

Comment on What Happened

by Tarek Heggy

The title of these "observations" is borrowed from the title of a poem, well known to every Arab intellectual, "Comment on what happened", published in September 1970 by Amal Dunqal, one of the finest Arab poets of the twentieth century. The poem can be considered a summary of the following remarks of mine.

The first observation is that events in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen in recent days have some common denominators, among which the most important are these events occurred in three countries ruled by "an army" and are ruled by men who have been sitting on their seats of power for decades (21 years in the case of Tunisia, 30 years in the case of Egypt, and 33 years in the case of Yemen). In all three cases there was a perverse desire to pass sovereignty to a son (because no woman would be able to do it!) or a family member (as they say in Egypt: 'Good blood does not lie'!). In all three cases legendary corruption reigns at the highest levels. Moreover, in all three cases, there is a presidential system in which the Constitution gives the President broad powers that make him able to do anything, except to resurrect the dead and make the sun rise from the west.

The second observation is that the pillars of the regime had underestimated, in the case of Tunisia, and are still underestimating today, in the experiences of Egypt and Yemen, the size and value of what has happened, projecting blame for it on "infiltration" and "foreign agents"-- a well known behavior of these totalitarian regimes.

The third observation is that the three political systems have watched (and are still watching in the cases Egypt and Yemen) what is happening and seek to handle it from the standpoint of safety alone, without giving rise to any political, cultural and social analysis. This too is natural for totalitarian regimes, where culture is regarded with little respect, as if it were a profession of "windbags" or, as I was told some twenty years ago by a member of these regimes, they believe "that culture is the profession of those who can not do any work!"

The fourth point is that the regimes which the people in the streets are demonstrating against (in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen) are not loved at all and people are demanding they be removed. Over the years they have become "oligarchies" (a band of rogues !) whose members are united by a Catholic marriage between the Authority and a number of "entrepreneurs", who have become incredibly rich without any effort or sweat, without efficiency or excellence, but only through powerful political muscle provided by these same groups of entrepreneurs under the auspices of a rigid monopoly.

The fifth observation is that the regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen have "sold" to the only superpower in the world (which is immersed up to its neck in naivety and superficiality and which pays attention to material goods, even if this attitude is to the detriment of the foundations of civilization), the idea that in the three countries the choice is between "the gang in power" or "the Islamists" . The tragedy lies in the situation created by these same rulers and which led to a great extent the superpower (which needs intensive courses in history and geography) to believe they are the lesser of two evils and a better disaster. The ruling regimes in those countries afflicted by (political and financial) ideologies have wasted all their energy to focus internally and externally on the primary issues (in terms of democracy and free elections!) within the Gaza Strip. How many times has the president of one of these countries repeated (of course, in all his undeniable wisdom!) the sentence: "I have suggested to America, I told them, but they did not follow my advice!"

The sixth point concerns the presence in the three countries of a huge gap and a frightening

chasm between "the haves" and "have-nots. The worst example undoubtedly comes from Egypt, where about forty million people (a bit less than half of the Egyptian people) live below the poverty line, that is, an Egyptian lives on two dollars or less per day. Add to that a high illiteracy rate (only half of Egyptians are literate, and a high proportion of those who are literate are victims of the consequences of corrupt and horrible education systems, as well as suffering from "cultural illiteracy."

It is the combination of these two diseases (ie poverty and ignorance) that makes Egypt the most serious case in the Arab region and the Egyptian situation the most likely to explode, and perhaps in a less systematic and more deleterious way than what we saw in the case of Tunisia.

(2)

Although you can find other common denominators between the "popular uprising in Tunisia" and "popular uprising in Egypt", I thought to point out only the six factors which could identify the main similarities among them. However, if one can speak of common factors, logic requires shedding some light on the differences between "the Tunisian case" and "the Egyptian case." The most important differences lie in the specificity, education, culture and economic status of the segments of the middleclass (medium-high, medium, and medium-low) of the two countries. The quality of Tunisia's middle class is better, more advanced and closer to European standards when compared with an Egyptian education that lives on the edge of degradation at all levels and it is penetrated by a backward and horrifying Wahhabi-Saudi culture.

Tunisian culture of the middle class is more marked by the progress of the modern world and less influenced by traditional and conservative values that paralyze large segments of the Egyptian middle class. In addition, the economic condition of the Tunisian middle class is much better than the miserable economic situation of the Egyptian middle class. It is fundamental here to reiterate two fundamental truths: the first is that almost half of Egyptians live below the poverty line (that is they live on two dollars or less per day), the second is that about 40% of Egyptians are illiterate and that 60% of people who read and write are the direct product of an educational system unhitched from reality, and that most of those who have received their training in the last half century are characterized by cultural illiteracy.

The second major difference concerns the trade unions in general and workers in particular. While in Tunisia union leaders have been appointed in a completely independent way and not by the political leadership and the government, the Egyptian trade union leaders are mere "followers" of power. While union leaders in Tunisia belong to the left, trade union leaders in Egypt either serve the central government or are "closer to Islamists". The third difference between Egypt and Tunisia is geographic: while Egypt is close to Saudi Arabia, Gaza and Sudan, Tunisia is close to France, Italy and Spain. The cultural consequences of this geographical proximity to France, Italy and Spain. The cultural consequences of this geographical specificity need not be explained.

(3)

In the third and last part of this article I will try to answer some common questions circulating these days in Egypt: What will happen next? What should we expect in the days and weeks to come? I think the government is going to fail to contain and suppress the uprising that began on the morning of January 25, 2011. It will be worth nothing that the "attempt to minimize the size and significance of what is happening," is an attempt made by the government and its followers (including the "big", government appointed journalists, who are swapped in and out as needed). I think that the snowball will continue to roll and grow in size and mass enough to force the government and its followers to face reality.

The most likely scenario is that the President will make certain concessions to the “rioters”, such as appointing a new government and declare not to run for a sixth term of office (since it was enough to rule Egypt for 30 years!) as well as announce that his son will not be his successor (whose candidacy for the office of President is criticized by most of the demonstrators, an idea that the majority of Egyptians, with the sole exception of people linked to the current regime, consider offensive to the dignity of Egypt and the Egyptians). He will offer a handful of promises of political and economic reforms. And it is most likely this will happen after the revolt worsens and after he will have realised the impossibility of controlling it unless he uses a very large dose of violence, with the consequential loss of many lives, and his ruling out of the scenario for national and international reasons. But there is also the chance that the regime chooses not to take sides in the middle of the storm, but this remains a less likely scenario. However, it is a very dangerous scenario that would lead to disastrous consequences. In my opinion, there is no doubt the scenario "could" lead to involvement in the crisis of "armed forces" which could bring over a few months or few years the substitution of the president (Mubarak will turn 83 years next May 4) at the hands of the army. This would hurt Egypt politically, economically and culturally, and it will do much damage to its strategic value. There is still a crucial question: are not Egyptians known, as the Muslim commander who led the conquest of Egypt, of Amr ibn al-As said, as "a people who instinctively rebels only when there is no bread"? History (that of Ibn Iyas for example) tells us that in times of famine the Egyptians were eating dogs and cats, but they did not turn their anger directly against the king or Pharaoh! My answer is that the current president has ascended to power in 1981. Egyptians who rebel today are completely different from the Egyptians who have seen Hosni Mubarak in power after the assassination of Sadat on October 6th, 1981. Egyptians of the Eighties are the "sons and daughters" of the Egyptian state, they are spineless citizens, they are employees working for the state, ruled by the Pharaoh. Egyptians who rebel today are children of globalization, the Internet and Facebook. Most of them are not employed by the State, and thanks to modern technology, are well informed about the outside world, and are perfectly familiar with the terrible difference between governing governments and servile governments. These people feed the snowball that will gather mass and force a change while at the same time bring the insurgency to a "critical threshold" so that things will no longer be like before ...

*Translated by **Valentina Colombo**, Senior Fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy, teaches Geopolitics of the Islamic World at the European University, Rome. After graduating in Arabic Language and Literature from Cattolica University, Milan, she earned a Phd in Islamic Studies from Orientale University, Naples. She taught Islamic Studies and Arabic language and literature at Bologna University (Faculty of Political Sciences). Her research focuses on democratization processes in the Middle East, with particular regard to Arab liberal intellectuals and the role of women in politics in the Middle East. Her latest works are: Islam. Istruzioni per l'uso (Islam. Instructions for use, Milan 2009); Vietato in nome di Allah. Libri e intellettuali messi al bando nel mondo islamico (Forbidden in the name of Allah. Books and Intellectuals banned in the Islamic World, Turin 2010).*