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Arab revolutions

What remains of the Arab Spring?

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It is now in vogue – in our present increasingly short-term and short-sighted times – to ask this question to the tune of Charles Trenet's song: “What remains of those beautiful days?”. The euphoria of 2011 has given way to the melancholia of those disillusioned with the revolution, when it is not the dumb satisfaction of the supporters of the “ancien régime”, hostile to the uprising from the start on the pretext that nothing good would come out of it.

Let us start with this latter argument. The idea that the deeply iniquitous and despotic old order was a bulwark against “Islamic extremism” is as foolish as the belief that alcoholism is a prophylactic against liver disease! The manifestations of religious extremism that we see here or there are but symptoms of a trend that has been at work for decades, a trend produced both directly and indirectly by the same regional order that imploded in 2011.

Let us take Syria for example. It is obvious that the transformation of the armed forces by Hafez el-Assad into a Praetorian guard of the regime, based on minority religious sectarianism, was likely to feed sectarian rancours within the majority. Let us imagine that the Egyptian president were Coptic Christian, that his family dominated the economy of the country, that three-quarters of the officers of the Egyptian army were also Coptic and that the elite corps of the Egyptian army were close to one hundred per cent Coptic. Would one be astonished to see “?Muslim extremism” thriving in Egypt? Yet the proportion of Alawites in Syria is comparable with that of Copts in Egypt, that is to say approximately one tenth of the population.

Besides, only poorly informed people are unaware of the fact that Bashar al-Assad's regime deliberately fed Syrian Sunni jihadism, by facilitating its intervention in Iraq at the time of the U.S. occupation as well as by releasing its militants from Syrian prisons in 2011, at the very moment when the regime was brutally repressing and arresting thousands of democrats of the Syrian uprising.

The proliferation of ultrafundamentalists in the Middle East is actually the direct product of the disastrous heritage of the rival Baathist dictatorships of Syria and Iraq, combined with the no less disastrous effect of the American occupation of the latter and the fierce competition that has pitted against each other the two rival bastions of regional Islamic fundamentalism: the Wahhabi Saudi kingdom and the Khomeinist Iranian republic. As one might expect, this proliferation is in full flow given the deep destabilization that naturally and inevitably accompanies any political rising. When an abscess is punctured, the pus escapes from it. It is quite silly to believe that it would have been better to keep the abscess.

Let us now return to the question we started with: what remains of the Arab Spring? The answer is straightforward: the regional revolutionary process is still only at its beginning. It will take many years, nay several decades, before the shock wave that sprang out of the depths of the irremediably corrupt regional order leads to a new stabilization of Arab societies. And this is indeed why the expression “Arab Spring” was mistaken from the outset: it was inspired by sweet illusion that the regional uprising was driven only by a thirst for democracy that could be quenched by free elections.

To believe this, one must ignore the fact that the mainspring of the 2011 explosion is socio-economic: this mainspring is decades of blockage of regional development, resulting in record rates of unemployment – in particular among young people and graduates. The corollary of this observation is that the revolutionary process that began in 2011 will end only when a solution is brought forward that makes it possible to come out of the socio-economic dead end – a solution which could be progressive as well as regressive, of course, because the best is never certain, alas, but no more than the worst is certain!

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This is indeed why the “Islamist winter” in Tunisia and Egypt, in which the doomsayers hastened to see the final result of the process for these two countries, proved so brief. The failure of the Nahda and the Muslim Brotherhood governments was determined above all by their inability to find the slightest solution to the socio-economic problems in a context of worsening unemployment. This failure was foreseeable, and it was foreseen. Likewise, one can today predict that the restoration of the ancien régime implemented by General Sissi in Cairo will fail for the same reason, the same causes producing the same effects and similar economic policies leading to similar results.

For the Arab uprising to lead to a true modernization of Arab societies, new leaderships embodying the progressive aspirations of the millions of young people who rose up in 2011 will need to emerge and impose themselves. It is only on this condition that the revolutionary process will clear its own original path, equally distant from both the ancien régime and the reactionary oppositions that the ancien régime itself generated.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [“Que reste-t-il du Printemps arabe??”](#) in **L'Orient Littéraire**.