The first and most obvious factor is the widespread demand for democracy. The second is the revulsion at the extreme gaps between rich and poor, provoking fury at what is seen as the unashamed looting by Arab dictators of the peoples’ wealth. The third factor is a revival of Pan Arabism, a sense that the Arab world shares a common destiny thwarted by Western domination in the last century. This is exacerbated by what is perceived as the imposition of an aggressively expansionist racist European Jewish colony in Palestine, at the heart of the Arab world.

The final factor is, in many ways, the most important: the intervention by millions of ordinary people changing and creating events from below. It is this factor which justifies the description “revolution”, and which may be compared to the great revolutions and revolutionary periods of the 1640s, 1790s, 1848, 1917 and 1968.

But why now? Interestingly, so extreme were the conditions, that the revolt in Egypt – and for the sake of simplicity and brevity, but also because of its centrality and importance, this article will focus exclusively on Egypt – was predicted with astonishing accuracy in essays in Egypt: The Moment of Change (Zed Books 2009) written by Egyptian activists (and their UK supporters) – all of whom would take part in the Tahrir Square demonstrations. But there is in addition what we might call in Marxist parlance “a detonating contradiction” – the particular spark of the global economic crisis of 2008 that set alight the rotting economic and political infrastructure.

Many mainstream commentators are noting the impact of the failed Western economic model of neo-liberalism. Thus The New York Times: “On paper, the changes transformed an almost entirely state-controlled economic system to a predominantly free-market one. In practice, though, a form of crony capitalism emerged, according to Egyptian and foreign experts. State-controlled banks acted as kingmakers, extending loans to families who supported the government but denying credit to viable business people who lacked the right political pedigree.”

Or as the Arab writer Larbi Sadiki has put it: “It is not the Quran or Syyiyd Qutb [the Islamic Brotherhood leader who is in absentia charged with perpetrating 9/11 despite being dead since 1966] Western security experts should worry about. They should perhaps purchase Das Kapital and bond with Karl Marx to get a reality check, a rethink, a dose of sobriety in a post-9/11 world afflicted by over-securitisation.”

From Tunisia and Algeria in the Maghreb to Jordan and Egypt in the Arab east, the real terror that eats at self-worth, sabotages community and communal rites of passage, including marriage, is the terror of socio-economic marginalisation.

The armies of “khozonest” (the unemployed of the Maghreb) now marching for bread in the streets and slums of Algiers and Kasserine and who tomorrow may be in Amman, Rabat, San’aa, Ramallah, Cairo and southern Beirut, are not fighting the terror of unemployment with ideology. They do not need one. Unemployment is their ideology. The real terror that eats at self-worth, sabotages community and communal rites of passage, the terror of socio-economic marginalisation.

What we have seen so far in the Arab world are political, not social, revolutions which have so far succeeded in removing rulers rather than their regimes.

But Trotsky also noted: “The masses go into a revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old regime… The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension of the masses by a method of successive approximations.”

Trotsky here highlights a key feature of revolutions: that while they revolve around decisive episodes where control over state power is settled, they are processes that unfold in time. The great French revolution lasted over five years. The failed German revolution, its failure symbolised by the assassination of the great revolutionary leader, Rosa Luxemburg, nevertheless lasted five years from 1918 to 1923.

The different phases of these processes, with their advances and retreats, victories and defeats for the forces of revolution and counter-revolution, and for left and right within the revolutionary camp, represent a learning process for the masses. The “successive approximations” onto which they latch in pursuit of a solution to their problems can lead to the progressive radicalisation of the masses and a decisive transfer of political power that
An intervention By millions of ordinary people

Mubarak forces in the military hitting back. But in May 1989 the party leadership backed away from making a bid for power, in part because of pressure from Moscow, which regarded Qasim, like Nasser, as an ally in the Cold War. The resulting demobilisation and fragmentation gave the initiative to the Ba'ath, which staged a coup with CIA support in February 1963 that toppled Qasim and subjected the Communists themselves to bloody repression and inaugurated the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The interim military government in Egypt, and indeed their would-be duplicitous US backers as they struggle to keep up with the pace of events, is desperate to avoid a continuing social revolution. We have already witnessed their willingness to employ the same repressive methods of Mubarak but alongside a much greater determination to continue social revolution. We have already witnessed the momentum of the last decade and political quietists favouring an accommodation with the regime. The latter were in the ascendent before the 25 January Revolution, but this did not prevent Brotherhood activists joining the rising. That pro-business character of the Brotherhood meant that it has taken an ambivalent attitude towards the strike wave. But undoubtedly many workers have supported it in recent years as the most powerful opposition force.

In fact the Brotherhood’s support for the regime trying to crack down on strikes, which, incidentally, precipitated the final overthrow of Mubarak, has limited its influence in the new and fast-developing independent trade union movement. It is here that the potential leadership and organising centre for renewed social revolution will be found. But it is far too early to speculate about the future of the Democratic Workers Party, founded by revolutionary socialists and one of several leftist parties now organising openly, rooted amongst the new rank and file worker activists.

However if they help Egyptian workers develop a clear political voice of their own, then dramatically greater revolutionary possibilities open up. Democracy may be the main slogan of the revolution, but equality is the implicit demand of the strike movement with a potentially massive audience across Egyptian society – and indeed the rest of the Arab world.

That desperately impoverished Tunisian street trader who set himself alight was both spark and symbol of a revolution disgusted at the avarice and greed of the corrupt Western-backed wealthy elites. The Egyptian workers’ insistence on trying to evict the “little Mubarak” bullying managers and bosses and their demands for a maximum as well as a minimum wage cannot be dismissed so easily as the narrow interests of a particular segment of society. Such demands clearly have universal appeal.

The politics of demands for equality in the Arab revolutionary movement has yet to translate as demands for a socialist alternative to capitalism. That is understandable given the deadweight of memory of the failure of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist dictatorship that replaced it. But providing the mass mobilisation intensifies, sooner or later that debate will surface.

This article is based on an adaptation of an essay by Alex Callinicos, Professor of European Studies at Kings College, University of London, “The Return of the Arab Revolution” in International Socialism Journal 130, Spring 2011. http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=7176