

# Islamism, Post-Islamism and Social Movements

*An Interview with Asef Bayat*

Interviewed by: Ahmed Al-Owfi

## *Revolutions and Social Movements*

**Ahmed:** From the beginning of your intellectual career, you have been dealing with questions on revolutions and social movements, and the transformation of their forms. How did you come to this interest?

**Asef Bayat:** I suppose this has to do with the kind of class and generation that I was part of. I grew up in a small village in Iran where barely anyone could read or write, before the Shah's Literacy Corps or Sepahi-ye Danesh brought a chance for education; but even this went only so far. So, because of the need for schooling my family was forced out of the village to settle in South Tehran slums as rural migrants. This rural migrant status, its underdog designation *dehati* like the Arabic term *fallah*, made me always aware of class, status and discrimination. This awareness in the College years pushed many of us in similar position towards political activism. So, I was part of the generation of the 1970s in Iran— with optimism and hope for social mobility, and contradictory attitude towards westernization (loving it and hating it), but certainly pissed off by class denigration and the Shah's political repression. So, for the people in my position, revolution was on the agenda, and it did happen in 1979. Political engagement with the revolution (its hope and then despair)

somewhat shaped my intellectual trajectory to pursue scholarship on this theme. My PhD dissertation was on the Iranian revolution and the role of workers in it. And I have continued this trajectory since.

**Ahmed: Within a wider postcolonial trend, a considerable part of your work focuses on subaltern classes. Particularly in “Street Politics” and “Life as Politics,” you looked at the everyday practices of ordinary people and the excluded as sites for social and political change. Why do you think such margins are important in understanding the political reality of a wider society?**

**Asef Bayat:** My attention to the subaltern as a scholarly endeavor has also to do with my own past and a great sensitivity to and awareness of their lives and daily struggles, their rationality in making the best of formidable conditions; I often sensed their complex life was at odd with the way they were depicted either demonized or romanticized. While Political Anthropology has covered some aspects of subaltern politics, Political Science has mainly overlooked it. A trick in understanding the politics of the subaltern is to observe it in a long span of time. If you follow subaltern life in a long span of time then you are likely to see its political component—the way in which their attempts to survive and enhance their lives place them in a position to challenge authority, vested interests, laws, or established order. Just look at the international refugees these days; from Africa or the Middle East. Theirs has gone beyond the usual calm and quiet encroachment, becoming very noisy and visible, thanks to the apprehended media. I had spoken of this phenomenon long before the recent massive wave of refugees and migration came to surface. And it is likely to continue; especially if the climate change, deforestation, and agricultural decline go on as they are, no matter how much barriers, barbed wires or border control you may install.

**Ahmed: One point of contention that can be raised about such an approach is that placing much value on the everyday practices in terms of political change could lead to over-reading into trivial practices, inflating its political effect and ignoring people’s intentions. How do you respond to such a concern?**

**Asef Bayat:** Yes, there is the danger of over-reading the practices of these ordinary people. To avoid the danger, we should place value on the everyday practices only to the extent that they are

‘valuable’. On this, we need to be conceptually sharp and precise. Every now and then I hear objections to the notions of ‘quiet encroachment or ‘non-movement’ on the ground that they do not fulfill the kind of political role that the readers expect them to do—like being revolutionary etc. I have often made it clear that non-movements are not necessarily pursuing regime change or revolutionary agendas. Rather they are usually engaged in enhancing people’s life-chances; and in doing so, I would argue, they cause significant changes in the actors’ own lives and in society at large. However, in conditions of high political mobilization, the people involved in everyday politics may join in the larger movements, and or even they themselves may turn into becoming social movements. So, these everyday practices produce immediate results for the actors, while keeping them mobilized so that their activities may become part of larger contentions.

**Ahmed: Form the point of view of social actors, can one count on the practices of ordinary people in their everyday life for social change? Can social actors strategize based on them?**

**Asef Bayat:** I have suggested that they can; just look at how cities have been transformed by the doing of ordinary people, how new communities have been created; new markets have been established; new modes of life (by the young people) have been practiced; or oppositional gender norms have been established. These are very important. In ordinary times, these practices may not be the outcome of collective strategizing or planning. Rather they are often done by actors who are disconnected from other actors who carry out similar activities. In exceptional times, times of rupture, these actors may come together to form tangible face-to-face collectives to strategize for the defense of their gains, or for further encroachments.

**Ahmed: In several places, especially in “Making Islam Democratic,” you criticized a Eurocentric tendency in the Social Movement Theory and pointed out its inadequacy in understanding our political reality. In what do you think the theory fails? And in what sense the Global South is different?**

**Asef Bayat:** It is not as much a criticism of Social Movement Theory per se; indeed there are valuable insights in social movement studies developed in Europe or the US from which we can

benefit considerably. Rather it is a criticism of ourselves who often overlook the specificities of our region's realities and so uncritically utilize notions which may not be helpful. For instance, an exclusive pre-occupation with the kinds of organized social movements in the west (with all the openness, legality, lobbying, orientation to change laws, etc.) would lead to overlooking the vast gray zones, non-connected activities, and the hidden sphere that in fact do much to change things than open or permitted collectives under repressive political systems. The social movement theory cannot account for these types of activisms.

*“Revolution without Revolutionaries”*

**Ahmed: Your latest book was based on close observations of the Arab Revolutions. The book has an interesting, and perhaps provocative, title: “Revolution without Revolutionaries.” What do you mean by that?**

**Asef Bayat:** I do hope it is not misunderstood. This phrase is never meant to deny that thousands and thousands of people in the Arab world-- mostly young, but also elderly, men and women, people with different religious or ethnic affiliations spearheaded these spectacular uprisings because they wanted better, freer, and more dignified life than their political regimes could allow. But they mostly (and here my focus is on Tunisia, Egypt or Yemen) were not equipped with any systematic revolutionary ideas and resources capable of breaking the entrenched institutional power of the old regimes. Because, just like most activists of the Occupy Movements in the West, they were operating in different ideological times when the very idea of ‘doing revolution’ has been discredited.

**Ahmed: In the book, you mentioned that you lived through two revolutions separated by three decades. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was erupted when you were a youth in Tehran, and you closely followed the Egyptian Revolution through visits to Cairo and Tahrir Square, where you taught as a professor in American University in Cairo for more than 15 years. Can you tell us the story behind the book?**

**Asef Bayat:** Yes; I had followed the Iranian revolution very closely; had observed and written about it. The outbreak of the Arab revolutions, especially that in Egypt, totally preoccupied my time, attention, and thinking. I was following it hour by hour. I had lived in Cairo for years and was familiar with the social, political, and religious scene. I had already published a book (*Making Islam Democratic*, 2007) which had traced the socio-religious and political developments since the 1970s in a comparative outlook with Iran. As I delved into the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, I sensed that there were different kinds of political happenings from the revolutions of the 1970s, including the Iranian revolution. This was intellectually enthralling and challenging. I wanted to make sense of these revolutions. So, this became my research project. The book *Revolution without Revolutionaries* is the first book-size outcome of my study.

**Ahmed: What is the main contention that you put forth in the book?**

**Asef Bayat:** The contention is that these revolutions were very rich as movement but poor as change. The uprisings exhibited spectacular mobilization that involved innovative ways, clever tactics and much bravery and sacrifice. But they fell short of causing a fundamental break from the old order. Because these revolutions were taking place in an ideological era in the world when the very idea of revolution (as a fundamental transformation) had been discredited. Ironically the revolutions of the 1989 in the Eastern Europe which steered an epochal change in the world heralded this non-revolutionary era.

**Ahmed: Your emphasis on the potential power of the ordinary comes also strong in “Revolution without Revolutionaries.” You convincingly showed that the revolutionary “breakthrough came only when ordinary people .. joined in these extraordinary struggles—when the slum dwellers marched, workers downed tools, and unlikely citizens publicly spoke out.” Thinking about them in the counterrevolutionary moment, can the power of the ordinary be harnessed by the political regimes? Can the “illegible realities” of the subaltern be colonized by the new regimes?**

**Asef Bayat:** At certain junctures, yes, the ordinary people may be support basis of authoritarian leaders or regimes. The history of populism (both left and right) is a testimony to how the ‘masses’ may lend support to regimes in particular junctures—the times when they see something good may

come from such leaders or regimes. But such support is often fractured, fluid and partial. It is also a peculiarity of current juncture in the Arab world that the ordinary is linked the ‘extra-ordinary’— I mean to the educated but poor activists; I mean they are linked to the ‘middle class poor’ who often bring a more strategic and political perspective to the often pragmatic rationality of the ordinary people. This makes the ordinary’s support of the authoritarian regimes quite tenuous.

**Ahmed: “The Arab Revolutions,” you wrote in the book “lacked any associated intellectual anchor.” Where have the Intellectuals gone?**

**Asef Bayat:** Prior to the Arab uprisings, there were certainly intellectuals in the Arab world, who spoke, wrote, created arts, and voiced critical views through different mediums. But they rarely talked about revolution let alone articulating visions about revolutionary futures in the way those of the earlier generations did, like those who were deeply invested in Marxist politics, or the Third Worldist liberation movements, Palestinian national liberation, or Islamists like Sayyid Qutob who developed a vision of an Islamist future. Like activists, the intellectuals of the 2000s were also the product of the times when revolution simply ‘was not in’, so to speak. These intellectuals had different preoccupations than envisioning revolution. The Egyptian literary scholars Samiya Mehrez and Sabry Hafiz have actually offered critical analyses about the poor state of intellectual life in Egypt in the many years leading up to the revolution. My own book *Making Islam Democratic* (2007) provides some discussions about how the intellectual life was conditioned by its maneuvering between the Islamist mode, nationalism, and the state demands.

**Ahmed: An interesting problem briefly discussed in the book is the dilemma of scholars between the influence of such spectacular events on them, their passion, beliefs and disappointment, and their commitment to the objective position of the researcher. Writing your book, how did you deal with such a tension?**

**Asef Bayat:** As I mentioned in the book it is a challenge to do research about revolutions which are unfolding. And of course there is the passion (like or dislike) of the researcher which might intervene in his/her assessment and judgment. How to avoid this? I think one needs to start by acknowledging this danger, and being aware of its possibility. I was constantly made my self conscious of this danger. I tried to remain as objective as I could. There were times that I would

get deeply disappointed by the outcome my own findings, because they were against my individual wishes. But I always tried to remain loyal to the findings of my study than my personal wishes or preferences. I also managed to establish and work within the perspectives in my study that allowed to be both truthful and hopeful. This is possible because Arab revolutions had different dimensions that appeared both disappointing and promising.

### *Islamism and Post-Islamism*

**Ahmed: One of the most influential theses that you have developed is the concept of “Post-Islamism,” which you defined as a “condition” and as a “project.” What is left of this condition? Are there still social forces that still represent its project?**

**Asef Bayat:** I think the condition for the exhaustion of the Islamist project (in sense of establishing an Islamist order notably an Islamist state) has not been diminished. On the contrary, I see the trend in such direction among the traditional Islamist movements. Anecdotal reports about the thinkers and activists of the Muslim Brotherhood whether in Egypt or in exile points to a rethinking about their Islamist project (I can imagine that there are trends within the same MB movement that following the crackdown have adopted a more militant postures too). What is missing thus far is the articulation of a fairly coherent post-Islamist project. This needs a candid and critical re-evaluation of the Islamist project and its contradictions to come up with a more inclusive Islamic project.

**Ahmed: How does the legacy of the Arab Revolutions affect Islamists and their political thoughts (whether those who have been integrated in the ruling polity or those facing persecution)?**

**Asef Bayat:** Famously and somehow surprisingly the place of Islam in the Arab uprisings was minimal if any at all. It was only following the fall of the dictators that a few religious parties ascended to the help of power as in Tunisia (el-Nahda), Egypt (Muslim Brothers), and Morocco (PJD). Among them both al-Nahda and PJD espoused a largely post-Islamist proclivity. That is to say they are departing from Islamist stance. But the core of the Muslim Brotherhood remained

Islamist. Yet, the story of Muslim Brotherhood moving into the governmental power is very instructive. Precisely because Muslim Brothers did move into the governmental power, the fact that it was tested out with quite a disappointing result, it lost a great deal of popular support. And precisely because the Muslim Brothers as the ruling party undermined themselves, shedding their oppositional popularity, the coup against them became quite easy, because many Egyptians had turned against them.

**Ahmed: In “Revolution without Revolutionaries,” you detailed the transition of main Islamist players from an anti-imperialist social justice-oriented stance to embracing neoliberal ethics and policies. Do you think there is any connection between Post-Islamist reformist discourses and such a transformation?**

**Asef Bayat:** Well, the fact is that both post-Islamist and neo-Islamist thinking have found selective affinity with the neoliberal rationality. Post-Islamism is a product of post-cold-war era with its predominant discourse on individual, civil society, and market, while the Islamist movements, like many other secular parties or movements, have also been ‘socialized’ into such discursive frame.

**Ahmed: How do you look at the future of Political Islam in general in the Post Arab Revolutions era?**

**Asef Bayat:** I can see double and simultaneous processes of both post-Islamization and Islamist radicalization. The Arab revolutions opened an opportunity for the ascendancy of political Islam to governmental power in some countries like Egypt, Tunisia or Morocco, while radical Jihadies felt free to race in the civil societies (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya) or in the warring zones as in Syria, Iraq, or Libya. For some of them, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who took governmental power, the experience cost them a decline in popular support because they showed their shortcomings when they were governing. In the meantime the violence of radical Jihadies made ordinary Muslims weary of these groups’ intents, leading to further isolation of these groups. This is the story of groups like ISIS—for instance an opinion poll conducted in a half dozen Muslim-majority countries showed that between 94% to 99% of Muslims opposed ISIS. In short, ordinary Muslims moved away from such strands of Islamism, even though they continued to remain committed to their Islamic faith. These developments meant that the ‘conditions’ for the growth of post-Islamism



further expanded. But post-Islamism may not fully develop unless it is informed by a ‘project’. For instance, al-Nahda in Tunisia seemed to articulate a project, but those critical members departing from the Muslim Brothers are yet to do so.

Parallel to a push towards post-Islamization, we may see also a radicalization of segments of Islamist activists, in particular those affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood who were victimized by the repression of the Egyptian regime beginning from the 2013 massacre. Here the key point is that none of these trends (be they new Jihadies, or Islamic Nihilists as Oliver Roy calls them, nor of course the post-Islamists) lend themselves to the kind of project that Islamists used to articulate before these developments—that is, creating an Islamic order with a workable Islamist state at its center. In short, Islamism as a project seems to suffer from a deep crisis.

### *Disillusion and Hope*

**Ahmed:** There is an argument, common in public discourses in the Arab World as well as the Western academia, that the Arab Revolutions were a “mistake” committed by political activists who had failed to assess the social and political conditions in the Arab World. As a scholar and an observer of the events, what do you think of such an argument?

**Asef Bayat:** Those who make these kinds of arguments assume revolutions as if they were certain rationally and carefully selected options available out there; they imagine revolutions in such a way as though the activists look at their options, assess them, and then decide that it is time to do a revolution. Revolutions do not come to fruition in such manageable fashion. Revolutions are much messier than these people imagine. A revolution may break out even when most people did not intend to make one. People do not make revolutions out of careful consideration and of pure voluntarism; rather people are put in a position where they are compelled to make them. It is often in the middle of revolutionary struggle when people have to figure out how to proceed and take the next step. Revolutions are usually far from carefully thought-out plans.

**Ahmed:** More than seven years after the first spark of them, the debate is raging whether the Arab Revolutions were a “blessing” or a “disaster”? How does Asef Bayat look at the issue? Did the Revolutions end?

**Asef Bayat:** Again to address this question we need to bear in mind the intriguing ways in which people are drawn into revolutions-- not out of pure rational planning, but out of the feeling that there is no other way out. And once revolution as an extraordinary political happening unfolds, it is often associated with the disruption of normal life, of public administration, social disorder, disturbances in economic activities, and factional political conflicts, etc. Despite all these disruptions and costs, revolutions can bring truly valuable things for the people, thinks like breaking the order of fear, undoing the tyrannical rule, and opening up new possibilities for progressive transformation. Today, Tunisia despite lots of shortcomings is very different from the Ben Ali's police state and his entrenched crony capitalism. But in truth the other Arab spring revolutions have suffered serious setbacks. For the large part, the outcome depends on how protagonists manage the post-revolution transition. Clearly in Tunisia the political players managed the transition much better than those in Egypt. But beyond, In the Arab spring the international and regional players, notably the counter-revolutionary powers played a devastating role in undermining the revolutions. The fact is that the revolutions caused a real panic among autocratic regime, which then proceeded to undermine the revolutions and to delegitimize them. Clearly this fear of losing out made them more repressive.

**Ahmed:** "[The] new regimes," you wrote in *Revolution without Revolutionaries*, "have to govern a citizenry that has been significantly transformed." Can you tell us more about such a new subjectivity?

**Asef Bayat:** Revolution is a process. But revolution is also an event—event in the sense of Alain Badiou, that is a political happening, a rupture, that generates new subjectivities-- new expectations, breaking taboos, new way of thinking, new imaginaries; it is often associated with the idea that things cannot go back to how they were. In such situations emerge an unprecedented quest for citizen rights, interrogating the authority, questioning hierarchies, or realization that one can do things that seemed unthinkable before. Of course, the new subjectivities are likely to diminish if they are not transmitted to the new generations, to those who have not experienced them. But if these subjectivities remain, they are likely to act against and modify the existing structures. The new subjectivities, if they remain and reproduced, are likely to increase the distance between the citizenry and the regimes, a gap that has to be filled either with concession and reforms, or repression and violence.

**Ahmed:** In an inspiring concluding chapter, you introduced Raymond Williams’ Gramscian-sounding notion of the “long revolution.” In your opinion, what are the main challenges of such a struggle and who (classes) are its protagonists?

**Asef Bayat:** I suppose this notion of ‘long revolution’ follows from what we discussed just above. The idea of ‘event’ as the sequence of occurrences that lead to undermining or modifying structures (the idea that one thing leads to another and then to another and so on) in a way underscores Raymond William’s idea of long revolution. But as I discuss in the concluding chapter of the book, the process of possible incremental change, the event effect, is not simply structural; the element of ‘subjectivity’ and citizen involvement is essential if a meaningful change is to be expected. The active involvement of the concerned citizenry in diverse layers of society—ranging from private realm, the street, and workplace, to civil society, political society, and even the institutions of the state—is essential to build hegemony. Of course there are serious challenges on the way; the entrenched elite interests combined with regimes violence, as well as the violent intervention of outside powers all pose real challenge to such a process. But let us not forget, however, that these regimes suffer from acute legitimacy deficit, which places them in an ongoing crisis of governance. Crisis at the top when it leads to division of elites would likely generate openings at the bottom.