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POLITICAL ISSUES ON THE MAGHREB FROM POST-INDEPENDENCE REGIMES TO ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REFORMS

by Fernanda Faria

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Introduction

The concern for stability in the Maghreb countries is something we rather suddenly inherited from the end of the Cold War; at least it emerged more clearly as a major concern of the European Community and particularly the Southern European countries. Being the southern frontier of the EC, which powerfully attracts the Maghreb populations for what it stands for, at least in economic and social terms -- since in political terms everything seems unclear --, European integration has somehow played an important role in that 'effect of awareness'. This is particularly true in what concerns Portugal. Having no relevant historical or economic links with the region, exception made for Morocco, the Maghreb was for a long time largely ignored by Portuguese foreign policy.

The increasing concern for the Maghreb is reflecting in the number of initiatives that have been brought up by the EC and/or its Southern European member countries. The rhythm at which those initiatives are launched and the rhythm at which they fall apart tells a lot about the urgent need for encouraging the countries in the region to find a way out of their deep social, economic and political crises. It also tells a lot about the difficulties Europe is experiencing in managing the complexity of the situation.

The most recent initiative of the EC regarding the creation of a free trade area with Morocco and the possibility of extending the same kind of arrangements to Tunisia and Algeria goes back to the same logic of bilateral relations that were predominant before the creation of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). In fact, relations on a bilateral basis were always predominant, in spite of the attempt for reorganising relations under a more cooperative framework such as the one represented by the Five+Five Group.

The creation of a free trade area with the entire Maghreb region is another EC attempt to address one of the major problems of the Maghreb countries, the deep economic crisis and the increasing impoverishment of the population, one of the sources of the social and political instability that is putting into question and threatening the governments in place and which may lead to increasing instability in Western Mediterranean region. It is often said that improving the economic situation is the key factor for creating greater stability. Yet, and although the economic dimension is fundamental, Maghrebi specialists often state that one of the reasons for the failure of the economic reforms started by their governments in the late eighties, was the fact that economic liberalisation was not followed by a political opening; on the contrary, frequently they were followed by a tightening of the political regime.

POST-INDEPENDENCE REGIMES

Until the watering down of the national legitimacy argument

The colonial past experience is fundamental to understand the evolution of the Maghrebi regimes -- there lies the cornerstone of the political rhetorics for legitimacy of government and praxis of the ruling powers. The process of independence of Algeria, for example, was very different from that of Lybia. Yet, and in spite of those differences, the argument of colonialism and/or independence is somehow present in all the Maghreb countries, from Mauritania to Lybia. There were always national heroes and/or a movement that considered itself to be entitled to inherit the state and to represent the will of the people and thus act for the people: the FLN in Algeria, the RCD (former Neo-Destour) in Tunisia; in Morocco, the King -- with a particular status, namely due to the fact that he is «Commander of the Faithful» --, and Ould Daddah in Mauritania. In Lybia, the situation was quite different, and so was the process of

decolonisation. The real separation between the former colonial power and the new country was accomplished only with Kadhafi who intensely spurred anti-western feelings and elected the support of every liberation movement in the world and the accomplishment of the myth of Arab Unity as his main and first cause.

In Maghreb countries, and particularly in Algeria and Tunisia, the argument of national legitimacy was exploited until the erosion. In the name of that legitimacy, governments in place did not allow other political forces to emerge or develop. National unity was taken as fundamental to the building up of the newly independent state. For the governments in place national unity meant the non existence of opposition forces, at least outside 'the Party' and the centralised power. Through tight control of the legislation relative to the creation of political associations as well as the electoral system, requiring the majority and often requiring a percentage of votes equal or superior to 5% for having representation in the National Assembly, the ruling powers managed to keep opponents out of the field. The rhetorics of the overriding need for national consensus resulted at times in some degree of openness of the regimes at times of social unrest. Alternative tightening and opening was a political instrument frequently used.

If one takes the example of Tunisia, the opening-ups of the regime followed moments of deep crisis: in 1979 -- after the general strike in 1978, in 1981 -- after the events in Gafsa.(1) By the mid-eighties, Bourguiba had again strictly tightened the regime. He was no longer able to control the increasing demands for power-sharing and institutional reorganisation requested by the other forces. After 'the couscous riots' in 1984, and in spite of the economic concessions made, the regime became more radical: censorship on newspapers and books increased; political opponents were sent to jail; the UGTT («Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens»), who had called for the general strike in 1978 and with whom Bourguiba's party had made

an alliance for the 1981 election, was dismantled; war was declared on the Islamic movement (MTI - «Mouvement de la Tendence Islamiste»), its leaders persecuted and a few hundred sympathisers arrested; even the Tunisian League for Human Rights was banned. No opposition was tolerated. Violence increased.

In November 7, 1987, Bourguiba was ousted by his prime-minister, General Ben Ali. In such a troubled context, Ben Ali appeared as 'the man of change' Tunisia was looking for. Some liberalisation measures followed the takeover of Ben Ali, but the rhetorics of national consensus was retained as an instrument of power. In 1988, he succeeded in signing the National Pact with the opposition groups guaranteeing namely political freedom, commitment to human rights, freedom of the press, with the aim of achieving a «consensual transition». This «entente cordiale» was soon to prove what it was worth with the 1989 presidential and parliamentary elections, in which the RCD («Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique»), the ruling party, kept all the parliamentary seats.

In Morocco, and in spite of the essential difference in the nature of the state, the scenario does not differ fundamentally. Although it is institutionally a «democratic and social constitutional monarchy», democracy in Morocco is merely formal, in the sense that a multi-party system exists, that there is a Parliament where the opposition is represented, elections do take place even if often not on schedule, but real power remains in the hands of the King. He is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces; he can sign and ratify international treaties; he appoints all the judges; he can by-pass the institutions by calling a referendum, as he recently did for the revision of the Constitution -- Parliament had no role in the changes made to the Constitution.

In Algeria, the FLN («Front de Libération National») was the very representative of the state and enjoyed the status of single political party in Algeria ever since independence in 1962 until 1989, when Chadli Benjedid, after the riots of 1988, decided to establish a

multi-party system in the middle of a process of economic and political reforms. The party and the state had developed within the same structure, the rivalries and the alternance being decided only within the FLN.

Almost all the regimes in the Maghreb are characterised by an intimate relation between the state and the elites. Having always had a privileged role and a great influence in the political and economic system, these elites can either be an element in favour or harsh adversaries of any change towards a more liberal political system, more open to forces outside the regime. Regimes contributed to deepening the gap between generations, between social classes, between regions. In economic terms, these gaps are particularly acute.

From independence to the seventies, all central Maghreb countries experienced growth and some prosperity, but the world economic crisis in the mid-eighties and particularly the fall in oil and phosphates revenues made it harder for Maghreb countries to overcome the crisis. The demographic boom is also an important constraint to their economic recovery: it is certainly a very difficult task for fragile economies, very much dependent on traditional economic activities and on the export of primary goods, to be able to respond to increasing labour demands of a population that has more than doubled in the last 30 years and which will continue to grow at an average rate of 2.0. In the case of Algeria, about 200,000 jobs per year would be needed in order to satisfy the job demand and reverse high unemployment rates. In 1989, Algeria had an unemployment rate of almost 23%, Tunisia of 13% and 14% for Morocco. Among the unemployed, the percentage under 25 years old represents 51, 25 and 20% of their young populations, respectively.

The economic options of the Maghreb countries were very much influenced by Socialist ideas, «l'État développementaliste», although some differences have to be noted. In Algeria, state ownership was

very much present in the national economy; the public sector, according to Abdelattif Benachenhou (2) was considered, until the late eighties, the major instrument for the restructuring and development of the economy. The same can be said about Tunisia in the sixties. In Morocco, Lybia and Mauritania, the public sector was just another economic actor among others; the state intervened in the economy, but not directly. However, the state remains an important investor and shareholder in all Maghreb countries. In Morocco, for instance, the state still «holds 100 percent of the capital in 140 enterprises, is majority shareholder in 160 companies, and owns between 1 percent and 50 percent of the stock in 387 firms».(3)

In spite of the growth these economies have experienced since independence, they are still not able to respond to the needs of a growing population. Their balance of payments is negative. The debt problem is far from having improved and living standards have consistently deteriorated in the last years. By the end of the eighties, Maghreb countries engaged in a policy of liberalisation, denationalising and privatising companies, creating legal and financial incentives in order to attract foreign investment. They were trying to adapt to the international economic system, but mostly they were remaking their image in preparation for a new phase in their relations with the EC. Yet, internally and particularly in Algeria, regimes seem to have great difficulty in injecting in their peoples renewed hopes for an improvement of their economic and social situation. It does seem unwise to ask more sacrifices and impose further restrictions on people whose living standards and purchasing power have been decreasing year by year.

Another explanation offered by Maghrebi specialists for the cleavage between state and society as well as for the failure of development programmes in the Maghreb is that separation between state and religion was never really accomplished. In Morocco, the close link between them is deliberately reinforced by the monarch. It is a powerful political instrument, a divine legitimacy above any political

quarrels, a status that does not allow anyone to question the king's decisions or actions since he is the personification of God's will. In Tunisia and Algeria, Bourguiba and Boumediène respectively succeeded in introducing some degree of laicization together with modernization and development programmes. The vigorous action Bourguiba took against some of the most sacred institutions of Islam, namely in what concerns the status of women's rights and the «Ramadan» are seen by some analysts as the cause of the hostility of the oulemas and Islamists towards modernization and their willingness to return to Islam. At the same time those modernizing actions were being introduced in Maghreb societies, strong pro-arabisation campaigns were developed by the powers in place. Another paradox lies in the use almost all Maghreb governments made of the Islamist movements to counter the influence of Marxist and Communist parties, which during the seventies had many followers among high school and university students, who were politically very active.

State/Political parties/Islamic movements.

The present social and political situation in the Maghreb has very much to do with what kind of relations the state/ruling party had (or had not) with the other social and political forces. It was already mentioned the monolithic power exercised by the governments and the consequent marginalisation of all other social and political forces. The advent of economic reforms and the growing social tensions within those societies led the governments to implement some political reforms.

In Tunisia, in the two years following the «coup d'État» that replaced Bourguiba before the 1989 elections, Ben Ali tried, to make an electoral pact with the opposition parties in exchange for a few seats in the National Assembly provided they did not challenge RCD candidates, which they refused. It was clear there was no intention on the part of the ruling party to change the system and live up to

the promises made in the National Pact signed a year before or does Ben Ali show any intention of recognising the Islamist political party En-Nahada («Parti de la Renaissance») -- repression of their members and sympathisers never ceased.

In Morocco, the multi-party system was established a long time ago. There are fourteen legal political parties, and about half of them have seats at the Parliament, there are also a few other non-legal parties, namely Marxist-Leninist ideology and the banned Islamist movements. Although political parties and social organizations are very active, the supreme law is the King himself, who directly or indirectly restricts the action of those forces. The stances of all political forces have also been largely determined by the Western Sahara affair, which has dominated political life in Morocco over the last two decades. Most of the parties support the King in his territorial claims. The Western Sahara affair and the broad consensus it generated was often used by the King to reinforce his royal powers.

The last revision of the Constitution, approved by referendum on September 4, 1992, with 97% of the vote. The purpose of the revision of the Constitution was, according to King Hassan II, to consolidate the choice of Morocco for the multi-party system and freedom and was intended to create a better equilibrium between executive and legislative powers. Under the new Constitution, the king no longer has the power to fully control and define the government policy, since the Prime Minister is now required to submit his programme to the Parliament; the monarch no longer has the power to appoint and exonerate cabinet ministers nor can he dissolve the Parliament and retain the law-making powers -- the Prime Minister chooses his cabinet, although the King may refuse his nominations; in case of state of emergency the Parliament will not be dissolved, thus continuing its legislative function. The new Constitution also creates an independent Constitutional Council (five of its nine members are appointed by the monarch) and an Economic and Social Council.

Whatever changes King Hassan II may implement, he has clearly

underlined his leading role when he stated that «l'Islam m'interdirait de mettre en place une monarchie constitutionnelle dans laquelle le souverain déléguerait tous ses pouvoirs et régnerait sans gouverner». (4) Besides, challenging the way the King conducts the state affairs entail criminal prosecution under Moroccan law.

Anyway, the Moroccan monarchy does not seem to be in danger. The great majority of the political parties back the monarchy, though claiming a less prominent role for the monarch and to be given the instruments and conditions that would allow the Parliament to play a more active and decisive role, namely the election of the all Chamber by direct vote instead of the current two thirds.

In Lybia, political parties are forbidden and the illegal ones do not seem to significantly threaten Kadhafi's military dictatorship. No political openness seems to be on the way.

Prior to independence, Mauritania was a democracy. After the independence, a single-party, military and authoritarian regime was established and political parties were banned. Yet, they never ceased to be active underground. By the late eighties, the government showed signs of political openness and initiated the «process of normalization of political life», as Ould Taya, the President, named it. Political parties were unbanned. Presidential and legislative elections took place in January and March 1992, respectively. Ould Taya and his party, the PRDS («Parti Républicain Démocratique Social»), had a majority of the vote in both elections. Opposition parties openly challenged the results. Real change is yet to be seen.

Algeria turned to a multi-party system as late as 1989. Chadli Benjedid then began a complete reversal of what had been his political options so far. Besides putting an end to the monopoly of the FLN, he also broke his ties with the party, thus changing from a single-party system to a presidential one. By separating state and party, reducing the army to national security requirements and breaking the FLN political monopoly by bringing other forces into the system, Chadli intended to reinforce his powers. The local elections

of June 1990 showed an altogether different reality, although neither the FLN or the President seemed to fully realize that. The alternative to the FLN became clearly the FIS («Front Islamique du Salut»). This was reinforced by the results of the legislative elections in December 1991, followed by the «coup d'État» on January 14, 1992.

Slimane Cheikh (5) gives a picture of multipartidarism in Algeria by pointing out the similarities between the political parties: the FLN is the model for the other parties and many of those who integrate the newly-formed parties are dissidents from the former single party; they share the same identity references -- attachment to the Islamic values, the defence of the Arabic language; they have the same concerns for economic development and mobilization of national resources; they share the same concerns for social justice and are generally favourable to economic liberalism; even their internal procedures are similar to those of the FLN. Hocine Benkheira, from the University of Algiers, refers to these similarities as «la continuité dans la discontinuité»; similarities in the rhetorics of today's radical fundamentalists and the laic nationalists of the sixties and seventies find a match in their similar concepts. «Les mêmes foules qui, en 1978, pleuraient Boumediène, scandent aujourd'hui en toute occasion le nom d'Abassi Madani. Le discours nationaliste, usé jusqu'à la corde, est remplacé par un discours plus mobilisateur. L'un des paradoxes des élections de juin 1990 est bien la continuité dans la discontinuité: le 12 juin n'est pas seulement la victoire du FIS et du fondamentalisme en général, c'est aussi celle de la conception autoritaire de la société et du politique. Or cette conception n'est pas une invention des fondamentalistes. Depuis sa naissance, le FLN y était attaché».(6) Another expert, Lahouari Addi, from the University of Oran, explains the rise of the FIS by the persistence of populism that has always marked politics in Algeria and the social and economic environment: «Les raisons du passage du populisme "laïque" au populisme religieux sont à rechercher dans l'échec consommé du projet de développement mis en place depuis l'indépendance. Les institutions moulées sur le schéma du parti unique ne permettaient ni un dialogue

gouvernants-gouvernés, ni des critiques d'une presse libre qui auraient pu aider à enrayer certaines dérives tant économiques que sociales. Ces dérives ne pouvaient être dénoncées qu'à la mosquée, ce qui fit de la religion un puissant vecteur de contestation sociale».(7)

From these statements one can easily understand the more than 40% of abstentions in the last elections. But such a situation is not exclusive to Algeria.

Elections in Algeria were of course followed with great expectations in Tunisia and Morocco. The Algerian experience legitimised in some extent and from a governmental viewpoint the policy they had been following towards the Islamic movements. However, it also obliged governments in place to face the watering down of their traditional political praxis, the rhetorics of national consensus and national legitimacy. Apart from the economic crisis which everyone seems to recognize as a major cause of popular discontent, governments also seem to have realized they need to make room for to the political forces in the opposition, at least the ones that can be taken as democratic -- those who accept and are committed to democratic principles. Otherwise they will be contributing to increase the number of supporters of Islamic movements.

In different extents, the state and politics in general suffer from a crisis of 'reliability'. To overcome this crisis, profound political changes are needed. Whether Maghreb countries are ready to perform those reforms or not is another matter.

Some major problems of the political transition.

We often refer to Maghreb has undergoing a process of liberalisation and democratisation. It would though be more correct to speak about economic liberalisation. As to democratisation, these countries may be on the very start of such a process. How will it develop is yet to be known. Many problems and doubts have been put regarding the political

transition in these countries.

One of the issues that are often subject of discussion is the interrelation between democratization and economic liberalism. Like in Eastern European countries, in Maghrebi economies there is a strong state interventionism; the state is an important or the most important investor and an important employer. The liberalisation of the production and trade system, but particularly the financial bankruptcy of the state implies a diminishing distributive capacity thus affecting almost inevitably the social policies of the state. Privileged elites, hostile to the reforms when they attempt to their interests, could easily be tempted to use politically such disengagement of the state to counter the process of reforms. This same problem was also raised in Eastern Europe; but ~~elites~~ elites seem to be adapting to the new system. The same is more probable to happen or is likely to be already happening in Tunisia and Morocco. In Algeria elites seem more resistant to transition; the fact that military elites always had a major role in the state-running is probably the strongest obstacle to the reform process. The reform process becomes even more difficult in situations in which the social and political instability is deeper -- the feeling of insecurity may generate increasingly xenophobic reactions.

Another issue is the search for a compromise between the various political and social forces during the process of transition, like it happened in Spain. Boudiaf was looking for a false compromise, because he had excluded the FIS. Whatever is their concept of democracy or politics, they still are the major political force in Algeria. A transition without a minimum of compromise is certainly more difficult to achieve and less peaceful. The basis for such a compromise would have to be, first of all, a commitment of all the forces on the political rules and principles and their engagement on the countering of the main economic and social problems. The compromise would be a step forward to the consolidation of the transition; it would not be the accomplishment of the process.

Other problems exist and condition the transition process in the Maghreb. Yet, these seem to be the most important ones, at least on the short run. If Maghreb countries succeed in countering them, it would be possible to envisage an optimistic way out for the Maghreb, either on a country by country basis, as well as on a regional basis.

NOTES

(1) See Miguel H. de Larramendi, «Frontismo Electoral y Democracia en Tunez (1956-1989)» in Elecciones, participación y transiciones políticas en el Norte de Africa, M.A.E., Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, Instituto de Cooperación con el Mundo Árabe, Madrid, 1991.

(2) see Abdellatif Benachenhou, «Repenser la place de l'État dans l'économie» in L'État du Maghreb (dir. Canille et Yves Lacoste), La Découverte, Paris, 1991.

(3) Kevin DWYER, Arab Voices. The human rights debate in the Middle East, Routledge, London and New York, p. 106.

(4) See interview given to the french daily newspaper Le Monde and published the September 2, 1992.

(5) See Slinane Cheikh, «Les élections locales en Algérie à l'ère du multipartisme» in Elecciones, participación y transiciones políticas en el Norte de Africa, op. cit.

(6) Hocine Benkheira, in «Algérie - vers l'État islamique?» in Peuples Méditerranéens/Mediterranean Peoples, n° 52-53, juillet-décembre 1990, p. 5.

(7) Lohuari Addi, «De la permanence du populisme algérien» in «Algérie - vers l'État islamique?», op. cit., p. 39.

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