Arab Spring, Libyan Winter

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Part I: Arab Spring.

I. Bread

When the unwashed began to assert themselves in France, the royalty scoffed at them. What they wanted was bread, whose price skyrocketed in 1774–75. Taking to the streets in remarkable numbers, the people demanded fair prices for bread, their main staple. In reaction to *la guerre des farines*, the flour war, Marie Antoinette proposed that the poor "eat cake." After the Revolution removed the monarchy and its *élèves* from the thrones of power, the new government hastened to subsidize bread. Hunger broke the back of fear. It is the lesson for the ages.

It was a lesson for North Africa in late 2010. In the last two quarters of 2010, the IMF Food Price Index rose by thirty percent. Grain prices soared by sixty percent. Protestors in Tunisia came onto the streets in December with baguettes raised in the air. In Egypt, protestors took to the streets in January chanting, "They are eating pigeon and chicken, and we are eating beans all the time." Hunger and inequality drove the protests. Their governments hastened to up their subsidies, but it was too little, too late.

The question of bread reveals a great deal about the delinquent states in Egypt and Tunisia. The Nasserite state in Egypt well understood the importance of a bread subsidy, and it encouraged the domestic production of wheat for the bread needs of the citizenry. When Anwar Sadat came to power in the 1970s, he gradually cut off the bread subsidy, what the Tunisian intellectual Larbi Sadiki calls a "democracy of bread" (*dimuqratiyyat al-khubz*). This was part of the wave of "reforms" in North Africa against the economic policies that favored national development. In Egypt, these "reforms" were part of the phase of *infitah*, the openness of Egyptian society to the Atlantic world's economic needs. Sadat opened a correspondence with the IMF: the Law of the

New Economic Measures (1974) was the opening gambit, sealed in a Letter of Intent to the IMF (May 1976) and a second Letter of Intent (June 1978). Robust national development went by the wayside. More important was the will of the IMF and the international bond markets. Nationalization and subsidies ended, and free enterprise zones were created by February 1974. Sadat wanted a "blood transfusion" for the Egyptian economy, and so the Atlantic banks began to draw pints of blood from the ailing Egyptian working-class and peasantry. The "democracy of bread" was a casualty of the new thinking. In 1977, the Egyptian people rose up in a "bread intifada," with additional targets being the nightclubs and liquor stores, symbols of the "openness." The regime's guns killed 160, and shut down the protests. Lessons were hastily learned. Subsidies returned.

The new regimes tried to maintain the subsidies along with the new "openness." There was to be no subsidy to the small farmer, the *fellahin* of the Nile's fertile plains. Instead, the Egyptian regime, for instance, relied upon US Agency for International Development assistance that amounted to $4.6 billion over the next three decades. This money was used to buy the massive output of the industrial farms in the United States. Wheat came into the country, but at the expense of the restive peasantry, now increasingly under-employed. In 2010, Egypt was the leading importer of wheat in the world. Egypt relied upon its rent income for survival (remittances from payment for privatization, among others). The ruling clique diverted a substantial part of the rent into the coffers of the Swiss banks. Democracy did not live within this economy. The tyrant here was the ruling clique but not operating alone. It had close collaborators in the IMF, the World Bank, the Banks, the bond markets and the multinational corporations.

Oil did not flow liberally under the sands of Tunisia and Egypt, but it did in the rest of the Arab world, from Libya to the Arabian Peninsula. It has long been a question of the Arab Revolution that opened in the 1950s: When will the economies of the Arab region be able to sustain their populations rather than fatten the financial houses of the Atlantic world, and offer massive trust funds for the dictators and monarchs? Cursed with oil, the Arab world has seen little economic diversification and almost no attempt to use the oil wealth to engender balanced social development for the people. Instead, the oil money sloshed North, to provide credit for overheated consumers in the United States and to provide the banks with the vast funds that are otherwise not garnered by populations that have stopped saving (in the United States wages have been stagnant since 1973 but cultural expectations for lifestyle have not declined, which means that the credit provided by the petro-dollars artificially closed the gap between empty coffers and lavish dreams). The oil money also went toward the real estate boom in the Gulf, and the baccarat tables and escort services of Monaco (the Las Vegas of Europe, which has another decrepit monarch, Albert II, at its head). It did not flow into the pockets of the Arab Street.

The contradictions of the neoliberal security state in Egypt were plainly exhausted by 2008, when the "bread intifada" returned in force (protests in much smaller scale were seen across the Arab world, from Morocco to Syria). The pressure was such that lines for bread increased, and by March 2008 about a dozen people died in scuffles or from exhaustion, waiting on bread. Hosni Mubarak, the heir to Sadat's policies, sent in the army to quell protests over these "bread martyrs." On April 6, 2008, a mass protest in al-Mahalla al-Kubra went from the issue of bread to unemployment and onward to the normal excesses of the security state. Mahalla is no backwater. In 2006, twenty-four thousand workers went on strike in the textile mills of this industrial town not more than a few hours drive north of Cairo. They were the backbone of the 2008 events.

US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone arrived in Cairo in 2007. This Turkish speaker and veteran of the Foreign Service was confounded by the "paranoia of the Egyptian dictatorship" (cable sent on May 14, 2007). A year later, Ricciardone sent his assessment of Mahalla and of the tremors underfoot to his superiors at the State Department in Foggy Bottom: "Although not on the scale of the 1977 or 1986 riots, Mahalla is significant. The violent protests demonstrated that it is possible to tear down a poster of Mubarak and stomp on it, to shout obscene anti-regime slogans, to burn a minibus and hurl rocks at riot police. These are unfamiliar images that lower-income Egyptians thrill to. In Mahalla, a new organic opposition force bubbled to the surface, defying current political labels, and apparently not affiliated with the MB [Muslim Brotherhood]. This may require the government to change its script" (cable sent on April 16, 2008). The government did not change its script. This new opposition, strengthened by factory workers and students, the unemployed and the embittered, would take the name of April 6—and eventually find themselves in Tahrir Square by January 2011.

In 2010, twenty-first century plagues reduced the Russian wheat harvest to a third. As the journalist Annia Ciezadlo put it, "a combination of factors—droughts, wildfires, ethanol subsidies, and more—converged into a global food crisis." The epicenter of this was North Africa. World wheat prices rose beyond imagination. Tunisia and Egypt, both importers of wheat, could not maintain the "democracy of bread." Inequality flourished in Egypt, and neoliberal policies produced an *haute bourgeoisie*, fanned on by Mubarak's son Gamal, with more investment in London than in Alexandria. In October 2010, the courts directed the government to raise the minimum wage from $70/month to $207/month. Unbalanced by the rising tide of discontent, Mubarak tried to return to the "democracy of bread." It was far too late. As the economic belt tightened, the Egyptian population inhaled for a political battle.