

Tunisia and the Arab Democratic Awakening

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Who would have foreseen such agitation? Who dared hope that the Tunisian people would be capable of overturning a plundering police regime whose stability and strength were extolled in Europe and elsewhere? Even those who are not novices in Arab politics were taken by surprise, dumbfounded by the turn of events, stunned by the speed of the victory of the Tunisian people and astonished by the maturity and modernity that it displayed.

It is thus hardly astonishing that the uprising by the Tunisian people had the effect of an electroshock. Let's admit it – the surprise was complete: a young street vendor, harassed by police in Sidi Bouzid, immolates himself on 17 December 2010 and a sweeping movement of revolt is triggered. Arising in the Centre-West region (Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Feriana, etc.), the movement spreads like wildfire throughout the entire country, which is roused and takes to the streets. Mohammad Bouazizi dies on 4 January 2011.

Believing it to be a simple riot like those that have punctuated the history of this country, the police do not go in for half-measures: tear gas and real bullets. But the more the Tunisians are cut down, the more the protests spread and become generalized. Deaf to the appeals of youth, Ben Ali first takes refuge in silence, confident in the efficiency of his police force, then he takes the floor only to attribute the riots to “excited and subversive” elements, before finally facing the facts and acknowledging the errors committed, uttering the famous phrase coined by another general (of greater stature) “I have understood you.” This came too late;

the protest had reached the point of no return. Ben Ali calls in the army but it rebels and, through the voice of its chief, refuses to shoot at the crowd. The regime collapses and the dictator, pursued, flees on 14 January 2011.

Tunisians themselves were surprised at the turn of events. They were prone to believe that the dictator had sharp teeth and long arms, but he turned out to be a paper tiger in the face of a population no longer fearing him and going into action. Evidently, fear changed sides.

I pride myself in closely following political, economic and social developments in Tunisia and the Arab world. Nevertheless, I must admit that I was caught unawares. I wanted change; I deeply hoped for it and never stopped repeating that “night is darkest just before the dawn” and that “after the winter of dictatorship will come the spring of freedom.” Then came the great surprise, a youth immolating himself and an entire country rising up for freedom. Thus, everything begins in the sacrificial mode, as it is called by Abdelwahab Meddeb, who adds that “it is Christ-like: giving of oneself to give health to others.” Personally, I believe that Bouazizi's self-immolation was devoid of any religious or sacrificial import; it was simply a statement made through fire, an act committed in order to say “enough” or “no.” This gesture cannot be associated with a form of Jihad either, for any cause whatsoever, nor, *a fortiori*, a simple suicide. These young Arabs who immolate themselves are seeking above all to make their despair visible. Perhaps they believe they can spark the population through a ripple effect and put them into action. And if they have succeeded, it is because their countries resembled dry scrub fields that only needed a spark to set them ablaze. Without believing in the miracle of unpredictability, it is clear that the situ-

ation was ripe for generalized revolt; all that was needed was a triggering event.

The Longevity of Authoritarian Arab Regimes

Yet if the situation was ripe for change, how can one account for the longevity demonstrated by authoritarian Arab regimes? Where were they getting their capacity to withstand such headwinds? And as a corollary, why have the Arab peoples waited so long, when waves of democratization had swept away the Franco and Salazar regimes in Spain and Portugal in the 1970s and the dictatorships of Latin America in the 1980s and the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe in the 1990s?

Let's first answer the question on the longevity of these regimes. I ascribe it to several factors of both an internal and an external order.

Internal Factors

First of all, these factors have to do with the nature of the post-colonial Arab State. Indeed, once the threshold of independence was passed, the problem of affirmation of nationhood took precedence over everything else. The Arab republics, created by military coups or national revolutions (Algeria 1962, Syria 1948, Egypt 1952, Iraq 1958, Sudan 1969, Libya 1969), brought to power new elites, essentially military and often of rural or petit-bourgeois origins. Under this new governing class, the nationalist, socialist and Arabist State succeeded the liberal State of the preceding decades. These military teams posed as the "saviours of the Arab nation from the clutches of colonialism" and "developers of societies," but quickly lapsed into elementary populism, silencing all dissent and accusing any opponents of being "agents of imperialism." In the name of the "glorious Arab nation" and its "eternal mission" (*Al-riisalah al-khalidah*), as per slogans brandished by the Ba'ath Party and other parties of that type, the new regimes rubbed out differences for the sake of unity. They made stability take precedence over democracy, establishing a tacit social contract with their populations: the State would take charge of matters of development, political independence and social justice in exchange for the population's consent and its not demanding political participation. This negative consensus could work when the

Arab population was still low; it no longer functions today because the Arab population has quadrupled over the past sixty years, its needs have rocketed and the States' means have been diminished by poor governance: the predatory excesses of regimes, arms purchasing and generalized corruption. Having lost all legitimacy, the States resort to a single or dominant party and a highly sophisticated system of repression and control, making a real climate of terror reign.

In oil-producing countries, oil revenues function as a damper: they devalue labour, the entrepreneurial spirit and efficiency, since the States' revenues are not linked to labour; they reduce taxation and empower States (recall the catchphrase of the early Americans: "no taxation without representation"); they canker the national economy via plethoric public employment and the generalization of corruption; and they buy the populations' consent. In sum, they clearly embody the "natural resource curse" known as the "Dutch disease," where revenues have a negative effect not only on economic efficiency, but also on democracy. This is true in emirates and monarchies just as well as in republics, as in the cases of Libya and Algeria.

The Palestinian issue has had negative effects on democracy: certainly, it is perceived as a source of suffering and humiliation by Arab peoples from Mauritania to Oman, but for regimes, it has been the object of all sorts of manipulation. Haven't they bombarded their peoples with misleading slogans? They were supposed to "close ranks against the Zionist enemy," and were told "not to create diversions," not to "break the national consensus on the struggle against Israel and its occupation" and that "it is time for combat and not debate." Regimes have used and abused this fallacious, so-called nationalist litany. The worst thing, as indicated by the journalist, Khaled Hroub, is that "these bywords have resounded for decades and have had a considerable impact on large sections of the population, which have accepted these regimes in return for the struggle against Israel" without asking themselves whether a dictatorship is more effective than a democracy in a struggle against a national enemy.

In monarchies, a different logic has prevailed: it is what Joseph Maila called "the logic of retribution." It is essentially a logic that seeks to maintain the hierarchical representation of social order based on tribal order (the emirates), the use of a "lineage indicating blood relations or proximity to

the Prophet” (the Hashemite lineage), “the protection of the Holy Places of Islam” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), or the fact of being “the Commander of the Faithful” (Morocco).

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Thus, globally, Arab political culture, both in republican and monarchic States, leaves little room for the citizens due to a lack of the institutional mediation necessary between the head of state and his subjects (*ra’aya*), between the Founding Father of the nation and his “children,” between the “saviours of the nation” and their “protégés.” In such a relationship, the State is no longer a “public good,” but rather a “private resource,” tapped by the Head of State, his family and the ruling classes that revolve around them. This means that not only are populations not involved in economic and social choices, but they are the victims of the predation of public officials, whose corruption raises society’s sense of helplessness and weakens awareness of the public nature of the State, making the latter a hostile phenomenon seen as a necessary evil.

External Factors

Naturally, in addition to these endogenous factors contributing to the longevity of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, we must also consider external factors, which can be summed up as the “instrumental function” of these regimes in the defence of the interests of external powers.

These regimes’ alliances with the major world powers during the Cold War were a determining factor in their longevity. Indeed, from 1956 to the collapse of the USSR at the beginning of the 1990s, the entire Arab subsystem was penetrated and polarised. By “penetrated system,” I understand a system submissive to interference by external actors. This is due to its geological riches (gas and oil),

its geographical location (key, corridor or crossroads region), its geopolitical and geostrategic importance (connecting the Mediterranean with oceans and bordering Africa, Europe and Asia) and its economic interest as a vast market, or even in its geotheological dimension, since the region is endowed with a sort of “sacred geography” by the three major monotheistic religions. The penetrated nature of the Arab regional subsystem predates the Cold War – since ancient times the Arab world has been coveted by political powers and has been the object of all sorts of desires and rivalries. But with the onset of the Cold War, the penetration became complete; not a single remote area was spared.

This produced a nearly systematic polarization in the Arab world between the pro-American (and pro-Western) contingents and the pro-Soviet sectors. Roughly speaking, the monarchies sided with the Americans and the “popular socialist republics” with the Soviets. Yet neither the Americans nor, *a fortiori*, the Soviets considered the issue of “political freedom.” Their concern was that their respective allies be “loyal” to their commitments. Dictatorships did not pose much of a conscience problem for the Soviet Union. As for the Western world, it recognized the low degree of freedom granted populations by their allies, but they were nonetheless “their allies” (“our son of a bitch”). Hence the Cold War froze democratic claims and fossilized regimes.

These regimes put themselves forth as guarantors of stability, and if necessary, of a regular flow of oil and gas. Indispensable to the operation of the world economy, these two resources are widely present in the Arab world, which possesses nearly 60% of proven oil reserves and nearly 20% of gas reserves.

These regimes portrayed themselves as bulwarks against Islamism, or even against jihadism. However, all experts on the matter unanimously recognize the role of authoritarian Arab regimes in the re-Islamisation of societies in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. Early on, after the death of Nasser and the erosion of Arabist ideology, Sadat encouraged student Islamist movements in order to counter students of left-wing, Nasserist ideology at Egyptian universities. Elsewhere, regimes have sought to beat Islamists at their own game by competing in mosque-building zeal. In Algeria, for instance, more mosques have been built than schools. Other Arab countries have followed suit, leading to the development of a conservative

culture, the reinforcement of the role of religion and the multiplication of signs of Islam or references to it, and of religious TV and radio programmes. In Tunisia, according to Hakim Ben Hammouda, it was Ben Ali's son-in-law who was behind the creation of the *Ezzitouna* radio station and an Islamic bank. Far from being secular, authoritarian powers have largely contributed to Islamization in both its moderate and radical versions. The development of the rule of wearing headscarves has been concomitant to the strengthening of dictatorships.

Have these regimes been more effective as anti-terrorist bulwarks? Certainly, but above all in order to protect themselves and not the West. And in any case, could one assume that democratic States would not be capable of fighting against terrorism?

These regimes portrayed themselves as anti-migration sentinels. It was the European Union (EU) that pressed them to play the role of border guard for the EU, often in exchange for substantial financial aid packets. We know that this externalisation of control causes human tragedies, fosters traffic in human beings, changes migratory routes and simply makes the crossing more dangerous, longer and more profitable for people smugglers. But what is ethically unacceptable in this policy of "long-distance policing" is that the EU demands that authoritarian regimes, which do not need to consult their peoples, turn an open, vibrant, interdependent and integrated border into an "alienated border," to use the expression of Donnan and Wilson.

This delocalisation of control offers no guarantees insofar as democratic rights. How can we trust someone like Gaddafi to protect the rights of migrants in his country, in his temporary holding facilities or detention centres? This is like asking a wolf to protect sheep.

Thus, the longevity of authoritarian Arab regimes over the course of decades cannot simply be ascribed to internal factors, but also to the instrumental function assigned them by their external allies, with the damage this has entailed. In fact, it is as a "bulwark against terrorism" that authoritarian Arab regimes have managed to crack down on civil society demonstrations, whether Islamist or not, imprisoning, silencing, torturing, exiling, in the face of the astonishing near silence of manifest Human Rights advocates. And it is as "anti-migration sentinels" that

these regimes have been able to detain sub-Saharan immigrants under wretched conditions or enlist them as mercenaries in their armies of repression, as is the case in Libya.

The Fiction of the Arab Exception

To account for the longevity of authoritarian Arab political systems, we must thus consider the nature of the governing teams, the different legitimations they have used, and the instrumental functions with which they have been entrusted. In sum, to understand events in the Arab world, it is in social sciences that we must seek an answer and not in the Koran or *a fortiori* in culturalist explanations. However, the culturalist theory on the Arab exception, the least pertinent one from a social sciences viewpoint, was and continues to be widespread among certain intellectual circles and in the Western media, and therefore on the level of popular perception. How many magazine covers – and not only sensationalist ones – haven't we seen bearing such headlines as "Is Islam Compatible with Democracy?," "Islam Against the Republic," "Integration of Muslim Immigrants Impossible," "The Islam-West Shock." All of these headlines lend a distorted image and denote great intellectual poverty.

What exactly is the "Arab and Muslim exception" theory? For the culturalist school, "there is a specific *homo islamicus*, anthropologically cut off from the rest of humanity," which implies that Islam is irreparably associated with a sort of theocracy incapable of opening up to the pluralist world and its democratic corollary. This is the thesis held by Bernard Lewis on "the intrinsic despotism of Islam."¹

According to the proponents of the culturalist theory, the Arab world, since it is primarily Muslim, suffers from the same authoritarian exception and constitutes the only region that has remained behind in the planetary process of democratisation, as it is refractory to pluralism. "At present, an Arab democrat," writes David Pryce-Jones, "is not even an idealization, but a contradiction in terms."²

Others have followed his lead, pointing out tribal divisions, the constant challenging of authority, chains of seditions and the succession of revolts that would render the Islamic City anarchic from the start, such that the culture of violence and of force supposedly

¹ LEWIS, Bernard. *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Responses*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

² PRYCE-JONES, David. *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs*, NY, Harper and Row, 1989, p. 406.

prevailing in the Arab-Islamic area would not allow the emergence of a dynamic civil society and an area of Rule of Law. To back up their arguments, the proponents of the culturalist theory go as far as evoking the importance of obedience to a Prince, Sultan, King, Zaim, Sheikh or father. In sum, social life is supposedly characterised by relations of authority, domination and dependence, and the Leader is attributed the features of an agent of repression.

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The extreme poverty of such a theory is blatant, yet it has had a great deal of repercussion. Why? The answer is not simple. I assume it is in part due to major ignorance regarding the ancient and recent history of the Muslim and Arab world, and that this negative determinism is nourished by a generalised confusion between Islam in texts and historical Islam, that is, Islam as manifested by the social practices of those who live in it. Perhaps among some there is a hint of bad faith, or a will to present Israel as a “democratic haven” amongst “an ocean of tyranny,” in others, an erroneous reading of Ibn Khaldun’s notions of *al-Asabiyyah* and Hisham Sharabi’s notions of neopatriarchy. It is not unlikely that the proponents of this thesis are influenced by the Muslim legal corpus, where the interests of the *Ummah* (Muslim community) normally prevail over individual rights.

Arab Democratic Revolutions Debunk the Myths

The Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt not only toppled authoritarian regimes; they also debunked the theories of the Arab and Muslim exception. With their blood and their courage, young Tunisians and Egyptians – like other young Arabs – have written, or

are writing the epitaph, not only for dictatorship in Arab lands, but also for the dictatorship of culturalist ideas on Arabs and Muslims. In doing so, they have dealt a powerful lesson to those who only saw inert, docile crowds walking Arab streets; they have provided an incisive rebuttal of the thesis of stability through dictatorship and revealed the incoherence of the EU, which planned on rewarding Tunisia and Egypt by granting them “advanced status.” At the same time, they have condemned the suspect friendships of certain European States with authoritarian regimes in the South in the name of a misconception of *realpolitik*.

The Arab peoples have followed the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions with enthusiasm, and even with a certain degree of envy. The other Arab regimes have attempted to divert attention or minimise the significance of these events. They believe they are safe, but the pursuit of liberty is contagious, as can be seen in Syria, Yemen, Libya and other Arab countries, both rich and poor.

Insofar as a “successful revolution,” that of Tunisian youth will create a following. We can rightly speak of a Tunisian paradigm. Indeed, a number of lessons can be gleaned from events in Tunisia. The first is this population’s maturity: it remained united, its movement remained spontaneous and there was no political party or religious organisation leading it. This prevented partisan or religious appropriation. The Tunisian people demonstrated extraordinary courage and self-control: they did not respond to police violence with violence. By remaining pacific, the protest finally triumphed over the obstinacy of the cronies of despotic power.

Better yet, the slogans chanted by crowds remained secular: freedom, employment, dignity. I never once heard “God is great.” Although there has indisputably been a re-Islamisation of a sector of Tunisian society, as one protestor recalls, “God is in the heart of Tunisians, but he is absent from the street.” Tunisian Islamists took a low profile and did not seek to control the protest movement or even appropriate it. This is a first in Arab countries: religious claims and political demands were not mixed. This says a great deal about the progress of secularisation in Tunisia, whose merit, needless to say, lies with Bourguiba himself.

Women were efficient actors in the movement. Spearheads of social change in Tunisia, they did not remain on the margins, nor were they sidelined. Today they are cited as examples in all Arab countries.

This revolution is not one of “empty bellies” but of “minds full of dreams and hope” for a different Tunisia. Certainly, economic issues such as youth unemployment, corruption and clientelism have been singled out, but it was above all the irrepressible desire for freedom that spurred the protesters on.

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The dictator deposed, democracy remains to be conquered. In this sense, the path remaining will be difficult: the technostucture of the dictatorship and the regime’s foundations (the militia, the secret service, the single party system, etc.) need to be dismantled, elections worthy of the name have to be organised and a democracy of appeasement and inclusion must be established. Yes, moderate Islamists will have to be included, but no one should ever be allowed to monopolize the Tunisian revolution. The army, whose credibility has remained in-

tact, should be on its guard, avoiding blunders and not giving in to the temptation of producing a “saviour of the nation” figure from among its ranks. How many “saviours of the nation” have actually been, under other horizons, the “gravediggers of democracy”?

In view of these Tunisian specificities, it is clear that the Egyptian revolution comes the closest to the Tunisian paradigm, with a more important role assigned to the Military Council, whereas Libya is the country farthest from the paradigm. In the latter, the revolution by youth veers towards armed rebellion, the Gaddafi regime’s repression takes on a bloody turn and the West intervenes, with an international mandate and Arab endorsement, to impose a no-fly zone and “all necessary measures.”

Insofar as the EU, it will have to review its policies from top to bottom and thoroughly reconsider its relations with Mediterranean countries and with Arab countries in general. Paralysed by the risks of all the “isms,” including fundamentalism, Islamism, terrorism, radicalism and “harraguisme” (illegal migration), the EU has kept its eyes well closed to dictatorships. Now it will be forced to open them; the Arab democratic awakening could well awaken Europe. From now on, it will not have to deal with the “Arab street” but with “Arab opinions.” And this is not the least of the merits of the democratic revolution in the South Mediterranean Basin.