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Algeria

“The top military hierarchy is part of the ruling oligarchy”

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More than two months have passed since the outbreak of the February 22 popular movement. In retrospect, and in view of the goals that the movement has set for itself, namely the ending of the system, do you not feel that there is a road map, from the regime, which is being unrolled after each Friday? A kind of orderly transition with scheduled withdrawals, there is a tone and a timing that gives the impression that the popular movement supports and/or is supported in the rollout, precisely, of this roadmap.

Indeed, we are in the controlled transition scenario, to the extent that the regime, the de facto power – inasmuch as there is a de facto regime - imposes a line of march. Moreover, we have just received an invitation from Bensalah (the interim Presidency) for a consultation meeting (around the July 4th election, editor's note). There are therefore these attempts to involve everyone in this road map involving a controlled transition, which should culminate with the election on July 4 in a President of the Republic.

This means that we are still in the same authoritarian “system” with its rules, its organization, its administration, and so on, its reflexes. But what millions of Algerians, the popular masses, say is the opposite: “Yetnahaw gaÅ¢”, “Yaskout enidham”, which means radical change.

As we have seen, even after the resignation of Belaiz (President of the Constitutional Council), the mobilization has increased and the people's movement has reiterated its rejection of the system and its road map which is, in effect, its continuity.

For, beyond its authoritarian, liberticidal nature, its monarchical excesses, the system is identified with disaster. An economic and social disaster; a direct consequence of neoliberal policies and recipes.

So, it's a system that has proven to be bankrupt. On the social level: a high unemployment rate, the decline in purchasing power, the SNMG (minimum guaranteed national wage) which has not been increased for at least nine years, wages which are the lowest in the Mediterranean, the incredible devaluation of the dinar.

This has been seen in the explosion of imports erected outright as a model of substitution for domestic production. It has been seen in the big projects: how big infrastructure projects have come to fill the order books of multinationals, when they could have served the construction of the national economy. All that has been announced as foreign direct investment (FDI), industrialization projects, is bankruptcy.

We can see it in what they presented to us as a car industry which, in fact, is only one sixth of what we had in the 1970s. Austerity, decreed with the 2015 budget law, with its severe budget cuts (...). It is these combined disasters that are also the roots of the *hirak* (movement). The 5th term being only the straw that broke the camel's back.

What is your reading of power relations in the regime?

It goes without saying that we are not privy to the secrets of the gods. We do not operate with a crystal ball. The

reading of the events first reveals the weight of the oligarchs, whose existence predates the Bouteflika regime. Of course, the latter promoted his own oligarchs. Both categories of oligarch have been enriched by the state.

Today, the “old oligarchs” claim their share. It is also from this reorganization, with its cleavages, that the pressures to renegotiate come, hence the networks of the former apparatus of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS) that would be acting and so on. But we will not speculate too much. What can be said, however, is that this struggle does not resonate with the claims of the *hirak*.

These are struggles between groups with vested interests, some impose their reinstatement in the circle of political decision making, and others continue to take control of this same political regime. This is not a class struggle, because it is a struggle between the factions in power.

How do you see the role of the army today? A positive or a reactionary role?

It is clear that the current crisis has accelerated the return to the forefront of the army. A crisis that obviously amplifies its role. A role questioned at least since the second term of Bouteflika and the defeat of the group around General Lamari/Benflis.

In parallel with the decline of the role of the army, that of the power of money has, on the other hand, grown. What we observe today with the *hirak* is that the takeover of power passes through the army. The hierarchy of the army, its Chief of Staff in this case, plays the role of guarantor of the continuity of the regime in a sort of recomposition. A recomposition where the army becomes again a very important actor in the centres of political decision.

How far can the army be or become a real instrument of change?

With the current leadership, it is not possible. We have just verified it again. The military hierarchy tries to contain us in a constitutional solution. However, this clearly signifies the continuity of the regime. The solutions, again, cannot be legal. And the political solution is not in the Constitution.

From a practical point of view, how can the army suggest, initiate, lead or support a political solution that remains to be defined?

Let's start by not making the army a brake. By moving rapidly towards removing all obstacles to the effective exercise of democratic freedoms. Because we are still today unable to assemble as a group on the forecourt of the Grande Poste. There are cops now who ... occupy the square and forbid it and the public media are not so open (...).

When you say that the army should not act as a brake, isn't this army manoeuvring?

Currently, it is the military hierarchy incarnated by Gaid Salah which sets the course, and which rolls out its roadmap of a controlled transition. It's a forced passage. Even though in his speeches, Gaïd Salah pretends to support the *hirak* and the application of articles 7 and 8. Even if he gives the impression of attacking some names. For him, the slogan “Khaoua” (“fraternity here”) is just for consumption. Because in fact, from a point of view of social classes, a “Khaoua” with those who represent the oligarchy is not possible. This is not possible regarding interests which are connected and well understood. See all these companies and private groups controlled by former soldiers, who benefit from the public order book, largesse and benefits.

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The top military hierarchy also forms a part of the ruling oligarchy and when the people demand “Yetnhaw gaÃ¢” (“The whole system must go), it includes Gaid Salah. Do not slow down, remove obstacles to freedom, to allow Algerians – workers, students, unemployed – to organize and open a national debate so that all ideas, proposals can be known and discussed freely, and from that we can go to solutions.

For the PST, the solution goes through a Constituent Assembly.

Yes, a sovereign Constituent Assembly, representative – which is important – of the democratic and social interests and aspirations of the masses, that is to say the majority of Algerians.

It is this Constituent Assembly, elected in a democratic, transparent way, which includes the direct control of the process by the popular masses, which will elaborate a new Constitution with a deep reorganization of the state, the institutions, which will have to organize the effective exercise of freedoms, economy, the place of religion, languages, equal rights for men and women, where the economy must serve the satisfaction of social needs.

We certainly need to end a regime that concentrates all power in the hands of one man, a system that returns power to the elected representatives of the people, whether they are at the local or central level. A parliamentary system without a Senate chamber to control and execute the tricks of the presidential third party. But all this must be debated.

((How can “radical disengagement” of the popular movement be transcended to achieve the implementation of this roadmap?

Through self-organization. Social movements are already represented through combative unions. In addition, the *hirak* must necessarily consider the election of its representatives. It’s possible. And why not consider, after the Constituent Assembly has been elected, the formation of a government which will emanate from it? Instead of doing the opposite.

But before you reach that point, and in the perspective that the whole regime goes, you’re looking at a provisional body, a provisional government ... that will lead and organize this whole process.

Yes. The proposals are not lacking, and we will not add to them. This incredible *hirak* that we experience means we must rise above these technical contingencies. And it is through the national debate, by this national debate, that these technical aspects will be taken care of.

Isn’t the Constituent Assembly a Pandora’s box insofar as this formula carries the risk that a fundamentalist, retrograde movement, sweeps the board? Otherwise, a remake of the elections of 1991 with the victory of the FIS in the parliamentary elections, do you take this risk into account or not?

For us, it’s a discourse that is malicious propaganda ...

That’s the history, though ...

But it happened almost 30 years ago. Those who claim that history will repeat as in 1992 do not want to see the collapse of Islamism. We are on the 9th Friday of demonstrations and the Islamists cannot even form a compact bloc

to even demonstrate their existence. Of course, at the margin there are epiphenomena that some tend to amplify.

This is a scarecrow that the Bouteflika regime used and that the regime still uses to lock us into its road map. Political Islamism has collapsed. And it's not just an Algerian reality. We see its defeat everywhere. Islamists do not fall, like that, from heaven. In Algeria, since the 1990s, armed Islamism has been defeated. Moderates are disqualified by their participation in the regime.

Now, can it be reborn from the ashes ... it's possible, but there's no point in speculating about it. Now, if you say religiosity, it's something else. Religiosity is not a political project unlike Islamism. It is, of course, classical religious conservatism, present in our families, neighbourhoods, workplaces and so on but it has nothing to do with the “*doula islamia*” (theocratic state).

But this religious substratum, this potential electoral reservoir, is it likely to produce, eventually, a mass fundamentalist movement?

This is the kind of scenario that we cannot construct. It's like projecting on the scenario of a nuclear war. We are starting from concrete elements, and the concrete elements say that political Islamism has collapsed. We are at the intersection, at the crossroads where everything is possible: the best and the worst. But, objectively, the evolution of the *hirak* is not in line with what you say. Islamism is no longer audible or visible. Concretely, we are living through a great, historical movement, but be careful, I'm not saying that Islamism is dead. I say it collapsed.

But aren't the Islamists in a tactical position, in strategic withdrawal, awaiting, opportunely, the right time to resurrect and steal victory, as has happened everywhere with the Arab Spring?

Again, it's speculating. In the absolute, everything is possible. But today, it is neither constructive nor productive, nor serious, nor interesting to speak of Islamism being reborn when we cannot see it or hear it in this formidable *hirak*, half of which is women, where there is a revival of workers' struggles and so on. I prefer to focus on that: it's concrete. I add that for the Constituent Assembly, the danger comes less from Islamism than from the liberals and their money resources.

The PST called for self-organization. It is difficult to do on the ground. Especially in back country Algeria. Why convergence is impossible to put into practice and to achieve?

I am optimistic. Why do you want that in just two months of *hirak*, we can set up a perfect organization? Let's not forget that the country is emerging from a very difficult situation, made of systematic de-structuring, depoliticization ... it is true, it is laborious, but the results are there: the *hirak* is better structured, is organized a little more every day.

In the demonstrations, the slogans are increasingly political, better elaborated. The student movement, for those who do not know it, is setting up a national coordination (...) for the labour movement, we are progressing seriously, either through the dynamics of re-appropriation of the UGTA by the workers or by the CSA (Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions).

There are collectives of women being set up. Even in neighbourhoods like Saâd Hamdine (Bir Mourad Raâs, Algiers) and also inside the country, neighbourhood committees are emerging. We must see and admire the agoras,

the “halaqate” (seminars) of political debates that are held throughout the country ... it's a whole process and starts from the bottom.

We hope that other sectors join this movement so that self-organization reaches its critical mass. This is to say that even if it does not progress as we wish, self-organization progresses anyway. Self-organization, this is what will give its content to the *hirak*.

Why do you think the *Hirak* had not clearly articulated social issues, the issue of women's rights and so on? Is it because of its cross-class character, or is it a question of hierarchy of objectives: the *hirak* first fixing itself the goal of clearing out the system?

Equality in rights between men and women is first and foremost about democratic issues. The movement of February 22 gave ample evidence of its popular character. An obvious popular dimension. Even if we also find there the liberal professions, the tradesmen, the middle layers in general, but the essential dimension is there. And if we are not, *stricto sensu*, talking of a proletarian, working class character, this relates to a problem that is not peculiar to Algeria, namely the decline of class consciousness and so on.

We experience it. The workers do not come to the *hirak* as such, not as a class force: they come individually. The popular dimension is present in the sense of the popular masses, Algerians from below, popular neighbourhoods, which permeate the *hirak*. The slogans, moreover, hegemonic in this *hirak*, come to us from the stadiums, and therefore from the popular neighbourhoods.

To return to the question of articulation, we must admit that it is a serious problem. But that's not true everywhere. And even in Algiers, when slogans about unemployment, social justice are launched, they are quickly taken up by the crowds. But let's be clear: every time these social issues are articulated, pressure is exerted by the regime and the liberal opposition to say “no, this is not the moment”, including for the questions of democratic rights, including women's rights.

So, if these questions of purchasing power, blocked horizons, unemployment, lower status of women are not asked now, when will they be? Being at the root of the *hirak*, these issues must be at the heart of the process. Therefore, we supported the principle of the general strike, knowing that it would put social issues, the working class, the workers at the centre of the political battle and thus give a progressive meaning to the popular movement.

There are arrests and legal proceedings against certain oligarchs and figures in the system. Operation “clean hands”, or witch hunt?

In the PST, as in the *hirak*, we say that the judiciary, under orders, is part of this system to be cleared out. Before, the judges were under the orders of the Bouteflika regime, today they are under the orders of Gaid Salah and the new masters. It's a logic of factions. If we are cleaning the Algerian house, the tenants of this regime are also involved. Of course, everyone must be judged, but bourgeois justice, which is part of the dominant order, must also be radically changed

[1] <https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/mahmoud-rechidi-secretaire-general-du-parti-socialiste-des-travailleurs-pst-la-haute-hierarchie-militaire-fait-partie-de-loligarchie-au-pouvoir-04-05-2019>.