

The transformation of memory

Last Thursday, January 14, was commemorated in Tunisia the tenth anniversary of the revolution that in 2011, after a month of protests and hundreds of deaths, overthrew the dictator Ben Ali and activated, by elementary contagion, the revolutionary cycle in the region. It was not commemorated. Taking refuge in the critical health situation, the government of Hichem Mechichi imposed a four-day confinement whose true purpose has not gone unnoticed by anyone. The country is not in the mood for celebrations and even less for mass celebrations in which the demands of the young people who raised up against the dictatorship ten years ago are recovered and revealed, against the light and by contrast, the little they have obtained.

On December 17, 2010 – let us remember – a young vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, incinerated himself in front of the governor's palace of Sidi Bouzid, a depressed town of 50,000 inhabitants located in the center of Tunisia. His desperate action, and then his death in a hospital in Ben Arus, triggered an unstoppable movement of spontaneous uprising which, from the rural populations of the south, spread to the capital, so that the material demands of the subordinate classes – work, bread, public services – were joined by those of the urban middle classes – freedom of expression, civil rights, democracy – in an explosive confluence summed up in the motto dignity (karama). On January 14, a massive demonstration in front of the Ministry of the Interior, the real core of the corrupt dictatorial power, forced the flight of Ben Ali, who had ruled the country since 1987. In the following months, silent struggles in the shadows and clashes between the army and the police, under pressure from the street (with the two occupations of the Kasbah, the seat of government), led to the convening of a Constituent Assembly in March 2011. Thousands of political prisoners were released and

thousands of exiles, including Rachid Ghanouchi, leader of the Islamist Ennahda party, returned enthusiastically to the country. A hundred political parties, new or banned, were registered to contest the first free elections in Tunisia's history. Young Tunisians stopped boarding small boats to flee to Lampedusa.

Those of us who lived through these events at close quarters cannot forget the radical enthusiasm of those days. The fear that had gripped the country, by lifting its gag, overturned the framework of collective sensibility: self-organization, solidarity, discipline, altruism, good education took over the public scene, demonstrating that disorder and extreme individualism were functional effects of the dictatorship, and not marks of destiny or nature. For two months, with the old regime provisionally out of the game and the clandestine political parties that had fought against it still absent, the most fragile and demanding utopia excogitated programs, listed demands, managed traffic and neighborhood security, renewed culture, appropriated memory and marked a whole generation before being formed, between blows of truncheon and political concessions, in the framework of a democratic transition agreed upon, Spanish style, between old and new elites; A transition which, without solving the material problems of the disadvantaged regions, has left unfulfilled its promises of radical democratic transformation.

In any case, for a few months Tunisia refuted all Western Islamophobic clichés by launching a victorious protest of a democratic, secular and sovereigntist nature. As I have often written, the Tunisian revolution revealed the weak popular root of the sinister quadruple forces that shackled the region like a destiny: dictatorships, Western interventions, radical Islamism and Arab nationalism. The Tunisian revolution was social-democratic, anti-colonial, non-Arab and non-Islamist; its protagonists, men and women, demanded the rule of law, not Sharia, raised the national flag with which the country was

founded in 1956 against the French and called for political freedoms and social justice.

As we know, very similar processes – spontaneous revolts without a party, democratic and laicized – were reproduced throughout the region, in a seismic shock that put an end, thirty years too late, to the Cold War. We should not forget this now that, ten years later, new shadows are looming over this part of the world. Very similar conditions (very young populations with very high levels of unemployment, corrupt and dictatorial or outright despotic regimes) explain that withering contagion which, in a way, spread to the European indignants and then to the rest of the planet. In the misnamed Arab world (because it is also Kurdish and Amazigh) these revolts overthrew, in a few weeks, regimes of decades: Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ghaddafi in Libya, Ali Saleh in Yemen. The revolts brushed Algeria, touched Morocco, shook Iraq, harassed the Bahraini monarchy, terrorized the Saudi theocracy and put the patrimonialist and bloody regime in Damascus on the ropes. Somehow, the fierce resistance of the Al-Asad dynasty stopped and reversed this luminous and almost stupefying process, which, especially since the coup d'état of General Sisi in Egypt in July 2013, has been captured by counter-revolutionary forces of different sign and reciprocally pugnacious. It is not true, as right-wing and left-wing analysts, very comfortable in obsolete binary molds, pretended, that the Arab revolutions arose from Islamist and/or imperialist conspiracies. With regard to Islamism, it was rather the other way around: the induced defeat of those revolutions, and the refusal to accept (as in Egypt or Tunisia) the electoral victory of moderate Islamist parties close to the Muslim Brotherhood, was what reactivated – very conveniently for almost all geopolitical actors – the jihadist option, now under the rubric of Daesh or ISIS (as one prefers), whose popular support in the region has been and continues to be minimal.

As far as imperialism is concerned, it is still hard to accept that the Arab revolutions, by bursting the Cold War schemes, introduced in the region a new global disorder or a geopolitics of disaster that revealed and accelerated the decline of the US empire in favor of local powers and subpowers whose volatile alliances are tied and untied within the framework of the real Cold War in the area: the one between Saudi Arabia and Iran and, in the background, between Saudi Arabia and Turkey and Qatar. All the other conflicts revolve around these. This is the case in Yemen and Syria, of course, but also in Libya, where we see how the alignments of the Western powers (and Russia) are somewhat trailed by the policies of the Emirates and Saudi Arabia and their confrontation with Erdogan. To this must be added the silent work of Israel, which is taking advantage of this regional Cold War, and the prevailing global disorder, to continue massacring the Palestinians and to further entrench itself in the heart of the Middle East, and this thanks to its relationship with Saudi Arabia and, through it, its recent rapprochement with Bahrain, Emirates, Morocco and Sudan, with which it has just established or is about to establish – a major sin in the regional imaginary – diplomatic relations. The result of these multiple competing counter-revolutions may seem atrocious to us, and it is, but it no longer obeys the rules of last century's campism. In Syria, Russia and Iran are in charge, and they also decide the fate of Iraq and, in part, that of Yemen. In North Africa, Saudi Arabia/Emirates and Turkey/Catar are vying for influence. It is not that the EU and the US have been left out of the game; it is that they no longer dominate the game or do not dominate it as they used to. One of the effects of the so-called Arab revolutions has indeed been to put an end to the order that emerged from World War II and to the US hegemony established after the end of the Cold War. We cannot be sure that this is as good as we had hoped, but we should not delude ourselves.

Be that as it may, the process of global democratization

undertaken in 2011, whose fulcrum was the Arab region, has been turned upside down in a reverse process of global de-democratization that not only affects the countries of the area (including Turkey, where Erdogan, having lost the regional battle, has become increasingly authoritarian). In these years, yes, we have seen the radicalization of Europe, zapped by powerful far-right parties; we have seen in America the victories of Bolsonaro and Trump, now defeated, but whose destropopulist legacy will not be easy to dissolve; and we have seen, of course, the victory of Al-Asad in Syria, the aggravated reestablishment of dictatorship in Egypt, the wars in Yemen and Libya. Ten years later, it cannot be said that democracy is advancing in the world; quite the contrary. While social and economic conditions condemn millions of human beings to marginalization and poverty, democracy has been losing validity and prestige throughout the planet. What concrete model will an Algerian from Hirak think of today in his protests against the new regime in the country? And the Syrian refugees? And the defenders of civil rights in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain? And the young Tunisians who, fed up with unfulfilled promises, are once again venturing in small boats to cross to Italy?

In this context, to which must be added the global health crisis, it is almost a miracle that Tunisia remains a small and relative exception. Small and relative, and in increasing deterioration. In social terms, just think of the situation in Sidi Bouzid, the city of Bouazizi and cradle of the 2011 revolution. With 23% poverty, more than 20% unemployment (much higher among young people) and an increase of up to 90% in job demands in the first half of 2020, Sidi Bouzid ranks third in the country in the ranking of social protests: 885 between January 1 and November 30 of the year just ended. The year 2020, in fact, closed with demonstrations in Kamour, Gabes, Qasserin, Sfax, Qairouan, Beja and Jandouba, some of them harshly repressed, called to demand development and employment policies for the region. According to the FTDES (Tunisian

Forum for Economic and Social Rights) the total number of protest movements throughout the country last year was 8,759, including strikes, demonstrations and rallies, which gives a fairly accurate picture of the situation and explains the government's decision to confine the population to their homes, under the pretext of health, to coincide with the anniversary of the revolution. It did not do much good. As I write these lines, violent clashes are multiplying between the police and hundreds of youths who, in the capital Tunis, Sousa and other cities of the country, are violating the curfew and robbing stores and blocking roads.

In economic terms, dependence on tourism in its lowest hours has been accompanied by the rapid devaluation of the dinar, rising inflation and financial exhaustion. Just one fact: at the last Council of Ministers in 2020, relations with the International Monetary Fund were discussed. Tunisia needs access to loans in excess of 18 billion dinars in order to guarantee the budget. The Prime Minister, Hichem Mechichi, has tried to obtain the IMF's endorsement by promising in return the immediate and effective start of the structural reforms demanded by the international financial institution, which has already annulled a previous agreement and suspended a previous credit. We know what these reforms mean and why no post-revolutionary Tunisian government, not even the most neo-liberal (as in the case of Essid), has dared to undertake them. The opposition of the UGTT union, and the growing popular despair, make it almost impossible to take measures – wage cuts and more privatizations, among others – that would undoubtedly produce a new social explosion. Without them, Tunisia looks, in any case, like a country in bankruptcy.

In these conditions, the institutional situation is more fragile than ever. Tunisia made in 2011 the first successful experience of a government alliance between the left and moderate Islamism (with the agreements between President Marzouki and the Ennahda party) and adopted in 2014, with an

Islamist Prime Minister, the only secular, egalitarian and democratic Constitution in the Arab world. Then, after the coup d'état in Egypt and fearing a similar drift in Tunisia, the Islamists accepted a national dialogue (of which the Tunisian Association of HRDs, the Tunisian Business and the UGTT trade union were part) that led to the acceptance of a de facto bipartisanship: the old and the new elites, represented respectively by the secularist party of the bourguibist Caid Essebsi and by the Islamist party of Ghanouchi, shared power, thus believing to provide at least political and institutional stability. Nidé Tunis was splintered in just three years and today has a token presence in Parliament; Ennahda, which pragmatically renounced its more socially radical program, abandoned the martyrs of the revolution and falsely closed the transitional justice process, has been losing the support of its voters. At some point I wrote half jokingly that Tunisia had consummated very quickly, as in a microwave, processes of change that in Europe had required centuries or at least years; it had passed in a few months from the ancien régime to the revolution and then to a Spanish-style transition by agreement; and now, no less quickly, to the decomposition of the two-party system in favor of adventitious forces of a populist and/or reactionary nature. Let us think of what happened in the last presidential elections held in 2019, whose second round was decided between Nabil Karaoui, the Tunisian Berlusconi, then in prison and today again in prison (for financial crimes) and the upstart and extravagant Kais Saied, a jurist without a party, with a very conservative culture but with a very radical conception of democracy, who mobilized thousands of young people in the name of the betrayed revolution and who ended up sweeping his rival. The fragmentation of the parliamentary forces and the open conflict between the Presidency of the Republic and the Parliament keep the institutions in a state of permanent crisis. Thus, for the next legislative elections all the polls give as favorite the Free Destouriano Party, headed by Abir Moussi, who claims "without complexes" the figure of Ben Ali

and promises a return to the policies of the dictatorship. In barely ten years, the successive governments, again undermined by corruption, after losing revolutionary credibility, have also lost their democratic credibility. It is no longer a question of transforming the country but of avoiding a backward step and a civil confrontation.

After this brief and discouraging review, one might ask what remains of the Arab revolutions ten years later. What remains is the memory of an unprecedented event in which, for once, the plebeian and subaltern populations were the protagonists. As Leyla Dakhly recalls in a recent interview in *Le Monde*: “no insurrection can be assessed solely in terms of success or failure”. What was decisive in this case was that the 2011 upheaval “introduced the revolutionary paradigm in the social and political history of this region” in which all “revolutionary” changes had always taken place in terms of palace intrigues and coups d'état: just think of Nasser, Saddam Hussein, Jafid Al-Asad, Ghadafi. In the transforming memory of the Arab world there was no memory that included, except passively, its citizens; no change not promoted by the elites and for or against U.S. imperialism. The Arab world now has its French revolution, a memory that can undoubtedly generate frustration but which guarantees new generations an alternative to the fatalism that condemned this part of the world to choose between Islamist dictatorships, neo-liberal dictatorships and nationalist dictatorships. All peoples need to have once done something good – even idealized in memory – in order to be able to complete the work later. All transformations begin, yes, with a good memory.

The overthrow in 2019 of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria and of Omar Bashir in Sudan, even if they have also led to a dead end, show that this memory remains active and that if the so-called Arab Springs did not realize the dreams of dignity of their protagonists and did not radically transform the societies of the region, they have completely transformed

their past. Where, as we know, everything begins.