

**SITUATING CONTEMPORARY POLITICS INTO KARL  
MARX THEORY: AN ANALYSIS OF EVENTS AND  
CONDITIONS THAT LED TO THE ARAB  
REVOLUTIONS**

**Mupereki Felistas, R.\***

**Murwira Ashton.\***

**ABSTRACT**

*The Arab region experienced minor to serious revolts from 18 December 2010. This study sought to establish whether the causes of revolutions identified by Karl Marx are consistent with what prevails in contemporary politics. This entails revisiting Karl Marx's ideas and weighing them against what is obtaining in contemporary politics. The researchers first established points identified by Karl Marx as providing fertile grounds for revolutions through analysing his social class theory. From the population of the Arab region, Syria was purposively chosen as a case study. This was due to the fact that its unique geographical location, history, ethnic, religious complexities and recent events provided a wide spectrum for the purposes of this study. The findings show that, indeed, class struggles, class consciousness, alienation, among other things identified by Karl Marx existed in Syria. These are the conditions that Marx identified as prone to trigger revolutionary spirit. In Syria these conditions also created fertile ground for revolts. However, the study in addition established aspects of geopolitics and religious factors that Karl Marx did not foresee in the genealogy of revolutions. The researchers recommend that countries must be wary of these emerging aspects alongside those identified by Karl Marx as causing revolutions.*

Key Words: Revolution, Class Struggle, Arab Spring, Geopolitics and Alienation.

\* University of Zimbabwe. Department of Political and Administrative Studies, Zimbabwe.

## 1. Introduction.

Karl Marx wrote about revolutions with the perception that there are some things that make an environment fertile for the outbreak of a revolution. Once these things occur in their multiplicity in a country there is a high likelihood of the occurrence of a revolution. The first part introduces Karl Marx's ideas on causes of the revolution. This will be followed by a literature review with constituent parts on analysis of the aspects and genealogy of revolutions in history. The third part will be a case study in which an analysis of the Syrian politics done will be presented; its history, political structures, ethnic groups, religious issues among others. Finally, an evaluation of Karl Marx's ideas against the emerging findings will be presented. Lastly conclusions and recommendations will be proffered.

## 2. Karl Marx's Ideologies on Revolutions.

Karl Marx's political ideology on class struggles informs this study. Marx wrote on the society and the classes therein, how they are formed, sustained and their effects. He also wrote about how the exploited class, the workers, will escape from this misery through a revolution. According to Bidet and Kouvelakis (2008)

Marx considers that which, officially at least, presents itself as the most general feature of capitalist society: market relations of production, based on exchange, in which everyone *eo ipso* considers the other as a free, equal, and rational individual, and thereby enjoys the status of citizen in a polity based on the social contract.

This setup however will eventually lead labour power to become a commodity to be bought from the market. Those who buy labour, the capitalist, will find an avenue to ensure that they get most returns, profit, from the transaction. Therefore every effort will be made to ensure that labour can be acquired cheaply. According to Roskin et al. (2006:24) to ensure profit 'workers produce things but get paid only a fraction of the value of what they produce. The capitalist owners skim off the rest, the surplus value.' As a proportion of what will be coming out of the toil, the workers get an insignificant share whilst the one buying labor gets the lion's share. This effectively widens the gap between the rich and the poor sowing the seeds of tensions within a society. Those who will be buying labor will have leverage because of a lot of disposable income for further investments. These investments will further propel them up the economic ladder.

Thus, according to Bidet and Kouvelakis (2008),

Thereafter, social relations can no longer be analysed as simple relations of exchange between individuals, because they are at the same time relations of exploitation between classes with conflicting interests. And the class that is economically dominant is also the class which is politically dominant, in a state whose institutions, in this respect, is non-contractual, is such as to reproduce and maintain the class structure.

As indicated earlier, the creation of classes is fuelled by one's ability to buy labour. This ability gives one an advantage over those selling labor. The moment one sells labour is the moment one becomes vulnerable to the exploitation that comes with class conflicting interests. Roskin et al. (2006:24) assert that 'every society divides into two classes; a small class of those who own the means of production and a large class of those who work for the small class. Society is run according to the dictates of the upper class, which sets up the laws, arts and styles needed to maintain itself in power.' The laws will be such that property is protected to the advantage of property owners. The enabling point to ensure a breakthrough is thus bleak to those who do not own property. Once one has property a lot of bargains come their way. In the contemporary time, as in the days of the old, property has been best preferred as collateral security by monetary institutions. Clarke et al (2006:580) quoted in Pelaez and Pelaez (2008) assert that because the poor do not have collateral, financial development benefits only the rich. In addition, the rich with their own capital irrespective of the level of financial development could have higher gains when financial market imperfections erode the rest's incomes. This opens doors to property owners as they can access financial loans at the expense of those without property.

However, according to Roskin et al. (2006:24) 'when the underlying economic basis of society gets out of kilter with the structure that the dominant class would have established, the system collapses.' This happens when the structure is overtaken by events. There emerge new forces in the system with new dictates that do not protect the status quo. Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* concludes: 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workers of all countries unite' (ibid: 100). The workers will get to a point of realising that they do not have anything and so have nothing to protect. Attacking the system to them will be the prudent solution. They see it as the embodiment of their oppression. The state will have to go because, according to Boucher and Kelly (2009:459), 'it always represents particular class

interests. Only when private property is replaced and classes abolished can human freedom be achieved.' So Marx saw the society as aiming to create a communist system, 'by and for man.' Marx thought with the coming of communism the society will be perfect, without police, money or even government. This becomes a driving force in the minds of the people as people dream of attaining that society once the bourgeoisie has been overthrown. The rationale for not having police is because in the absence of private property, there will be no need for such security apparatus.

In a capitalist system man suffers from alienation. It is this alienation that man seeks to overthrow through a revolution. Alienation, according to Hoffman (2007:4-5) denotes a process by which a person is dominated by a product they have created themselves. In this case people will be dominated by such things as governments, states, religion, money and organisations that they will have created. Marx developed the notion of alienation from his reading of Ludwig Feuerbach who had used the notion against religion (ibid).

There are four forms of alienation/ enstrangement experienced by the modern worker as put forward by Marx: alienation from the product of labor, alienation from the act of production within the labor process, alienation from species-being (that which makes us distinctively human) and alienation as a consequence of the other three (alienation of 'man from man') (Boucher and Kelly; 2009:462). Men are being alienated from the things that came to be out of their own making. The judgment brought about by Marx is that workers will have been turned into machines. They will no longer be kith and kin to other humans as they will have been dehumanised. Man will be free only in 'functions such as eating, drinking and making love', which, according to Marx, are animal functions. Yet there is supposed to be more to human life than this. Therefore to overcome such estrangement there is need for emancipation of workers from this misery as it is key to 'universal human emancipation.'

Marx prescribed how man will progress from this alienation to full freedom. The method is rooted in dynamism of historical development (Boucher and Kelly; 2009:464). There will be creation of a social class 'compelled to resist' the forces of capitalism. However this is not an instant event as its driving force comes from worsening of conditions in the system. 'The development of technology opens the way for human emancipation by offering the prospect of material abundance, but its immediate effect is the furthering of the dehumanisation of man',

(ibid). Eventually there will be worsening of the plight of the workers especially because most of them will lose employment and fail to afford basics for survival. This loss of 'humanity is recoverable only by revolution' (ibid). A revolution, in the mind of workers, will change the status quo and restore the workers stature among fellow humans. Marx therefore situates the emancipation of man as lying only in the 'cooperative action of all mankind, and only as a result of history.'

### 3. Literature Review

Farley (2008) analysed the revolutions in Africa and established some key aspects on causes of revolutions. One of the findings was that no other continent than Africa has seen greater political change during the past half-century. The research established that in Southern Africa, the pattern of European domination was rather different. It put forward that the colonialists were settlers, not, as pertained in most of Africa north of the Zambezi, administrators on contract. Like the indigenous inhabitants, they regarded these countries as their own. Those in Southern Africa owned vast tracts of land. This enabled Europeans to enjoy a standard of living distinctly higher than their African counterparts (ibid). This particular study also established how this shifted the frontiers of Black majority rule hundreds of miles further south and reinvigorated African nationalism as a political force. Secondly, it encouraged the Black populations of Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa to think in terms of gaining political emancipation in the foreseeable rather than indefinite future. These ideas point towards how revolutionary tendencies sprout in a region and the type of discontent that can lead to this spirit. Whilst many struggles and much turmoil lay ahead, within six years Rhodesia had become independent under majority rule as Zimbabwe in 1980 and within few years South West Africa had thrown off the South African yoke and emerged as Namibia in 1990.

Earlier studies also established how global civil society can be mobilized in support of a cause of a disgruntled people. Johnson in Wilbur (2007) presented findings from a research on African guerrilla movements. It showed how African revolutionaries mobilised support across global civil society on the basis of the human-rights-based claims of self-determination of nations. The study established that global pressure, at its zenith in the struggle against South African

apartheid, caused actors in both other sectors to accede to the values of a mobilized global civil society, and apartheid was dismantled. This global pressure can be likened to the contemporary democratisation wave or force that has hit authoritarian regimes such as Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. This wave in the form of Arab revolutions led to the demise of some of the authoritarian regimes. The above studies were more concerned about the revolutions of indigenous against outsiders. This study seeks to look at an aspect that is slightly different, revolutions of indigenous people against indigenous governments in relation to Karl Marx's ideas. This is the prevalent scenario in most revolutions occurring in contemporary politics.

#### 4. The Syrian Case Study and its analysis.

##### 4.1 Causes of the Revolution Consistent to Marx's ideas

This study revealed that indeed, in Syria the conditions identified by Marx as nurturing the revolutionary spirit prevailed. The Assad family has been at the helm since 1970, making it over four decades under a non-Muslim president. Hafez al-Assad assumed power in November 1970, a position he held until his death in 2000. He was succeeded by Bashar Hafez al-Assad who reigns to date. The coming into power of the Assad regime was accompanied by radicalism (Rubin; 2007). It established a doctrine that would justify not only its hold on power in Syria but also the state's expansion to dominate its neighbors. As such the regime used all means possible to ensure its survival. 'Syria's leaders used educators, journalists, intellectuals, and cultural figures to ensure that people did not just obey the dictator, they would love him. The government did not just sit in its offices and issue decrees. It has had command of the country's wealth, information, ideology, and every conceivable institution', (ibid: 44). Consistent with Marx's theory is the issue of a few people dominating all facets of the state. The Assad family and its loyalists thus became a dominant class in all spheres of life.

The study established that the economy has not been spared from this minority's control, perpetuating the alienation that Marx propounded. For Syrians to conduct business they had to make government officials their partners or succeed in most careers only by echoing the regime's ideology, whether they believed it in their hearts or not (Rubin 2007). There has also been use of

propaganda and heavy information censorship. 'It is a society where all the media are under regime control and adhere to the official line; sustained public criticism can lead to torture and imprisonment; cell phones and internet use are tightly controlled; private conversations may well be reported to the secret police; and any contact with a foreigner is suspect', (ibid:44).

Patronage politics has also been rife to ensure loyalty. Channels to access goods, services and jobs have been linked to Baath party lines. The Baath party has been, by no means Syria's only important political force, (Hinnebusch, 2001). Rubin (2007) asserts that the regime emphasised party membership. However, one key point in preserving top-down control is that only about 30 percent of these people got to become full party members (ibid). The above factors and measures thus created fertile ground for uprisings as the majority was frustrated by the bad governance of the Assad regime and the Baath party.

Rubin (2007:46) further asserts that

Party members or sympathizers head all significant organizations, so that trade unions and writers', women's, peasants', and professional organizations become arms of the regime. Party membership is a useful, sometimes indispensable, tool to advance one's career. Students who join the party have points added to their grades and more easily enter prestigious universities and degree programs.

The strategy adopted to conceal the extent of dictatorship was through establishing a representative government. However, Rubin (2007) postulates that the focus of the Baathist doctrine was on the regime's interests, not those of the citizens. 'Socialism here is the doctrine of state control, a highly centralized economy ensuring the regime's ability to dole out patronage as suits its interests. The idea is to ensure that too many resources do not fall into private hands, which would set up sectors independent of the state', (ibid: 47).

Rubin (2007) commented that Syria's system consisted of diverse population. The element of classes manifested in this minority dominated country affecting the distribution of goods and services. The system of government perpetuated militancy to provide an excuse for tight controls and domestic popularity through its demagoguery rejecting Western view of moderation,

compromise and open economy, (ibid). This has been seen as necessary to control its ethnic religious complexity. 'Sixty percent of the population is Sunni Arab Muslim. Of the remainder, 13 percent is Christian, 12 percent Alawite, 9 percent Kurdish, 5 percent Druze, with a scattering of other groups' (ibid: 28). The government has used a heavy hand on non-Arab Kurdish minorities. As such ethnic religious complexity buttressed the social, political and economic ills of the regime thereby laying the seeds of uprisings. In Syria, this low class status is associated with certain deprived minorities, that is, where class and communal cleavages overlap, not only will conflict be particularly intense, but deprived communal groups may view class revolution as the solution to their particular deprivations, (Hinnebusch; 2001:4)

Therefore, it was inevitable that these people would come to the realisation that their problems emanated from the system. The situation makes it ripe for a conflict or uprising to be staged by the oppressed groups within a society. According to Marx, the oppressed people would get to a point when they appreciate that in-order to escape their plight the state must be put under the hammer. Once this realisation comes the workers eventually come together united to be a force for the overthrow of the system.

Inevitably the Syrian territory has been plagued in uprisings. These began as mere anti-government demonstrations on 26 January 2011. Among other things, the Syrians bayed for reforms in the government system. The Sunni Arab Muslims, who constitute the greatest part of the population, were joined by those who deserted the government's army. This force developing over time as the conditions gradually deteriorated. This made them a formidable force against the government which is backed by the minority, the Alawites.

#### **4.2 Causes of Revolution: Inconsistent with Marx's ideas.**

The Syrian case however shows contemporary politics revolutions' causes departing from Marx's divination. Location, time, religion and external factors seem to be imminent causes of revolutions in contemporary political systems. The location of the Syrian country seems to have made it inevitable for the country to suffer from waves of revolutions in the event of their occurring in the Arab world. Syria is found in Western Asia. It shares borders with Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Israel. All these countries have been, in one way or another, unstable. Iraq has been a field of war dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kees Van Der Pijl, 2006).



Lebanon has continuously suffered from being invaded by Israel (Kechichian, 2001). Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq share a colonial background of their state formation (Bacik, 2008). As an artificial creation, Jordan has been without natural and economic resources since its formation (ibid). This has brought the international involvement in the permanent proximity of Syria. Such type of neighbors can lead to overspill problems into a country.

There are tribes spreading across these countries. Tribes represent large kin groups organized and regulated according to ties of blood or family lineage (Bacik, 2008). This set up proves to work against stability in a country. In fact modern studies confirm that indeed revolutions are taking a unique geographical pattern in the way they spread. This shows that revolutions might not necessarily be fueled by internal problems as put forward by Marx. Rather external forces can act as catalyst sparking a revolution or opening the eyes of the oppressed. As such a country might find itself in that situation, not out of its making, but due to its being located in proximity to countries with problems. These will be spillover effects (Mupereki; 2014).

There is also need to greatly appreciate the impact of religion in contemporary politics. World politics has changed; religion has changed as well - and perhaps even more radically (Hatzopoulos and Petito, 2003). This is contrary to once widespread expectations that religion would gradually disappear as apolitical force in modernising societies, religious communities have been getting stronger in many nations over the last two decades (Hasenclever and Rittberger in Hatzopoulos and Petito, 2003). Religious leaders put forward grievances about discrimination, raise claims as to how state and society should be organised, and mobilise the faithful into action. Social institutions such as schools, charities, and hospitals are run in the name of their respective religious denominations. In many Muslim countries, there are calls for the introduction of the sharia as public law (ibid). Syria, the country under examination in this study, has not been spared by this religion wave. Karl Marx concentrated on economic classes as the main sources of dissent in the society. However in the Syrian context religion has proved to be a fundamental factor that needs to be considered in the analysis of causes of revolutions. The religious groups in Syria include the Arab Alawites, Arab Sunnis, Arab Christians and Armenians whilst ethnic groups like Assyrians, Druze, Kurds and Turks add to the multiplicity of groups. Reconciling such varied groups is laborious a task. In the Arab countries the Muslims claim that they should rule and that they represent the people in the Rosseauian sense (Myloie in Mirsky and Ahrens, 1993).

Acts of violence require legitimating, and religion and religious leaders can provide such legitimation (Hasenclever and Rittberger in Hatzopoulos and Petito, 2003). At its core, the civil war in Syria is not a religious conflict. The dividing line is one's loyalty to the Assad's government. However, some religious communities tend to be more supportive of the regime than the others, fuelling mutual suspicion and religious intolerance in many parts of the country (Manfreda, 2014). The composition of the Syrian population shows that most of the people belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. However with the leader, Assad, belonging to the minority Alawites group the effect of religion on the uprising is difficult to rule out. Therefore the frictions and factions among these religious groups form the basis of conflict or tensions within a state. There is also presence of Sunnis in the rebel groups, a sign that these might be driven by their religious beliefs to go against the Syrian leader as he belongs to a religion different from theirs.

### **Evaluation.**

The conditions in Syria have made the outbreak of revolts inevitable. The theory given by Karl Marx comes true to explaining the conditions that perpetuates revolutionary tendencies from an economic point of view. In Syria sharp gaps between urban-based landed magnates and the village, combined with the agrarian crisis arising from capitalist infiltration and land concentration, radicalised important sections of the Syrian peasantry (Hinnebusch, 2001). The population has been divided into distinct economic classes due to the government ability to ensure that only loyal party members access goods and services. Alawites, by virtue of their disproportionate recruitment, were best positioned to succeed (ibid: 6). This ensured the progression of the Baath loyalists up the economic ladder at the expense of the rest.

However to uphold Marx theory as suffice in explaining the Syrian politics will be tantamount to aborting of justice in this analysis of events. There are several issues that explain the occurrence of revolutions that have emerged in the events that occurred in the Arab region that must be bone in mind in understanding the Syrian revolts. Geography, history, religions and international politics are issues that require academic attention that Marx did not incorporate in his writings about revolutions. 'Geography has shaped Syria's historical fate. Its location at a strategic land bridge between three continents and amidst desert and steppe exposed the country to movements of diverse peoples and periodic nomadic invasions which left behind an extraordinary socio-

cultural heterogeneity' (Hinnebusch; 2001:14). This geographic location played a role in magnifying the fragmentation of the Syrian state. It seems inevitable to have a system breakdown in such a setup. It would be sufficient to say in a country like Syria, the explanations about causes of revolutions in contemporary times have gone beyond Marx's theory. Marx looked at the classes forming as a direct product of economic inequality. However in Syria there are a lot of dividing factors that are outside economic lines.

Religious conflicts have been rife in the Arab region. To the detriment of its stability, Syria has not been spared in this religious tug-of-war. 'In 1976 the Syrian Muslim Brothers launched a series of actions aimed at overthrowing President Hafez al-Assad, and culminating in a series of urban uprisings in the early 1980s. Although this opposition was linked to Syria's domestic situation, it benefited from a degree of support from activists in neighbouring countries' (Kepel and Milelli; 2008:15).' This study also found out that activists like the late Osama Bin Laden had vested interest in Syrian politics. This pit Syria as a target for his expeditions as 'Osama may have been interested in the regional situation and seemed concerned with helping Islam movements against a secular regime' (ibid: 16). Syria is Osama's mother's native country and secondly by the nature of the regional flare that the religious conflicts took in the Arab region, Syria was not spared.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations.**

The Syrian conflict must be viewed as emanating from more than what Karl Marx postulated. The presence of the syndromes that Marx identified as fertile for eruptions of revolutions must however not be downplayed. Prevalence of classes in Syria has exposed the country to warring tendencies. The most part of the population was disenfranchised and frustrated since the minorities ruling have alienated them. Patronage politics have been used to ensure that only those aligned to the ruling elite progressed economically. This has left the country with a distinct division between the minority Alawites and the majority Sunnis. There was little commitment by the government to solve this disparity as this system has been in place for more than four decades.

The Alawites, who are ruling Syria yet they are the minorities consider themselves Twelver Shi'ite Muslims, a position disputed by the Sunnis. This has been worsened by the fact that the Alawites are very secretive that a lot about their religion has been guarded from public scrutiny. This religious identity crisis has positioned the Sunnis against the Alawites and fanned Syrian

uprising. Thus the Syrian revolution may be emanating from causes outside Marx's perceptions. The Syrian conflict might have an economic underpinning yes, but the drive seems to be religious. This study is of the assumption that had the ruling section been of the same religious orientation as the rest, with the same economic conditions as prevailing to date, politics would have been different in Syria. Probably they would not rise against one of their own but leave his fate in the hands of religious doctrines. There is historical evidence of persecutions of Alawites by the Sunnis in the region. Assad's coming to power therefore destabilized the domination that the Sunnis had in the country making Syria fertile for uprisings. External interests cannot be ignored in fueling the uprisings in Syria.

Also, the location of Syria has left it with a lot of geopolitical pressures to deal with. It becomes inevitable that its politics get influenced by the politics of the Arab region. Religion has also complicated the class conflict in Syria such that it is difficult to understand whether people are fighting for economic freedom or religious appeasement. The politics of contemporary world therefore has become more complicated than what Marx foresaw. It becomes prudent for leaders to be wary about what Marx put forward but at the same time be on the lookout for emerging issues in politics. Countries must make every effort to eliminate factors that create classes, of any creation, as they fuel the revolutionary tendencies.

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