

More Middle-East Revolutions?

by David Smiley

We are witnessing history in the making. As unrest spreads across the Middle East the internet is being swamped by accusations of poverty and inequality.

Tunisia and Egypt

For example, Tunisians protested against “high unemployment, food inflation, corruption...”¹. For Egyptians “Inequality drives Egyptians to the streets”². But Tunisia had boasted an economic miracle while Egypt’s economy was growing at 7 percent. And similar enigmas are now emerging across the region. So why do we have poverty in the midst of progress? We have to go back in history.

*Land Economics*³ (1968) reported of Tunisia that “With the establishment of the protectorate in 1881 the French authorities began to settle their nationals on the most fertile ground enacting legislative measures to upset the traditional Muslim laws of property...Agricultural production in Tunisia exists in two distinct sectors: a traditional and a modern sector. The latter was developed mainly by the European settlers...the traditional sector accounts for about 24.0 percent of gross domestic product.” That a much larger population generates only 24 percent of GDP suggests that the original inhabitants were pushed into marginal land. Twenty years earlier Doreen Warriner⁴ (1948), while documenting poverty and inequality across



Palestine

the Middle East, predicted of Egypt that “The distribution of land ownership is extremely unequal” as a result “The fellaheen ...are an almost slave population...With the present distribution of wealth and power, there is likely to be no measure of land reform....Land reform must therefore wait upon political change, and may one day become the main motive for revolution.”

So, who next?

You can find a huge literature, in books, journals and the internet, on the problems of the Middle East. A useful atlas of Middle East poverty and conflict can be found at Smith (2006). And Chomsky (2003) documents America’s involvement in the region. But poverty and inequality, and therefore the seeds of revolution were sown way back, as Warriner demonstrates clearly in these extracts.

“The majority of the Arab population already live on farms that do not guarantee a subsistence minimum...” In 1936 population and average incomes were: Arab 58,000 and 78 sterling, Jewish 55,300 and 34 sterling [Then, incomes would have reflected large differences in productivity. By now, occupations of Palestinian land would have widened the gap further]The number of landless agricultural workers was estimated at 22 percent [in 1931] Their numbers are now certainly larger...Rich landowners are enabled to acquire more water than they need for their own land and so can force their poor neighbours to sell land.” (Warriner).

Transjordan (Jordan)

Agriculture has benefited since 1943 from the establishment of clear title. “One unfavourable result of

1 Wikipedia.org/wiki/2010-2011_Tunisian_revolution

2 <http://willblogforfood.typepad.com>

3 *Land Economics*, 1968, The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin

4 Warriner, D., 1948, *Land and Poverty in the Middle East*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs.