements. "The West met the East over global mass protests" in 2011–2012. (Mahdavi & Knight 2012: xxi).

The contemporary social movements in the East and the West represented a new paradigm shift from two hegemonic discourses of the post-Cold War era: Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*. Human dignity, freedom and social justice are not exclusively Western civilizational achievements; they are widespread values across the West and the East – "a common theme in the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Aden, Tehran,

Madrid, New York, Athens, and London (Mahdavi & Knight 2012: xxi). These social movements revealed a systematic crisis in the neoliberal order that Fukuyama (1989:271) liked us to see as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

The Occupy Movements symbolized a "post-ideological" moment in which the well-educated "middle class poor" poured into the streets and challenged the dominant neo-liberal order – the richest one percent who governs the neo-liberal order. As the international development agency of Oxfam (2013) reported, "the richest one per cent has increased its income by 60 per cent in the last 20 years with the financial crisis accelerating rather than slowing the process." According to the report, "the US$240 billion income in 2012 of the richest billionaires would be enough to make extreme poverty history four times over." It also adds, "we can no longer pretend that the creation of wealth for a few will inevitably benefit the many – too often the reverse is true.... Concentration of resources in the hands of the top one per cent depresses economic activity and makes life harder for everyone else – particularly those at the bottom of the economic ladder." Hence, "a global new deal is needed to reverse decades of increasing inequality" (Ibid). Likewise, in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* Thomas Piketty (2014) suggests that in the twenty-first century capitalism "the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of output and income." Hence, "capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based."

The rise of contemporary social movements in the East and the West were nothing less than a warm welcome "to the End of the End of History" (Mishra 2013). These movements paved the path towards, to use Walter Mingolo's concept (2011), an "epistemic disobedience". They resisted hegemonic universalism, celebrated our differences, and proposed a third alternative way to both Fukuyama's hegemonic universalism and Huntington's essentialist particularism. The third way is a radical call for "universalism from below" (Mahdavi 2013). It suggests that each culture/nation should engage in a critical dialogue with its own tradition and formulate the universal values of freedom and social justice in a local language that can be implemented through local/homegrown institutions. In other words, it "aspires to a different kind of universalism, one based on deliberation and contestation among diverse political entities, with the aim of reaching functional agreement on questions of global concern. This kind of universalism differs from one resulting from universal injunctions by self-assured subjects" (Grovogui 2013: 263).

The Unfinished Projects

"The old order is largely back in business" in a number of MENA societies after 2011–2012 social movements. Nonetheless,

> these are the old ways in new times, when the old order faces new political subjects and novel subjectivities; when the memories of sacrifice, the taste of triumph, and betrayal of aspirations are likely to turn quiet but lingering mass discontent into periodic social upheavals. These are uncharted political moments loaded with indefinite possibilities, in which meaningful social engagement would demand a creative fusion of the old and new ways of doing politics.
> BAYAT 2015

The MENA social movements have created a historical momentum and "memories" of "extraordinary episodes"; they have generated "moral resources", which "have become part of the popular consciousness" of young and restless generation in the region (Bayat 2015). For this generation, revolutions and social movements are unfinished projects. Many of Middle East and North African societies and cultures, argues Dabashi (2015), "are in the midst of systematic and epistemic changes, by virtue of the material forces that underlie their daily lives. False and falsifying binaries still afflict these cultures (East-West, Persian-Arab, Sunni-Shia) but the body of their seismic transmutation moves towards liberating horizons apace." Change, however, is not easy. Freedom is not free; it is costly. There are at east two major challenges ahead: regressive forces from within and the meddling of external forces, i.e. regional powers and the global hegemon. Despite such structural constraints, one should not underestimate the force of hope and will – the power of people's agency. Antonio Gramsci (1971) has reminded us we need to overcome the "pessimism of the intellect" by the "optimism of the will." This will and hope will be materialized, Bayat argues (2015), "with building an 'active citizenry' endowed with the 'art of presence;' a citizenry that possesses the courage and creativity to assert collective will in spite of all odds by circumventing constraints, utilizing what is possible, and discovering new spaces within which to make themselves heard, seen, felt, and realized."

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This special issue comprises twelve articles. The first four articles identify some common themes and discourses in contemporary social movements in the East – Iran's Green Movement, the Arab Spring, and the Gezi Park movement

in Turkey – and the Occupy Movements in the West. In his article "Suggestion, Translation, Transposition: Semiotic Reflections on Collective Action in the Middle East and Beyond", Peyman Vahabzadeh uses "a semiotic approach" to identify the connections between Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy Movement. He masterfully demonstrates how contemporary social movements in the East and the West affect each other beyond their actors' intentions.

Siavash Saffari's article titled "The Post-Islamist Turn and the Contesting Visions of Democratic Public Religion" problematizes the relationship between religion and sociopolitical development in the context of MENA social movements. More specifically, it examines two post-Islamist discourses of Abdolkarim Soroush and a new reading of Ali Shariati's revolutionary discourse – neo-Shariatis – in post-revolutionary Iran. The article identifies some of the capacities and limitations of these post-Islamist discourses and their particular conceptions of democratic public religiosity for contributing to the ongoing processes of change in Iran and other contemporary Muslim societies.

Navid Pourmokhtari's article titled "Understanding Iran's Green Movement as a 'movement of movements'" is a detailed sociological study of Iran's prodemocracy Green Movement. It uses a constructivist approach to demonstrate that Iran's democratic forces took a proactive role in constructing opportunities to mobilize their forces and pursue their goals. Citing the examples of the student and women's groups involved in Iran's Green Movement, and tracing their historical trajectories and particular experiences, the article suggests that the Green Movement may be best described as a "movement of movements," – a mega social movement capable of harnessing the potential to mobilize all democratic forces inside Iran.

In "Anger in Search of Justice: Reflections on the Gezi Revolt in Turkey," Gürcan Koçan & Ahmet Öncü shift our attention from Iran, the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement to Turkey. The authors examine underlying motivation behind the participation of the Gezi Revolt. They argue that the Gezi Revolt was the expression of anger in response to a perceived social injustice. Anger and fury were the two particular emotions that provided a sense of urgency among a large section of people across the land.

The next six articles are particularly focused on the crisis of contemporary MENA social movements. Each author problematizes a specific case with a different approach to the study of these movements. These articles investigates the failure of domestic polices of the Egyptian Islamists in power; they also examine the meddling of regional and global powers in the Arab Spring. "The Muslim Brotherhood: Between Democracy, Ideology and Distrust" is co-authored by Eid Mohamed and Bessma Momani. This article problematizes

the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood after the Egyptian revolution. It argues that the myth of Islamism has been exposed in Egypt and that the Muslim Brotherhood's identity, torn between political pragmatism and religious conservatism, shaped its political actions under Morsi's presidency.

In the same manner, Richard Heydarian's article titled "The Arab Summer and Its Discontents: Origins of Revolution, and the Role of Islamic Movements in Post-Revolutionary Middle East" examines the distinct combination of structural, agential, and triggering factors in the rise of the Arab Spring. More specifically, it problematizes the role of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in the region. The paper argues that "one of the principal pitfalls of the ruling Islamist parties was their inability to establish a credible mode of governance, which could decisively mark a break with the old order." The Islamists failed to provide an alternative economic agenda to address the structural maladies of the crony capitalism. Moreover, the paper sheds light on the support of the Arab Sheikhdoms for ultra-conservative Salafis, which diluted the process of democratization in Egypt.

Paul Rowe directs our attention to the questions of Coptic Christians in revolutionary Egypt. In "Democracy and Disillusionment: Copts and the Arab Spring", he examines the role of Copts, the indigenous Christians of Egypt, in the Egyptian revolution and how their enthusiasm for a new era was dampened after the revolution. The paper examines the polarization of Egyptian society between Christians and the Islamists, and the role of the church and lay movements in representing Coptic interests.

"Revolution in the Age of Identity: North Africa and the Postcolonial Condition," authored by Farid Laroussi, shifts our focus to North Africa. More specifically, it examines social movement and "democratization" within the postcolonial condition of Arab/Berber-Muslim sphere of Algeria and Morocco.

Andrew Wender's article titled "Beyond Resurgent 'Islamists' and Enlightened 'Secularists': Critiquing Caricatures of Religion in the Arab Uprisings" deconstructs the oppositional pair 'Islamist/secularist', and related identifiers like 'fanatic' and 'terrorist', to investigate the reductionist construction of Islam, and constructed binaries of religion and secularity. The paper asks whether the MENA uprisings might challenge these constrained horizons and false binaries.

Ghada Ageel's article titled "A Palestinian Uprising: Is it Possible or is it Too Late?" brings us to the old and yet new question of Palestine. She examines the possibility of a non-violent, civil and social movement in Palestine – a Palestinian Spring/uprising. While attempting to place Palestine within a broader context of the MENA social movements, the article argues that non-violent resistance is emerging as the most potent means for reforming the Palestinian politics and also for defying the Israeli occupation.

The last two articles examine the role of social media in the contemporary MENA social movements. Nermin Allam's article titled "Activism and Exception in Covering Egypt's Uprising: A Critical Reading of the *New York Times* Representation of Female Protestors" is a postcolonial feminist insight to the representation of women in the *NEW YORK TIMES* coverage of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. It highlights "some of the ways in which Orientalist stereotypes were often manifested in the *NYT* representation of female protestors." By evoking the myth of female passiveness and framing female activism as an exception, the *NYT* assuaged the effect of women's activism in deconstructing traditional gender and geopolitical stereotypes.

Roozbeh Safshekan examines communication technology in the Iranian context. His article titled "The Matrix of Communication in Social Movements: A Comparison of the 1979 Revolution and 2009 Green Movement in Iran," is a comparative study of two social movements in contemporary Iran. It explores the role of communication technology, and more specifically the trinity of "matrix of communication" – "mainstream media", "alternative media", and "social network" – in the success and failure of political opposition in the 1979 revolution and the 2009 Green movement in Iran.

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