

# **DEPLOYMENTS OF STREET POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY MENA**

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The year 2011 has witnessed a completely unexpected surge and spread of street pressures and toppling of what has long appeared to be strongly established dictatorial regimes in the Arab World: military leaderships issued from '*Coups d'Etat*' and who had subtly traded their uniforms into civilian coats and ties, under the appearance of democratic masquerades. The "*Arab Spring*" phenomenon has thus been born and has proven to be a very effective trigger of social and political change in the MENA region. Although only a few countries seem to have achieved, to different degrees, some relative change so far, i.e. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, none of the countries of the region, including Israel, may however consider themselves as safe heavens from the ongoing surges. And even in the four countries which have so far experienced some change, the process is still ongoing through a real jump into the unknown. Furthermore, street expressions of discontent have not only marked the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, but other forms of street claims have also marked most European capitals during the same period. Is that to say that new determinants of major changes are switching in present times from often off limits official institutional buildings, i.e. parliament buildings and executive offices, to street arenas which are more easily accessible to all? Probably! But nothing of this all is new.

Street expressions of social and political discontent have always prevailed, even though real power has always managed to remain within the grasp of established political and social leaderships, themselves operating as mere tools of execution guided by the economically and financially dominant national and international spheres.

## **A. Historic Background:**

History books report that as early as 44 BC, after the assassination of Julius Caesar and during his cremation in the Forum, an "incensed mob took firebrands from the pyre and attacked the houses of Brutus and Cassius"! Later in the sixth century, the "Nika" riots (also known as the "Nika" revolt) which took place in Constantinople (532 AD) have been reported as extremely violent with "nearly half the city being burned or destroyed and tens of thousands of people killed". The Boston Bread Riots (between 1710 and 1713) which were reported to be riots by the poor of Boston in response to food shortages and high bread prices all ended with casualties. A little more than one century later (1863), the New York Draft Riots were reported to be among the most destructive civil uprising in American history, killing more than 120 people and injuring up to 8,000 individuals! More recently, the April 1968 Chicago West Side Riots (in the aftermaths of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis) and the August 1968 Democratic Convention Chicago clashes in the streets and parks between police and anti-Vietnam war protesters are yet other testimonies of the worldwide prevailing of street expressions of collective anger. Not to mention major well renown street events such as the May 1968 popular uprising and civil unrest in France, the 1976 South African Soweto riots, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, the

Russian people's demonstrations in the aftermaths of the 1993 constitutional crisis, the still ongoing and repeatedly violent street clashes in central Athens, the 2005 Maldivian civil unrest which lead to events that supported the democratic reform of the country, the 2009 anti-government riots in Bangkok, Thailand, etc... From further investigating into the riot issue, it just appears to some authors that "rioting is a human tradition and that ...people need little excuses to turn into a mob and stage a riot". There certainly are profound reasons for social unrest in most times; but pulling a crowd together is simply proving, in present times, to be much easier than any time before, mostly that mobilized mobs are often constituted with easily manipulable and non politicized teenagers.

Most particularly, in the MENA region, the list of situations of unrest and social disobedience may also be long and much revealing of the meager resistance of the prevailing equilibrium of forces. But, not until 2011 has any one of these movements been able to topple the then apparently strongly established policed regimes. In most cases, all preceding uprisings took either the form of isolated events or were rapidly dislocated in bloodshed terror. Let's take just a few revealing and most recent examples: In **Egypt**, a series of situations of unrest have marked the most recent decades. Among the most notable ones are the 1977 Bread Riots which had affected most major cities in January 1977. The riots were a spontaneous uprising by hundreds of thousands of lower class people protesting World Bank and IMF-mandated termination of state subsidies on basic foodstuffs. As many as seventy-nine people were killed and 800 wounded in the protests, which were only ended with the deployment of the army and the re-institution of the subsidies. Much later, on February 25, 1986, burst the *Conscription riots*: around 17,000 Egyptian conscripts of the Central Security Forces (CSF), an Egyptian para-military force, staged violent protests in and around Cairo. The riot came as a reaction to the rumor that their three year service would be prolonged by one additional year. The incited conscripts targeted tourist areas and destroyed two hotels. The regime then relied on the army which was sent in to restore order. The riot lasted for 3 days and a total of 107 people died, according to official reports. In 2007 the *Food Price Crisis* touched large swathes of the population which had been hit as food prices, and particularly the price of bread had doubled as a result of producers exploiting a shortage that had existed since 2006. Had thus resulted violent clashes in which a boy was killed from a gunshot to the head after Egyptian police intervened in violent demonstrations in Mahalla. And finally, in 2011 exploded the '*Sahat Attahrir*' Revolution which took place following a popular uprising that began on Tuesday, 25 January 2011 against the then 82 years old ailing autocrat, and is still continuing against the remains of his firmly rooted military regime! Thus in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak who had been in power for more than three decades resigned on February 11th, 2011. He left office after only 18 days of protests in Cairo and in other cities, rapidly destabilized by the unrest which was basically driven by "poverty, rising prices, social exclusion, anger at corruption (Egypt is 98th out of 178 countries) and personal enrichment among the political elite", as well as by a demographic bulge of young people who were unable to find work (beyond 43% of the active population).

As per **Tunisia**, it has long been known for its authoritarian stability under a skillful combination of co-optation and repression applied to its 11 million inhabitants by the then 74 year old ruler who indifferently used electoral manipulation, intimidation and multi-faceted efforts to co-opt leaders of ruling party organs and civil society organizations, while still firmly applying the mighty force of his internal security apparatus against any kind of

resistance. A few uprisings have been reported during the last three decades (a Libyan supported insurrection in January 1980, the "bread riots" in January 1984 and the 2008 'Redeyef' jobs protests, commonly known as the precursor of the Tunisian revolution). Otherwise, not until December 2010 had Tunisia ever occupied the front scenes as a theater of social unrest. What began with one young man's desperate protest against unemployment in 'Sidi Bouzid', spread quickly to other regions and later involved other issues. Multiple fringes of the population representing all social classes took to the streets in several cities, including Tunis, to "condemn the government's economic policies, its repression of all critics, and a mafia-style corruption that enriches members of the president's family". Thus, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali has been forced out of power after nearly a quarter of a century. He resigned in January 2011 after weeks of protests against poverty, corruption (Tunisia is 59th out of 178) and unemployment of youth (about 31% of the active population). Was thus launched the 'Jasmin' revolution, which was due to trigger the awakening of most other Arab countries within what has commonly been named the "**Arab Spring**": a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protest has since been occurring in the entire Arab world and, beyond Egypt and Tunisia, has also toppled the Libyan ruler Muammar Kadhafi, ousted the Yemeni president Abdallah Saleh and is seriously shaking the foundations of the Syrian Baath party 'alaouite' leadership headed by Bashar Al Assad.

Most particularly in **Libya**, Col Muammar Gaddafi has been ousted after four decades of his "Jamahyria" expression of "democratorship" power, when rebels took the capital Tripoli in August 2011, after eight months of civil war in which the Libyan rebels benefitted from the active support of NATO air forces. Libya's uprising began in mid-February 2011 when, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, hundreds of Libyans came out onto the streets of several towns and cities demanding the end of Col Gaddafi's rule. The authorities responded with violence, opening fire on protesters, as the rallies grew and spread across the country. The revolt soon evolved into an armed conflict opposing forces loyal to Col Gaddafi based in Tripoli and a few other cities against rebel forces based in the eastern port city of Benghazi. Here too, corruption (Libya's rank is 146th among 178), unemployment (relatively high ratios for an oil producing country) and search for human dignity were among the main motives of the uprisings. In **Yemen**, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for more than 33 years, has finally stepped down in January 2012 and left the country after almost 12 months of violence between demonstrators and security forces. His country is known to be the Arab World's most impoverished country. Beginning in February 2011, hundreds of people were killed in violence between security forces and demonstrators calling for an end to Saleh's iron-fist hold on power. The powerful 'Hashid' tribal federation sided with the protesters. The President's compound in Sana was attacked and after multiple procrastinations, he finally seemed to welcome the idea of "power-sharing" while his military aircrafts were still shelling positions of protest-supporting troops. It is finally in light of a UN Security Council call that he signed a brokered deal by Gulf States and he finally accepted to step down in return for immunity. As per **Syria**, the revolutionary process is underway and will certainly be as enriching in its teachings.

Everywhere else in the Arab World, major protests, and sometimes serious uprisings, have also been reported. This was the case in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. And the process is still underway almost everywhere in the region, not to mention its final impact on the much

expected Palestinian uprising whose two previous *Intifadas* do not seem to have procured the human dignity that Palestinians have legitimately been aspiring to for more than six decades.

## **B. From Peaceful Claims to Violent Clashes:**

Street attempts to express discontent, influence the decision making process, change the course of events or modify already established power equilibrium are multiple. They range from pacific means of collective expression to angry and sometimes violent forms of stability threatening movements. For the purpose of a clearer understanding of the ongoing events in the target region, it may not be superfluous to attempt a terminological clarification of what the local arenas have witnessed.

In most countries of the region, it has long been taken for granted that any surge, be it pacific, any public expression of discontent (تعبير عن الإستياء) or any street expression of anger would have been met by violent reactions of established authorities. Yet, what the regional MENA scene has witnessed during the recent commonly called "Arab Spring" may well carry a wealth of genuinely interesting teachings. If are only to be considered in this context the four countries where the heads of states have been ousted after periods of mighty exercise of power that have lasted for three to four decades, various scenes of ' *Idhtirab* ' "إضطراب" in the form of public disturbances, disorderly outbursts and breaches to civic order and public stability have been spontaneously and surprisingly launched. They were later relayed by the unexpected means of a no controllable IT usage for mass communication, and fed by an active coverage of satellite televisions, thus leading to the encouragement of real turbulences, in the form of overspread agitation, uproars, in the form of tumults and noisy expressions of discontent, as well as real turmoil mainly leading to mass confusion and agitation. They were first qualified by the then reigning rulers as mere scenes of isolated riots (*shaghab*) "شغب" and chaos (*faoudah*) "فوضى" that classical means of repression would have rapidly neutralized, under previously prevailing circumstances. But, they did not.

In all four countries, turbulent disturbances carried out by increasingly populated crowds and, in a few instances, unruly mobs, progressively took the form of surges and uprisings that openly sought the overthrow of established regimes. The multiplication of street demonstrations, riots, protests and upheavals progressively led to clashes, extreme agitation and political uncertainties. It quickly became evident that these were no longer signs of mere civil unrest or social disobedience, episodically tolerated and/or sometimes efficiently fought and rapidly neutralized in the past, but real tolling of the bell against established state authorities. Tumults and uproars swiftly paved the way to real revolts (Tamarroud) "تمرد", thus launching unprecedented revolutionary processes (thawaraths) "ثورات" in the region. And, beyond the generated signs of seditions (Fitna) "فتنة" and constantly invigorated revolts, it evidently appears that the generated process of change is at its mere beginning, not to mention all other Arab countries of the region which are and will still be directly concerned with this gangrenous outburst, no matter how temporarily successful may their peaceful attempts to plug the breaches be or may their heavily armed forces be deployed!

The engaged process is irreversible and the generalized occurring of real social and political change is still to be seriously expected! Words that were first heard in Tunisian streets have become a common slogan voiced in all other Arab streets: "*Ash-shaab youridou*

*iskat annidham* "الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام" ("The people demand the fall of the regime"), and all street militants have notice that the mechanism functions. Thus, the temptation to give it a try is growing everywhere, despite a growing stubbornness and a deployment of innovative approaches by all other Arab governing leadership to reinforce and maintain their exercised power. Once again, it is only a question of time. And the model is simple: mobilize people in the streets and outnumber the deployed regime forces!

### **C. Actors of the Surge, Revolutionary Patterns and Emerging Claims:**

While observing the birth and nurturing of the various geographic deployments of the Arab spring, it may be worth wondering if there is a common dynamic, or if these are merely a set of national trajectories with some shared features? Can a coherent pattern be discerned amid the flux of these diverse events? The evident answer is that there has been no preliminary consultation between the now visible actors of these surges. In most arenas, there was a clear and evident lack of pre-designated leaders. Spontaneous spokesmen emerged from the crowds. And consequently, there was and there still is a lack of coherent policy platforms.

Normal circumstances of change would have imparted a major role played either by the army, as the most prevailing hierarchical structure, or through organized initiatives led by political party leaderships, more apt to bring about any possibly hoped for change. This is at least what would have been normally expected, given the structured form of such organizations and their apparently deep rootedness within their respective societies. Yet, none of this happened. The activists who have emerged everywhere stemmed out of neighborhood solidarities. These were basically impromptu non-hierarchical youth movements who have paved the way to larger mobs of improvised street fighters, later relayed by a few civil society organizations and surprisingly untamed and courageous unemployed youths and school students. Inactive college degree holders also seized this unique opportunity to voice out their unsatisfied concerns and hope for better and more promising perspectives. Rapidly and efficiently organized in social networks against which repressive forces proved the limits of their prediction capacities, they made of their active blogs an excellent organizational instrument of subversion.

The absence of preplanned action and the lack of structures which could possibly have planned such a challenge to established authorities, explains largely the lack of any political program that these youth movements could have come up with. It therefore is worth wondering what ideas are then coming to the forefront. It has therefore clearly appeared that the emerging claims have no genuine connotation. Beyond the now classical slogan of the "people wanting the fall of the regime", often pop our such common claims as "more democracy", "good governance", "more justice", "jobs", "equality", "a fairer daily existence" as well as "ending corruption" and "rejecting police brutality". They are voiced out more as pious wishes for which no programs of action are set out. The path may thus be long and sinuous before any of these claims is effectively achieved if ever!

### **D. The Main Outcomes:**

Within their domestic boundaries, the 2011 MENA region uprisings have allowed the emergence of two interesting realities that will shape the future of the region: the access to

power of various profiles of Islamist groups and the non predictable conclusion of inadequacies of liberal democratic values as major carriers of societal change.

1. **The raise of Islamist governing Leaderships:** All the countries of the region which have managed to launch new institutional changes in the aftermaths of the Arab Spring and have organized legislative elections have seen the emergence of Islamist majorities: 'Annahda' in Tunisia (90 seats in the newly elected Constitutive Assembly out of a total of 217, i.e. 41,47%), in Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party حزب الحرية والعدالة (affiliated to the Muslim brotherhood) [Al Ikhwane Al Muslimine] obtained 38% of the suffrages, while the hard line Salafist party "Nour" obtained 29%, i.e. 67% for Islamist inspired tendencies. In Libya and until new elections, scheduled for next June, allow a trend to emerge, the Transitional National Council has openly declared its attachment to "Shariaa" inspired choices, while in Morocco, legislative elections organized in November put in the forefront of the governing scene the moderate Islamist "Party of Justice and Development حزب العدالة والتنمية", who won 107 seats out of 395, i.e. 27.08%. What is common to all these parties is that not only have they all been formed during decades of repression, but that they all have so far intelligently capitalized on efforts initially deployed by unorganized crowds of dissatisfied youths. And this is very important for the upcoming phases of the process.

This generalized success of Islamic inspired parties in most elections that have been organized so far, is a clear evidence of the positive impact of their past action, often clandestine, during iron fist years. Their success in harnessing support amongst the population may be explained by their continued efforts deployed during many decades embedding themselves deep within local communities through social welfare and education schemes. Even cemeteries have been transformed into areas of recruitment, taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of mourning families to offer their free services and financial assistance that will pave the way for them to later enter the homes of these families that same night and carry out their mission! This is mostly true in Morocco for the non recognized association "Al Adl Wa Al Ihssane" العدل و الإحسان and in Egypt for the "Ikhwane Al Mouslimine". The temporary absence of Sheikh Abdeslam Yassine's "Al Adl Wa Al Ihssane" in Morocco, has been relayed in the urns by the more moderate Islamist party "Al Adala Wa Attanmya" (Justice and Development) headed by the turbulent Abdelilah BENKIRANE, now Head of the Moroccan Government! In all these countries, these new groups have successfully adapted themselves and their organizations to the contemporary political climate and have also intelligently managed to harness the support of young activists through the careful use of social media.

It may however be pretentious to consider Islamism as a unified doctrine. Diversity of trends along with a multitude of divisions among Islamist movements happens to be a reality. Yet, all those who have so far managed to access decision making positions in these target countries will certainly try to inscribe among their priorities their will to orient their policies through the prism of Islamic values, in styles that may foster the instituting of Islamic banking systems, the progressive restriction of the sale of alcohol, the adaptation of the educational programs, etc... Some of these intentions of reforms have already been mentioned among declared priorities. Yet, adopting democratic values along with defense of individual liberties may also impose themselves as imperative obligations, not to mention the ability of the system mechanisms to neutralize any slight intention of change. It may therefore be instructive to examine within this context what genuine peculiarities would these newly

emerging groups dispose of in the accomplishment of their challenging mission?

Ideologically, Islamist trends have tended to recruit mostly among extremely poor neighborhoods, left out by the development locomotives in precarious socio-economic conditions, thus mostly populating shanty towns in urban outskirts of large cities and/or in extremely impoverished rural areas. As of their organizing leaderships, they are generally well educated and represent the produce of secular groups of doctors, educators and engineers. As per the core content of their strategic choices, they appear to be opportunely dictated by a smart exploitation of the mass dissatisfaction generated by the injustices of capitalism as incarnated by leading western powers! Thus Islamism, beyond the basic non secular and deeply rooted Islamic beliefs and convictions, may politically be described as a cultural reaction to the hegemony that has been favoring oppression and social injustice among the population, namely western support to the decaying regimes. And in this context, it may sure be expected, once in power, that the new leaderships deploy various mechanisms that may reverse the prevailing uneven capitalist inspired social equilibriums. It is therefore also not surprising in this context to note that most Islamist leaderships, at least in Morocco, are issued from former left wing militants who had traded their revolutionary ideas into more Islamist inspired and locally adaptable means of infiltration in the aftermaths of the fall of the Soviet empire. After all, would have they found any ideology, other than Islam, which would have allow their militants to find markets for recruitment five times a day at the occasion of each gathering for the prayer?

**2. The inadequacies of liberal democratic values:** Ever since the fall of the Berlin wall, an arrogantly one dimensional liberal vision of the world has progressively been prevailing. Standing for democracy and for the establishment of democratically inspired regimes in the MENA region has rightfully been preached for by the west, with relatively limited success. During the George W. Bush's Jr. era, a new definition of 'Democracy' has been forged by Rick Haass (Richard Haass, "*Reinforcing Democracy in the Islamic World*", Presentation to the "Council on Foreign Relations", Washington, D.C., December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002.), the then Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, in which he was advocating that American foreign policy would be guided in the future mostly by concerns related to political participation, support for the civil society and due respect for the rule of law. One of his key conditions was that it must be a "process in which the dynamics emerge from the concerned society itself", relayed locally by the 2005 Condoleezza Rice Cairo Speech. These ideas basically served in paving the ground for MEPI. For his part, and less than 5 months after assuming office in the White House, President Barack H. OBAMA voiced out in his Cairo Speech at 'Al Azhar' that he "came to seek a new beginning ...based upon... principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings...and that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose...(thus concluding) We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning". And as if he considered that time was ripe for social movements to shake some regions of the world, or as if he rather had some informed feel for it, he clearly ascertained in his September 2010 speech before the UN General Assembly: "Now, make no mistake: The ultimate success of democracy in the world won't come because the United States dictates it; it will come because individual citizens demand a

say in how they are governed... freedom, justice and peace for the world must begin with freedom, justice, and peace in the lives of individual human beings... each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its own people."

It therefore appears that while it may be evidently established that democracy has been lacking in the region, it cannot be totally excluded either that the US policy visions had totally been missing their aim, when it comes to their multiple direct or indirect pressures on repressive regimes. The trends of the Obama policy in the region seem to have retained completely different strategies. Reading between the lines and considering the role of west supported NGOs over the long run, an evident impact of new style western pressures cannot be easily discarded.

Yet, there is also and mainly something genuine about what has been happening, in terms of democratic deficiencies in the region: the youth have progressively been deserting the political arena as officially orchestrated. The rate of participation to national, regional and local elections has been constantly decreasing, mostly among youth. Political parties, even the historically established ones with a minimal degree of credibility, have progressively been losing grasp over youth, these parties themselves having been reluctant to change their leaderships. Critics referred to them more as Jurassic parks, rather than as dynamic agents of change. The same situation of rejection by youth applies to Trade Unions, the younger generation being globally unemployed, thus in no position to pretend to any union involvement. Thus, what seemed to be incarnating democracy in the region was a merely dramatic play in which the main actors were not visibly operating on the scene.

It therefore dangerously appears that beyond their usage of 'democracy calls' as basic slogans, it might not be evident that the core mass of insurgent youths believe profoundly in politically constrained liberal democracies. So far, they all seem to be lacking political programs simply because of the fact that they were caught by surprise and they therefore continue acting so far as mere street movements. Normally, policy is defined within established structures and institutions. Street may only be a field for anarchy and chaos, legally repressed by the existing laws that normally define a legal status quo basically in favor of the interests of established leaderships. The wishful thinking of the revolted youths may probably lay elsewhere. And even though, they still have not accessed power to deploy their future vision to be; so far, only organized forces have managed to place their tokens, while the end of the turbulence game does not seem to be peeking in the horizon.

Thus, beyond these two main instability focused outcomes, a multitude of other ideas merit further exploration for a better understanding of the lessons to be learnt from this genuine experience as well as for an adequate prediction of the probable future perspectives of the region, both in terms of domestic policies and in terms of international and regional implications: These are mainly (and not exclusively):

- The failure of security based approaches in containing social progress and reform;
- Perspectives of establishment of Instability as a rule for some time to come, in the region and elsewhere, i.e. the globalization of street centered claims: "Occupy as an example" although the objectives are diverse in various parts of the world!



- The emergence of new societal profiles; a return to the decaying neo-Marxist inspired ideas might probably need to be revisited and updated, with plenty of useful teachings for this socially boiling context!
- The pressing need for social reforms based on more attention to people's demands;
- An imperative need for establishing a genuine system of redistribution of wealth;
- Growing demands for public accountability;
- An increasing role of public spheres, civil society and NGO activism;
- Accepting approaches based on realistic tolerance and cautions support for the natural deployment of events;
- An opportunity to an immediate deployment of the international “responsibility to protect” obligations in places like Syria and Bahrain;
- The need for western policy-makers to rethink their approaches to the region and the need for a recalibration of the U.S. Arab policy in the region, including its unlimited support to Israel”;
- Reconsidering the notion of geographic borders and seeking development solutions on a more global basis;
- Rethinking the whole region (including Turkey and Israel) in terms of a Mediterranean perspective that integrates it into a larger European Community.
- Decrypting the relatively passive temporary silence of the Palestinians! Heading towards a third and more determining “Intifada”?

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