

Debates in Algeria: Democracy, the constituent assembly and the challenge of transition

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It is the political question that is now structuring the actions and debates in the popular protest movement known as “Hirak”. Since 22 February 2019, the date of the emergence of the movement that occupies the street and Algerian public space, the demand has quickly passed from its ethical dimension, the rejection of the candidacy of an old and sick president for his fifth term, towards the political issues that underpinned this candidacy and its corollaries relating to the organization and democratic exercise of Algerian government.

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What is at stake is clear, clear and precise: on the one hand, there are the forces that hold power, embodied by the military institution and the governmental structures left by the decamped president. They demand the continuity of the structure of power, the respect of the existing institutions through the strict and formal application of the constitution in force, especially Article 102. On the other side, there is an opposition that calls for a break with the current regime and commitment to a transition to a new political structure.

But this opposition remains diffuse in its organization and differs in its conception of the “rupture” demanded and consequently on the democratic future of the country. There are the forces that are asking for a transitional government that will organize the election of a new president and initiate reforms. Forces that we can call “reformist”. There are those who demand a constituent process and the passage through a constituent assembly to a true democratic rupture and a new structure of power. Forces that can be described as “revolutionary”. These are the questions that this transition poses.

But before examining the issues related to this transition, let us return to the significance of this popular and historic mobilization for Algeria.

The meaning of the movement

Regardless of the obstacles and difficulties that can block its path, the movement that emerged on 22 February is an untrammelled opening to a real future and a democratic possibility for Algerian society. A fundamental spontaneous awareness has overcome the sediments of defeatism laid down

by years of being haunted by civil war, anguish and fear of a dark future. A volcanic effervescence has raised the dead weight of accumulated failures. In this popular movement, action has freed itself from that which weighed upon it. It has metamorphosed at one leap into a community, into a communion in which demonstrations turn into joy and celebration.

The strength of the movement is in its numbers and territorial and national deployment. There is in this strength a will of the rebels to become the masters of their life and their history, not only with regard to political decisions but also in their daily lives. "Blad dyalna, n'dirou Rayna" says one of the main slogans of the demonstrations ("the country is ours; we do what we want"). It is this strength that remains the only guarantor of a better future and the guard against a barbaric drift or a dark regression.

In this movement, the heroes and geniuses are collective. The movement does not have great leaders or official guides. But the leading figures, both the theoreticians and the men and women in action, do not lack genius, breadth or competence. Like this strategy called "Silmiya", (peaceful), which has become a good technique of struggle. The bodies and voices of women, men and children block police officers in the face of every attempt at violence, introducing a certain ethical dimension to political confrontation, even if a strong presence of repressive forces continues in the streets of Algiers, the site of power, protecting the "Casa d'El Mouradia" during the demonstrations.

The strength of the movement also lies in the unanimous denunciation of organized theft and the widespread corruption of the "system". "Edditou blad ya serraquin" ("oh thieves, you took the country"), says another emblematic slogan. While this denunciation is expressed above all at the moral level by claiming the right to dignity and freedom, the debates and criticisms during the marches reveal the deep wellsprings and the economic underpinnings of this organized theft. Economic liberalism and the privatization of entire sectors in all directions are increasingly being blamed. A sovereign appropriation of the wealth of the country is one of the demands that emerges from the slogans. It already prefigures the content of the debates to come on the way out of the crisis.

This collective and spontaneous force, however, has its limits. The movement cannot fail to give birth to its own leadership and emerge as an alternative power. This is the necessary condition for imposing a revolution or, where appropriate, negotiating in a proper way a reform of the system. Although this possibility is contained in the movement itself, its emergence requires a critical theoretical action to give it a meaning and a democratic and social future at the level of its demands.

Reform or revolution?

Some theoretical critiques limit themselves to stressing the absence of the revolutionary character of the movement. It is said to be reformist because of its sociological component - middle layers and youth - or because of the absence of a vanguard party which would bring the necessary consciousness from outside. It is too easy to manipulate and is even at the mercy of plots from inside or outside.

These readings come from static and formal logics. Because, there is no "revolutionary" movement by definition or essence. No denouement is predictable. Criticism cannot proceed by salvation or condemnation a priori.

Often carried by a spontaneous consciousness, protest movements of this kind always begin with immediate social, cultural, economic or political demands, without addressing the question of "reforming" or "revolutionizing" the existing system. They can be extended in time and space, if

their demands are not met, without making a qualitative leap in politics. This is currently the case of the gilets jaunes in France. They can radicalize quickly only to peter out later. This was the case in Kabylie in 2001. And they can take political steps and arrive at revolutionary breakthroughs, without prejudging the scope and nature of this revolution. As was the case in Tunisia in 2011.

It is above all the political elites and vanguards who, driven by a critical consciousness, formulate their projects and their alternatives in terms of "reform" or "revolution". These formulas are hypotheses of necessary construction that start either from a pre-established philosophical system or from direct contact with reality and a realistic critique of the situation with a view to transforming it.

From this point of view, the "system" so much decried by the Algerian demonstrators tries to maintain itself by starting from its constitutional matrix which serves as its political and ideological support. The demand for a provisional government that organizes a presidential election, as we pointed out above, is located on the terrain of a radical reformism. The opposition political forces, essentially neoliberal and oligarchic, demand a parenthesis of the current constitution in order to resume it as soon as a president is elected and then reform it if necessary. They reject, therefore, any revolutionary break with this "system". They reject the Constituent Assembly slogan under various pretexts, notably the slowness of the constituent process which would open a breach to a "foreign hand" or "Islamist barbarism". In reality, this rejection avoids any broad and transparent debate with all the components of society on the much-maligned "system".

It is here that the revolutionary character of the slogan of a sovereign constituent assembly resides. For it opens the way, under these conditions, to a radical and truly democratic change of the "system".

Democracy, a permanent construction

Other voices consider that it serves no purpose to formulate transitional political alternatives, whether a general strike or, still less, a constituent assembly, as the marchers have not yet clearly formulated a program to challenge the current social order and are not organized into an alternative revolutionary power. The moment is not propitious for any democratic or revolutionary change, these voices tell us. It would then be necessary to wait for the construction of this vanguard party which would direct the masses towards the seizure of power. In the meantime, we should base ourselves on demands: the demand for democratic, economic and trade union freedoms from a de facto regime. In other words, according to this reading, it is a question of asking the millions of demonstrators to give up their political demands, to stand behind the reformers or to stay out of the real story unfolding before us.

It is necessary to abandon this tautology. To get rid of them all, "yetnahha-w gaâ", as demanded by the slogan of the millions of protesters, to get rid of them effectively, i.e. to get rid of thieves, but also of oppression and exploitation, it is certainly necessary to have vanguard parties that can bring this critical awareness. But it is the movement itself that can create the conditions for its own political, social and cultural emancipation. It is from within the protests that a project can be built and with it the structures that will carry it to its fulfilment. It is not the mere creation of a partisan organization that will bring the solution from the outside.

It is also here that the meaning of the Constituent Assembly takes on its full meaning. Because by aiming for a refoundation of the republic, a 2nd or even a 3rd in its wake, it requires a wide and transparent debate that the organization of this assembly can structure.

But the Constituent Assembly is not the ultimate solution. It is the starting point for a democratic

solution, especially in the face of this crisis posed by the movement. And the form that this democracy, or this second republic, as a part of the movement stipulates, would take, is not defined a priori. It is a construction. To prefigure the alternative would already be falling back into the trap of Utopia.

Democracy does not have a universal form of expression. That of today, in its unequal expression according to the country, is a legacy of the European peoples introduced in the 18-19th centuries by revolutionary processes called “bourgeois democratic revolutions”, in the context of a triumphant and colonialist capitalism. These structures and institutions of management of the city are not constant. If this form of democratic management can be taken for granted for all humanity, it is called upon to change. It has already evolved from a limited suffrage to universal suffrage, then from white men to women and people of colour, from self-determination to social and cultural rights. It has also known other direct but ephemeral forms, those of the “popular councils”.

But the new structures cannot be created ex-nihilo. If men and women make their own histories, but not under conditions they have chosen, Algerians are creating their own history in a context of a backward capitalism dependent on another global capitalism in crisis. It is also this problem that the debate around a constituent assembly will try to settle.

The technological and productive reality in which we evolve has not really overcome the great problems and contradictions introduced by capitalism. What is new is the awareness of the links that exist between the means of communication and collective behaviour. An awareness that has taken shape thanks to the perfecting of globalization and the extension of mass media.

The problem of method - by way of a conclusion

The political preconditions for any change, whatever its form, start from a question on the place of the work of art by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin: “instead of asking: what is the position of a work with respect to the relations of production of the time? Does it accord with them, is it reactionary or revolutionary? Instead of this question, or at least before this one, I would like to ask another one ... I would like to ask: what is its place in these same relations?” The same question can dictate our conduct: what is the place of democracy in a global manner and the slogan of the Constituent Assembly in a particular manner in the current political relationships of force? That is what we have tried to explain in this contribution.

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P.S.

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