

Review of

*The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East*

Jamie Allinson

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Arab revolutions filled with aspirations for social justice, freedom, and human dignity. But most of the uprisings led to brutal repression, savage civil wars, and state collapse. Are they failed revolutions? Passive revolutions, or as has been argued revolution-restorations?

Betrayal, loss, defeat, and tragedy are common words that appear repeatedly in the literature of revolutions. Despite their commonality, the book tells us that they are insufficient to explain the processes of these revolutions and their failure. A revolution cannot fail until the counter-revolution succeeds. Therefore, to understand revolution's failure, we need to understand the success of counter-revolution. This is while in the existing literature not much attention has been given to counter-revolution.

How did the counterrevolutions in the Arab Spring succeed and how did they crush revolutionary movements? What type of counter-revolution characterized the Arab Spring? How did they succeed?

*The Age of Counter-Revolution* answers these questions in eight chapters and 367 pages. To summarize the argument of the author, there were revolutions in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, and Bahrain. However, except for Tunisia, counterrevolutions succeeded and took the upper hand, though through different mechanisms. In Egypt, the counterrevolution was led by the Egyptian army, while in Syria the regime led a counterrevolution with the help of Russia and Iran. In Bahrain, the revolutionary movement was suppressed by the Saudi military intervention. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, the state or part of it collapsed or dismantled, and as a result the revolutionary movement burst into chaos and civil war. It cannot be said that the Arab revolution failed; counterrevolutions also succeeded (p.3).

The difference between counter-revolution and passive revolution which is used to explain the experiences of the Arab Spring is that while passive revolution demobilizes or absorbs mass movements, counterrevolutions crush them (p. 45). Therefore, passive revolution, Allinson argues, is unable to fully understand the process we witnessed in the Arab Spring,

In the literature around this issue, counterrevolution is historically associated with the trinity of throne, sword, and altar. The book examines how the situation has changed. It investigates the ways in which counterrevolutions intervene between the revolutionary situations that are produced by mass uprisings from below and the outcomes that result from them (p. 3). It explains how the opponents of the revolution from above, below and within pursue the eradication of the revolution and create counter-revolutionary forces.

Counterrevolution typically has ties to old regimes. We call this thermidor, which became common after the French revolution in 1789. Thermidor refers to the reversion, after establishment of a new social order, to the practices of the old. If a revolution consists of the change to a new revolutionary economy and society and therefore, a counter-revolution consists of the undoing of this change.

The case of the Arab counter-revolution is different. Allinson describes the counter-revolution from below as social counter-revolution. This terminology is quite interesting, since in the dominant literature the social is primarily associated with revolution rather than counter revolution.

A social revolution calls forth a social counter-revolution. Counterrevolutions can emerge from within the ranks of revolutionaries as they seek to recreate themselves after gaining power on the terms of the old order that they originally overthrew. Counter-revolution is therefore a project that thus involves both a policy and a movement to reverse revolution or close a revolutionary situation (41).

Another related topic to revolution and counter-revolution, the book argues, is to understand a revolutionary situation. In a revolutionary situation, there is a dual sovereignty caused by mass insurrections. A revolutionary situation does not always lead to a radical outcome. A counter-revolution aims to end a revolutionary situation by restoring singular rather than dual power. A counter-revolution may be mounted against a revolution that has succeeded in establishing its rule: a process of civil war and overthrow, most often enlisting the support of outside powers (p. 41). Counter revolutions typically close a historical moment of revolutionary situation through demobilisation and repression. In this book, counter-revolution means the closure, attempted or successful, of a revolutionary situation on terms favourable to the old order- in either its narrow political or broader social sense (p. 40). Counter-revolution, therefore, depends on the existence of a prior revolutionary situation but is not solely limited to the restoration of the rule that preceded it.

Can revolution and counter-revolution be explained from a gender perspective? And what would revolution and counter-revolution look like from this angle? These are relevant questions considering the central role that women have played in the Arab and Middle Eastern uprisings including the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Previous studies on revolution and counterrevolution have barely taken them into consideration. One of the novelties of *The Age of Counter-Revolution* is that it disrupts this tradition. Unlike many other studies, Allinson takes gender perspective into consideration and analyses the role of gender in revolutionary and counter-revolutionary framings. Gender and sexual violence played a part in counter-revolutionary trauma. “Many of the increasing instances of harassment and assault on the streets and demonstrations could be ascribed to *baltageya* [Egyptian thugs]”. “The effect of such assaults was counter-revolutionary in nature, allowing existing gender hierarchies deeply embedded *among* the revolutionaries to disrupt and diminish the active revolutionary subject. The less secure women felt in the squares and protests- and the more male protesters and opposition leaders implied, on ‘pragmatic’ or Islamist grounds that women’s presence rather than male violence was the problem- the smaller the demonstrations would become [...] Assault and harassment, in pushing women out of street politics, served ‘to mark the end of the “revolutionary process”[...] and to return to “normalcy”, including normative gender relations.” (p. 115). Counter-revolution was expressed particularly in struggles around gender and sectarianism (p. 128). Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain became

battlegrounds between revolutionary and counter-revolution forces fought over gender equality.

*The Age of Counter-Revolution* provides valuable insights for scholars interested in social and political studies specifically in the Middle East and North Africa.

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