

Algeria and the Arab Spring
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A year ago, waves of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa swept away western-backed tyrants one after the other - first Tunisia's Ben Ali, then Egypt's Mubarak... It seemed the list of toppled dictators was bound to go on and on. These uprisings were unforgettable historical events and the emancipatory experience was so contagious that people all over the world were inspired. Occupiers from London to Wall Street were proud to "Walk like an Egyptian".

These revolts had echoes in other countries because they shared the same detonators of the explosion: authoritarianism, inegalitarian development, high unemployment, poverty, endemic corruption and nepotism, a suffocated political life, repression, human rights abuses, a frustrated educated youth without horizons and parasitic bourgeoisies who continue their protected robbery, exploitation and self-enrichment.

The peoples of this region were long confined to racist stereotypes and contemptuous clichés of the like: "Arabs and Muslims are not fit for democracy and they are incapable of governing themselves".

The Arab Spring shattered these stereotypes and debunked these myths. The wind of revolution has spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco and Oman. Algeria at the vanguard in the 1960s, a nation that inspired the entire world with its heroic revolutionary war against the French colonialists, paradoxically seemed preserved from these aspirations. The western media portrayed Algeria as being at the margin of the Arab spring, of being the exception. Of course this is an optical illusion.

Not at the centre of the media spotlight, nevertheless the country in 2010 and 2011 saw an unprecedented number of demonstrations, strikes, occupations, and clashes with the police. In 2010 alone, the authorities counted 11,500 riots, public demonstrations and gatherings across the country. The year 2011 started with the implementation of fiscal measures introduced by the government to counteract the informal economy. These had dire consequences on the already-difficult life of the population: a substantial increase in basic food staples (30% for sugar for example). For the networks that controlled the informal market, these measures were bound to cause huge financial losses.

The reactions converged into violent riots between January 4 - 10 in several cities. These of course were contained by a bloated police force. 'Algiers the White' became 'Algiers the Blue' in reference to the uniform of 140,000 policemen who successfully suppressed all the marches and demonstrations organised by political parties and by figures of the civil society in the following weeks.

All this indicates that Algeria has not been spared from the wind of revolution, and like their counterparts in other Arab countries, Algerians have expressed the same aspirations to freedom and dignity. The rapidity with which the flames of revolt spread - thanks to Al Jazeera - gave the illusion that change will happen overnight and regimes will fall one after the other like a house of cards. That did not happen!

Why is Algeria not following in the footsteps of Egypt and Tunisia in toppling dictators? A revolutionary experience along the lines of the Tunisian and Egyptian scenarios will be very difficult to reproduce in Algeria, but that does not mean that Algeria is immune or protected from the wind of change.

Why such a task is hard to achieve

Despotism in Algeria is collegial. It is shared and not concentrated in the hands of one person/one family that focuses all the hatred and grudges. A diffuse dictatorship like the Algerian one is harder to dislodge than those that offer a precise target to popular resentment like the Shah in Iran, Suharto in Indonesia or Ben Ali in Tunisia, just to cite a few examples. The oligarchic coalitions have a larger base than

personalised dictatorships, which makes them less fragile. They are also more resistant because they conceded some power to the people, especially to the large and complex networks.

On top of that, the oil rents contribute significantly to regime longevity and stability by pacifying the population and delaying any radicalisation of the popular anger, especially with the recent redistribution of the petro-dollars à la Bouteflika.

The Algerian ruling elite likes to repeat that Algeria had its democratic revolution in October 1988 when the regime was forced by weeks of riots to open up to political pluralism and allowed an independent press. These gains in civil liberties were diluted and the democratic transition aborted in the civil war of the 90s that left the nation wounded, traumatised and less disposed to rise up against a regime that triumphed over radical Islamism at the expense of hundreds of thousands of deaths.

This fratricidal war has divided democrats, seriously damaged civil society and left a political vacuum in the face of the ruling parties. There is almost no opposition with a proper base that can take the demands of the people forward.

The spectre of the civil war and the fear of bloody violence have been exacerbated by the Libyan drama, and what's currently happening in Yemen and Syria. The intervention in Libya was a war of regime change and was perceived as an imperialist plot in Algerians' minds, reviving their anti-colonialist feelings. I have been told by many friends and family members: "Algeria is fine, we don't need to go down the route of the Libyan disaster, and we don't want the France we expelled in 1962 to come back to our country".

What is to be done to achieve a genuine democratic change? The conjunction of social discontents that we have seen in the last year seems insufficient to threaten a regime that has always repressed revolts in blood. There is a crying urgency for an authentic democratic opposition to revive itself and politicise the legitimate demands of the people that currently find only confused expression.

Some people say that democratic change will come from above, i.e. from the citadels of the regime. But as long as the masses do not exercise pressure from beneath, struggle to radically change the status quo will be unfulfilled and the interests of the profiteering cast will be maintained.

This year, Algeria will be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of a thwarted independence, an anniversary that bears witness to the deception and disappointments that followed, a celebration tainted with bitterness as Algerians feel cheated of the fruits of independence and realise that the corrupt pouvoir betrayed the revolution. It is time for Algerians in Algeria and abroad to revive that revolutionary fervour that was admired all over the world, to renew our struggle for a true liberation and a meaningful democratic change, and to build a dynamic civil society and a strong mass-movement against authoritarianism and any form of oppression and injustice.

In that spirit, some Algerian friends and I, inspired by the historic events of the "Arab Spring", have founded Algeria Solidarity Campaign, an organisation based in London, which is campaigning for peaceful democratic change and the respect for human rights in Algeria. We are striving to build a platform for debate and an exchange of ideas regarding the challenges that face the Algerian people.

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