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The Algerian Regime after the Arab Revolts

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Many observers of the Arab world have asked themselves why Algeria has not experienced revolts after the fall of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes. Indeed, this is quite remarkable for a country that has so often been shaken by popular protests threatening the regime, destabilised by discontent culminating in the 5 October 1988 riots, which resulted in 500 dead and several hundred wounded. These riots were a turning point in the country's post-independence political history and shattered the single-party myth, giving way to multiparty politics and freedom of the press after the constitutional reform of 23 February 1989. From February 1989 to January 1992, the country experienced political effervescence, with free public speech and open debates that had never before been seen on television. More than 50 parties had emerged, but after elections, a single party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), had outstripped the National Liberation Front (FLN), in power since independence. In January 1992, the electoral victory of Islamists led to the suspension of the electoral process and the institution of a state of emergency following the eruption of violence. The country was plunged into a bloody conflict that lasted nearly ten years, causing the death of over 100,000 people, 15,000 of which 'disappeared.' The democratic transition announced three years earlier had turned into a nightmare for the population, daily enduring the atrocities of an opaque conflict pitting invisible Islamists against security forces with expeditious methods. The Algerian Spring had become a "bloody winter" in only a few months.

From Political Dissent to Social Protest

In October 1998, the Department of Intelligence and Security (*Département du renseignement et de la sécurité*, DRS) entered a secret agreement with the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) to end hostilities, an agreement rejected by President Liamine Zéroual, who preferred to resign over implementing it. He believed the agreement did not settle the political aspect of confrontation with Islamists. He was replaced by Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 1999 under the slogan of a return to peace and national reconciliation. A referendum was organised to pass the Civil Concord Law (*Charte de la concorde nationale*), which served as the legal framework to reintegrate amnestied Islamist prisoners into society and to protect the members of the security forces from possible lawsuits for human rights violations. The amnesty measures taken after Bouteflika's election put an end to a generalised climate of violence, despite several isolated acts perpetrated by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), whose freedom of action in the mountainous and desert regions suggested it was manipulated by the DRS. The victory over the insurgent Islamists allowed a return to tranquillity, though punctuated by localised riots in medium-sized cities following incidents of police brutality or abuse of authority by agents of the administration. As if dissent had ceased to be "political," relinquishing overthrowing the regime, to become "social," demanding that the State fulfil its mission of safeguarding the dignity of its citizens and the consumers' purchasing power. In the form of riots after the distribution of housing or strikes by different administrative bodies, social dissent has become chronic. Since 2001, pillaging of administrative buildings and roadblocks are recurrent throughout the country, either brought about by disaffected housing applicants or occurring during power outages or after fatal traffic accidents in cities.

Social demands not being put forth by parties nor elected officials, they are expressed in the street in the form of strikes and riots. In 2008-2009, secondary school teachers and university professors engaged in an arm wrestling match with the government, which was forced to give in and meet the demands for salary raises. Everyone was satisfied thanks to the surplus in state reserves, estimated at 150 billion dollars in 2008. In April 2001, the population of Kabylia was shaken by a protest movement that lasted two years. The movement eventually ran out of steam, not having been granted support by political parties to lend it a national dimension. Despite the multiplication of localised social protests, the decade of the 2000s was one of political ebb or demobilisation.

Purchasing Social Peace with Oil Revenues

Public opinion considers Bouteflika as the one who brought peace, in a financial context highly favourable to economic activities due to the continuous rise in the price of the oil barrel. Indeed, between 2000 and 2008, it soared from 25 to 147 dollars! Having financial resources like never before, the State has launched major transport infrastructure works (motorways, tramways in cities, etc.) and an ambitious housing programme, allocating a total of 280 billion dollars in the 2004-2014 period. The availability of large sums of money from hydrocarbon exports lends the illusion of economic growth. The swelling of the money supply and the importation of foreign products by the private sector have created opportunities for gaining profit for some, and for amassing fortunes for others through legal activities or recourse to informal commerce. Many Islamists have turned away from political dissent, forgoing confronting the State to dedicate themselves to commerce, by which they seek to acquire the social status that will allow them to gain the respect of the population and the administration's civil servants, whom they do not hesitate to corrupt. This is how what Patrick Haenni has called "Islamismo-business" appeared, flourishing just as well within the framework permitted by law as it does in the informal sector, alternately repressed and tolerated. In large urban centres (Algiers, Oran, Constantine, etc.), informal trade provides revenue to dozens of thousands of youth working in undeclared activities, which mitigates the social effects of unemployment pressure.

Multiparty Politics with No Electoral Alternation of Ruling Parties

On the political level, throughout the decade of the 2000s, there were a number of national and local elections won by the two parties in power, the FLN and the National Rally for Democracy (RND), though a few seats were left to either legal Islamist parties or so-called secular parties without popular support. The political field was thus somewhat stabilised, with multiparty politics without elections bringing alternation of ruling parties and where the administration chose elected officials through rigged elections. The Parliament emerging from the 2002, 2007 and 2012 elections has been dominated by FLN and RND party members, who support the government and pass the bills of law proposed by the latter. Several representatives of minority parties (in particular, the Rally for Culture and Democracy – RCD, and the Workers' Party – PT) have taken the liberty of criticising government policies, which has lent parliamentary debate a democratic aspect. In fact, the electoral offer was fashioned in advance such that the government could be criticised without putting it in danger. A false "civil society" was entirely fabricated to substantiate the idea that the State is struggling against the fundamentalism threatening the population and its freedoms. The political setup was as follows: a political police with carte blanche to hound opponents, parties faithful to the administration that benefit from rigged elections, a government without political authority to run the State, a justice system at the administration's orders and newspapers subject to extortion through advertising and the supply of printing paper. This political setup has led to the administration's inefficiency and the generalisation of corruption.

In 2008, the constitution was modified to allow Bouteflika to run for a third term in 2009. He was re-elected as no surprise after a routine electoral campaign. Less than two years later, revolts began in Arab countries, toppling the Tunisian, Egyptian Libyan and Yemeni regimes. These revolts weakened the Algerian regime, whose ambiguous position revealed a certain unease: should the government support the dissent of those populations, whose demands were legitimate, at the price of encouraging them in Algeria? The government avoided appearing as if it approved of said authoritarian regimes because it feared the contagion effect in Algeria.

Effects of the Arab Revolts

In January 2011, at the height of the Tunisian revolt, there was an onset of rioting in large cities in Algeria, quickly extinguished after the announcement of social measures to assist the underprivileged. At the State's top political level, there was a fear that the riots would spread throughout the country and topple the regime. The government then took emergency measures, among them: continuing subsidies to staple products (bread, coffee, sugar, oil, etc.); granting bank loans to youth through an organism created to this end, the National Agency for Youth Employment Support (ANSEJ); raising civil servant salaries; and expanding consumer credit. Thus discontent was defused, thanks to the State's budget surplus, estimated at 200 billion dollars in 2011.

In April 2011, Bouteflika addressed the nation in a televised speech to announce structural reforms, aiming to improve the representative capacity of the elected Assemblies, also asserting that his generation, that of the struggle for independence, had to yield its place in the State's leadership. He promised the revision of the law on political parties to strengthen democracy. The announcements had no effect on the political actors, but they unfettered the public voice, which condemned the government more harshly, accusing it of corruption and incompetence. Throughout 2011, the social front was in ferment, with numerous strikes and other pacific demonstrations, the main demand being a raise in salaries and the distribution of housing to slum inhabitants. Each time a list of housing recipients was posted, riots would break out, whereas the forces of order had received instructions to restore the peace via dialogue and not repression. In any case, the State's financial well-being allowed it to defuse dissent by substantially increasing salaries and providing new housing for thousands of families. At the risk of relaunching inflation, the salaries of teachers and other public administration officials were raised by between 10 and 50%, with a three-year retroactive effect. Even retirees had their pensions upgraded by 15 to 30%. To include these increases in the national budget, the 2012 law on finances stipulated expenditures of 1,500 billion dinars (i.e. 15 billion euros).

In January 2012, the new law on parties, announced by the President in 2011, was enacted. It was de-

signed to expand the electoral offer, aiming above all to atomise the Islamists. Hence, of the ten authorised parties, four belonged to an Islamist movement: Party for Liberty and Justice, Justice and Development Front, Jil Jadid (The New Generation Party) and the New Algeria Front. The new parties participated in the May 2012 legislative elections with the hope of diminishing the number of MPs of the parties in power, i.e. the FLN and RND. However, the results were as surprising as they were disappointing for those who believed that change was underway. The FLN and RND took the lead as usual, followed by the Green Alliance, a coalition of Islamist parties. The FLN took 45% of the Assembly, with 221 seats, followed by the RND (68 seats) and the Green Alliance (49 seats). Through the May 2012 elections, the regime demonstrated an incapacity to bring about change from the inside. The regime has remained in place, but it is faced with riots and violent protests focussing on social demands. Since the In Amenas gas facility attack in January 2013, the unemployed from southern regions have mobilised, gathering thousands of youth who denounce regionalism, of which they claim to be victims.

Conclusion

Algeria did not experience the "political" revolts occurring in other Arab countries in 2011 for various reasons. The first is associated with the memory of the virulent conflict between the military forces and Islamists in the 1990s. The second reason is that the multiparty system emerging in the wake of the October 1988 riots was a disappointment since it did not lead to electoral alternation of power. The third reason can be sought in the State's financial readiness to distribute oil revenues to defuse popular protest. And finally, the last reason is that the Algerian regime is not embodied by its President as Mubarak's Egypt or Ben Ali's Tunisia were. Since 1992, Algeria has had five presidents: Chadli Bendjedid, Mohamed Boudiaf, Ali Kafi, Liamine Zéroual and Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The Algerians know that ousting the President does not mean changing the regime. Although it is not institutional, power in Algeria is also not embodied in a single person, which prevents discontent from crystallising around a leader.