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Algeria

Youth revolt shakes authoritarian order

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After a week, the riotous fires burnt out, leaving a feeling of bitterness, a taste of ashes. But the national scope of the revolts and the virtually total paralysis that resulted shook the existing authoritarian order and opened the possibility of qualitative changes in the political situation.

Beginning on January 5 in Algiers (Fouka, Staoueli, Bab el Oued), Oran and Djelfa, the youth revolts extended to hundreds of neighbourhoods in every region of the country. There were neither slogans, nor demands nor structures. We are not talking about massive popular demonstrations which degenerated into looting. More often it was small groups of youths who emerged from peripheral neighbourhoods to take over central arteries that they closed down with burning tyres, looting vehicles and violently confronting the police. Once the square was taken the surrounding shops were looted. Haunted by several decades of riots, the authorities immediately withdrew the numerous police officers spread across the town under the pretext of the anti-terrorist struggle and entrusted the defence of the essential centres to the anti-riot brigades. While awaiting reconquest operations, the street was abandoned to the rioters. Public or private establishments were attacked, town hall, hotels, telephone agencies, schools, professional training centres. Public edifices were besieged, like the commissariat in Bab el Oued, while in the same neighbourhood the showrooms of Renault and Dacia and their inaccessible cars were looted. Public or private banking agencies the post offices were the privileged targets with the manifest intention of taking the money they held. The looters also targeted jewellery shops, sports stores, expensive cars, without sparing ordinary traders and modest passers by who were robbed without consideration. This disordered violence, which did not spare the poor, led to an end for the initially unanimous popular sympathy. High school students and the less precarious youth sectors lost their sense of solidarity and instead organised the self-defence of their areas against looters.

In explaining the events some analysts evoked struggles within the ruling clans and the military, while others attributed the movement to speculators, importers or wholesalers, accused of having activated their informal networks of distributors to oppose the pressure of the administration that demanded they pay tax. In fact these manipulations, if they exist, are anecdotal. The situation lends itself to explosion, it has exploded. The initial revolts are similar to the sporadic riots that have taken place for years. Their privileged actors are the same precarious youth. Concretely, the events of January 4 and 5 were very localised. The resonance of the private press gave them a national impact. Spokespersons of the resentment of the business world and the international capitalist community against protectionist impulses, the private press generously covered every protest. And it is all the better for our struggles. From the first incidents, at Bab el Oued and Oran, the dailies devoted their front pages to images of urban desolation with headlines like "The riots of the end", "Troubled night in Bab el Oued", "Riots: the conflagration".

The movement has retrospectively been given a simultaneous nature that did not exist. When the movement ended in the neighbourhoods of January 5, it had hardly begun in the towns of the East and the Kabyle Soummam. What existed on the contrary was a general anger of modest people against high prices at the beginning of the year. And these increases were no more than unexpected collateral damage stemming from the government's attempt to reduce the informal sector of the economy. In Algeria, you can buy a car or even a villa of a million Euros in cash. From the end of March 2011, a ban on cash payments for sums above 500,000 dinars or 5,000 euros (three years of minimum wage) was planned. With a view to this ban, the producers asked their wholesale distributors to produce tax documents so as to draw up invoices. That meant leaving the informal sector, paying taxes, indeed social security contributions! Faced with this intolerable state aggression against freedom of trade and the exploitation of employees, the wholesalers ceased their deliveries of goods. The result was shortages, speculation, and immediate increases in the prices of basic food products

The adolescents and young people in revolt are not concerned by the daily purchases of their parents who reject this intolerable pressure on their wallets. They are, rather, involved in small informal business. They share the generalised popular anger in relation to prices, but what concerns them more directly is the progressive dismantling of the informal markets that occupy the big shopping streets. Like the young Bouazizi who set fire to himself in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, they are deprived of decent employment, forced to occupy a street corner to sell cigarettes or various smuggled Chinese products avoiding tax. Like the young Harraguas who flee their country on improvised boats to participate in the wage slavery of Spanish agriculture or minor precarious jobs in France, they express their unhappiness in a blocked society. The lack of housing leads to the cramming of families and perpetuates an anachronistic patriarchy and a strict moral rigor. Without housing or stable income, marriage is late. This sharpens despair in a country that Europe is recolonising, a country whose productive enterprises are being destroyed along with jobs in the name of the logic of the market, a country that is invaded by the triumphant values of the West.

Popular anger

This general revolt is the expected outcome of a popular anger which for some months has been directed against Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his regime, associated with the emergence of insolent wealth which offends an egalitarian populist culture, a regime complicit in affairs of corruption, at astronomical amounts, which have been on the front pages of the big dailies. In the midst of an Algerian-French diplomatic crisis, the construction of a 1,200 km highway, the glory of Bouteflika's programme, was attributed to the Chinese by Mr Pierre Falcon, airplane manufacturer and dealer in French weapons, himself responsible for redistributing the commission of 20% on the amount of 11 billion dollars. And so one discovers on this occasion a Franco-African network at the heart of a regime originating from the war of liberation. In a gilded neighbourhood in upper Algiers, where a square metre of land to build on can fetch 5,000 euros, Bouteflika offered 760 ha at a symbolic dinar per square metre to an Emirates group. The privileges accorded to the Gulf magnates are regularly denounced by the press and the elites, who lean rather in the direction of France. These gifts are explained by the President's affinities with his Emirate hosts during his period of exile. The national oil company Sonatrach has been robbed by its managers through overvalued privately negotiated contracts. This had already happened before, to the profit of BRC, a subsidiary linked to former US vice president Dick Cheney. There lies one of the reasons for the firmness of US-Algerian relations.

These press revelations and the subsequent legal cases sometimes lead to derisory sanctions against members of the higher echelons, rather of the second level, whereas the hand of class justice strikes hard against the desperate youth who revolt to obtain a tarmac road, a link to the distribution network for potable water or gas, to protest against a distribution of social housing deemed to be unjust or to demand a job. There are also prison sentences against illegal emigrants, these harraguas who risk their lives on improvised boats. The crackdown on informal traders and the prosecution of small traders avoiding tax led to popular resentment. The multinationals are exempted from tax by way of encouragement and all the private industrial and commercial enterprises more or less escape tax obligations, which finally only concern declared wage earners and the enterprises of the public sector.

Paradoxically, the rehousing of the inhabitants of the shanty towns is also a source of discontent. Countries that distribute thousands of housing units to poor people are pretty rare. But Algerians are not completely resigned to class society. The emergence of the bourgeoisie is very recent. The right to housing was conquered at independence in the confused occupation of the towns deserted by French settlers. The Bouteflika regime, which is responsible for the most aggressive neoliberal advances, continues in some respects to follow a populist approach based in its history. Thousands of housing units have been distributed, though it is a drop of water in the ocean of needs. The housing offered is not enough to hold a whole family, the new arrivals in the shanty town are not affected and the overpopulated urban neighbourhoods resent an operation which ignores them, because the priority is to absorb the shacks which surround the towns. Corruption is also present. In a situation of penury, what is more predictable than favouritism and corruption?

Retreats of the regime

It was the symbolic struggle around housing at Diar Echems in the heart of Algiers whose violence convinced the regime to renounce its policy of tough action on the streets and the crushing of strikes. The confrontations at Diar Echems, in October 2009, coincided with the revolt of the El Ançar neighbourhood in the western city of Oran against the pollution of a quarry. At the same time, rail workers launched a lightning strike that disorganised the economy and threatened a total paralysis. The regime then decided on a policy of conciliation. The rail workers received a pay increase. The inhabitants of Diar Echems were promised early rehousing. From battle to battle the government has made concessions. The big dailies denounce the "riot bonus" of the government which promises hundreds of thousands of social housing units instead of letting the market regulate things. Despite severe legislation and legal persecution of the actors of the social movement, the government has always ended up giving way to each strike movement. Thus the big movements of teachers and doctors and their autonomous unions in struggle since 2003 have won various provisional victories with a fairly big increase effective of January 2008 in the context of a general revalorisation of the public service. But the small wage earners, who are the majority, have not much progress. There is a will to re-establish the hierarchy of wages skewed by several decades of uniform increases, to valorise the "middle layers" according to the IMF recommendations to better stabilise society. But these increases, obtained under the blows of strikes and so on are not enough to give to the higher wage earners an income comparable to that of their equivalents in neighbouring countries. The counterpart to these wage concessions is a new status of the civil service which introduces casualisation, the precarity of civil servants in short-term contracts bringing about a massive regression.

The strikes in the economic sector have had a considerable subjective impact. They have allowed an initial small wage catch up, after 15 years of a freeze on wages. Rail workers, after several wildcat strikes, have achieved an increase of more than 50%. Actions in the steel complex at Annaba, on the rail, in the truck factory in Rouiba and the surrounding industrial zone, and in the port of Algiers have mobilised less workers than the big national strikes in the civil service, but their struggles have caught the imagination of all employees and they function as a vanguard. They took place after a decade of demoralisation and rampant dismantling of public enterprises. The new politics of struggle against imports rehabilitates national production and fills order books. We have gone from a situation punctuated by voluntary redundancies and the compression of the workforce to massive hirings.

The struggles extend beyond the local trade union leaderships and above all the national leadership of the UGTA which since the general strike of 2003 against privatisation has sunk into an ever more indecent servility. But these strikes take place always in the context of a UGTA that is curiously back in the saddle despite an avowed discredit. Of around sixty existing unions, the UGTA federation is the only generalist one. The more representative autonomous unions concern specific corporations in the public service: high school teachers, university lecturers, doctors and so on. Another reason for this survival and hegemony of the UGTA is a relationship of forces that is still unfavourable to the workers. In a public sector officially condemned to disappear, the room for negotiation is non-existent, the capacity for strike blackmail is reduced to nothing. Halt production? That is precisely what the IMF wants. In these disastrous conditions the UGTA, the complacent partner of the authorities, functions as an umbrella union. The prestige of the autonomous unions is immense despite the rapid bureaucratisation of most of them, but the reality of the trade union struggle remains for many the attempt to regain control of the UGTA. It is a question of the relationship of forces.

The private sector super-exploits in disastrous conditions the majority of the country's wage earners. In 2007, the official figures indicated 78% of workers in private enterprises were undeclared. These are legal enterprises that appear to pay their taxes. But the informal enterprises escape any control and statistics whereas they employ a considerable part of the workforce. Labour law no longer exists. One can increase the minimum wage, discuss pensions, review trade union legislation, but that does not concern the overwhelming majority of workers. Thus there is no question of trade union law and the right to strike. The struggles in the private sector are rare and brutal. In a situation of scarcity of jobs, recalcitrant workers can be immediately replaced. Some big strikes have nonetheless

taken place in the private sector, at the Tonic group (packaging), on the sites of the Chinese enterprises building the highway, where the Algerian workers denounce slavery and the Chinese workers demand simply to be paid. And there was of course the symbolic strike at the formerly state owned steel complex sold to Arcelor Mittal in Annaba. The workers succeeded in dislodging the union mafia in the service of the multinational. The new team uncovered various rackets and revealed the derisory performances of the world steel giant which did not equal the production of the complex under public management. But above all they defeated the plans to reduce the workforce and forced a wage increase. What allowed this victory was the massive workers' mobilisation but also the perspective of the renationalisation of the complex in the new economic course of the region.

Limits of authoritarianism and liberties

Teachers on a national general strike have demanded retirement after 25 years at work and a wage increase of 100%, which they are not far from having obtained. The announcement two years ago of the suppression of the optional pension at age 50 led to an immediate revolt of the industrial zone of Rouiba, near Algiers, and a mobilisation of oil workers. It was all the same decided a year ago and still has not been applied. A moratorium is spoken of, for fear of social explosion. Those who riot for rehousing reject the new and free units offered to them. The suppression of free medicine in 2002 was immediately postponed after the riots of Ain Fakroun. It should be applied in the next few months, though the January riots will have deepened the thinking of the authorities about that. University lecturers have demanded and obtain better wages but also their priority right to social housing. Our comrade Daniel Bensaïd, visiting Algeria a few months before his death, compared this situation to that of Mexico which also has social gains inherited from a past revolutionary situation, gains which the neoliberal steamroller is trying to erase.

For others concerns are linked to neoliberal globalisation. The massive unemployment of youth is a consequence of the dismantling of the public sector and the unfettered opening up that delivers the market to the disloyal competition of the products of wage slavery in China or the subsidised exports of the European Union. The Draconian fall in purchasing power stems from the division by twenty of the value of the dinar successively since the structural adjustment plan of 1994. But although wages have been the lowest in the Mediterranean basin, the workforce is not disciplined enough, not submissive. Investors only come for the oil rent or the telephone company profits. Capitalist exploitation is profitable in Algeria, but apparently much less so than in China.

Another aspect to stress is that of the relative liberties that remain under this authoritarian regime whose repression and arbitrariness we regularly denounce. The revolts of October 1988 imposed a democratic opening, political and media pluralism, the freedom to demonstrate, legality of strike actions. From the beginning, successive governments have sought to hinder popular freedoms and tolerate only salon activities and electoral meetings. But popular lassitude, after the bloody decade that appeared as the fruit of the opening, has allowed the regime to take firm control. Bouteflika professes publicly his allergy to pluralism and dreams of a US-style two party system. Associations, unions, parties are refused approval. Activities are rarely authorised except in electoral periods when the parties, prevented from building themselves, appear derisory. Electoral law hardens the conditions. And Bouteflika is comforted by the discredit of the parties, all of them, and by their corruption. But October 1988 is not totally forgotten, far from it. It is not restrictions that limit popular expression so much as popular disenchantment with respect to democracy and the discrediting of politics.

Bouteflika's patriotic turn

Bouteflika's first term, from 1999 to 2003, was one of professions of ultra neoliberal faith but his promises to his

imperialist tutors have not materialised. His projects were hindered by the resistance of the civil and military state bureaucracy, and the irritation of the private employers faced with the preference given to multinationals. Above all the hostility of the trade union apparatus to neoliberalism allowed a significant mobilisation. Popular resistance obliged Bouteflika to reconsider his projects. Oil strikes blocked the hydrocarbons law. The popular movement in Kabylie imposed a return to big state projects to the disgust of the orthodox neoliberals. The revolt of Ain Fekroun in the Aurès postponed the suppression of free medicine, the national strike by UGTA forced back total privatisation, the autonomous unions of teacher, doctors, challenged the wage freeze.

The re-election of Bouteflika in 2004, against Ali Benflis, the candidate of the FLN and the head of the army, gave him the necessary legitimacy to go further. The law on hydrocarbons was voted through. He privileged outrageously foreign companies allowed to benefit from concessions. An indecent programme of total privatisation was adopted. Then Bouteflika fell ill. The regime positioned itself for succession struggles but a physically weakened Bouteflika continued to dominate all areas. In June 2006, a new tone appeared, more concerned to preserve the national interests, the law on hydrocarbons was frozen before being amended to favour the national company. In 2008, the price per barrel collapsed, while imports which had tripled over a few years consumed all the oil income. Privatisation appears at a stalemate. Supplementary finance laws have involved Draconian measures to re-establish balances. Taxes and administrative measures reduce imports, while foreign enterprises are obliged to find a majority Algerian partner. This is the background which explains the change of tone of the Western governments despite the attraction of 150 billion dollars of public investment and juicy contracts. It is this which is at stake in the battle to give a political direction to the popular discontent, the workers' strikes and the youth revolts.