Political Dynamics and Religious Debates in Contemporary Maghreb

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One of the most exciting debates in current Muslim society focuses on the role of religion in the political environment. Two realities have shaped the conducts of Maghrebian societies: religious ideals and nationalist conceptions. Indeed, the most recent history of political events in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco reveals how the political situation continues to lie to a large extent in the management of religious power. However, the fact is that there are secularised societies where the prevailing representations have not assimilated the secular vision. In this context, the religious issue is a real separate power. Thus, the presence and action of religion in the public sphere is essential for the democratisation of these societies.

"Flux and Reflux in the Faith of Men" is the chapter title of one of the most outstanding works by Ernest Gellner,[1] which inaugurates a series of studies on Muslim society, offering a surprising example of the application of a theoretical scheme (rational, coherent and elegant) to the explanation of the prevailing events, organisation and representations in a given society. It means, therefore, a depiction of the most extended tendency among researchers: to subsume a multitude of disparate data into a simple form.

The idea of cyclical variation related to expressions of religious faith, evoked in the title of this essay, which Gellner later develops extensively, is not new and is not limited to a particular social context. We find different formulations of it in thinkers who belong to distinct environments. Those chosen by Ernest Gellner to nurture his reflection are Ibn Khaldun, a Maghrebian from the Middle Ages (1332-1406) and a sagacious observer of his own society, and David Hume, an English philosopher from the 18th century (1711-1776), a universal spirit who addressed major philosophical issues. The two have in common the fact of having examined the cyclical variation of religious feeling as a key to explaining the

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1. Ernest Gellner, "Flux and Reflux in the Faith of Men", in Muslim Society, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

main events in the history of human societies.

For Ibn Khaldun, both moments (flux and reflux) find their initial expression in two distinct environments, i.e., the tribal and the citizen. The first distinguishes itself by austerity and material scarcity, the two combined with war mobilisation and the virtues that such a mobilisation raises and fosters. The second is characterised by certain wealth, luxury and the search for pleasures. The "tribal spirit" periodically produces an intensive mobilisation against the "deviations" of the "citizen style". The tribe or groups of tribes become a political-religious force and subjugate the city, while creating a return to the religious ideal, a new political system, a new dynasty. Once it has been set in the urban environment, the latter gradually loses its energy and determination, and succumbs to the "spells" of urban life. Its way of life and the relaxation of its thirst for war soon awaken new mobilisations in the tribal medium and, consequently, a new movement of religious purification, leading to a renewal of the political system or, rather, a rotation of the men who govern it. According to Ibn Khaldun, this is how the wheel of history turns: the moments of intensification and relaxation of the religious feeling follow one another producing a socio-political dynamic which has all the characteristics of a cycle whose phases are known beforehand. Movement and dynamic do not mean evolution or in-depth change but rather its periodical return, the rotation of people, but without changes in the system.

For his part, Hume opposes polytheist religiosity and monotheist religiosity. The first does not have, so to speak, great aspirations. Mostly it appears as worshipping a local divinity following rites, customs and picturesque, even folkloric, expressions. The second is based on the idea of an absolute and universal truth, and it relies on a system of dogmas, laws and rites whose objective is to rule all the aspects of the believers' lives. Naturally, the former is tolerant, open and favourable to understanding between men, while the latter is exclusive, intolerant and an enemy of freedom of spirit. In real life, the two forms coexist, or follow one another as distinct phases, within the same societies and religious families. Within the monotheist traditions themselves it is possible to distinguish tendencies (and periods) in which local practices and a "polytheist spirit" prevail, and others in which a "call to order" takes place, a movement of return to the purity of the dogma and the practices in conformity with the law.

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Gellner, who calls himself a neo-Khaldunian, explains the cycle described by Ibn Khaldun based on the conditions of the ecosystem in which Maghrebian societies used to live. Whereas the city was the centre of production of all wealth (trade, arts and crafts), including symbolic wealth (religious knowledge and high culture), the tribe was experiencing the most absolute poverty, often on the verge of survival (predominance of grazing). Despite being the centre of production of wealth, the city was unable to defend itself. In military terms, it was vulnerable. Its residents, whether craftsmen, traders or learned, could be subjugated to a powerful "protector". The tribe, in contrast, was organised as a military unit in (almost) constant mobilisation; thus, it was mobile and ready to defend the space it passed through and its animals. The men of the tribe were warriors with a similar status, and their leader was a *primum inter pares*. This disparity would explain the constant temptation of the tribe (or groups of tribes) to "meddle" in the city and provide it with the military protection (and police force) it needed,

Signs by Mohamed Nabili (Éditions Marsam).

receiving as a reward part of the wealth it produced. Thus, relations similar to those between predator and prey were established between the tribe and the city. The inevitable competition between "predators" (groups of tribes) explains the constant fights for power and the rapid successions of individuals and dynasties within it. In this process, the learned, the man with access to high culture, conveyed through the writings, founds the legitimacy of the order, both the order established and the order requested by protesters. In practice, the alliances between the learned, defenders of the religious rule and the men of the tribe, the "armed force" of the movement, is what makes it possible to access political power and retain it.

The intrusion of the modern state ends with this "mechanics". The modern state, introduced by the colonising powers and later adopted by the local elites, puts an end to the autonomy of the tribes, imposing, for the first time in the history of the region, a strict control of the territory and men. Thus, the national territory is divided into arbitrary administrative regions (without relation with the backgrounds of their residents) and homogenised by the territorial Administration and the services that affect the population (health, education, etc.). The state introduces other changes of much deeper effects when developing intensive literary policies embracing the whole of the population. These policies lead to a restructuring of the social field and to major changes at the level of the prevailing representations. The generalisation of access to written culture puts an end to the privilege of the learned, the cultivated elites that monopolise the role of legitimisation and formulation of the "orthodox" ideas and rules of conduct. The previous division between "cultivated Islam", that of the elites with access to culture and written heritage (*ilm fiqh*), and "popular Islam", that of the masses who lived in the framework of oral culture, no longer has the "structuring" role that it usually had. The whole of the population has access to cultivated Islam, constituted by dogmas, rules and attitudes that make up a system and must govern all aspects of life. As a result of this improvement, the population lives in a kind of very peculiar "disenchantment with the world". Indeed, popular Islam, based on the worship of local saints through myths, festivals (*moussem*), magical rites and so on, is eliminated or marginalised to the benefit of a religiosity made of absolute truths and a system of laws (sharia) which covers private life, religious rites, and individual moral and social relations. Religion thus becomes the equivalent to a *constitution of holy origin,* above the will of men and inaccessible to change, whose function would be

that of governing all the beliefs and actions of all individuals. This would have led to what is called Islamic fundamentalism, and therefore it can be easily understood that the policies of the modern state, the control of the territory and population and, above all, education policies, have created the conditions for its appearance, development and popularity.

What is true in all this? Is it possible to just adopt the elegant and simple scheme suggested by Gellner?

The modern state, the traditional organisation of society and some of its institutions have concluded. The tribes, clans, brotherhoods or corporations are no longer the basic units of the social system

Undoubtedly, the modern state has managed to establish its authority and extend its control over the whole of what has become the national territory. In this way, the traditional organisation of society and some of its institutions have concluded. The tribes, clans, brotherhoods or corporations are no longer the basic units of the social system and have ceased to ensure the continuity of the ancestral traditions and ways of living. It is also true that the policies implemented in matters of national education and literacy have led, in general, to the propagation of a culture based on modern forms of communication: written culture has a leading role, even in those individuals who are still illiterate, because through audiovisual media a "classical" language is inculcated in them. The image and a complete modern system of symbols impose representations in which the nation replaces traditional forms and structures of identification and representation. Popular religion is seriously threatened by these changes. Nationalists qualify its expressions as vestiges of a poor glorious past and reminiscences incompatible with the new era.

The worship of saints and all related myths and rites are relegated to the rank of shameful practices and suffer the effects of the disenchantment that erodes popular beliefs. Up to this point, everything seems to match Ernest Gellner's observations.

However, there is more. The modern state undertakes far more important transformations, both at the level of social organisation and prevailing ideas. What has been called "disenchantment of the world" is, in effect, a true process of secularisation. As a direct result of government action, many aspects of life are subjugated to rules whose origin is no longer religion or achieve their legitimisation in religious traditions. The law, in the modern sense of the term, replaces the sharia, the *urf* and the forms of regulation prevailing in traditional society. At the level of representations, the world is broadened and is structured on mechanistic perspectives. Indeed, the laws of chance substitute, as a final explanation, the action of powers, minds and all kinds of intentions. Moreover, with the triumph of the nationalist idea the notion of economic and social progress is set and, with it, a new aspiration to the improvement of the economy and political liberty. Economic development, along with the positive consequences it awakens, is rooted in the minds of people as a concrete and determining horizon. Improvement in living conditions and the broadening of the space of liberties have ceased to be considered a chance to become a right. Thus, expectations have moved from the field of religious hope to earthy aspirations. In a few words, progress has become a social "demand".

The representations related to "cultivated religion", favoured by the extension of access to writing as advocated by Gellner, are mobilised in their turn at the service of this demand, the ideal of liberation, progress and expansion inculcated by nationalism. Thus, religion is "reinvested" in the political, but

in a way and according to modalities different from those that prevailed in pre-modern societies. Religion is not invoked with the objective of achieving a purification that must apparently put an end to the abuses of a dynasty (or a political system), but rather with the aim of favouring social ascension, the realisation of an ideal of development, extension and strengthening of the domain of law; in short, with the aim of successfully carrying out the nationalism programme. Even in its apparently retrograde aspects, much more than a true rejection of modernity, this invocation to religion is a call for the moralisation of the social order.

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This means that between nationalism and conservatism (which is inappropriately called fundamentalism) a particular relation is established. Alliance and confrontation follow one another. Both seem to call for the support of the masses, curiously in an alternative way, which in its turn makes us also think of the idea of "cycle". When considering the 20th century as a whole, it is easy to realise that, in terms of Maghrebian societies, there have been moments in which religious ideals have prevailed and determined behaviours, and others in which this role was taken by nationalist conceptions. Sometimes the two have "fused" or combined their effects, to the extent that at some moments it is not possible to assign to one or the other the leading role in the management of minds and behaviours.

Thus, it is possible to discover the effects of a kind of flux and reflux between the two visions. It is a kind of rotation of the representations as the main driving forces of

collective actions. Thinkers such as Abdallah Laraoui and Mohammed Abed al-Jabri point out (with distinct formulations) that, during the last century, several elites followed each other (or competed) in the management of Arab societies (traditional *ulama,* modernist learned people, new Arabised intellectuals, etc.). The dominion that these elites have one after the other through the attraction they have on minds (and within society as a whole, which has become permeable to mass communication) can be explained precisely through one of these primordial conceptions of the social order and political practice: one conception that we could call modernist and another traditionalist. From this perspective, are we not closer to the variations of a political nature that can be observed in modern environments, those of Western Europe and North America? Do we not find a flux and reflux there of a new kind, similar to that which marks the political life of democratic societies? It seems so.

The question posed then is the following: how do they move from a pre-modern cycle (flux and reflux in the faith of men) to the strictly modern cycle (variation of the nature of populations and political rotation)?

The recent history of the Maghreb shows that cases with diverse results can take place: an extreme polarisation between two tendencies that leads to civil war (Algeria); one of them can assert its dominance and try to maintain it through the most authoritarian means (Tunisia), and, finally, a strong and skilled central power can keep them at a distance (Morocco). In the three cases, the key to the situation lies in the management of what we can rightly call "religious power". In a recent book[2] Mohamed Charfi, has suggested that, along with the three classical powers (legislative, judicial and execu-

tive) a fourth power, religion, should be recognised. The latter, as it has not been subjugated to any explicit regulation, is the main battlefield in Muslim societies. The non-recognition of this power as such (its "deregulation", we could say) is what makes it a challenge and, in its turn, an "apple of discord", a "void" field that anyone can appropriate, a system of symbols that different authors can mobilise at will. This seems to again lead Maghrebian societies to pre-modern times, in which politics was practised, according to Mohammed Abed al-Jabri's phrasing, in religion.

In de facto secularised societies, but in which the prevailing representations have not assimilated the secular vision, the religious power is a true independent power

Indeed, it could be said that in de facto secularised societies (albeit partially), but in which the prevailing representations have not assimilated the secular vision, the religious power is a true independent power. Perhaps not a fourth power, but probably the first. These societies cannot trespass over the threshold of a true modernisation until they reach a minimum agreement on how to conceive and manage this power; in other words, on the modes of presence (and of action) of religion in the public field. The legal, constitutional, approach suggested by Mohamed Charfi is truly ideal: it enables the explicit and clear formulation of rules that delimit the action, without eliminating debate in society (it is possible to continue challenging a constitution while respecting its provisions). This pragmatic approach, which has apparently prevailed in Morocco in recent decades, enables the sovereign to monopolise religious power

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2. Mohamed Charfi, *Islam et liberté, le malentendu historique,* Paris, Albin Michel, 1998.

while authorising a certain margin of debate on the issue. Both approaches are not mutually exclusive, as pragmatism can help pave the way to more wilful and regularised attitudes. Nevertheless, any kind of progress on the path to democratisation in Maghrebian societies seems unlikely without a decisive change of direction in the religious field.