



Asociace
pro mezinárodní
otázký
Association
for International
Affairs

Briefing Paper 7/2011

Why Algerians don't make revolution?

—

October 2011

Why Algerians don't make revolution?

—

Karim Amellal

4 October 2011



Why Algerians don't make revolution?

After decades of political sclerosis and inertia, the Maghreb and the Middle East have brutally become a row of dominoes. In this part of the world that has been considered as culturally resistant to any democratic change for a long time, values of liberty and democracy are brandished like banners by young people yearning for a major change in their lives.

Algeria didn't escape the movement. In January 2011 several unrests took place in the country. Five people were killed and several hundred injured. Unemployed and poorly housed made up the bulk of protesters. All the ingredients were gathered for a revolution: a spark (rising prices of food), a sclerosis policy, an aging leader at the helm for over 10 years, a growing inequality despite oil wealth, corruption, etc. And yet the country stood relatively intact by the massive upheaval that was rocking all around in the Arab world. For a nation built with revolutions, it's quite surprising. So let's try to see why.

First, we must remember that Algeria has known a similar revolution 20 years ago - in October 1988 - which keeps shaping the national imagination and most people's perception of what's now happening abroad. In 1988, the regime was breathless because of a strong economic crisis linked with very inept political choices, and a huge popular discontent spreading on the basis of the feeling of « hagra » - injustice mixed with resentment. When the riots broke out in Algiers and the militaries (designated by the acronym ANP for National Popular Army) drew in blood the crowd gathered in the capital city to express its anger, the regime was completely discredited and delegitimized. Corrupt and highly incompetent, President Chadli Bendjedid was ousted both by a popular revolt and a cohort of greedy and power-hungry generals, finally fed up with their own puppet who they manipulated behind the scene. Therefore the road was open for a democratic transition that lasted three years and brought about a multiparty system and freedom of press and association. But only one party succeeded in matching the Algerians' expectations and in providing the only credible alternative to the regime: the Islamist party FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), founded in 1989 and immediately authorized. The FIS, extremely powerful during this period, won the 1990 local elections and was on the launch pad to win the general elections of 1991, which would have given the Islamists the access to State power. The military intervened in a coup d'état to stop the Islamists and regain power. The democratic transition crashed and the civil war started: the GIA (Armed Islamic Groups) emerged and a dramatic struggle against the Algerian government was engaged. The civil war, responsible for around 200 000 dead, ended in late 90's with new President Bouteflika and the amnesty he gave to most guerillas.

In the new context of the Arab spring, everybody in Algeria recalls the unrest and tragic consequences of the transition process started with the fall of Chadli – in many respects similar to Mubarak or Ben Ali but much less powerful as they were – and ended ten years later. Despite the considerable concerns of the people, and especially the youth (half the country's population is under 25), the civil war's memory is still fresh in the minds: by weighting the pros and cons of a revolt, most people consider that it is now too early to engage in a process whose outcome is far from certain. The street is definitely not ready for a



Briefing Paper 7/2011

Why Algerians don't make revolution?

–
October 2011

new revolution that could bring unpredictable changes – and why not radical Islamists, once more, to power.

The second issue we need to keep in mind is the important differences that exist between Algeria and its neighbors. Freedom of expression and a relative – but real – multiparty system are the components of an authoritarian regime that is not a dictatorship. In the streets of Algiers, Constantine or Oran, every Algerian is free to speak and express his/her distrust of the government. The print media are rather free – as opposed to television which remains under strict state control – and it's very common to read in newspaper columns that a minister is involved in a corruption case. Despite all the democratic deficits of the Algerian regime in terms of rights, freedoms and transparency and a still heavy weight of the militaries, it would be an exaggeration to describe Algeria as closed, autocratic or dictatorial as Ben Ali's Tunisia and Mubarak's Egypt were.

Thirdly, after the turmoil of the 90's, Algeria is now a wealthy country with considerable oil and natural gas export revenues, thanks to the economic upturn experienced in recent years and the rising prices of oil. In 2010, the foreign exchanges reserves reached \$150 billions – i.e. more than those of the US (\$140 billions), the UK (118) or Canada (63)! Although these figures mask a tough social reality (with unofficial unemployment rate reaching 25% and around 23% of the population living below the poverty line), it gives the government a certain room for maneuver. In the wake of Ben Ali's fall on January 14th and Mubarak's on February 11th, the Algerian regime was forced to make concessions to make sure that the demonstrations do not degenerate into a mass revolt. The state of emergency has been finally lifted after 19 years and during the spring a very substantial redistribution plan has been adopted, including a massive rise of public spending intended mainly for housing and employment. Moreover, in a television address to the nation, president Bouteflika announced a revision of the Constitution and the setting up of a committee involving political leaders and experts to comply with the principles of parliamentary democracy.

Have the promises of freedoms, change and money durably extinguishes the flames of protest? The marches recently organized in Algiers by a heteroclite “National Coordination for Democratic Change” – a group of unofficial unionists, opponents and rights defenders – has not met the expected success and support and was unlikely to destabilize the government. Perhaps this is the last reason why no deep political change has happened in Algeria despite the ongoing feeling of “hagra” shared by the people: there are no forces anymore able to catalyze the protests. Indeed, Islamists are still mostly out of the game and those, moderate ones, who participate in the governmental coalition do not benefit from the same support as the banned FIS had benefited at the beginning of the 90's. Opposition parties - and mainly the one with a popular basis: the socialist party (FFS) of former opponent Hocine Ait-Ahmed - are very divided and not strong enough to emerge as a credible alternative to Bouteflika's coalition.

Finally, the Algerians carefully scrutinize the ongoing transition process in Tunisia and Egypt. Tunisia is still far from a democratic regime and at this stage no sound alternative has emerged from the “Jasmine Revolution”: there is a risk that the great hopes of the youth remain unfulfilled and get strangled in an endless cycle of political uncertainty. In Egypt, six months after Mubarak's fall, square Tahrir's protesters are still waiting for the major change they struggled for and signs of impatience are amplifying with the very low speed of reforms



Asociace
pro mezinárodní
otázký
Association
for International
Affairs

Briefing Paper 7/2011

Why Algerians don't make revolution?

—

October 2011

undertaken by the militaries – although Mubarak's trial may be a significant step forward and a massive signal sent to other autocrats.

Algerians now want a democratic evolution, more jobs and less corruption. Not a hazy revolution. But the revolutionary fervor that is firmly rooted in the national spirit could surface again if the legitimate aspirations of the people remain ignored.

The author, a collaborator of AMO, is a French-Algerian writer, CEO of Stand Alone Media and lecturer at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris (Sciences Po)