afriche e orienti

rivista di studi ai confini tra africa mediterraneo e medio oriente

Ten years after the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East

Historical roots, political transitions and social actors

Edited by
Antonio M. Morone

Ten years after the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. Historical roots, political transitions and social actors.

Introduction

It has been ten years since 2011, when a wave of uprisings quickly spread from North Africa across the Middle East and beyond. The protests, conveyed in the images of squares in revolt (the Kasbah in Tunis or Tahrir in Cairo), became the symbol of the aspiration for regime change that quickly overwhelmed governments across the entire region. In the Western media, those images circulated rapidly and were often referred to as popular protests for democracy. In reality, the narrative of a people's revolt eager to impose democratic regime changes in their respective countries soon turned out to be misleading; it was related more to an external expectation, linked with Western perception, rather than an impetus from inside the protests. The uprisings did not follow a precise revolutionary political program nor present a clear demand for democracy in pursuit of the Western model. On the contrary, the uprisings were the enraged expression of those who were living in these countries as marginalised and excluded from economic and developmental government policies. It was not the desire for democracy but an unsustainable poverty that triggered the revolts. The risk of reading and interpreting such uprisings as a claim or expectation for Western democracy could be referred to as a renewed orientalist approach that – as in the

19th century – characterises African societies according to categories derived from Europe. The temptation, therefore, is still to talk about Africa for actually talking about something else.

Deconstructing the Westernised stereotype of the so-called 'Arab Spring' also means deconstructing the supposed urban character of the protesters. Uprisings were unleashed especially among those groups of people marginalised in the allocation of public resources since national independence during the 1950s and 1960s. In actuality, the uprisings of 2011 largely took hold among the rural population, whether they were still living in the peripheral districts or, as often happened, they had moved into different ghettos of the main cities during the 1980s and 1990s. The oversimplification of an eminently urban protest did not account for the continuous networks between the countryside and the urban suburbs which, more and more, besiege the rich, gated communities where a very small part of North African societies lives. The progressive widening of the social and economic gap in North African societies represents another facet of the ongoing process of mass pauperisation. This aspect, moreover, reflects a global trend showing once again that North Africa is not an exceptional region in comparison with the rest of the world.

Ten years after 2011 it is now clear that, after the first wave of protests, it was not the Western democratic model that imposed itself or even made headway. On the contrary, the alternative of political Islam, or rather Islam in the public sphere, was undoubtedly the main vehicle for political mobilisation to achieve a different, more equal redistribution of resources among the community (of believers). Indeed, the 2011 uprisings forcefully challenged, for the first time since independence, the legitimacy of the nationalist ruling class and the ideology of nationalism as the basis for the postcolonial state. The reticent reforms that in many North African countries opened up to the political pluralism during the 1980s had left the former one-party system to guarantee an undoubtedly hegemonic position for the nationalist ruling class. The 2011 uprisings reveal the failure of an entire political class: the nationalist one. More than fifty years after independence, the nationalists' promise to subvert the mechanisms of subordination and economic marginalisation introduced by colonial rule had clearly disappointed. Indeed, recent privatisation processes re-established a scenario of dependency similar to former colonial rule. The independence of these countries and the international recognition of their sovereignty was not followed by a real reform of society in terms of redistribution to promote the social mobility of their citizens. The latter, on the contrary, were often forced to opt for emigration, first to cities in their own countries and then abroad, in the hopes of achieving the social mobility that they had been waiting for since the end of colonialism.

Within the folds of the crisis of nationalism, Islam has proposed itself as a possible alternative solution. The protests of 2011 revealed a fact already known to the most careful observers, namely the broad re-Islamisation that was occurring in North African

and Middle Eastern societies. The main challenge was to channel the religious message from the private to the public sphere through the constitution of fully flagged political parties instead of religious associations. This passage, or transformation, proved to be more difficult than expected: Islamism has openly contested nationalist ideology as a source of legitimacy for the postcolonial state, nevertheless has failed to carry out any real reform for the constitution of the Islamic State. The alternative for a populist Islamism has then ultimately deprived a new incipient political class of the possibility or the capacity to control the complex apparatuses and mechanisms of the postcolonial state. Finally, it cannot be forgotten that the protests have never stopped since 2011. The economic outlook has generally worsened; not only those who protested in 2011 today face an even worse struggle to live than before, but above all, dependence on foreign countries in terms of political and economic interference has profoundly increased.

This themed issue aims to promote critical reflection on the deep-rooted causes that can explain the events of 2011 and their evolutions in the following ten years. In particular, the themed issue aims to deconstruct a stereotyped and (neo)orientalist reading of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. The collected essays employ a multidisciplinary perspective to investigate the uprisings, the trajectories of the state and nation, and the international dimension of these processes. The analytical instruments of a variety of disciplines such as history, anthropology, political science, sociology and international relations are used to address the different topics. Finally, the essays are characterised by a relevant field research in various contexts and societies of North Africa with the precise purpose to enhance their perspectives and viewpoints.

<div align="right">Antonio M. Morone</div>

Numeri pubblicati