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Maghreb

Maghreb: elements of a debate on the situation.

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Description:

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At the end of 2016, in the Al-Hoceima region of Morocco, a similar movement emerged around social and democratic demands with the same political scope, following the death at police hands of a fish seller, Mouhacine Fikri. This movement resembled the Tunisian case in its detonating issue and the Algerian case in its limitation to an area where Berber identity tended to structure the movement.

The inequality of expression of these movements in time and rhythm is in the final instance linked to the respective histories and degrees of insertion of the three countries in world capitalism. Nonetheless they have something in common in highlighting the social and political questions.

2. Algerian society's relationship to capitalism is more complex than its neighbours. Historically, the emergence of capitalism in the territory which later became Algeria was accompanied by a violence and radicalism which resembled a cultural genocide. The colonisation of the early 19th century, hailed by the thinkers of the Enlightenment including some socialists, notably the utopians, fashioned modern Algeria and profoundly restructured the society and its territory. But this capitalist "modernisation", far from creating a new society and constructing the emancipation dear to the utopians, instead engendered exclusion, experienced as a rupture with the Oriental world, represented at this time by the expiring Ottoman Empire. This exclusion was expressed first by an identity-based turning inwards and a rejection, out of despair, of this "modernity". The latter was associated more with colonial violence than with the historic "benefits" of capitalism. It subsequently generated a resistance and then a radical and violent rupture with colonisation, and its associated "Western" culture, without an explicit break with its corollary, capitalism.

This history in part explains the manner in which Algerian nationalism was constructed. Nourished for decades by Arabism (Baathism, including its Syrian version), Islamism or Berberism as recently incarnated among the Kabyle autonomists of the MAK, this culturalist problematic has however only in part succeed in placing the question of identity at the centre of political life and has not totally erased the social and political questions.

3. Introduced by a "softer" colonialism, under the form of a protectorate in the late 19th century for Tunisia and the early 20th century for Morocco, capitalism played more on the integration of local élites (the Makhzen for Morocco) than on exclusion in the new mechanisms of colonial and capitalist domination. This territorial and urban restructuring was in the image of the social transformations of the two countries. The traces of urban and cultural patrimony are strongly visible today in Morocco and to a lesser degree in Tunisia, whereas they have been almost totally erased in

Algeria.

The conditions for the triumph of capitalism and European bourgeois culture in these countries of the Maghreb have strongly conditioned their subsequent capitalist social and economic development, more inclined to integrate itself into an assumed relationship of dependency for the Moroccan and Tunisian bourgeoisies than to seek autonomy like the nascent Algerian bourgeoisie. This also partly explains the acceptance by the subaltern classes of the traditionally inegalitarian social hierarchy in Morocco and to a lesser degree Tunisia, while this was systematically contested in Algeria where an egalitarian spirit is well anchored among the popular layers. This posture in Algeria proceeds more from the conditions of fierce resistance to the process of expropriation-privatisation led by French colonialism than from attachment to the "socialist ideology" which marked the first decades of independence.

4. These cultural and historical aspects do not explain everything. The emergence of social struggles which increasingly occupy a significant place in the politics of the region is directly linked to the increasingly neoliberal policies followed by the governments of the three countries. The development of capitalist structures converges towards a common point - a direct economic dependency with world capitalism (banks, industrial groups, services and so on), even if Algerian capitalism manages a certain autonomy, notably at the financial level, because of its energy income through oil and gas. This dependency generates a form of exploitation of the same type of the workers and the environment, with increasingly sharp insecurity for workers on the one hand and a pillage of natural resources on the other (hydrocarbons, phosphates or agricultural products), without concern for ecological and environmental equilibriums directly affected by the world climate crisis. At the social level, this evolution leads to a growth in social inequality. There is also an underhanded desire to integrate the new sub-Saharan migrants into the economy informally so as to better exploit them.

This evolution leads, in the case of Morocco, to intense "development" in tourism, cars and free trade zones and immense areas relegated to the periphery like the Rif and the Atlas. It is the same in Tunisia which experiences the same type of predatory appropriation and unequal distribution of its natural resources, with the same type of geographical development and territorial unevenness. Between "a useful country" along the Mediterranean Sahel, and a western and south western back country, inequalities appear. This explains why the revolutionary process underway started from this part of the territory in 2011. It also explains why the revolt in Morocco began in the Rif.

This social and territorial inequality is slightly different in Algeria despite its vast territory. That does not however exclude the same dynamic being underway. The developmentalist logic employed by Algerian capitalism for the first thirty years of independence was informed by the concern for a global integration of territories and populations. Above all it engendered a movement of population and growing urbanisation around the big urban centres but also towns of average size. From this viewpoint, the recurrent and significant revolts in Kabylie should not obscure the equally numerous revolts in the big urban centres. The protests in Algiers, Constantine, Bejaia, Annaba or Ouargla in the Mزاب valley - the latter two being presented as "southern revolts" so as to regionalise them - all have an urban character. These are "urban struggles", that is a progressive generalisation of urban social movements, systems of contradictory social practices which challenge the established order on the basis of specific contradictions of the urban problematic.

But, just as there is no such thing as "socialism in one country", we could say there is no development integrated in the context of the capitalism of one country. Breaking with this project from the end of the 1980s, the policies pursued have sought the destruction of a productive apparatus which was certainly stuttering but nonetheless real. The economic, industrial, energy or agricultural project led by the government of Abdelaziz Bouteflika from 1999 onwards sought a "consistent" integration in the neoliberal economy and world market. It resulted not only in an industrial crumbling but also a crumbling of the territorial structure engaged in an overall redevelopment whose main objective was to facilitate the circulation of commodities and investments of foreign capital (east-west and trans-Saharan highway, mobile telephony, big dam projects, drilling in the Sahara water table, solar energy and shale gas, and so on).

5. The corollary of this search for integration in the world market and the neoliberal economy is competition between the bourgeoisies of the three countries, notably between the ruling bourgeois bureaucracy in Algeria and Morocco's Makhzen (royal institutions under the French protectorate and subsequently). If this competition takes place in an underhanded manner between the Tunisian and Moroccan tourist industries, with the latter drawing dividends from the weakening of the former, the "cold peace" between the Algerian regime and the Moroccan king does not conceal the desire of the two regimes to take the leadership in subcontracting with world imperialism in the region and indeed Africa as a whole. Which explains the major projects around highways and the Casablanca-Tangiers TGV, and also the highlighting of the Algerian army's capacity to secure the regime and police it on behalf of the world powers.

At the economic level, the Algerian regime is struggling to overcome its "backwardness" in relation to Morocco, seen from the angle of level of insertion in the neoliberal economy and the world market. From this viewpoint the closure of the borders between the two countries has been a stroke of luck for the Algerian regime. For if these borders should open, they would offer European and US firms operating in Morocco the horizon of a cheap conquest of the Algerian market. This would place the Algerian economy, slowly liberalizing, before an unequal competition. The French car firm Renault, for example, which has a big factory in Tangiers which entered into production in February 2012 (170,000 vehicles per year in 2013 and 400,000 in the medium term, 90% of production being for export) could benefit from the normalization of the Algerian-Moroccan frontier. This would allow it to satisfy, from Moroccan territory - and not from France or Romania as is currently the case - an incessantly growing Algerian demand for cars. Which would render obsolete any vague desire for investment in this area in Algeria.

6. This inter-governmental competition constructs a common basis for the people of the region, notably the working masses. The populations of the three countries do not benefit (except in a very socially selective manner) from the wealth and potentiality of their respective territory. This dominant neoliberal logic increasingly marginalises layers of the population and entire regions with its constant deepening of social and territorial inequalities. If this phenomenon is ideologically admitted in Morocco and Tunisia, it is gaining ground in Algerian culture despite resistance, which explains the recurrent revolts.

Thus we are witnessing, in these three countries, the emergence of a diversified, social, trade union, environmental, cultural and associative movement which constitutes the matrix of opposition to the authoritarian regimes and their anti-democratic and neoliberal policies. Through their battles and resistance, they give consistency to political demands and to the social and democratic struggle.

Politically and ideologically, this resistance remains without a social and democratic revolutionary project. The phantom of Islamism resurges in a context of a global ascent of the far right around the world. The term "Islamism" has many definitions now, from the cultural to the political. The domination of Islam over the mores and culture of the peoples of the Maghreb is not a new fact. The independence of the three countries has unfortunately not completed the cultural and democratic dimension of the revolutionary process, even if it has followed different and uneven trajectories in the three countries, more "secularising" in Tunisia, subordinate and institutionalized in Morocco and over-politicised in Algeria. The rise of political Islam has consolidated this conservatism and distanced the necessary advance towards a secularisation of public space and institutions. It is necessary today to return to the meagre conquests of independence in this area.

The response should be however to analyse each movement identifying with Islam in its real dynamic and to go beyond the simple formal reading of its expression. Today, in the eyes of the people, the danger is above all a regional degeneration which could lead to a "Daeshisation" from the outside. Which rather strengthens the internal front around the regimes that for now show no great signs of exhaustion despite the illness and age of their respective kings and presidents.

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