

From Tahrir to Taksim: The Carousel of Revolt in the Mediterranean Periphery

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Events seem to have come full circle. Riots have come to Turkey: precisely to that Turkey which had been pointed at as the moderate, democratic and Sunni Islamist model for the new post-revolution Arab regimes. Precisely to that Turkey which had appeared to many observers as the main forerunner, and at the same time the winner, of the Arab revolts. The events of the last months show how all countries and local forces involved have been in reality more object than subject of the regional turmoil, and that – at least by now – no one in the Mediterranean can claim the title of winner of the revolts.

This was not the perception of the Turkish case, at least until the beginning of 2012. In all the Arab world, political movements ideologically close to the AKP were moving forward towards power: in Egypt and Tunisia, in particular, they had come to power clearly winning the elections. The Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan started a tour in those countries where the revolts had been successful, receiving a triumphal welcome and convenient agreements for his country everywhere. When the revolt blew up in nearby Syria, Erdoğan dumped president al-ʿAsad in a few weeks and presented himself as the major supporter of the opposition, which seemed like it would be able to overthrow the regime with the same quickness as had happened in Egypt and Tunisia.

A couple of years on from these events the situation seems to be less rosy for Ankara. The relationships with post-revolution governments of North Africa are quite good, but a clear and strong political axis with Turkey at its centre seems not to have been created by now. In Syria the regime proved itself far more resilient to what had been foreseen and, after strong resistance, and at this very moment is leading various attacks that could be decisive. On the contrary, the Turkish border area seems to have destabilized because of the traffic of weapons and armed personnel at the border and the worsening of already quarrelsome Kurdish relations, promoted precisely by the actual autonomy that Kurds have gained in Syria. In the end, massive and violent revolts have blown up in Istanbul, spreading then to many Turkish cities, ruining the democratic image of Turkey in the world at best, and threatening the survival of the government and of civic coexistence in the Anatolian country at worst.

Actually already during the “triumphal” year of 2011 Turkish conduct gave the impression of being very much tied to the contingent nature of events and dependent on elements over which it had no control. Ankara has neither foreseen nor fomented revolts: until the day before the beginning of disorder it maintained very good relationships with governments in power. Initially when the revolt blew up in Libya, Erdoğan – who has a good relationship with al-Qaddāfi too and probably understands that the nature of the conflict is more that of a tribal struggle than that of a popular revolution – is prudent, apparently more favourable to the government than to the rebels. Things change when Great Britain and France accelerate

matters overriding German hostility and American hesitation and towing Italy along too, with one of our many diplomatic turnarounds. The Tripoli regime was winning against Cyrenaic rebels as long as the conflict remained domestic. When the crisis internationalizes, with all the near and most interested powers (Russia and China, on the contrary, pull themselves out of it with a compliant abstention at the UN) sided against al-Qaddāfī, his destiny is decided. Ankara understands this rapidly and joins the coalition.

Libyan experience surely affects Erdoğan and his Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, influencing them when it comes to facing Syrian events. During the past years the AKP government has busily worked to mend the relationship with Syria: Erdoğan and al-'Asad show a certain harmony in public. But when a revolt takes place, Turks bet on the defeat of the regime. Very likely they wager on the repetition of the Libyan scenario, with the intervention of at least some NATO countries united in a coalition with Gulf Emirates to support rebels. So as not to leave the initiative again to Paris and London, this time Erdoğan proceeds first and proves himself rapidly as the main patron of the rebels and the most eloquent supporter of the necessity for an external intervention in their favour.

But there is something wrong in this equation. The revolt in Syria does not look like that in Egypt or Tunisia, where an overwhelming majority of the population rises up against the oppressor. In Syria the tribal element is stronger and this places the Syrian crisis closer to the Libyan one (which, not by chance, would not have been decided in the rebels' favour without external intervention). The dichotomy "secular" government/Islamist opposition is well present in Syria too, as well as in Egypt and Tunisia, but in the eastern country it only sharpens sectarian conflict. Afraid of the Sunni extremism of some rebel fringes (which gain growing importance progressively as the conflict goes on), Alawites and Christians unite in favour of the regime, which is seen as a guarantee of community coexistence – or as a pure and simple guarantee of the survival of these minority communities.

What matters more is that the mood has changed internationally, too. Moscow, burnt by the Libyan experience (where, despite its compliance at the UN, it did not have sufficient say in the development of the crisis), concerned for the fate of orthodox Syrians, and above all for that of its naval base of Tartūs and the orders that Damascus guarantees to the Russian weapon industry, is less willing to support western plans. Moreover al-'Asad's regime is not completely isolated like Mubārak's or bin 'Alī's or even al-Qaddāfī's ones: it has a strong ally in Iran and the favour of the Shiite parts in nearby Iraq and Lebanon. If the countries of the Gulf, inspired by the Afghan scenario, send jihadists to Syria, and if Turkey supplies with weapons the so called rebels "Free Syrian Army", the Islamic Republic of Iran and *Ḥizbu 'llāh* give instead their support to governmental forces.

The Western attitude has also significantly changed. If divisions had already arisen in the Libyan case, they are even greater faced with the Syrian crisis. The perception of the tumult in the Arab world has changed. When confronted with the rising of Islamist political forces in the countries touched by revolutions, when confronted with the growing importance of Sunni extremism among Syrian revolt lines, substantial parts of public opinion and of the western ruling class show fear and open hostility towards advancements in progress. The USA does not hesitate in including groups of Syrian rebels in the terrorist groups list, while the European Union imposes a ban on the supply of weapons to Syrian factions. This ban has expired only now and from August on France and Great Britain – countries most favourable to the revolt – may start openly to supply weapons to Syrian rebels. But this happens at the moment when the revolt seems to have lost its impetus and risks even final

defeat. The fact that this debacle is caused or not by the use of chemical weapons by governmental forces is irrelevant. And this not only because allegations about the use of forbidden weapons concern rebels too, but above all because this accusation against the Damascus regime has not succeeded in budging public opinion and moving along diplomatic efforts, as happened on the contrary with successful pretexts for intervention, such as “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq or “aerial bombardments of demonstrations” in Libya. A western military intervention on the rebels side could, with all probability, reverse the outcome of the conflict (exactly as happened in Libya), but the chance that this will happen seems to dwindle with the passing of months. Also because even the Libyan example has proved how difficult it is to manage the subsequent destabilization which, in that case, has spread to Mali and threatens Niger and Algeria too, forcing France into a second military intervention.

In the meantime, the “Islamist wave” has had a setback not only in Syria. Great and violent protest demonstrations against Islamist governments have taken place, at different times, in Tunisia and Egypt. Now in Turkey. To tell the truth, it is unlikely that Turkish revolts will have a different outcome to that of Tunisian and Egyptian ones, i.e. the return to normality – unless unlikely events happen, such as a military coup d’état. Nevertheless they show a divided society, a part of which – a minority though large – not resigned to the historic passage from “secular” authoritarian regimes to “Islamic” democratic regimes. Precisely the fact that in Turkey, Egypt or Tunisia an “Islamic republic” with its own peculiarities was not born, as in Iran, is the reason for disorder and conflicts. They are present surely in Iran too, but they are more concealed there because the regime, exquisitely native and Islamic, has marginalized, or completely excluded, from the system the most radical counterpropositions (not to mention the last electoral process just finished, in which only “centrist” candidates have taken part, reformists as well as “deviationists” having been excluded). Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia have instead political regimes which are shaped on the western model, but unlike western countries they have an intrinsic social and ideological dichotomy far more pronounced. Conflicts in these countries – but also other not Muslim countries could be mentioned: see for example Venezuela – are too important to be solved in the peaceful game of representative democracy. Each involved faction considers the other as a deadly enemy, and its proposals as disastrous in themselves. Experiences of dictatorships and oppressive regimes confirm these convictions in the minds of the citizens of all factions. Applying a political system created for cohesive societies to divided ones can only cause instability.

In conclusion, a remark on the way the Turkish revolts have been received by the European public cannot be spared. This same public was infatuated at the beginning by the Arab revolts, described as the uprising of secular young people, modern and democratic, against retrograde and repressive regimes. Becoming aware of the presence of an Islamist majority in the revolutionary process, the prevalent image in the West switched rapidly from the elegiac “Arab spring” to the pejorative “Islamic winter”. The people, the ideas and the dynamics in the Arab countries had not changed, only the western perception had changed. At the beginning the rebels had been described as identical in every sense to us (or, better to say, to the image we have of ourselves). When their difference and peculiarity were realized, the reaction turned to one of rejection and closure, as if western public opinion can feel sympathy for other people’s causes only insofar as they and their causes are identical to us and ours. Turkish riots have awakened idealist and a little bit naïve western observers from their disillusion. Finally, those who take to the street are truly secular and “modern” (in fact post-modern) like them. On the government side there are, this time, Islamists. A

golden opportunity to purify themselves of the presumed mistake of 2011, and finally support a revolt in which it is possible to identify themselves completely.

Unfortunately, the western view continues to be too simplistic (there are always the “good guys” against the “bad guys”) and too ethnocentric (those who look like us are “good”, those who look less like us are “bad”). Erdoğan’s government is at the least paternalistic, maybe authoritarian too. The AKP is an Islamic-inspired party, even though “moderate”. But Erdoğan’s government was democratically elected and probably still benefits from the consensus of at least half of the population. The most politicized (and representative) protesters – without considering now the good environmentalists of Gezi Park or young people who are afraid they will not be able to give public displays of affection anymore – refer to that opposition which is laic but for decades has based its power – when it is in power or in opposition – on the military which used coups d’état and arbitrary detentions or detentions for crimes of opinion. It is the same political faction which, in the name of its nationalism (the alternative proposal to the Islamism of the AKP), conducted the bloody persecutions of Kurds, or imprisoned those who did not show sufficient deference towards the Turkish nation and its father Mustafa Kemal. It is the same political party which sees proposals like the possibility, for women who want, to wear the veil everywhere as provocative and an attempt to “re-Islamize” the country. Continuing to interpret facts that take place in other countries using one’s own political and cultural categories is the best way to be mistaken, always and everywhere. And in recent years Western countries have really made many mistakes in reading Mediterranean riots.

The riots, the domestic conflicts, the instability of Arab countries and now of Turkey too match up well with the difficulties that the Mediterranean countries of Europe are going through. If our Muslim neighbours have to face domestic divisions and riots, sometimes other-directed, Italy, Spain, Greece (Portugal could be added as well) grope in an economic crisis apparently without a way out, also because they have subcontracted their economic and financial policy to the powers of Northern Europe. Great things are happening in the Mediterranean – for better and for worse – but in each of them it is difficult to identify an inner subject which is acting with full creating force, instead of being overwhelmed by events, and trying, with more or less ability, to control them as far as possible. The sea is stormy and our boat is at the mercy of waves and winds which blow from afar. The Mediterranean reveals itself more and more as a geopolitical periphery, while the centres of power have relocated further West, further North or further East. But in any case far away from here.

Translated from Italian by Giulia Renna.

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