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Algeria

A president and system without opposition?

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Some months away from the presidential elections, Algeria has a sick head of state, a political class which is clinging to the actions of the president and a people which has rediscovered its pride through its national football team qualifying for the World Cup in Brazil. Is there anything more?

The economic field

The Algerian capitalist economy has essentially been built on oil taxes since the 1970s, even if the oil income in 2012 was 73.981 billion dollars on a GDP of 207.96 billion dollars, according to the official figures. The fluctuation of fuel prices continues to render public finances fragile. Such is the case in the current conjuncture. The dinar is depreciating. This depreciation is declared to be a form of devaluation and presented as a voluntary and intentional act to limit imports of manufactured products into Algeria. A way of protecting the national economy! If this is the case it should be said that this depreciation is not reflected by any price increase in raw materials imported. It should also be said that this national production will be taken on by a private sector whose activity is fully within the context of neoliberalism, according to the statements of Prime Minister Sellal. We are in reality witnessing a process of the transfer of money from public to private finance, embellished by the slogan of "national production". Which poses the question of the ability to construct any kind of economic sovereignty in the context of a global privatisation.

Whatever, prudence should be the watchword, insists the official discourse. Some even advocate the freezing of wages and the halting of recruitment to the civil service. However the projects of big infrastructural works, highway networks, hydraulic and urban transport projects (tramways in the main cities) are maintained. If this situation persists, they will surely be cut back, which would lead to increased unemployment. But for now we are not there. In the short term, the regime has a certain financial leeway, since Algeria is not in debt.

The discourse on austerity is from this viewpoint intended to rein in the demands of the workers and the masses. The project of the grand mosque, for example, costing 1.5 billion dollars, or something like 2% of the income from fuel exports, a vanity project simply for the glory of the president, is being maintained. That gives us an idea of the margin of manoeuvre the regime still has.

Social reaction

Since 2011, under the shock wave of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, we have witnessed a social explosion provoked directly by an increase in the price of basic necessities and a fall in value of the dinar. This social explosion has been followed by a strike movement involving workers in the civil service, the public and private sector and even the unemployed and precarious workers. We have also seen a succession of local social revolts around living conditions: housing, roads, health and so on. The government has succeeded in controlling the situation by satisfying a certain number of social demands (wage increases) and by according credits and other benefits to jobless youths who wanted to start up enterprises. It succeeded by these actions in keeping opposition at the social level and, by a peaceful management of rallies, avoiding any dynamic which would have transformed the social conflict into political revolt. Thus the social opposition has been dissociated from political action. But the social protest has still not halted and strikes and protests have continued.

The response of the regime

The response of the government remains the same: give way on the financial aspects and prevent any overspill onto the political level. Indeed it remains fairly tranquil at the latter level. The opposition remains incapable of presenting a consistent and credible political response. The time is for consensus, it is said! This is explained by the integration of the ruling political élites and the social components which structure the main political parties making up the opposition. The case of the Islamists of “Algerian Hamas”, of Muslim Brotherhood affiliation, is revealing of this sociological integration, even if the latter is now trying to reconstruct its virginity after years of collaboration with the government.

Bouteflika’s version of capitalism has succeeded in giving a social and economic base to the bourgeoisie, rebuilding a middle layer which no longer needs Islamism to channel its ideological deviations. It has succeeded in dividing the popular classes and in absorbing a good part of the social opposition in a populist tunnel.

One of the cards in the president’s hands is article 87a of the labour code. The article in question defines the national minimum wage, the SNMG, not on the basic wage but including bonuses! The subject of dissent during the tripartite negotiations between the government, the UGTA trade union and the employers’ representatives, the article in question should have been abrogated. But according to recent statements by the general secretary of the trade union federation, the file is in the hands of Bouteflika who will announce it when the right time comes! Meanwhile the minister of labour has just indicated that the new labour code will favour short term contracts so that flexibility allows employers “to recruit more”!

Credibility of alternation

The “Bonapartist” tradition of the Algerian regime, consolidated by the successive crises which have engulfed the country, has served Bouteflika who has often sought through popular plebiscites to rule alone and uncontested. His illness has however weakened his personal power. But his desire to go to the end of his reign finds an echo among the different social and political factions which make up and structure the Algerian regime. However it meets indifference among a part of the popular layers. If the former factions have every interest in maintaining the political status quo which royally serves their economic interests by largesse in the distribution of the financial manna, the lack of interest of the second category is explained above all by the absence of an alternative political project, be it only in terms of alternation inside the same regime. It is true however that the search for stability is underpinned by a relative improvement of social and economic conditions comparative to the previous situation. It is above all fed by the fear of a return to insecurity with respect to what is happening in Libya, Egypt or Syria.

The option of a fourth term is not ruled out. The great unknown remains however the attitude of the voters. A strong abstention and a popular disavowal will tarnish the image of a president seeking a final plebiscite. A technical scenario to salvage things seems to be in construction: it would involve a constitutional revision before the end of the current term introducing an amendment which would make possible the extension of the presidential term and also install the post of vice-president who would succeed him in case of a premature death.

The revolutionary left?

The absence of a consistent and credible opposition is also felt on the left. In what one might call the parliamentary left, represented by the PT (Parti des Travailleurs – Workers’ Party), the discourse is on the defence of the borders

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against imminent imperialist attacks. Because Algeria is in NATO's gun sights like its Arab neighbours, according to this critique! This justifies the barely critical support given to the president, presented as guarantor of this stability. The rest of the left is unhappily weak and divided. The ideological inertia and the political differences reflect the absence of an alternative project at a mass scale today. The time has come for the rallying of this left despite the difficulties, which the PST (Parti socialiste des travailleurs – Socialist Workers' Party, Algerian section of the Fourth International) is laboriously trying to do.