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Citizen expression and engagement in an authoritarian context

Billel Aroufoune
Michel Durampart

ABSTRACT

Starting with the so-called smile revolution that floods the Algerian streets every Tuesday and Friday, with the strong mobilization of students and teachers (Tuesday) on one hand, and citizens from all sides (Friday) on the other, this contribution focuses on citizen mobilization and forms of expression of the revolt. For us, these forms of expression lead to structure and form a new space of demand, commitment, position-taking and, more particularly, participation in socio-political life. This space would be for us the establishment of a democratic framework, in the sense that Algerians would wonder about an alternative to their daily political life, which has been stagnating for decades. Thus, we suggest, through an X-ray of materials collected on the Web, via some social media, to understand how contestations, in their different compositions, form a “new” partial public space that is structured and mature, comparable to the polis of ancient Greece. These forms of claiming show both complementarities and asymmetries between digital communication and the physical contestation in place that re-appropriate public spaces that are often confiscated, framed or fenced off. It is in this interlacing that we will have to specify between distanced action and action in presence, we make the hypothesis that manifestations of expression occur that signal a form of citizen public space emerging in Mediterranean societies. These can renew with participative, claiming, and citizen movements that prove to be complex and often controlled or even fought or denied.

Keywords: Citizen mobilization, Digital space, Mediterranean area, Policy commitment, representations.

“The difference between tyranny and authoritarian government has always been that the tyrant governs according to his will and interest, while even the most draconian of authoritarian governments is bound by laws”.

Hannah Arendt, 1954.

The succession of popular movements in Algeria between ruptures and the permanence of authoritarianism

The events in Algeria since February 2019, the Hirak, are not “historic” as some commentators put it. On the other hand, it is true that they, along with other historical episodes, constitute the limits of the resilience of the Algerian people. Let us mention some of the events that have marked this society: the ‘Berber Spring’ of 1980 – known for the identity claims of the Kabyles and particularly the demand to make the Amazigh language official –, the riots of October 1988, demanding the end of the single party and the liberation of the citizen and popular voice, the countless demonstrations against the representation of the deposed president, Bouteflika, repressed cogently. At the same time, the solutions suggested by the Algerian state to deal with each conflicting circumstance were failures. Following the example of the promise of opening up to a multi-party system and the concrete implementation of a democratic transition, in fact ‘there has been no alternation and the same regime that emerged from independence in 1962 still remains in place’ (Addi, 2017).

During the Arab revolutions of 2011 (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya...), the international community was waiting, with its eyes riveted on these Arab areas across the Mediterranean, for the reaction of the Algerian ‘street’. Thus, several foreign (Western) media foreshadowed an awakening, a spring, demonstrations in Algeria. In reality, this was on the fringes of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests, but the state and the Bouteflika regime had prepared for it, especially since an economic crisis was ravaging the country. In April 2019 Bouteflika gave a speech on public television (ENTV) in which he announced several reforms in terms of employment, housing, and above all an increase in social subsidies (especially for so-called basic necessities).

This speech comes after the explosion of speeches and protests in the member countries of the Arab League, including Algeria. Did the state fear that the people’s anger would translate into violence? The soaring prices of a few products were one of the reasons why citizens took to the streets. For Ait Dris Hamadouche and Dris (2012), the government’s attitude towards the neighbouring revolts drew attention to Algeria’s “complicity with the despots who tried to stay in power by all means”. The former head of state returned in his speech on the risks of changes in Arab countries, declaring: “Algeria is, of course, following the changes taking place on the international scene, particularly those that have occurred in some Arab countries. Faced with this situation, Algeria reaffirms its attachment to the sovereignty of its brotherly countries and to their unity, its rejection of all foreign interference and its respect for the decision of each people stemming from its national sovereignty”^[1].

Finally, the coercive political model long exercised over all regions of the country and particularly against Algiers and the Kabyle regions, where the dynamic of protest is different from the others, no longer stops the popular enthusiasm. According to the politician Layla Baamara (2016), the democracy displayed by the Algerian state is only a decoy that crystallizes in its conduct and actions vis-à-vis civil society and its political appetite, in the context of the citizen dynamics of 2011-2014. It recalls that “the obligation to request authorization to organize a meeting or the restriction of access to the media constrains the protest activity” (Baamara, 2016). However, during these citizen mobilizations (2011-2014) other channels

of protests emerged. For the sociologist Fanny Gillet, who studied this period based on an ethnographic field analysis with a few students from the capital's School of Fine Arts, these artists would form "an ephemeral attempt (...) a form of expression of resistance" circulating in digital social networks. In fact, the issue is clearly at stake, whether or not the political discourse of the Algerian authorities and government says so explicitly or not.

Algerians and people of the southern Mediterranean would not have the necessary maturity to organize systems of representation and citizen participation in the manner of Western democracies, which in any case would not fit the cultural and historical identity models of these countries. As a result, autocracy, the prevailing or authoritarian control of street demonstrations and opinions, is justified and legitimized as an inexorable fact in itself, with its procession of nepotism and confiscation of economic resources for the benefit of a clan. It is obvious that the spread of the web and the Internet in Algeria and elsewhere has posed many problems to this conception of the organization of the leprosy movement. Tunisia offered one of the most obvious examples.

Under Ben Ali, a very effective policy aimed at promoting ICTs as an instrument to reinforce the country's catch-up in terms of development and its access to the groups of large modern nations was systematically accompanied by a policy of surveillance, blocking, repression of citizen use of the Internet and the expression of protest. The paradox reaches its climax at the Second World Summit on the Information Society (SMSI), which at the same time may be seen as the apogee of modernism and the international opening up of the power willing to promote its very active policy towards ICTs and which also foreshadows its downfall. We can say that "the king is naked" insofar as the assertion of this modern Tunisia displayed was subject to incessant operations, police, control, and repression aimed in particular to prevent any porosity between Tunisian activists demanding more democracy and foreign nationals, particularly through an accentuated control of the web that has become almost unbearable. Examples are legion, from this lawyer imprisoned without trial or charges, sewing his mouth shut to express the confiscation of his speech, to the inscription of Tunisia in a very good place (not far from China) on the map of Internet black spots (displayed for a moment by Reporter Sans Frontières in the alleys of the summit itself). Can the web, the Internet, and communication 2.0, then embody a democratic expression that prolongs otherwise or in coexistence those who express themselves in presence?

Citizen expression and engagement in the face of modern authoritarianism

Today, a few years after these uprisings, with the peculiarity of each country that saw them pass, what would be the similarities between the recent "smile revolution" in Algeria and the other springs hastily called "revolution 2.0"? Let us recall that most often the president (tyrant, authoritarian or despot) is banished by social movements made up of different social strata. How are these movements organized? Assuming that digital information and communication technologies (DICTs) participate in the gatherings of demonstrators in the citizens' arena, to what extent do they contribute to them?

Far from wanting to compare the above-mentioned citizens' movements in order to draw a picture of them, highlighting the obvious similarities and disparities. We will try to bring out the singularity of Algerian popular expression in the face of the authoritarianism of the political regime of the Bouteflika era and probably its legacy.

In Egypt, to take just one convincing example that speaks for all, the hoped-for democratic transition finally gave way to the military. In Algeria, after the forced resignation of Bouteflika,

it was the Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaïd Salah^[2] who took command, particularly with regard to the organisation of ‘forced’ elections. He occupied a strategic position because he was Deputy Minister of Defence (Bouteflika was the minister). He accumulated weekly speeches that became almost daily. At the same time, mobilisations intensified in response to each speech, calling on the people to end the movement and go to the polls. Meanwhile, the demonstrators brandished new messages and demands in response to each speech and to all the political news (concerning the interim government) as well as those relating to the organisation of elections. Scheduled by the interim President of the State for 4 July 2019 in the first instance, and then for 12 December, at the request of the Army, to take up only a few headlines from international newspapers “The Army goes by force to organise a presidential election”^[3] or national newspapers “From one sham to another”^[4]. The French-speaking Algerian press is full of praise for Hirak in editorials such as *Liberté*. The traditional media warns against false promises: “the electoral solution aims to recycle the system to maintain it rather than to liberate it”^[5]. It is a former Minister of Justice who was elected to chair the Independent National Electoral Authority (Anie), whose mission is to organise elections. The general observation which is obvious in this situation is that “Gaïd Salah is hardening the tone”^[6] after each protest in the streets, the Hirak refuses to hold elections, claiming instead from the slogans carried on his steps ‘*dawla madaniya machi askaria*’ [a civil and not a military state].

In Egypt, to stay within this crude analogy, there is a place that has become an international symbol. The Egyptians see it as a representation of freedom: Tahrir Square [literally liberation]. In addition to this emblematic square, the Egyptian Revolution is also Mohamed Mahmoud Street and its graffiti. In addition to bringing demonstrators together, the Egyptian street, through artistic expressions, is transformed into a “new form of citizenship” (Carle and Hugue, 2015). In Algeria, if we speak of its capital Algiers, it is at the Grande Poste, in the city centre, that the great moments of the protest movement are played out (in the same way, the other Wilayas make their voices heard). While demonstrations and public gatherings are banned and repressed, the weekly marches have opened up the field of the possible to citizens who want a space for production, expression and exchange. For a long time confined and stifled, citizens have shouted their indignation and have been able to free their speech. It is simply a form of catharsis in that the citizens have expunged their exasperation through permanent theatre by exalting their revolt without unleashing violence. Not far from the Grande Poste, on a roundabout, these citizens can attend plays telling the story of the revolution, the uprising, but above all the national unity and the inextricable links between Kabyles (and the other Berbers of Algeria) and “Algerian Arabs”. Also, through this street scene we see young actors ironing about the situation and using a very humorous tone to ridicule the “power” and the “system”.

On the other hand, during the first weeks of the “peaceful”^[7] revolution the street became a space for debate and discussion. Several national personalities joined these spaces, and the agenda was updated as political actors put forward “absurdities” or questioned public opinion on the risks of socio-economic instability that the movement might face. It is then finally appropriate to note how, since the Arab Spring, the direct expression of discontent and aspirations for change has been woven into this complex and shifting association of citizens’ presence in advocacy activism, against the backdrop of paternalistic and stifling authoritarianism of the powers that be. The cybernetic expression would reinforce or otherwise express this manifestation of a new societal catharsis. In fact, expression on the web, digital social networks, often allows a more liberated claim or at least complementary and coexisting or even continuous with the demonstrations or struggles that are taking place. If we evoke the

ancestral link with catharsis, it is precisely to show the function of the “release”, the indictment, the direct address towards the rulers that can provoke a snowball effect (the “release” addressed to Ben Ali, Bouteflika and Gaid Salah).

This function allows citizens to regain a place to express themselves and sometimes say more than they can in the public space in times when speech is stifled. It is also to say that it is possible that this dematerialized expression allows one to express with force what cannot be said without real violence if it is expressed in the street and in materiality. Moreover, this electronic agora can also prolong demonstrations and confrontations in forms that may appear more direct and intense, especially when there is no direct confrontation as was the case for the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt. In other words, between resilience, continuity or contiguity, extension or diffraction, the permanence of digital social networks or other forms of electronic media maintains the permanence of claims or disputes (Durampart, 2012). These can be expressed without, however, taking the form of a physical and direct confrontation outside periods of crisis. We could refer to the work of Miège (2005), Proulx (2013), about renewed partial public spaces, online social participation, or Christophe Varin who refuses to make distinctions between strong and weak signals by showing that expression on the web can also be on the side of strong signals of citizen evolution in Mediterranean societies. On the other hand, as in Syria, a cyber-war that will allow the Syrian security services to flush out activist opponents in a formidable tracing operation taking the appearance of opening up and decompartmentalizing the web. What appearances and forms does this cyber presence of democratic protest take?

The people’s arena, crystallization of demands towards a new space of expression

Popular marches and rallies carry messages in response to the deterrents of decision-makers. These responses are first given on social media and then expressed in public space. The Internet and cyber communication have enabled the extension of the public space and according to Dominique Cardon, “society has taken a few steps ahead of institutional policy. By freeing the expression of individuals and the right to express themselves in a public space without constraint or censorship, the Internet nourishes what is the most essential source of the exercise of popular sovereignty”^[8]. In this perspective, can we speak of a displacement or a continuity of the claim via physical space to a digital space? from the Web to the street? Several research works have questioned this field, relying on the relationships caused by digital social networks between users and forms of self-presentation (digital ethos). In many cases, users imagine an identity that goes beyond their reality, and so they put on a mask. On the other hand, “the image that the Internet user has of his body is projected into the future, frozen in the past or idealized in the present, all traces (...) show bodies that are ‘in potential.’” (Casilli, 2012). For Cardon (2013), users of digital networks apply, consciously or unconsciously, the principle of “strong ties” and that of “weak ties”. The social web would lead more and more Internet users to socialize with people who are rarely (or never) visited in “real” life. On the other hand, “digital tools and devices cannot be approached only as sociotechnical constructs, but rather as nested objects in contexts where there is a permanent co-influence of the technical and the social” (Durampart, 2012). This can be observed within HIRAK and particularly from group pages or personal content on the digital network Facebook, as well as video-sharing platforms such as Youtube. Indeed, there is a concentration of messages and demands on these social media that move, like a continuum, to the field of action. From participatory media, and alternative social media activists (Granjon, 2001), to the structuring of a space specific to the new “relationships

between media, communication and democracy” (Dhalgren, 2000), we see a link between these concepts and the power to act formulated by Serge Proulx based on Anglo-Saxon work, as he reminds us: “The power to act is the affirmation of life, and ultimately, the affirmation of the desire to exist individually and collectively, the desire to survive even in a difficult economic and political context” (Proulx, 2013).

What are the prospects for a new modernity and democratic renewal for Mediterranean societies in their context and specificities? This readapted form of a permanent catharsis may in some way accentuate the maturation of citizen expression in countries such as Algeria and Egypt. It would set up certain permanent communication facilities that would promote, if not in a structured way, then at least in a way that would encourage public opinion, at least citizen public expression in diffraction or in complementarity with direct expression in the public space in question. In diffraction, because often in times of crisis, tension, confrontation, or riots, the web at the very height of control and repression offers a space where expression is transported differently. Thus during the Tunisian Arab Spring, mobilized activists used it to play a funny cat-and-mouse game with police and security organizations by spreading false information about gathering places or by occupying their attention to better prepare a protest in front of them. And so, during the WSIS or the uprisings provoking Ben Ali’s departure, when control and lockdown were at their peak, web activism continued either to destabilize the police state or to polarize it in the form of diversions. In reverse, during the WSIS, while all forms of protest were systematically sought and fought on the web, a porosity between opponents and representatives of Western NGOs and associations was woven while the authorities had their attention fixed on the agitation present on the web. It should not be forgotten that this phenomenon can be totally reversible, as Varin (2012) expressed it about Syria, where stopping Internet filtering is in fact a trap set for opponents to better identify them, what Morozov calls “spinternet”. “The Google doctrine, this ‘enthusiastic belief in the formidable capacity of the liberation of technology’ is ‘turned’ by the Syrian regime, just as the Iranian regime had done before it during the Green Revolution” (Bazan, Varin, 2012).

However, in times of relative calm or lull, the web can be the receptacle of unbridled expression, diffuse or firm protest. In Lebanon, for example, some sites take societal taboos such as mixed marriage or homosexuality head-on, which can therefore represent a certain permanence of citizen expression, all the more so when public spaces and demonstrations are tightly controlled and framed, as is currently the case in Egypt. What is important is to note these phenomena of coexistence, extension, and continuity that can persist in different forms and contexts. A public expression that is all the more present, even in a diffuse way, when authoritarianism is increased, all the more coexisting when repression is weakened, without forgetting this reversibility that also allows regimes to track down and flush out their opponents by turning this space against its users. Can this form of catharsis, intertwining expression in the presence and expression at a distance in subtle interactions, promote a habit of claiming and demanding citizen participation that builds a shift towards a political public opinion of the citizens of these countries? In any case, Pandora’s box is now open, which means that protests can be sustained in different ways by maintaining a permanence of this strong and/or weak citizen expression that can serve to keep this citizen expressiveness out of and during the crisis or confrontation. It could progressively nourish the habit, continuity and maintenance of a citizen presence so feared by authoritarian powers that they are thus challenged by the emergence of a citizen or public consciousness in the making before we can speak of a citizen democracy as it is understood in the West. For the time being, this would rather resemble the presence of the

spoken word, amplified expression, polemics or cacophony, cathartic between the demand for participation on the basis of contestation, which could constitute one of the possible models of the civil society in the making in the Mediterranean countries.

Notes

- [1] Speech by Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 15 April 2011
- [2] Deceased following a cardiac arrest on December 23, 2019 announces a press release from Algeria press service (APS), <http://www.aps.dz/algerie/99310-deces-du-general-de-corps-d-armee-ahmed-gaid-salah>
- [3] Médiapart, septembre 12, 2019, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/120919/algerie-l-armee-passe-en-force-pour-organiser-une-election-presidentielle>.
- [4] Liberté, septembre 29, 2019, <https://www.liberte-algerie.com/editorial/dun-simulacre-a-un-autre-5357>.
- [5] Liberté, octobre 10, 2019, <https://www.liberte-algerie.com/editorial/presidentielle-une-perspective-hypothetique-5362>.
- [6] Le Soir d'Algérie, septembre 14, 2019, <https://www.lesoirdalgerie.com/actualites/gaid-salah-durcit-le-ten-30176>
- [7] *Silmya, Silmya*, [Peaceful! Peaceful!] chanted the demonstrators during the first marches to deter the use of violence by law enforcement officials.
- [8] Interview given to the magazine *Transversalités*, available on the link : <https://doi.org/10.3917/trans.123.0065>.

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