Social Movements and Uprisings, 10 Years after the 2011 Spring: The Characteristics of the Crisis of Politics in the MENA Region

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As of 2018, a second round of the Arab Spring has emerged in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq. It is taking place among a sort of general indifference that seems to be linked to the disappointments following the 2011 uprisings, particularly in Western opinions, fuelled by the migration issue and the development of terrorism. This indifference also concerns the citizens of the countries in the region, although the Arab Spring has achieved undeniable success. Abdelaziz Bouteflika was unable to stand for a fifth presidential term and, more importantly, the Sudanese uprising removed a Muslim Brotherhood president: Omar al-Bashir. In Iraq and Lebanon, the uprisings forced the resignation of their respective prime ministers.

Despite this, Arab citizens do not seem ready to remobilize as massively as in 2011. The example of Egypt is significant in this regard. While the authoritarian and repressive lockdown of the political space is far more intense than under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak, calls to take to the streets have met with no success. It would be wrong to think that this is only due to the fear of repression. Today, the “demand for state security” is at the top of the agenda not only for Egyptian society but for all societies in the region, including Tunisia, and it seems to exceed the demand for freedom and democracy that emerged in 2011. The balance between freedom and security seems to be very difficult to strike in this region of the world, which is discovering political democracy at a time when the latter is experiencing a deep crisis throughout the world. Changing the leadership at the highest state level is not the same as questioning the logic, meaning and impact of a political and economic system. In this respect, the Tunisian example is conclusive. Representative democracy has not fulfilled the social promises related to employment and social and regional equality, indeed, quite the contrary. The current institutional crisis between the three political powers (Presidency of the Republic, Assembly of the Representatives of the People and Government) heightens the process of debilitation of the State and its health, education and social services.

The Social and Political Uprisings of 2018-2020: Characteristics and Outcomes

It would be wrong to link the current stalemate of the 2018-2020 uprisings solely to the COVID-19 crisis, although the latter obviously played a role. In fact, it is their mixed results that have dampened the momentum of the uprisings’ actors. Despite its exceptional longevity, the Algerian Hirak has gradually evolved into a popular force of peaceful opposition, expressing its opinion on various government decisions at each demonstration. It is therefore not surprising that the new president Tebboune has agreed to reform the constitution and organize new legislative elections. It is as if questioning the army’s political role and the regime’s rentier characteristics were less on the agenda than this reform dynamic. The victory of electoral abstention in the presidential and legislative elections and the results of the latter show the weakness of popular support for the cosmetic reforms of the Algerian regime and the absence of a political translation of the Hirak.

The Algerian Hirak was unable to challenge the rentier political and economic system, and the same applies to the Iraqi and Lebanese mobilizations. What
can peaceful popular uprisings do to change political systems that are firmly anchored in clientelist and rentier interests, built in conjunction with regional and international forces from their own perspectives and interests?

In this regard, the example of Iraq is highly significant. The nationwide protest movement of autumn 2019 had political and social demands relating to public services, employment, spiralling social and regional inequalities and corruption. The uprising, which was bloodily suppressed, was driven mainly by youth and was not imbued with a community spirit. It is a clear demonstration of the failure of the post-2003 “democratic” reform. The latter led to the confessionalization of political life, the considerable weakening of the state security services and the multiplication of militias. However, the protest of Iraqi youth was made in the name of the Iraqi nation and against both American and Iranian interference. Similarly, while the Shiite community was the “privileged” one of the post-Saddam American order, the uprising revealed the social and political divisions that cut across it between a frustrated and abandoned rank and file and the highly privileged elites. The same can be said for the Lebanese social uprising, which also denounces the communal clientelism of a political system built for decades on the confessional distribution of responsibilities. Preceded in 2015 by the mobilization linked to the rubbish crisis, the 2019 uprising was provoked by the government’s imposition of new taxes (notably on WhatsApp calls), unemployment and the deterioration of living standards linked to the devaluation of the pound. The terrible explosion in the Beirut port on 4 August 2020 testified to the deterioration of the services of a failed state, without leading to an in-depth questioning of the political system that runs it. Even though the “youth,” dominated rank and file of religious communities, especially Shiite, was part of the movement, the fear of civil war in connection with regional and international interventions led the uprising’s actors to prefer renegotiating the community contract rather than abolishing it. Thus, the American call for the demilitarization of Hezbollah fractured and challenged the initial unitary nature of the uprising. These are the impacts on the Lebanese uprising of the multiple conflicts in the region, heightened by the Sunni/Shiite division between Iran, the Gulf States, Turkey and Egypt.

Crisis of Politics in the Arab Region

For many Islamologists, the removal of Ben Ali in 2011 by popular pressure represented a momentous event in Sunni Muslim Arab history, marking the political imagination of Arab citizens. The departures of Bouteflika, Omar al-Bashir, Adel Abdul Mahdi and Saad Hariri confirm this analysis. However, the experiences of the region’s people have also been marked by the negative events that quickly followed 2011: the military coup of July 2013 that deposed the first democratically elected president in a country central to the region, Egypt; the civil wars and/or the collapse of the Syrian, Libyan and Yemeni states. As for the creation of Daesh, it can be considered the height of the debacle of the first Arab Spring. Political language gave way to violence and to identity and religious mobilizations. Far from expressing a cultural trait specific to these societies, such phenomena are local expressions of the general, worldwide crisis of language and political identity brought about by globalization and neoliberalism, above all, the questioning of states as the sole or even dominant centres of political decision-making. But they are also different for reasons specific to this region of the world and the fact that the authoritarian regimes of the countries in the region, aided by the major regional and international players, mainly the Gulf states and the USA, have fostered the language of identity and community of the many Islamist currents over several decades. The latter have reactivated an episteme that has its roots in an imaginary shared by all Muslims. The reasons for this alliance are multiple. Internally, Islamism has been used to weaken ideologies critical of neo-liberalism. Similarly, Islamic charities have compensated for the withdrawal of states from health and education and have allowed the renewal of the “authoritarian social pacts” that characterize the regimes in the region.

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The ideological offensive of the Gulf states via satellite TV in the 1990s completed this “great cultural transformation” towards the Islamization of minds. Thus, the dominant language available to the majority of the population became the language of Islam(ism) in its different variants and hybrids. This highly “performative” language, in turn, perverted social struggles by transforming them into identity struggles against the Other, whether it be the Christian or unbelieving West, the Shiite and Coptic neighbours or even the Sunni fellow citizens who are insufficiently Muslim because they live in jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic ignorance). It is therefore not surprising that Islamist movements were the big winners of the 2011 Arab Spring, either through the ballot box or violence. Contemporary Jihadism, says Nabil Mouline, has a double parentage: the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabi Salafism spread from Saudi Arabia.

Crisis of Political Questioning in the MENA Region

Several researchers have questioned the paradoxes of the 2011 Arab Spring, particularly the conjunction of revolutionary protest and reformist approach. In reality, this complex characteristic is not specific to the Arab uprisings at a time of “hybridization of politics.” The Arab Spring of 2011 highlighted the characteristics of social movements and uprisings in a globalized world: absence of ideology and centralized organization; myriad collectives and committees; multiplicity of leaders; distrust of institutional politics; sociological diversity of actors and demands; importance of the (new) media for international visibility, as in Tahrir Square in 2011; peacefulness and/or sporadic violence, etc.

Researchers find it difficult to perceive the signs of the crisis of politics in the Arab region because they are in fact coupled with a crisis of political questioning, due in particular to the polarization regarding political Islam by specialists in the region. This phenomenon is the source of many misunderstandings and even errors of analysis. Thus, the social movements that heralded the 2011 uprisings were considered epiphenomena because they had no link with Islamist movements. Similarly, a large part of the academic field perceives political Islam as a social alternative to neo-liberalism, whereas this movement actually advocates a neo-liberalism corrected by the beneficence of the rich towards the poor, coupled with a social conservatism of great intensity. In Tunisia, the Ennahdha movement has not initiated any reforms related to health, poverty and education. The development of the country’s infrastructure has stalled and inequalities between regions have not been addressed. Even more than the absence of a social state, it is possible to speak of a negative vision of states, and from this perspective, the outcome of Omar al-Bashir’s 40-year reign in Sudan is significant: civil wars and partitions of populations between north and south, etc.

It is therefore not surprising that the intense demand for the State, both socially and in terms of security, is now emerging with such force in most societies in the region. If in Egypt, it is part of the consensus around Sissi’s military regime, in Tunisia, it reinforces the popularity of a party that clearly claims to be state-centric Tunisian nationalism, the Free Destourian Party (PDL). However, here too, it is clear that the polarization of the academic field on political Islam has led research to neglect the analysis of the multiple, contradictory reappropriations of the nation-state model in the Arab region. The existence of an Arab public space characterized by a common language (Arabic) and a dominant religion (Islam) is in fact structured around these different nationalisms without challenging them. Like the national constructions of European countries, the different states in the region have constructed multiple national political affiliations through their citizenship, nationality codes, borders, administrative apparatuses, courts, schools, security and military forces and conflicts. These constructions have sometimes been accompanied by powerful discourses around the nationalist, notably in Egypt and Tunisia, and in other cases, around “other” entities, whether the “tribe,” the “masses,” and/or Arab nationalism.