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Review Essay

International Sociology Reviews
2023, Vol. 38(2) 182–193
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DOI: 10.1177/02685809231158845
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Understanding revolutions: About the trilogy of Azmi Bishara

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Abstract

Influential in his writing about the Arab Spring, Azmi Bishara delivers a trilogy about the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria which was first published in Arabic and then translated with some updates to English. while theoretically grounded, they are the outcome of extensive research and documentation of everyday events in these three countries and a reflection on the heated debates in the Arab world. Using a democratic transition theory perspective, Bishara thus explains the failure of the democratic transition and how it has impacted the Arab revolutions ever since. Despite the major setback in all these revolutions, Bishara, like myself, is still hopeful that this is the only dynamic that is possible to deliver long waiting changes.

Keywords

Arab Spring, Azmi Bishara, revolution, democratic transition, authoritarianism, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria

Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia. London: Bloomsbury, 2021; 5 Chapters; 328 pp., ISBN 9781784532222, $50

Egypt: Revolution, Failed Transition and Counter-Revolution. London: Bloomsbury, 2022; 17 Chapters; 732 pp., ISBN 9780755645909, $81.00

Syria 2011–2013: Revolution and Tyranny before the Mayhem with a Critical Account of Developments since 2013. London: Bloomsbury, 2022; 14 Chapters; 376 pp., ISBN 9780755645435, $82.80

Azmi Bishara is one of the most prominent intellectuals and philosophers in the Arab world, who has extensively published on political thought, social theory, and philosophy, focusing on the Arab world from the Arab-Israeli conflict to civil society, democracy, secularism, sectarianism, and the Arab uprisings. The force of his philosophy is that he

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engaged with the social sciences, particularly sociology, economics, and political science, in terms of not only theory but also empirical research conducted in these fields. In this essay, I would like to review his trilogy on the Arab uprisings, particularly on Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, which were published in I.B Tauris (New York & London):

- *Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021; 5 Chapters; 328 pp.
- *Egypt: Revolution, Failed Transition and Counter-Revolution*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021; 5 Chapters; 328 pp.
- *Syria 2011–2013: Revolution and Tyranny before the Mayhem with a Critical Account of Developments since 2013*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021; 5 Chapters; 328 pp.

These are translations of three books first written in Arabic, which have been presently updated based on the recent events in all three countries, bringing renowned Arabic-language scholarship to the English-speaking world.

The trilogy is the outcome of extensive research and documentation of everyday events in these three countries and a reflection on the heated debates in the Arab world around the Arab uprisings since late 2010. Indeed, Bishara is a public intellectual who participated during the uprisings through his reflective writings, as well as his commentaries in TV programs of Al-Jazeera and later on Al-Araby. The center directed by Bishara, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (attached to Doha Institute for Graduate Studies), is a laboratory of research produced by many excellent Arab researchers. It is a liberal center animated by researchers who have different political and religious sensitivities, something very different from other research centers in the Arab world that often promote one political and ideological strand. This center carried out the Arab Opinion Index which, along with the Arab Barometer, is the most reliable survey in the Arab world about the main issues facing their societies since 2011. Bishara is a heavy user of such statistics, which makes his analysis very close to how the Arab world thinks about these uprisings and what meaning social actors themselves give to their political actions and social movements.

This trilogy is very distinctive from many writings you find in the Arab world and beyond; on how to understand the emergence and development of the Arab uprisings. In fact, it privileges internal dynamics over external ones, including international relations. The bibliometric study I conducted about the first 520 scholarly articles written in Arabic, English, and French about the Arab uprisings (Hanafi and Arvanitis, 2016: Ch. 8) shows the global hierarchies of knowledge and networks that are generating this scholarship. First, political science has hegemony over the study of the Arab uprisings, and that the English language – including the networks and perspectives that are dominant through it – serves as the vehicle for most analysis of the uprisings. The consequence is a predominance of geopolitical and international relations perspectives over those that analyze what the uprisings themselves seem to focus on, namely, the questions of social justice, democracy, and accountability.

The objective of this review essay is not to summarize the rich analysis of the three uprisings in the trilogy, but to highlight some aspects that I found particularly interesting

about the debate in the Arab world and about our disciplines on revolutions and democratic transition. The 'Arab revolutions', as people in this region opt to call them, have indeed already inspired protests in Spain, Israel, Mexico, Afghanistan, and beyond.

Understanding revolutions: A theoretical debate

The first chapter of the book *Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia* (2021) is a fundamental theoretical piece on the development of the concept of revolution and how it helps us to understand the Arab revolutions. After a long discussion conceptually and etymologically about the genesis of the word 'revolution' in many languages, including Arabic (*Thawra*), and how it was theorized by scholars like Theda Skocpol and Charles Tylor, Bishara defines it as 'a broad popular movement that takes place outside the confines of the currently existing constitutional structure or legal legitimacy in order to change the current ruling regime in the state'.[1] In this sense, he rejected Skocpol's consequentialism (it is a revolution because it yields positive outcomes), and this conceptualization is echoed by Gilbert Achcar (2022), who argues that one can reconcile the incompleteness of these events with their revolutionary nature by seeing them as protracted, ongoing processes that are bound to recur as long as political and socioeconomic transformation is not reached. Such a positioning distinguishes revolution as different from the concept of 'reform', which are simply political and social changes from within the system.

This theorization is important to understand the Arab events which are different from the perspective of modernization theory, which envisages top-down reforms leading to democratization – as were witnessed in Spain, Latin America, and some Eastern European countries. The ruling elites in these countries, Bishara explains,

> who launched the reform process lost exclusive control of their own initiative and were forced to go further, due to the reaction of regime hardliners and/or by a rising popular movement that demanded more. The best way forward was to first come to terms with the opposition [. . .] in order to transition to a pluralistic system that permitted for the peaceful rotation of authority. The compromises they reached towards this end guaranteed that neither side lost everything and that the moderates from both the regime and the opposition could work together to ensure the success of the transition.

Pushed by some Western countries, the 1980s reform process across the Arab world was based on changing laws and regulations without a real political restructuring, resulting in a hollow outcome. Therefore, it would be mistaken to regard the recent revolutions that occurred in these countries as complementary to or emanating from the top-down reform processes. In these cases, it was bottom-up revolutions, not reforms, that split the ruling elites.

Learning from the history of revolutions, Bishara argues, contemporary revolution cannot be accomplished without being a liberal democratic one. If this is the case, should we consider the Arab 'events' as not merely revolution as they have not (yet) delivered a democratic system? Bishara replies in the negative; for him, they are revolutions as not all revolutions against authoritarian rule have democracy as their aim. He notices the gap between the leaders who may not use the word 'democracy' or 'secularism' but who

know that 'the list of demands presented, including fair elections and civil liberties, could only be implemented in a democracy, which was the only alternative to authoritarianism being proposed, even if political parties were not ideologically democratic'. It is true that the Tunisian Revolution was not focused on introducing democracy; it nevertheless came eventually to demand it as a readymade product. It did not emerge fortuitously. Bishara believes in the saliency of the role of elites as agents of democratization through a negotiating and bartering process. This is particularly important in the time of transition from authoritarian rule. The Lebanese political scientist Ghassan Salamé once wrote in the early 1990s a book mocking a democracy without democrats or, more accurately, without democratically oriented elites. Yet Fawwaz Traboulsi's (2013) *Revolutions Without Revolutionaries* is quite different from that of Bishara's analysis, as Traboulsi sees the Arab revolutions as rather liftest ones against the neoliberal project and revolutionaries are not necessarily the elites.

Using a democratic transition theory perspective, Bishara thus explains the failure of the democratic transition and how it has impacted the Arab revolutions ever since. Bishara pointed out six pathologies that the Arab uprisings have:

First, he criticizes the fascination of post-Leninist leaderless revolutions, among many scholars, particularly the radical Left (e.g. Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt). They think that this will lead to radical or direct democracy. Even I considered the inevitability of leaderless revolution in the context of the Arab uprisings, arguing that a new type of reflexive individualism in the Arab revolutions (Hanafi, 2012) which, in contrast with the Eastern and Central European cases, has made it difficult for a unified opposition leadership to emerge. This absence may be due to two sources (Bamyeh, 2013): long-standing local traditions of autonomy, mutual help, and 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat, 2013) outside the state, and historical memory: we did have savior leaders in the past, and leadership seemed essential both as a symbol of a unified struggle and due to organizational imperatives in the immediate postcolonial era. Bishara is right that spontaneity and lack of leadership became weaknesses rather than strengths: 'Liberal democracy is not the manifestation of a mere idea but a product of two centuries of practical experimentation with ideas, tools and concrete realities'.

Second, there are many difficulties of democratization after a revolution, as protests may continue by inertia, they may become the knee-jerk reaction to everything, and might obstruct stability and 'normal life'. As such they alienate people from the revolution and render them more vulnerable to counter-revolutionary propaganda (the case of Tunisia).

Third, a revolution that deepens sectarian or other identity-based cleavages will clearly not lead to political pluralism but to division. Secession and infighting will ensue in an endless process of identity construction (French-styled secularism vs Islamic identity in Tunisia).

Fourth, power struggles between ideological and other political forces take center stage after the revolution because, unlike reform, revolution provides neither time nor opportunity for dialogue but, rather, espouses temporary unity against the regime (the cases of Libya and Tunisia).

Fifth, the danger is that a political party will attempt to raise ideological disputes before the nascent democratic regime has consolidated as a framework inclusive of various ideologies and conceptions of the public good, thus obstructing the transition to democracy (the case of Egypt and Tunisia).

Finally, if democracy means majority rule. This very majority should govern according to democratic principles (epitomized in civil liberties and political rights). This was not often the case in the Arab revolutions. Tunisia seems the only revolution which fully respects that.

Then, Bishara moves to discuss revolution as a contagious phenomenon. He noticed that since the nineteenth century when nationalist and democratic sentiments overlapped, revolutionaries' driving forces were simultaneously nationalist and internationalist. He brings the case of Guissepe Mazzini (1805–1872) who

> participated in the establishment of nationalist organizations such as Young Italy, Young Germany and Young Poland, hoping to group them all within the Young Europe Organization. Mazzini believed that each group had a specific mission, representing a singular contribution in realizing the broader mission of humanity. Nationalism in this sense is the specific mission of a people in the context of the greater humanistic quest.

Similarities can be easily noticed in the Arab context. Each Arab revolution expressed an interest both in changing the regime for the sake of the people of a state (state-nation) and in integrating themselves within a regional Arab wave of change via revolution. Beyond the structural conditions that drove the forces of these revolutions, they may also be interpreted in different ways in terms of their cultural power (Alexander, 2011) and the power of symbols. The sheer theater of the drama that unfolded in Tunisia caused a domino effect in other Arab countries, starting in Tunisia. Contingency also operates within the same country. The act of achieving democracy 'by contingency' results from a peculiar balance of powers among political players who cannot determine the outcome of the struggle between them but who, at the same time, do not want to risk losing everything as an outcome of a potential civil war.

At the same time, Bishara warns us that contingency may be very effective but also misleading, as in the case of the Syrian Revolution. A revolution cannot be contingent even if countries have similar situations. He brought the example of non-structural factors that may play a major role, such as in the case of Tunisia:

> Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, the strong communal ties inside Sidi Bouzid, politically conscious activists, and neighbouring areas' solidarity with Sidi Bouzid, were decisive in both the outbreak and continuity of the uprising to the point where the poor neighbourhoods of large cities, including the capital, joined in.

This idea is similar to the importance of political opportunity structure that one finds in the social movement's theory that was developed by some American political scientists.

Bishara in this sense does not over-theorize the Arab Spring, he acknowledges that it came as a surprise to everyone, including himself. I do remember Alain Touraine, in his

seminar, had the same comment about the Eastern Europe political changes in the late 1980s.

Some features of the Arab revolutions

After this theoretical introduction in the Tunisian volume, Bishara analyzed the background, triggers, and dynamics of the Tunisian revolution. It appeared as a classic example of a reformist revolution that forced a ruling regime to accede to popular demands by handing political power to an elected institution. By doing so, he explores the new political subjectivity ushered in by these revolutions. Through five chapters, he deploys amazing data in order to understand this revolution and always in the back and forth between the Tunisian revolution in comparison with the Egyptian one and of course other Arab revolutions and beyond. In many cases, the authoritarian regimes attempt to convince their people and Western powers that any alternative to them will be Islamic forces. They often (ab)use the political polarization between the religious and the secular.

In the Arab revolution, Bishara argues, the alerted young people were very instrumental in launching these revolutions. The Arab region witnessed the first extensive use of social media by Tunisian bloggers, local activists, and activists critical of the regime living in France, England, and Canada for the benefit of foreign media outlets. The first days of the revolution had witnessed online participation by opposition party leaders on Facebook. By then, the number of Facebook users in Tunisia had already exceeded 1.7 million. More generally, 86% of the Arab population use Facebook according to the 2022 Arab Index.[2] Yet, these uprisings cannot be captured by Orientalist terms such as the 'Facebook Revolution'. This label does not account for the radical transformation in politics and values that the Arab world is undertaking.

Social media was used as a means of coordinating protest actions in a few cases, although its main role was to break the state monopoly over the media by disseminating information and supplying news, photos and videos for TV stations (mainly Al Jazeera, France 24, and BBC) and news agencies. Cyberspace comes to empower this reflexive individualism. Each demonstrator became a 'journalist' carrying a mobile phone and filming state repression, thereby bypassing the official media.

Beyond their general indignation at 'the system', these Arab revolutions were characterized by vagueness of common objectives, a vagueness that was useful for allowing experimentation and engendering temporary unity among otherwise distinct agendas. Bishara warns us against the economistic analysis of the 'cause' of the Arab revolutions. The Arab uprisings happened in poor countries like Yemen and Egypt, but also in relatively rich ones like Libya and Bahrain. They touched countries that had a relatively open public sphere and relative freedom of association and press, as well as countries that were very tightly controlled. Sometimes they capitalized on the technologies of social networks, but sometimes they evolved without them and in regions that were least connected. For instance, in Tunisia the effect of the financial crisis of 2008 on the Tunisian economy

> would not have been enough to explain a revolution, nor was there an escalation in oppressive policies in 2009–10. Rather, what catalysed the revolution at last was people's intensified sense

> of deprivation and frustration in spite of the economic growth taking place around them, including relative improvement in standards of living, higher expectations, a keener awareness of injustices and growing disappointment and bitterness over the absence of jobs.

I do remember in a private conversation with the head of call centers of France Telecom in Paris, she explained to me why the call center in Tunis had faced many problems with a high rotation rate of employees. She attributes that to the fact that the young and university-graduated Tunisian employees are often overqualified for such a 'boring' job, which makes them feel a sense of relative deprivation. The authoritarian states have governed through their heavy 'right hand', to borrow this concept from Bourdieu (1999), using their security and repressive apparatus and exemplified by the alliance between bureaucrats and crony capitalists. Up to 2000, the population has 'borne' or tolerated this because the same state also has a 'left hand', which provides public goods to a large portion of the population, it being a remnant of the welfare state. The neoliberal and deregulatory system of the right hand no longer wants to pay for the left hand. I was shocked during a visit to Libya in 2008 to notice the extent of which this wealthy country has a poor infrastructure outside Tripoli and to witness the harsh level of poverty. The rentier economy was incapable of generating a surplus to subsidize the deprived strata of the population. Bishara rightly concludes that economic inequalities and repression are fundamental components of a society's susceptibility to revolution.

In Chapter 4 of the volume on Tunisia, Bishara unfolds the vitality of civil society organizations and political parties before the upheaval. He highlights particularly the important role of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). This union was not only important for mobilization in different sites during the revolution but also played an important role as an umbrella organization for a large number of political factions, in adopting initiatives meant to preserve the achievements of the revolution, complete the dismantling of the regime and prevent the return of its leading figures. For Bishara, this is where it differs from the Egyptian revolution. The major difference lies in the political awareness and political culture of the elites of both the regime and the opposition and of course the role of the army. In Egypt, the 'deep state' resisted change and was even ready to cooperate, once the time was 'right', with a military coup against the first elected president in Egyptian history, as well as documented in Part 2 of the volume on Egypt.

After a long discussion of some chapters in both Tunisian and Egyptian volumes about the tumultuous process of democratic transition in Tunisia, Bishara pointed out analytically the counter-revolutions that spread not only in Tunisia but in both the first wave of the uprisings (Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yamen, Libya, and Syria) and the second (Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon). Both the Arab despotic regimes and the Army learned from the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions that these events occurred because the authorities there had not exercised sufficient systematic repression at the onset of the protests, causing them to lose control over events and rendering them unable to contain the protests after they surged. The extreme violence from the outset was so eminent in Yemen, Libya, and Syria. This is why, I consider these regimes as brutalizing authoritarian regimes and should not be confused with a simple authoritarian one (Hanafi, 2019). This brutalizing authoritarian spread politics of fear and so much active and suspended violence. Bishara in his book on Syria unfolds how people collectively pretend being

with the regime, a significant sign of actual loyalty or fear, and the two are of the same value for a dictator. This is a Machiavellian approach to gaining respect via planting and generating fears by means of brutalizing power. The counter-revolutions are thus instigated by the internal dynamic but also the external one: the petrodollar has been so instrumental in this process.

The most sophisticated analysis Bishara does is about the transformation of some Islamic parties, so different from the mainstream Arab Left, who imagines that all social actors can change except the Islamists. Bishara documents in Tunisia that

> Islamists and secular opposition movements had begun communicating with each other since 2003, producing programmes for regime change that would guarantee human rights on multiple levels within a democratic framework. In other words, democracy was not a mere afterthought of the revolution; rather, it had been a conscious, agreed-upon objective among the various forces opposed to the regime since before the revolution began. State institutions that remained stable after the departure of the president stood ready to lead the country through a democratic transition and to negotiate the nature of the transition period with the opposition. In this unique constellation, revolution would open the way to democracy.

Al-Nahda is a sort of post-Islamist movement as politics has tamed its solid ideology. The dialogue was indeed very instrumental for Al-Nahda to narrow down the fields of possibilities, lower political expectations, and appreciate the particularities of Tunisian society and state, thereby enabling it to take a more pragmatic approach to dealing with secular parties, and to engage in the process of drafting a democratic alternative to the regime. For Egypt, Bishara is more skeptical about the possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt to change their habitual attitude, that is, MB 'was set on getting democracy to adapt to it by custom fitting public freedoms to its conception of Shari'a'. I think this observation can be nuanced if we take into account the outstanding work of Khalil Al-Anani (2020) about MB. Of course, both Bishara and Al-Anani pointed out the intellectual and structural obstacles to MB in Egypt, particularly about the difficulty of distinguishing between the preaching and the politics, prior to the events of 3 July 2013, and the coup against President Mohamed Morsi. They both, along with Nawwaf AlQadimi (2012), think that democracy is practiced and learned in the field, rather than driven by the ideational positions.

Beyond MB, Bishara noted about the Salafists, a socially fringe and dogmatically extremist religious movement, that they actually flourished more under secularist despotism than under democracy, despite the fact that democracy granted them more freedom of expression. Some young people who had been culturally alienated and/or economically marginalized under the old regime felt betrayed by the politicians. Yet what happened to a country like Tunisia was that some felt that Al Nahda had turned its back on them by making deals with elements of the old regime, especially with the aggravation of the economic situation after the revolution. In Egypt, the entry of the Salafists, into politics and the parliamentary electoral race, was instrumental to generating this polarization as they lured MB into pietistic one-upmanship. On the other side, 'some secular opposition forces, fearful of the elections, ratcheted up the alarmism and fear-mongering over Muslim Brotherhood rule and the Islamist organization's designs to assert its hegemony over the state'.

Beyond his seminal analysis of the transformation of Islamic movements in the Arab world, Bishara points out that the secular forces become important. Historically, secularization was imposed from above and religion was subordinated to the despotic state, yet in Tunisia and elsewhere, 'the secularization process so permeated the consciousness of large segments of society that it took on a social and intellectual life of its own and thus no longer needed to be imposed top-down'.

In addition to this religious versus secular divide, the democratic transition has been a very difficult process. Bishara noted that

> democratic countries are ruled not only by democratic majorities but also by bureaucracy; moreover, a country's economic and cultural elites may be supportive or obstructive. And if this is important in an established democracy, it is all the more important during a transition to democracy. There is no way to face all this if nearly half of the population has been pushed towards the opposition. The first phases of transition (before democracy is consolidation) require large coalitions committed to democracy.

And this is what AlNahda did in Tunisia and MB did not do it.

For Bishara, one of the reasons for the failure of the process in Egypt and Libya is the early elections in the transition period:

> elections are not a sufficient gauge of the success of democratic transition. Elections should mean that the necessary conditions have been met to enable government by the people through their representatives elected in multiparty polls. . . If elections are held under conditions of extreme ideological or cultural/identitarian polarization, the elections will lead to a crisis that can only be defused if a broad-based coalition steps in to mend the rift.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the most important distinctive feature of the Bishara trilogy is his focus on internal dynamics. The carnivalesque performances, particularly those in al-Tahrir Square in Cairo, were replete with chants, music, comedic acts, humor, and sarcasm. In these essentially indigenous revolutions (except for Libya's), no sign of US Agency for International Development (USAID) or other international agencies was found or requested for funding glossy placards and brochures or hosting workshops in five-star hotels. Yet, he did not neglect the saliency of the external one after the launching of the uprisings, particularly the intervention of regional anti-democracy forces in the transition process: 'The role of reactionary Arab regimes whose rulers not only feel threatened by the transition to democracy in the Arab world but also have the financial means to fight it has been a significant hindrance to democracy'. These regional forces are even more important than the historical role of the former colonial power (France, Italy) or the imperialist force such as the United States and Israel. Azmi Bishara rightly highlights the role of Iran in Syria and Yemen and Russia in Syria, and of course Israel's role in influencing the decision of many Western countries concerning keeping the status quo of the despotic regimes better than any unpredictable democratic changes. Let us put it this way: beyond backing historically the despotic regimes, Western powers did not support financially the democratic transition. Remember that in post-WWII (1948–1951), the United States transferred US$13 billion (roughly US$115 billion at current prices) to the war-torn nations of Europe under the Plan Marshall, constituting

2% of the US GDP for supporting the transition to democracy there (Eichengreen, 2010). Bishara is right to highlight the Tunisian difficult economic situation and the serious challenge this poses to a young democracy there:

> little, if any, support has been forthcoming from democracies in the West, and this despite the fact that the European Union played an indispensable role in encouraging democratic transition in Spain and Portugal in the 1970s and in Eastern European countries in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the United States still extends billions of dollars' worth of financial and military aid to authoritarian regimes in the region.

The drop in direct foreign investments measured by GDP after the revolution, and the contraction of capital investments were estimated by the same measure. The negative impact of this drop on the growth, employment, and capability of the state to meet the expectations of the Tunisian public after the revolution is obvious. The Tunisian philosopher Mounir Kchaou has insisted in some of his writing that the negative role played by the worker union during the transition with (excessive) social demands discouraged even more foreign investment to come to Tunis.

In the Tunisian volume's 'Postscript: Democracy Imperilled by Populism', Bishara deeply analyzes the major setback in the democratic transition process with the authoritarian measures taken by the Tunisian President Qays Saeed, a chapter that was recently added to the electronic version of the book. Saeed took advantage of the fragmentation of the political parties and the conflict between them in the parliament and in political actions. Bishara points out how the old regime forces were disguised as new political parties, and 'made unrelenting attempts to provoke a secular-religious polarization among Tunisians in a bid to marginalize both the moderate Islamists and the pragmatic secular forces, which by this time had formed a democratic coalition'. and he concludes that identity politics promoted a division of 'us' and 'them', thus replacing pluralism with exclusion.

The volume about Syria was different from those of Tunisia and Egypt, as Bishara analyzes the first years of the revolution there. He examines the complex roots of Syria's political and sectarian conflicts from the day revolution erupted on 15 March 2011 to its descent into civil war in the 2 years that followed. The book unfolds and discusses the very first signs of protests from across Daraa, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus, Raqqa, Deir El Zour, Edlib, and Homs, and it deals with Syria's ruralization process and the subsequent economic liberalization (labeled as social economy but in fact deeply neoliberal and oligarchic), which eventually led to the revolt against the Baath Party. Bishara noted rightly that Syria's revolution should be chronicled in two stages: the peaceful civil stage and the armed stage, as some Arab Left forgot the former stage. Bishara's analysis first centers on the regime's strategy, unveiling authoritarianism, massacres, kidnapping, sectarian tendencies, jihadist violence, the emergence of thugs and warlords, and the chaotic spread of arms. He then turns to the role of the opposition to narrate in detail the events that broke out and exactly how a peaceful protest turned into an armed struggle. The book provides a roadmap to how revolution broke out and is a comprehensive analysis of what drove those early events. Bishara calculates the 'incalculable' of what Syria is witnessing today as 'mayhem' from the most worldwide acute

crisis of refugees and internally displaced persons to all the calamities befalling Syria with economic collapse. His analysis does not rely only on secondary data but also on interviews he conducted and his active role in bridging between different factions in the Syrian opposition. Bishara like many Tunisian scholars (e.g. Salem Labeid, Mounir Kchaou, Mehdi Mabrouk, Mounir Saidani) believed in what I called 'dialogical sociology', producing *situated* criticism instead of a *radical* one in order to come to terms with the dangerous elite polarization that the Arab world is witnessing.

Bishara in this trilogy shows us how a researcher should be first deeply interested in the social phenomenon itself, and in the real humans that make it, flesh and blood, before the social phenomenon being an 'opportunity' to feed a discipline or a perspective. Revolutions, indeed, are opportunities to learn something new. The worst analytical insult to a revolution is to use it as an opportunity to apply mechanically an existing theory or model (Bamyeh and Hanafi, 2015).

Despite the major setback in all these revolutions, Bishara, like myself, is still hopeful that this is the only dynamic that is possible to deliver long waiting changes. Let us echo the Cuban poet and philosopher Jose Marti: 'Now is the time of the furnaces, and only light should be seen'.

Notes

1. All the quotes in this essay are from the three volumes under review. The fact that I used the electronic version (HTML) makes it difficult to determine the page number.
2. https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/News/Pages/the-acrps-announces-the-results-of-the-2022-arab-opinion-index.aspx

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