

The Impact of COVID-19 on State-Society Relations in North Africa

by Camellia Mahjoubi

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has not hit North Africa as violently as it did in the case of Europe and the United States. In spite of the limited numbers, national governments and local authorities in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia have adopted strict measures that have had significant consequences on civil and human rights. Furthermore, the pandemic economic consequences will be devastating in the short-to-medium term for the already cash-strapped North African countries, posing a major threat to the fragile social contracts between the state and society.

North Africa | Tunisia | Algeria | Morocco | Coronavirus | Domestic policy | Democracy

keywords

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by Camellia Mahjoubi*

On the 28th of May 2020, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) organised a virtual expert briefing on the impact of COVID-19 on State-society relations in North Africa. The meeting was part of the ongoing project "Analysis of Areas of State Fragility in Italy's Foreign Policy Priorities" sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and in the framework of the strategic partnership with the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.

In addition to the two panellists – **Amna Guellali** (Director of Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa) and **Younes Abouyoub** (Director of the UN Governance and State-Building Division for the MENA), participants included IAI senior researchers as well as Italian journalists, international experts and practitioners in the domains of human rights, socio-economic development and democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The webinar started with an evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on human rights in North Africa, and in particular in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Rocked by two large and mutually reinforcing shocks in the last couple of months, notably the health crisis and the ensuing economic downturn, North Africa is one of the regions that worries the international community the most in terms of the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the expected political instability. With the exception of Libya, for which no reliable data is available because of the ongoing conflict, the North African states seem to have managed to contain the spread of the pandemic, mostly thanks to the introduction of strict lockdown measures and an increased health spending, despite their tight fiscal spaces. However, what is likely to have a destabilising effect on the region is the harshening of repressive measures against the population and the long-lasting

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and indiscriminate effect of the economic downturn that will further exacerbate existing inequalities.

The first speaker started by noting that Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco do share similarities but they also diverge on certain aspects such as governance. One of the commonalities between the three countries is the fact that the pandemic has unveiled pre-existing challenges and weak institutional set-ups.

According to the speaker, in Tunisia the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. When it comes to human rights, and in particular socio-economic rights, Tunisians are still suffering from a lack of social justice and from social and geographical marginalisation. COVID-19, for instance, has demonstrated that despite the democratic gains of the last decade, there are still places that have not been supplied with a good health system. Therefore, the requests that were at the heart of the 2011 social uprising are still largely unaddressed. In addition to that, the pandemic has also been used by the government as an excuse to put on hold the reforms needed to consolidate and crystallise the democratic process, such as the ones related to the Constitutional court and the penal code.

In Algeria, where the mass protest movement (*Hirak*) has brought to the ousting of former president Bouteflika and has led to unprecedented fractures within the political establishment, radical changes of governance have not been implemented by the new regime. If it is true that with COVID-19 the *Hirak* decided to stop its weekly demonstrations, at the same time the regime has taken advantage of the health crisis to impose a ban on the protests. In addition to that, the government has also implemented repressive laws – such as the one concerning the freedom of expression on social media – in order to silence the opposition that has been pressuring the regime for more than a year.

In parallel to this, Morocco shares a very similar situation to the one in Algeria. The system, also known as the “*makhzen*”, has not heeded the demands of the protest movement in the Rif region that started in 2016, and has instead stifled it by condemning its leaders to heavy prison sentences. In the same way as in Algeria, during the pandemic lockdown, the government has advanced a repressive legislative agenda reducing the freedom of expression and of assembly as well.

With this in mind, the second speaker moved on to discuss the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, insisting that in the most immediate situation most of the North African countries have been privileged to be able to protect lives, but long-lasting challenges will come into play in the post-COVID phase when the containment measures will be lifted.

The weaker growth projections of the North African region for 2020 can be mainly explained by two factors: the pandemic economic repercussions and the plummeting of oil prices. The crisis has resulted in severe trade disruptions and losses that have affected job-rich sectors, and the containment measures have heightened them significantly. In addition, the manufacturing sectors have been

hit very hard, with special regard to small and medium-sized enterprises – that compose the main business fabric in the region – as well as the very important tourism sector for countries like Morocco and Tunisia.

Unemployment will continue to worsen for a long time. Overall, the economic downturn will aggravate the already existing social and economic challenges and potentially create more instability across the region whether in conflict-affected countries like Libya, those in transition such as Tunisia or others which have not yet resolved governance issues like Algeria and Morocco.

Framing the political and economic state of affairs as such, in the short and medium term, the effect of the COVID-19 on social movements in the region will differ between those three countries. Indeed, the previously-mentioned economic grievances will potentially reinvigorate the call for more social reform. In Tunisia for example, despite the democratic gains achieved in the last ten years, COVID-19 will strengthen political and social movements calling for political reforms and the redistribution of economic wealth and fiscal justice. Thus, according to one speaker, there might be also the possibility of radical social movements getting out of control due to the extremely difficult economic situation the government will find it difficult to contain.

As for Algeria, it is no exception to the trend of economic contraction despite the fact that it is an oil-rich country. In fact, even if the government has used its financial muscle to reduce the economic grievances, its sustainability is uncertain given the negative effects of the oil crisis. In addition, with regards to its response to the demands of the Hirak, the government is pursuing a somewhat contradictory agenda through the launching of a constitutional reform that only responds to some of the popular demands, while repressing others, which casts doubt on its genuineness. That being said, because it has been halted for months, it is not yet clear whether the Hirak will be revived with the same appetite, cohesion and effectiveness as in the pre-COVID phase.

All things considered, participants agreed that regardless of the peculiarities of each country, the COVID-19 crisis will have significant ramifications on state-society relations in North Africa, but they will only take their final shape in the post-COVID phase. In that phase, a resumption of protest movements renewing their demands for social justice could take place. What remains to be seen is whether their respective governments will ride the wave of change and rethink their Washington-consensus type of development by introducing substantial reforms or they will try to strengthen their repressive apparatus just to consolidate their power.

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