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Algeria

Between rumours, clamours and social networks: a social explosion

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After the social explosion in opposition to the government's draft finance law followed by conflicts with the security forces in early January 2017 in a number of Algeria's wilayats – in Bejaïa, Bouira, Boumerdes, Blida and Tiaret – and the social discontent in others, the question is: are they the fruit of rumour and manipulation, as the government and the media tell us? This regime does not ask why violence has become a mode of expression, why youth has its horizon blocked, why the public school throws more than 500,000 children onto the streets every year, while the barons of the regime enrich themselves. The social explosions, riots, strikes and social movements reveal a profound political and social malaise.

According to an editorial in *El Watan* "the recent social movements, riots and strikes which have opened 2017 are worrying for more than one reason. Their anonymous and viral character (rapidity of the propagation of news or rumours) paralyses any effective action... in the current context of preeminence of social networks, the least rumour, combined with a climate of tension, can spread very quickly everywhere and also mobilize social actors to act in the immediate" [1].

Almost all the media and the parties linked to the regime have accepted the official explanation of what has happened, that of "manipulation and conspiracy", "the internal hand" and "the external menace". These are the tricks the regime has used for decades to demonise all social movements, displaying the contempt and paternalism intrinsic to it. The Algerian system does not wish to start on the political and social changes that the country obviously needs. A phobia of social networks has been an obsession since 2011 since these networks were behind the rise of the popular movements in the countries of the Arab region, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt.

For those who observe attentively what has happened in this multiform popular movement, the events are rich in lessons. The dynamic of the Arab spring has shown its limits through the various Arab countries, and finally the role of social networks in the movements of mass revolt has been grasped. The social networks have surfed on a social movement and put in place mediations which can serve this movement downstream, but they are incapable of substituting themselves for the social forces put in movement. The experience of the Egyptian revolution has shown the political and social inconsistency which characterizes them. Why then this demonization of social networks? Because Algerian society – and Maghrebian societies in general – are known for their porosity to rumour. The specialists of social conditioning know it. The regime has used and abused this technique in its struggle against the Islamists in the 1990s.

The information revolution and the techniques of modern communication were key to the social and political movements which characterised what became known as the "Arab spring". Since then politics has been convulsed by the appearance of new techniques and applications, electronic exchange on the internet, email with dialogue boxes and the sending of texts, the programming of direct contact up to new formulas of electronic press and the various supplementary sites of different media, all this with the development of "alternative journalism", individual sites and blogs, all of which have expanded at a dizzying pace since 1997.

Weblogs have become a social reality escaping the constraints of censorship and surveillance which characterise the classic media. In the 2000s, these networks have abandoned their subjective character to become a tribune which has acquired the status of a "popular press" critical of the reporting of the traditional media. Blogs have thus come to influence political and economic life and shape ideas and opinions.

The other aspect which the media have inordinately stressed is that the movement of opposition which has

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developed in BejaĀa, Bouira and Boumerdes has taken on a riotous character. Abdelmalek Sellal, the head of the government, alleged that the riots of early 2017 were due to “anonymous manipulation by parties hostile to Algeria”. He added “we do not know the Arab spring and the Arab spring does not know us, and we will soon celebrate Yennayer” [2]. Meanwhile the spokespersons for the regime and their media attempt to localise the movement of opposition solely to Kabylie.

There has been a news blackout on the movement of discontent which has spread to other towns and regions of the country, like Tiaret, Blida, Tipaza, Algiers and Constantine. The regime has lost all reserve faced with the contagion of the social movement and has also mobilised the mosques. The minister of religious affairs sent instructions to all mosques that the sermon of Friday January 6, 2017 should be centred on an appeal to wisdom highlighting the drift of the social mobilisation towards violence and looting rather than the legitimate demand for abrogation of the 2017 finance law. The paternalist discourse of the head of government has been relayed in all the country’s mosques which try to mobilise public opinion against “Algeria’s enemies”. The regime has been once again the first to violate the constitution of which it is supposedly the guardian.

PS:

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[1] *El Watan*, January 6, 2017

[2] The Berber new year