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THE ARAB WORLD

CURRENT SITUATION AND STATE OF THE STRUGGLES

I. THE AUTOCRATIC STATE VERSUS THE CHALLENGE POSED BY MODERNITY

1. Aristotle said that man (today, one would say the human being) is a political animal. In other words, the society is the place of options for political status targeted before all the rules and principles governing its management. The political identification of the nature of challenges facing societies at each moment of their history, and that of the options offered to them, is therefore an inevitable precondition for any analysis of the reality. It is understood that, behind each of the possible options are real class interests and those of social groups and nations of which the contradictions constitute the foundation.

The dominant discourse in vogue evokes an attempt to use the language of so-called “rational”, and therefore necessarily “consensual” options concerning social “management”, in analysing political conflicts and social struggles. Thus, post-modernism has substituted for the clear language of social struggles that of the discourse on social “movements”. There is nothing neutral in any way about this use of terms because the phenomenon presupposes that society is already reconciled with itself and that the “movements” in question transmit an inexorable movement -- implicitly to the best of the worlds. The explosion of what is referred to as decentralised initiatives of civil society organisations – women’s movements, ecologist movements, all kinds of so-called non-governmental organisations – appears to be the expression of this qualitative change in “post-modern” political life.

Along with the strong comeback of the brutal capital dictatorship, vis-à-vis momentarily weakened adversaries, this discourse loses every day a little more of the transient credibility accorded to it. The reason is that, far from bringing about a peaceful consensus, the imbalance in favour of capital stimulates more social struggles, the condition for any change in the balance of power that can reorient the societal movement towards enhanced justice, democracy and efficiency.

These struggles are not deployed in a political and economic vacuum. They develop in, and at least partially, against the double powers of the managing State and against the globalised economic liberalism that defines the framework for options of both the dominant capital and the State at its service.

Hence, it is initially a question of making a critical review of practices of the State in question, and then analysing the forms of organisation of political and social struggles, their strategic visions (or their absence).

2. There is no democratic State in the Arab world. There are only autocratic States. This is certainly a harsh judgement, but it is essentially correct, even if we later on try to identify the flaws whereby the political and social struggles can initiate the transformation of this reality.

This general autocracy certainly assumes diverse forms. It would not be difficult to cite well-known names corresponding to the identification of each of these forms of the common autocracy. The plight of Arab peoples appears or appeared to depend in some cases on the mood of a General who proved to be an assassin by nature, a junior police officer specialised in torture, or a king who built perpetually dark dungeons, a chief of a tribal pyramid or a religious extremist. In a less negative case, the Arab State was sometimes ruled by an enlightened despot, in the true sense of the term, or by an easy-going heir, and therefore relatively tolerant. Lebanon partly shares the common feature of the Arab States even if it appears as an exception, as elections are held there regularly and the Presidents are actually changed every four years. For one thing, if it is true that the premise that “the elections are not devoid of a certain interest” is meaningful, it is only so because, in fact, the political authorities that follow one another are so much alike that their difference is negligible.

Although autocratic, the Arab political regimes have not always been or are not always denied legitimacy by their own societies. According to Hashem Sharaby, State power has always been synonymous with personal power as opposed to the power of the law defining the modern State. This Weber-like descriptive analysis is worth qualifying since the personal (or personalised) powers in question are legitimate only insofar as they are proclaimed as being respectful of the tradition (and especially of the religious Shariah) and are perceived as such. From a more in-depth perspective, it is the relationship Sharaby establishes between autocracy and the “patriarchal” nature of the system of social values. The term “patriarchy” is understood here to be more than what is ascribed to the popularised commonplace term of “male chauvinism” (asserting and practising the marginalisation of women in society). The patriarchy in question is a system that upholds the duty of obedience at all levels: while school and home education put down the slightest critical attempt and sacralisation of hierarchies in the family system (subordinating women and children of course), in the business sector (subordinating the employee to the employer), in public service (absolute submission to the senior in rank), absolute prohibition of religious interpretation, etc.

This observation – which appears indisputable to me – links up with the conclusions that I have drawn from the definition of modernity, which I proposed, and from the challenge it constitutes.

Modernity is based on the principle that human beings create their history individually and collectively and that, to that effect, they have the right to innovate and to disregard tradition. Proclaiming this principle meant breaking with the fundamental principle that governed all the pre-modern societies, including of course that of Feudal and Christian Europe. Modernity was born with this proclamation. It had nothing to do with rebirth; it was simply a question of birth. The qualification of Renaissance that Europeans themselves gave to history in that era of history is therefore misleading. It is the result of an ideological construction purporting that the Greek-Roman Antiquity was acquainted with the principle of modernity, which was veiled in the “Middle Ages” (between the old modernity and the new modernity) by religious obscurantism. It was the mythical perception of Antiquity that in turn paved the way for Eurocentrism, whereby Europe claims to go back to its past, “to return to its sources” (hence, the Renaissance), whereas in fact, it is engineering a break with its own history.

The European Renaissance was the product of an internal social process, the solution found to contradictions peculiar to the then Europe through the invention of capitalism. On the other hand, what the Arabs by imitation referred to as their Renaissance – the Nahda of the 19th Century – was not so. It was the reaction to an external shock. The Europe that modernity had rendered powerful and triumphant had ambiguous effect on the Arab world through attraction (admiration) and repulsion (through the arrogance of its conquest). The Arab Renaissance takes its qualifying term literally. It is assumed that, if the Arabs “returned” to their sources, as the Europeans would have done (that is what they themselves say), they would regain their greatness, even if debased for some time. The Nahda does not know the nature of the modernity that enhances Europe’s power.

This is not the place to refer to different aspects and moments marking Nahda’s deployment. I will just state briefly that Nahda does not forge the necessary break with tradition that defines modernity. Nahda does not recognise the meaning of secularism, in other words, separation between religion and

politics, the condition to ensure that politics serves as the field for free innovation, and for that matter, for democracy in the modern sense. Nahda thinks it can substitute for secularism an interpretation of religion purged of its obscurantist drifts. At any rate, to date, Arab societies are not adequately equipped to understand that secularism is not a “specific” characteristic of the western world but rather a requirement for modernity. Nahda does not realise the meaning of democracy, which should be understood as the right to break with tradition. It therefore remains prisoner of the concepts of autocratic State; it hopes and prays for a “just” despot (al moustabid al adel) – even if not “enlightened” and the nuance is significant. Nahda does not understand that modernity also promotes women’s aspiration to their freedom, thereby exercising their right to innovate and break with tradition. Eventually, Nahda reduces modernity to the immediate aspect of what it produces: technical progress. This voluntarily over-simplified presentation does not mean that its author is not aware of the contradictions expressed in Nahda, nor that certain avant-garde thinkers were aware of the real challenges posed by modernity, like Kassem Amin and the importance of women’s emancipation, Ali Abdel Razek and secularism, and Kawakibi and the challenge posed by democracy. However, none of these breakthroughs had any effects; on the contrary, the Arab society reacted by refusing to follow the paths indicated. Nahda is therefore not the time marking the birth of modernity in the Arab world but rather the period of its abortion.

3. Since the Arab States have not yet embraced modernity, whereas they bear the bunt of the daily challenge, Arabs still accept to a large extent these principles of autocratic power, which maintains its legitimacy or loses it in fields other than its non-recognition of the principle of democracy. If it is able to resist imperialist aggression – or to give that impression --, if it is able to promote a visible improvement of the material living conditions of many, if not all, the autocratic power enjoys guaranteed popularity even if it now appears as an enlightened despotic power. It is also because Arab societies have not embraced modernity that the latter’s brutal pompous refusal presented as the sole ideological theme placed at the centre of the Islamic project can find a favourable echo as powerful as it is known to be (cf. Political Islam later on).

Beyond this non-modernity principle, the autocratic power therefore owes its legitimacy to tradition. In some cases, this could refer to a tradition of national and religious monarchy like that of Morocco (in which case the specific feature consists in the fact that no Moroccan political party questions the eloquent motto of this monarchy – Allah, The Nation, The King) or of a tribal monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula. But there is another form of tradition – the one inherited from the Ottoman Empire dominant in the territory between Algeria and Iraq, and therefore influencing the largest segment of the Arab world – which I describe as the tradition of “Mameluke power”.

What is it about? It is about a complex system that associated the personalised power of warlords (relatively structured and centralised, or otherwise scattered), businessmen and men of religion. I emphasise men, since women are obviously not allowed to assume any responsibilities. The three dimensions of this organisation are not merely juxtaposed; they are actually merged into a single reality of power.

The Mamelukes are men of war who owe their legitimacy to a certain concept of Islam that places emphasis on the opposite of Dar El Islam (Muslim world – a community governed by the rules of peaceful management) / Dar El Harb (an extra-Muslim world, the place for the pursuit of Jihad, “Holy War”). It is not by chance that this military concept of political management was fabricated by the conquering Seldjoukide Turks and the Ottomans, who called themselves “Ghazi” – conquerors and colonisers of Byzantine Anatolia. It is not by chance that the Mamelukes’ system was built from the era of Salah El Dine, liberator of the

Lands occupied until then by the Crusaders. Populist powers and contemporary nationalists always mention the name of Salah El Dine with respectful admiration without ever considering or making any allusion to the ravages of the system from which it originated. At the end of the Crusades, the Arab world (which became Turkish-Arab) entered into a military feudalisation and isolation process reflecting a decline that put an end to the brilliant civilisation of the early centuries of the Caliphate while Europe was beginning to discard feudalism and preparing to embark on the invention of

modernity

and move on to conquer the world.

4. In compensation for this service as protectors of Islam, the Mamelukes gave the men of religion monopoly in the interpretation of dogmas, of justice rendered in the name of Islam and in the moral civilisation of the society. Relegated to its purely traditional social dimension – respect for rites being the sole important consideration – religion is absolutely subjugated by the autocratic power of men of war.

Economic life is then subject to the mood of the military-political authority. Whenever possible, the peasantry is directly subjected to the whims of this ruling class and private property is jeopardised (the related principle being indisputably sacralised by the fundamental texts of Islam). The proceeds of trade are no less tapped.

The Mameluke ruling class naturally aspired to the dispersion of its autocratic power. Formally responsible to the Sultan-Caliph, the Mamelukes took advantage of the long distance then separating them from the capital (Istanbul) to personally exercise full powers within the radius of the land under their control. In areas with an age-old tradition of State centralisation, such as Egypt, there have been successive attempts to discipline the whole military corps. It is not by chance that Mohamed Ali established his centralised authority by massacring the Mamalukes, but only to re-establishing a military–real estate aristocracy under his personal authority from that time onwards. The Beys of Tunis tried to do likewise on a more modest scale. The Deys of Algiers never succeeded in doing so. The Ottoman Sultanate did so in turn, thereby integrating its Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian provinces of Anatolia and its Arab provinces of historic Syria and Iraq under an authority “modernised” that way.

Just modernisation? Or just a modernised autocracy? Enlightened despotism? Or just despotism? The fluctuations and variants are situated in this range, which does not usher in anything making it possible to go beyond.

Certainly, the typical autocratic model of Mameluke had to reckon with the numerous and diverse realities that always defined the real limits. Peasant communities that took refuge in their fortified mountains (Kabylians, Maronites, Druzeans, Alaouites, etc.), Sufi brotherhoods almost everywhere and tribes obliged the dominant authorities to reach a compromise with and tolerate the rebellious groups. The contrast in Morocco between Maghzen and Bled Siba is of a similar nature.

Have the forms in which power was exercised in the Arab world changed so much to justify the assertion that those described here belong to a distant past? The autocratic State and the related forms of political management certainly exist to date, as will be seen later. However, they are beset with a profound crisis that has already curtailed their legitimacy, as they were increasingly incapable of meeting the challenges posed by modernity. Some of the testimonies in this regard are the emergence of political Islam, overlapping political conflicts as well as the resumption of social struggles.

II. POLITICAL ISLAM

1. The fatal error lies in thinking that the emergence of mass political movements identified with Islam is the inevitable outcome of the rise of culturally and politically backward people who cannot understand any language other than that of their quasi-atavistic obscurantism. Unfortunately, such an error is not only widely circulated by the dominant simplifying media; it is also echoed in the pseudo-scientific discourses on eurocentrism and awkward “orientalism”. Such views are based on the biased assumption that only the West can invent modernity, thereby confining Muslims in an immutable “tradition” that makes them incapable of apprehending the significance of the necessary change.

Muslims and Islam have a history, just like those of the other regions of the world. It is a history fraught with diverse interpretations concerning linkages between reason and faith, a history of mutual transformation and adaptation of both society and its religion. However, the reality of this history is denied not only by eurocentric discourses but also by the contemporary movements associated with Islam. In fact, the two entities have the same cultural bias whereby the “specific” features ascribed to the different careers of their own peoples and religions are allegedly intangible, infinite and trans-historical. To the Western world’s eurocentrism, contemporary Political Islam solely opposes an inverted eurocentrism.

The emergence of movements claiming to be Islamic is actually expressive of a violent revolt against the destructive effects of the really existent capitalism and against its attendant unaccomplished, truncated and deceptive modernity. It is an expression of an absolutely legitimate revolt against a system that has nothing to offer to the peoples concerned.

2. The discourse of the Islam proposed as an alternative to the capitalist modernity (to which the modern experiences of the historical socialisms are clearly assimilated), is political by nature, and by no means theological. The “fundamentalist” attributes often ascribed to Islam by no means correspond to this discourse, which, moreover, does not even allude to Islam, except in the case of certain contemporary Muslim intellectuals who are referred to in such terms in western opinion more than in theirs.

The proposed Islam is in this case the adversary of every liberation theology. Political Islam advocates submission and not emancipation. It was only Mahmoud Taha of Sudan who attempted to emphasise the element of emancipation in his interpretation of Islam. Sentenced to death and executed by the authorities of Khartoum, Taha was not acknowledged by any “radical” or “moderate” Islamic group, and neither was he defended by any of the intellectuals identifying themselves with “Islamic Renaissance” or even by those who are merely willing to “dialogue” with such movements.

The heralds of the said “Islamic Renaissance” are not interested in theology and they never make any reference to the classical texts concerning theology. Hence, what they understand by Islam appears to be solely a conventional and social version of religion limited to the formal and integral respect for ritual practice. The Islam in question would define a community to which one belongs by inheritance, like ethnicity instead of a strong and intimate personal conviction. It is solely a question of asserting a “collective identity” and nothing more. That is the reason why the term “Political Islam” is certainly more appropriate to qualify all these movements in the Arab countries.

3. Modern political Islam had been invented by the orientalist in the service of the British authority in India before being adopted intact by Mawdudi of Pakistan. It consisted in “proving” that Muslim believers are not allowed to live in a State that is itself not Islamic – anticipating the partition of India -- because Islam would ignore the possibility of separation between State and Religion. The orientalist in question failed to observe that the English of the 13th Century would not have conceived of their survival either without Christianity!

Abul Ala Al Mawdudi therefore took up the theme stipulating that power comes from God alone (wilaya al faqih), thus repudiating the concept of citizens having the right to make laws, the State being solely entrusted with enforcement of the law defined once and for all (The Shariah). Joseph de Maistre had already written similar things accusing the Revolution of inventing modern democracy and individual emancipation.

Refuting the concept of emancipatory modernity, Political Islam disapproves of the very principle of democracy – the right of society to build its own future through its freedom to legislate. The Shura principle is not the Islamic form of democracy, as claimed by Political Islam, for it is hampered by the ban on innovation (ibda), and accepts, if need be, only that of interpretation of the tradition (ijtihad). The Shura is only one of the multiple forms of the consultation found in all pre-modern and pre-democratic societies. Of course, interpretation has sometimes been the vehicle for real changes

imposed by new demands. However, the fact remains that by virtue of its own principle – denial of the right to break with the past – interpretation leads into deadlock the modern fight for social change and democracy. The parallel claimed between the Islamic parties – radical or moderate, since all of them adhere to the same “anti-modernist” principles in the name of the so-called specificity of Islam – and Christian-Democrat parties of modern Europe is therefore not valid, strictly speaking, even though American media and diplomatic circles continue to make allusion to the said parallel so as to legitimise their support of possibly “Islamist” regimes. Christian-Democracy is an element of modernity of which it upholds the fundamental concept of creative democracy as the essential aspect of the concept of secularism. Political Islam refuses modernity and proclaims this fact without being able to understand its significance.

Hence, the proposed Islam does not deserve at all to be qualified as “modern” and the supporting arguments advanced in this regard by friends of “dialogue” are extremely platitudinous: they range from the use of cassettes by its propagandists to the observation that these agents are recruited from among the “educated” classes – engineers for instance! Moreover, these movements’ discourse solely reflects Wahabite Islam, which rejects all that the interaction between historical Islam and Greek philosophy had produced in its epoch, as it merely turned over the unimaginative writings of Ibn Taymiya, the most reactionary of the theologians of the Middle Ages. Although some of his heralds qualify this interpretation as “a return to the sources”, it is actually a mere reference to the notions that prevailed two hundred years ago, notions of a society whose development has been stalled for several centuries.

4. The contemporary Political Islam is not the outcome of a reaction to the so-called abuses of secularism, as often purported, unfortunately. It is because no Muslim society of modern times – except in the former Soviet Union – has ever been truly secular, let alone appalled at the daring innovations of any atheistic and aggressive power. The semi-modern State of Kemal’s Turkey, Nasser’s Egypt, Baathist Syria and Iraq merely subjugated the men of religion (as it often happened in former times) to impose on them concepts solely aimed at legitimising its political options. The beginnings of a secular idea existed only in certain critical intellectual circles. The secular idea did not have much impact on the State, which sometimes retreated in this respect when obsessed with its nationalist project, thereby causing a break with the policy adopted by the Wafd since 1919, as testified by the disturbing evolution inaugurated even at the time of Nasser. The reason for this drift is perhaps quite obvious: whereas the democracy of the said regimes was rejected, a substitute was found in the so-called homogeneous community, with its danger obviously extending to the declining democracy of the contemporary Western world itself.

Political Islam intends to perfect an evolution already well established in the countries concerned and aimed at restoring a plainly conservative theocratic order associated with a political power of the “Mameluke” type. The reference to this military caste that ruled up to two centuries ago, placed itself above all laws (by pretending to know no law other than the “Shariah”), monopolised profits from the national economy and accepted to play a subsidiary role in the capitalist globalisation of that era – for the sake of “realism” – instantly crosses the mind of anyone who observes the declined post-nationalist regimes of the region as well as the new so-called Islamic regimes, their twin brothers.

5. From this fundamental point of view, there is no difference between the so-called “radical” movements of Political Islam and those that wanted to appear “moderate” because the aims of both entities are identical.

The case of Iran itself is not an exception to the general rule, despite the confusions that contributed to its success: the concomitance between the rapid development of the Islamist movement and the struggle waged against the Shah who was socially reactionary and politically pro-American. Firstly, the extremely eccentric behaviour of the

theocratic ruling power was compensated by its anti-imperialist positions, from which it derived its legitimacy that echoed its powerful popularity beyond the borders of Iran. Gradually, however, the regime showed that it was incapable of meeting the challenge posed by an innovative socio-economic

development. The dictatorship of turbaned men of religion, who took over from that of the “Caps” (military and technocrats), as they are referred to in Iran, resulted in a fantastic degradation of the country’s economic machinery. Iran, which boasted about “doing the same as Korea”, now ranks among the group of “Fourth World” countries. The indifference of the ruling power’s hard wing to social problems facing the country’s working classes was the basic cause of its take-over by those who described themselves as “reformers” with a project that could certainly attenuate the rigours of the theocratic dictator, but without renouncing, for all that, its principle enshrined in the Constitution (“wilaya al faqih”), which constituted the basis of the monopoly of a power that was therefore gradually induced to give up its “anti-imperialist” postures and integrate the commonplace compradore world of capitalism of the peripheries. The system of Political Islam in Iran has reached deadlock. The political and social struggles in which the Iranian people have now been plunged might one day lead to the rejection of the very principle of “wilaya al faqih”, which places the college of the men of religion above all institutions of the political and civil society. That is the condition for their success.

Political Islam is in fact nothing other than an adaptation to the subordinate status of the compradore capitalism. Its so-called “moderate” form therefore probably constitutes the principal danger threatening the peoples concerned since the violence of the “radicals” only serves to destabilise the State to allow for the installation of a new compradore power. The constant support offered by the pro-American diplomacies of the Triad countries towards finding this “solution” to the problem is absolutely consistent with their desire to impose the globalised liberal order in the service of the dominant capital.

6. The two discourses of the globalised liberal capitalism and Political Islam do not conflict; they are rather complementary. The ideology of American “communitarianisms” being popularised by current fashion overshadows the conscience and social struggles and substitutes for them, so-called collective “identities” that ignore them. This ideology is therefore perfectly manipulated in the strategy of capital domination because it transfers the struggle from the arena of real social contradictions to the imaginary world that is said to be cultural, trans-historical and absolute, whereas Political Islam is precisely a communitarianism”.

The diplomacies of the G7 powers, and particularly that of the United States, know what they do in choosing to support Political Islam. They have done so in Afghanistan by describing its Islamists as “freedom fighters” (!) against the horrible dictatorship of communism, which was in fact an enlightened, modernist, national and populist despotism that had the audacity to open schools for girls! They continue to do so from Egypt to Algeria. They know that the power of Political Islam has the virtue – to them – of making the peoples concerned helpless and consequently ensuring their compradorisation without difficulty.

Given its inherent cynicism, the American Establishment knows how to take a second advantage of Political Islam. The “drifts” of the regimes that it inspires – the Taliban for instance – who are not drifts in any way but actually come within the logic of their programmes, can be exploited whenever imperialism finds it expedient to intervene brutally, if necessary. The “savagery” attributed to the peoples who are the first victims of Political Islam is likely to encourage “islamophobia” and that facilitates the acceptance of the perspective of a “global apartheid”-- the logical and necessary outcome of an ever-polarising capitalist expansion.

The sole political movements using the label of Islam, which are categorically condemned by the G7 powers, are those involved in anti-imperialist struggles – under the objective circumstances at the local level: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. It is not a matter of chance.

III. POLITICAL CONFLICTS AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES

1. A quick look at the global situation today would easily reveal that nothing has changed: the Mameluke power is still in existence.

The first striking similarity with the past consists in the supreme authority exercised by the military institution in Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Iraq; in some areas, the institution is disciplined and strictly subjected to a respected hierarchy (Egypt) while elsewhere, it is parcelled between many generals permanently engaged in muffled or open contentious rivalry (Algeria). Certainly, the military institution is probably not the firm guarantor of stability that it appears to be. At least, even if the military institution is partly influenced by political Islam, and is by no means immunised against the centrifugal forces that can be fanned by ethnic or religious diversity, the fact remains that this institution was the sole inheritor of the era populist nationalism that spanned the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. It therefore preserves a nationalist tradition that has not quite disappeared. It constitutes the sole reference to in terms of devolution of supreme powers. As nobody took the farcical elections seriously and neither did the disinterested working classes in particular, one president succeeded another peacefully or through a “coup”, as it happened at the time of the Sultans, Pashas and Mamelukes, who were always under the threat of being assassinated by their peers.

No doubt, in Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates, it is the monarchical institution, which is itself merged with the Moroccan and Wahabite type of religious institution that directly sees to the transfer of supreme power.

The second striking similarity with the Mameluke autocracy lies in the inter-penetration of the business world and the world of power. It is because, truly speaking, there is no genuine “private sector” and not many autonomous capitalists managing their businesses are assured of the ownership of their enterprises. The Egyptian language coined another term for the new millionaires of the “open economy” (infatih) involved in the new liberal globalisation. There are clarifications on the “private” sector (Khas) – in other words, normal and authentic capitalist business – or on the “personal” sector (firdani), that is, business existing through the complicity of the powers that be. Whenever the private sector exists, it is composed of medium-scale enterprises rather jostled by the economic situation and liberal globalisation. On the other hand, the “personal” sector is the one whose turnover increases annually but is at the same time fraught with the scandal of unequal distribution of income. A well-known example can be found in a famous Egyptian firm run by a multi-billionaire, which snaps up all the State contracts to subcontract them subsequently, regardless of the laws against this practice. Most of the profits accruing from the so-called private economy in the Arab world of the last twenty years therefore appear as a real political rent.

The third similarity consists in the exploitation of the traditional conservative religious legitimacy. It is noticed that the more the Mameluke – compradore power is compromised by its concrete submission to the dominant imperialist interests, the more it aligns itself with the exigencies of the liberal globalisation and the more it tries to compensate for the loss of national legitimacy due to such submission which stiffens its so-called “religious” discourse, thereby generating competition with the rival Islamist movement. That was exactly what the Ottoman and Mameluke ancestors did as they yielded to the imperialist diktats of the previous centuries!

Certainly, the reader will be eager to state that the phenomena described above are not specific to the Arab world. Indonesia constitutes an example of dictatorship of the military-mercantile complex with the religious rhetoric of a striking analogy. Would one therefore be tempted to see in it an impact of the “Islamic culture”? But then why is it that yesterday’s China of the warlords and Kuo Ming Tang and today’s Philippines present similar examples in several essential respects? It would therefore be finally wiser to see in the religious, cultural, conservative, military-mercantile autocratic model (Mameluke-compradore / rent-holders) the product of “underdevelopment”, understood not as a “time lag”, a “stage” of development, but as the other side of the polarising global expansion of capital. The latter produces not modernisation (and the subsequent potential democracy) but rather the opposite – modernisation of both autocracy and poverty. Authentic modernisation and democratisation are brought under control by taking a stand against the dominant forces of the global system, not by following in their wake.

2. In any case, in the Arab world, this contemporary resurrection of Mameluke autocracy would not have been imagined a century or even fifty years ago. On the contrary, the page seemed to have been turned for good.

In the first phase, the Arab world – at least its Egyptian and Syrian centres – appeared to have embarked on an authentic bourgeois modernisation process. Mohamed Ali and then the Nahda of the 19th Century seemed to have prepared for that. The Egyptian Revolution of 1919 manifested the first strong expression of that process. It was not by chance that this revolution took place under the closest banner of secularism known in the history of the Arab world, with the proclamation of “Religion is for God”, the fatherland for all”, and the choice of a flag with crescent and cross. In the Ottoman Empire, the Tanzimat initiated a parallel evolution inherited by the Arab provinces and which they even developed after the Empire’s decline. Constitutions, civil codes, “liberal” bourgeois parties and parliamentary elections inspired the hope that the society moved in the right direction despite all their inherent weaknesses and inadequacies. In terms of real economic and social development -- which easily found expression in the weakness of the local bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the then imperialists and their local reactionary allies, and the aggravation of the social crisis for that matter -- the meagre results ultimately ended this first period of ineffective modernisation of the Arab world.

The second phase was therefore that of the populist nationalism of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The triumphant nasserism, baathism and the Algerian revolution seemed capable of stemming the social crisis through the deployment of a more determined anti-imperialist policy (promoted with Soviet support) and active economic and social development policies. This page is turned, for reasons that are not analysed here, which include the system’s internal contradictions and restrictions and the reversal of the global economic and political situations.

At this time resurfaced the pre-modern autocratic State while the society was no longer comparable in any way to the one that existed a century or even half-century ago.

The social crisis today is incomparably more acute than it used to be a century or half-century ago. It is not that the society is “poorer” on the whole. On the contrary, the progression is indisputable in terms of average real income. It is not that wealth in this entity is distributed more inequitably than it used to be. On the other hand, the key reality concerning changes in this domain consists in the expansion of the middle classes in Egypt in fifty years: from 5% to 15% for the country’s upper class population and 10% to 30% for all the constituent social groups (according to Galal Amin). At any rate, the modernisation in question has also been that of poverty.

The intensity of the crisis is commensurate with the urbanisation of the Arab world, which constitutes its key indicator. More than half of the Arab population is now urbanised. However, this massive transfer is not the outcome of a two-sided agricultural and industrial revolution, more or less similar to the one that built the developed capitalist West or the Soviet world and which contemporary China has embraced for half a century. It is rather the result of the absence of both agricultural revolution and industrial revolution. The growing rural misery is simply transferred to urban areas that modern industries and activities cannot absorb. The structure of social classes and categories in which this crisis found expression no longer has anything to do with that of the Arab world a century or fifty years ago. The crisis is therefore expressed through the one marking the forms of political life, ideologies and organisations, forms of social struggles.

The page of populist nationalism turned, the discredited single party system gave way to the explosion of the multiparty system, which the world media hastened to acknowledge as the beginning of a democratic development naturally and obviously promoted by the opening onto markets as envisaged by the vulgate in fashion.

The paradox here is that this explosion of the multiparty system was accompanied by a prodigious regression to the Mameluke type of autocracy.

3. Nasserism “had nationalised politics” (actually placed politics under State control) as purported in Egypt; that is, it had used violent repression to suppress the two poles between which the active political forces and public opinion were divided – the bourgeois liberal pole and the communist pole. By this means too was created an ideological vacuum that Islam had to fill gradually in the nasserian era, and violently as from 1970. The influence of the religious institution encouraged by Nasser’s modernisation of Al Azhar, did penetrate the expanding middle classes, key beneficiaries of the populism that dawned with improved education and employment. Apparently domesticated, Al Azhar did not manifest any disturbing signs to the regime; that was the time when its “fatwa” justified “socialism”. The Muslim Brothers, who some time thought of imposing their presence in the regime, opposed a repression that always proved to be wavering in their regard, as many Free Officers had been closely associated. Whereas they were formally dissolved, these entities continued to be tolerated through the “religious associations” that progressively infiltrated the State machinery, particularly the education, legal and media sector.

When Sadat decided to turn to the right after Nasser’s death in 1970, the stage was set to place political Islam abruptly in the limelight with the support of Gulf oil money and the open support of American diplomacy. The price lay in the “opening” (infitah) initiated by Nasser after the 1967 defeat, that prepared the ground for reintegration into the global capitalist system, the break with the Soviet alliance and finally, the trip to Jerusalem (1977) and subsequently, the Madrid-Oslo process (1993).

All the same, it still took ten years for the law to establish (in 1979), a “granted” multiparty system initially limited to the three “tribunes” of the defunct so-called Socialist Union of the left, centre and right. The unchanged constitution vests the President with powers that place him above the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. The new democracy granted and controlled (“elections” must guarantee the perpetuation of the power of the President approved by the military institution), was negotiated with the United States, that gave the President its blessing (as per the 1991 Agreement between the Government of Egypt and USAID!), thereby making it possible for Washington to issue a certificate of democracy to the Egyptian Government.

One cannot therefore have several illusions about the “political parties” arising from such combinations. The Democratic National Union does not have a greater existence than the Socialist Union, which it inherited. The latter did not even enjoy the historic legitimacy of the Communist Party models (of USSR, China or Vietnam) of which it constituted a caricature. Before enduring the deteriorating effect of their solitary exercise of power, the Communist Parties in question organised real revolutions. In contrast, the Egyptian Socialist Union was never but a mere collection of opportunists without much conviction, which was convenient for the enlightened despot. The self-dissolution of the Egyptian communist organisation in 1965, which was obtained not without reluctance on the part of many militants, did not bring about any considerable improvement in the system since the government had taken rigorous measures to forestall the materialisation of this “threat” (to it).

Among the new political parties, Tagammu, which tried to rally the Nasserian Leftists, and inheritors of the Egyptian Communism, suffered the defection of the Nasserians.

Nostalgic of the past, and apparently lacking the capacity to understand the nature of the new challenges, the old Nasserians contented themselves with the rhetoric of the Arab nationalist discourse (qawmi) and therefore initiated a process of reconciliation with the Islamists who were also very fond of simple rhetoric. At any rate, Tagammu will remain a hope for the revival of a political debate worthy of its name, provided it succeeds in mobilising the militant traditions it has so far been trying to benumb.

The Labour Party organised by Adel Hussein (died in 2001), who was succeeded by a member of his family, had to mobilise the Islamist discourse with greater apprehension, in presenting himself as the rival to the traditional leaders of the Muslim Brotherhoods.

Hitherto, the Egyptian parties' political democracy therefore did not go beyond a bottled-up campaign. Renouncing any form of action – which the regime formally prohibited – and content themselves with discourses, these parties did not present themselves as a real alternative to the ruling power. They did not develop credible alternative programmes but rather took to criticising government action intermittently.

The resultant drift occasioned by this political vacuum did contribute to the reaffirmation of the Mameluke autocratic tradition. The most disturbing demonstration of this drift unexpectedly found expression in during the last parliamentary elections (1999): a crowd of so-called “independent” candidates exploited the possibilities that this situation offered to them. They were not opponents, even disguised, but rather candidates for this class of “entrepreneurs – fundholders supported by the State” (typical of the Mameluke system) who often managed to form a group of lobbyists sufficient to “win” the election amidst the indifference of the majority of the population. The term “baltagui”, which the Egyptian people gave them immediately, aptly expressed what they were – since the term slightly reflected what its translation as “loutish - band leaders” could inspire. The liberal “academics” – Americans among others – who hailed the expression “birth of a bourgeoisie of entrepreneurs” probably misleads the ignorant external opinion and not the Egyptian people.

Under these circumstances, the sole force that presents itself as an alternative to the real power – that of the military institution – is represented by the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the latter have no other project than that of an autocratic power of the same nature, in which the religious institution would take the place of that of the military. In that context, the Muslim Brotherhood is not similar to the Christian-Democrats Party, even though people sometimes try to make them appear as such. As for the rest – adhering to the globalised liberalism and local money-oriented compradore economy – there is no difference. That is the reason why the diplomacy of Washington actually sees in them an alternative solution, if necessary.

Nasser's regime was one of a planned project of an enlightened despot. The regime's socio-economic project was a real one that was implemented with determination. That is why, in spite of its dictatorial and police behaviour, the regime had to take – and did take – into account the social forces who expressed themselves through workers' unions, student movements, professional associations, rural co-operatives, the media and intellectuals. Moreover, Nasser's political language had a name for these agencies – marakez quwa (power centres) – and this testified to the acknowledgement of the fact.

In Egypt, there are 25,000 union committees (which still exist) integrated into 23 unions that formed a single confederation of trade unions (General Workers' Union of Egypt) during the Nasser's regime. This body rallied between 3 and 4 million real members (probably small, in comparison with the 15 to 17 million wage earners, but already considerable, as the number included almost all the salaried employees of the modern enterprises). Nasserism had given them real powers, not to participate in the running of enterprises (these powers were mere façade) but rather to manage workforce (tenure, etc.) and living conditions (housing, consumer co-operatives, etc.). Having renounced “class struggles”, the working class was compensated with improved material living conditions. However, the militant spirit and Communist influence continued to exist at the grassroots (in the 25,000 local committees) even though the regime took steps to gain effective control over the unions by appointing loyal agents to managerial positions at national level. This explains the low permeability of the working class that hitherto clamoured for Political Islam.

What is the situation today? First, the emigration openly promoted as from 1970, certainly weakened the militant force. Why fight to obtain at best a meagre salary increase if one could achieve more by working for a few months in the Gulf States, in Libya or in Iraq? As usual, emigration encouraged the search for individual solutions and weakened the collective fight. Now that emigration is stemmed, are there any signs of a possible recourse to the Egyptian tradition of collective solutions? The new laws deregulating the labour market in turn weakened the unions, thereby paving the way for wholesale unemployment. This policy, which generated poverty that people were allegedly willing to fight, has so far not appealed to the champions of democracy among the authorities of the globalised system!

Many indices indicate a resumption of the struggles. The actions, often violent, are henceforth to be counted in thousands and no longer in hundreds but these will always be scattered. In 1998, seventy strike actions took place in the largest enterprises of the country. The forceful intervention by the special security forces in each of these strikes was difficult to conceal. Some modest victories were recorded here and there. Very little is said about such events. The political parties are silent about their subject. Nobody – of course not even the Islamists -- wants to take the risk of being credited with such struggles. The working class struggles remain isolated but are neither unknown nor unpopular.

In the rural areas, Nasserism operated through some fifteen thousand input purchasing and consumer co-operatives. Although dependent on the fractions of the middle peasantry and mostly influenced by its rich components, these co-operatives were not chambers for recording decisions taken by the Minister of Agriculture, as purported too often, but rather partners whose views were taken into account. That made it possible to avoid conflicts and marginalise the poor classes among the peasantry.

The new liberal policy – suppression of subsidies, credit liberalisation and the increase of interest rates from 5% to 14%, threefold increase in the rates of ground rent and finally the liberalisation of relations between land-owners and tenants (the rights of tenants were guaranteed until then by the renewal of leases) – broke up the co-operative movement, enabled the rich peasantry to get richer while the middle classes became more impoverished. The frequent but isolated acts of violence that accompanied this change of direction did not prevent the implementation of the liberalisation process. In 1993, Tagammu did attempt to establish a new “Peasants Union”. However, it retracted against harassment by the administrative authorities. That did not prevent the protest movement of the majority of tenants from assuming an unexpected dimension in 1998. Nevertheless, the Government made manoeuvres, granted concessions to some parties at the expense of others and neutralised the movement (provisionally?) with these tactics.

In taking a stand openly in favour of owners in the name of the sacrosanct right to property, did the Muslim Brotherhood “miss” the opportunity to mobilise in their favour this rural community perpetually sensitive to the religious discourse? In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood knew what they were doing. They deliberately aligned themselves with the rural rich, just as they did with the urban compradores, since they were primarily concerned about preserving their image as the valid intermediary for the dominant capital and American diplomacy. Their discourse appealed to only the middle classes (as will be seen through the efforts they made in the professional associations), by assigning “radical” Islamic organisations (Islamic Jihad and others), to recruit their henchmen among the poor middle classes and the lumpen proletariat. In avoiding attempts to defend or condemn these organisations, the Muslim Brotherhood knew that the State destabilisation operations conducted by these organisations objectively strengthened them, in their capacity as candidates for the “changeover”. The Muslim Brotherhood continues to convince their interlocutors that they alone - in power- would be able to put an end to the “terrorist” transgressions.

The discourse and action of Political Islam therefore target the middle classes as a matter of priority. The latter’s expansion enhanced the organisations’ exceptional influence in the political life of the country. There are twenty-three big professional associations (lawyers, doctors, journalists, engineers, pharmacists, teachers, etc.) with hundreds of thousands of members and a large number of networks of local agencies. Nasserism controlled without much difficulty these entities that pre-eminently constitute the mass of principal beneficiaries of the populist socio-economic growth.

The social crisis fomented by the liberal economic option offered Political Islam the opportunity to assume leadership of many of these associations, all the more so as these associations have traditionally been one of the places for increased verbal polarisation on account of the lack of general debate among the parties. In 1993, the State reacted by taking legislative provisions that enabled it to bring the hostile associations again under control. Demagogic to some extent, the official discourse emphasises the fact that the associations are “politicised” at the expense of their concentration on

defending the real interests of the professions, which is true. It remains to be known whether the actual defence of these interests did not in turn conflict with the liberal policies of the State! That could be the starting point for a promising militant action in favour of the Egyptian Leftists.

The outburst of community life, which will be discussed later, offered the opportunity for the formation of new “businessmen” associations. The ancient “Industrial and Commercial Society dispersed by Nasser, and the Chambers of Commerce having lost their functions during the planning period, the new businessmen associations filled a real gap. There is much talk about them and they are presented as the proof of the vitality of capitalism, etc. The reality is very different, for it concerned only a clique of “political rent seekers”. However, their impact in real life is far from being negligible. They are understood as “sages” and sometimes they even succeeded in having their points of view adopted (policies guaranteeing their private income) against some recalcitrant ministers.

The student movement had traditionally played a leading role in Egypt, in the Arab world as well as in the Third World as a whole. It was the forum for a dominant Communist influence for decades. Even during the glorious period of Nasserism, when this system was accorded prestige and respect, the Nasserian students themselves were identified with the left wing of the regime. They belonged to those who were mobilised after the 1967 defeat to advocate radicalisation of the regime while Nasser himself chose, on the contrary, to make concessions to the right by initiating the “Infitah”.

There is no longer any student movement. This evolution witnessed nearly all over the contemporary Third World certainly has complex reasons, which have not been adequately examined to date. The tremendous expansion of the middle classes, which is the outcome of the wave of post-war national liberation struggles, as well as the population and number of universities, actually has its share of responsibility in this depoliticisation process. However, this process was often aided by the authorities’ option for systematic repression. That is the case of Egypt. Before and after Nasser, the Government deliberately supported the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in the University so as to prevent Communism, through substantial external funding (by sources in the Gulf States). Moreover, Nasser’s “modernisation” of the Azhar University considerably broadened the spectrum opened to the teachings of obscurantists who have their share of responsibility for the drift. The fact remains that the University still plunges into a state of unrest from time to time, but henceforth, exclusively in matters concerning the Palestinian question, (support of the two successive intifadas) and there is no longer any mobilisation for criticisms against the liberal economic and social policies. The aggravation of the social crisis, the worsening situation of middle classes and decline of outlets for graduates have reinforced the instinct for survival, all the more so as the deteriorating quality of education henceforth compromises the analytic potential that the youths had previously. The penetration of Islam is the outcome rather than the cause of this drift.

The worlds of the Press, intellectuals and artists (especially film-makers), writers (poets and novelists) have always been present and active on the Egyptian political scene. In the Nasserian era, Al Ahram, the institution then headed by Hassanein Heykal, was considered as one of the “power centres” that enjoyed a certain dose of tolerance vis-à-vis the enlightened despot. In spite of the high quality maintained by Al Ahram, its newspaper (a 125-year old daily comparable to the world’s leading newspapers in terms of quality), and its think tanks these media currently have insignificant influence in the Egyptian society. The mass media – especially the television organisations - are henceforth vying for monopoly of the empty official discourse and an Islamist propaganda equally mediocre and obscurantist. The few “independent” television channels (Nile TV) operate a self-censorship that annihilates its potential scope – those of all the Arab countries are no better, with the exception of Lebanon’s copious network of political television channels. Qatar’s new television outfit (Al Khaleej) owes its success to its hosting of lively debates, even though this medium’s channels are carefully closed to any leftist radical criticism. The suspicion that it may be the agent of identified evil forces poses a problem. Egypt still boasts a quality film industry, even if large-scale commercial production often obscures its existence. Literature – Egypt is a country of novelists – most of them being of considerable merit – also has substantial cultural and political influence. Cinema and novels constitute the mainstay of the survival of Egypt’s analytical political culture.

Lack of democratic management reflected in virtually all forms of political and social organisations – parties, workers’ unions, professional organisations (and in the new developing community life, as will be seen later) is a major negative feature of Egypt, and perhaps of other Arab countries. These institutions have more quasi-irremovable “historic heads” than militants.

To complete this picture of struggles, it is worth pointing to the increasing emergence of new forms of struggles by the poorest classes that are barely noticeable because isolated from the visible organisations. The world of street vendors, car park attendants and squatters is no longer an “unorganised informal sector”. Initially combated for infringing formal rules and regulations, the poor social classes finally asserted themselves – through collective actions – and made their claims heard to such an extent that the State renounced the initially scheduled destruction of shanty towns in Cairo, which it replaced with development projects (water supply, road works, etc.).

4. This picture of politics and social struggles in Egypt cannot be generalised to cover the entire Arab world without considering the real conditions and historical origins varying from country to country, even though a few similar trends could generally be identified.

Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Algeria share in common, the fact that, in the course of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s decades, they carried out a set of populist and nationalist experiments very similar to one another in their essential structures.

In Syria and Iraq, the Baathist Party initiated these experiments. Unlike Egypt, whose evolution in this perspective had been triggered off by the Free Officers’ military coup d’état, without any partisan preparation, the Baath remained the central pole for the political organisation of Syria and Iraq (whereas the Socialist Union of Egypt never really existed). The military nature of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes led to an infiltration of armies by the Baath (or its segments). In Egypt, Nasser gradually imposed the populist option against the majority of leaders from among the Free Officers – rather reactionary – but these conflicts at the summit were not transferred at any time into the army, which remained disciplined. There is only one Pharaoh in Egypt, just as there is only one Emperor in China. Thus, the system prevailing in the Baathist model is rather of the nature of a Baathist-military-mercantile autocratic complex in which the rhetoric of Baathism (Arabism initially) fulfilled functions similar to that of the religious discourse elsewhere. The conflict between this model of autocratic power and political Islam therefore assumed more violent dimensions whereas in Egypt the inter-penetration of the two forces at play in the post-nasserian system operated differently.

Since the Baathist model initially had at least a real partisan base, it consequently became “more efficient” in its dictatorial practices: bringing to heel the dissident political organisations (just as was done to at least some of the Syrian and Iraqi Communists), destroying opponents (bourgeois liberals, non-compliant Communists, Muslim Brotherhood), absolutely subjugating the social organisations (by suppressing all activities at grassroots level, in the workers’ unions for instance), whereas in Egypt, the regime had to make do with them). The system’s weaknesses are attributed to other equally objective factors, particularly, specific regional characteristics and the ethnic and religious diversity of the two countries. This diversity was managed in a dubious manner, to say the least, if not unskillfully, in any case, without giving a single thought to the principles of democracy. The supreme leaders’ personal qualities and flaws were therefore instrumental and became a determining factor. A typical example was Hafez El Assad, a patient, diplomatic and intelligent leader in Syria, who incidentally had direct confrontation with Israeli expansionism, of which he managed to contain the strategic ambitions through firm resistance without falling into the illusions of “negotiated solutions” under the guidance of American diplomacy. As regards Iraq, a series of murderous military officers – from Abdel Salam Aref to Saddam Hussein – led their country to the tragic impasse in which it finds itself today.

The initial populism has faded away. The military-mercantile complex has embarked on an “infatih”, unconfirmed but visible in the eyes of the public opinion, and worthy of recognition in one way or another. The legitimacy and credibility of the original vision of society and of the attendant Pan-Arab

discourse are therefore considerably eroded. The political and social struggles are resurfacing actively. The fact that a thousand Syrian intellectuals signed a petition pressing for democracy, without facing repression (a novelty) probably foreshadows the starting point.

Algeria had a different history. Here, the national liberation struggle assumed another dimension under the leadership of the National Liberation Front (FLN), an authentic and powerful party comparable, at this level, to the Communist Parties of China or Vietnam even if it was distinguished by its ideology (actually limited to the national claim), its vision of society (or rather the absence of the latter) and therefore by the social content of the resultant power. Similarly, it can be said that, national awareness in Algeria has been the result of this struggle and that the Algerian Nation and FLN have therefore become synonymous.

The tragedy stemmed from the rapid substitution of FLN with ALN (the Army, a border unit that had not been the mainspring of the FLN struggle) right from July 1962, or probably earlier, and subsequently at the time of Boumediene. Hoisted at the summits of power, the exclusive centre for final decisions, the Army destroyed the legitimacy and credibility of the FLN. The Algerian populism did not outlive Boumediene. In choosing Chadli to succeed Boumediene, the Army ceased to be unified and disciplined, as each of its Generals grabbed a segment of the military-mercantile powers – the Mameluke way. Algeria entered into a period of turbulence, serious political conflicts and repeated social struggles that simultaneously produced the worst (the reality to date) but also the best possible results (without that being the outcome of a fake and groundless optimism).

It is because the Algerian people aspire to political and social democracy probably more than any other Arab people. This aspiration certainly dates back to the colonial era, to the ambiguity of its discourse and to the forms of resistance it generated. Not even the FLN populism of the glorious era of Boumediene's short reign could really curtail such an aspiration. The Algerian Charter of 1964 (true copy of the Nasserian model promulgated in 1961), which was revised in 1976, asserted a few major principles aimed at merging social interests, which were not being granted recognition because of their alleged conflicting nature.

In reality therefore, other "power centres" had to be recognised (in the Egyptian fashion). The first comprised workers' unions, which were important, active and demanding (at least at the grassroots level) with rebellious militants in the bureaucratically imposed departments. Improperly subjected to the FLN, they became active during the last few years: now, thousands of strike actions and "incidents" are recorded each year. On the other hand, the peasantry brutalised and altogether destroyed by colonisation and the liberation war, could not assert itself as an autonomous force, in spite of the hopes initially placed in the "self-management" of domains recovered from colonisation in the 1960s. That is why the "agrarian revolution" proclaimed by Boumediene was a binding official order that did not depend on the support of any peasant movement. It was later smashed silently, in the same way as it was "made". Otherwise, the peasant question found expression in the ethnic diversity – through perpetuation of the Berber phenomenon. But here too, the deplorable management of this real diversity as part of a poorly designed Arabisation policy, and the constant negation of the problem in the tradition of autocratic powers, produced no results other than making the problem explode through many crises.

Another explosion that foreshadowed crisis took place in 1988 in the form of an action taken by the low-class urban population and particularly its marginalised youths without any future, whose more than deplorable conditions worsened as the new liberal policies abolished the vestiges of the social populism. It was therefore not a revolt of the "working class", neither a «peasant rebellion» nor a movement of middle classes and intellectuals demanding political democracy, but actually an explosion of new categories of victims of contemporary capitalism, people without any tradition of organisation and without any ideological culture.

It is therefore understandable if this outburst, which imposed the recourse to elections (1992), obviously ended in deadlock. For one thing, patrons of the "Islamist movement" were intelligent

enough to understand that they had all their chances in the process. A furious electorate chose to say “no” to the ruling authority, by saying “yes” to the Islamists, who therefore presented themselves as the sole visible alternative. Fortunately, since the ruling authority opted to fight back but proved incapable of re-forming or had no intention of doing so. Therefore Algeria landed in the infernal cycle created by two opposing accomplices who wanted to ensure that the sole option left for the people be “them” or “us”. There is no need to say more about the assassinations for which the Islamists claimed responsibility, particularly, those perpetrated against journalists, teachers and democratic artists -- personalities who could constitute the third and sole valid choice. There is no need to recall that the massacre of villagers in Mitidja enabled agri-business speculators to “buy up” the best lands of the country at zero prices. Unlike the writings of several foreign analysts, it is Yasmina Khadra’s novels that give a better insight into the nature of the logic dictating the option for Political Islam.

However, the 1988 explosion created a shock such that right from 1989, the law authorised reforms in the country’s political life. Fifty political parties, 55,000 associations were registered. What is looming on the horizon, beyond the figures that astonish observers, lies in both range of aspirations to political and social democracy and the objective possibility of their crystallising around a “third force” that is potentially the most powerful. That phenomenon has not materialised to date for reasons that are difficult to accept – personal conflict between resurrected “historic leaders”. The proliferation of associations actually engaged in the fight for democracy and social reforms – in defence of human rights, against torture and deliberate killings, for revision of the family law, for cultural rights of the Berber people, etc., do not constitute an alternative to the fundamental shortage of leaders. Not more that the increasing working class struggles pointed out earlier on.

Unfortunately, what is lacking is a unified tribune from which an alternative could be developed in all of its dimensions: defining an authentic economic and social development policy (that will not be a pure rhetoric or the expression of a populist nostalgia), defining a new citizenship, a specific code of democratic rights, defining a modern nationality, at the same time Arab and respectful of the Berber reality, defining terms of compromises between the conflicting interests of the social classes and groups, defining the role of the State and linkages with the global system. That is a lot to do.

For its part, Sudan presents two major contradictions, which have not found a solution – and will not find any – through the acts of violence perpetrated for half a century. The Political Islam – in power here -- has proved in turn that it was incapable of finding a solution.

The first of these contradictions oppose the rural world of the Arab-Islamic North to its urban counterpart. Sudan’s rural areas are closely managed by two Brotherhoods -- the Ansar and the Khatmia – based on a dominant model in the African Sahel from Senegal to the Red Sea.

The two major political parties (Mahdists and National Democratic Party), which are closely linked to frontiers of the brotherhoods (and constitute the historical Islam really existing in Sudan) are therefore assured of their victory in any election, even though they obviously have no programme apart from the one aimed at managing the society as it is. On the contrary, the urban sector is surprisingly developed: there are powerful workers’ unions (particularly that of the Railways Sector, which is vital to this vast country), a vanguard students’ union, professional organisations comprising active and democratic middle classes (an exception or almost unique in the Arab world), blossoming community life involving women’s movements, the strong ideological influence of the Communist Party.

This contradiction is insoluble, for it commands the changeover from military dictatorships, behind which are rallied the two Brotherhoods, amidst popular democratic demonstrations provisionally terminating the existing system.

The second contradiction in Sudan opposes 30 million inhabitants of the Arab-Muslim North to the religiously different South (with between a quarter and one-third of the population). Sudanese Governments are unable to consider managing this contradiction otherwise, except through constant war, whereas it is not difficult to think up a solution based on democracy, local autonomy and recognition of diversity. At any rate, this solution is advocated by all the democratic forces of the

North, particularly, the Communist Party, and is even implemented by these forces for very short periods (never exceeding a few months) in places where they wield power, only to be called into question by reactionary forces ever ready to use violence in toppling down the former group. This solution is also recommended by political forces of the South, whose army -- under John Garang -- is designated as the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (without reference to secession), not by chance.

The intrusion of Political Islam has been the outcome of weariness due to repeated failures, massive injection of Saudi financial resources (channelled through a powerful mercantile class that is itself affiliated to the brotherhoods), and the tactical genius of a very ambitious power-hungry religious fanatic (Hassan Tourabi). In concluding an alliance directly with the military dictatorship (of Numeiri, and of Bechir subsequently) while short-circuiting the Brotherhoods, Tourabi dreamt (or, while seeking in reality to entrench his power, pretended to be dreaming) about "purging" and "wahabising" the country's political Islam (hence, the support enlisted from Saudi Arabia).

The resources used by the military-Islamic dictatorship were therefore meant to be "modern" and to put an end to the "toleration" of the historic brotherhood Islam. This explains the series of harsh laws prohibiting free union activity (1992), subjugating community life (especially the blossoming of associations in charge of humanitarian relief operations in this country plagued with war and famine -- the Law of 1995), gagging the Press (Law of 1996) etc. The fact remains that all the attempts made to substitute a network of new "modern" institutions -- controlled by Tourabi's personal power -- for the prohibited democratic organisations produced no result, strictly speaking. The few "NGOs" that appeared to survive the massacre have integrally been retrieved by the brotherhoods!

Obviously, the regime's economic and social action could only end in disaster: totally subjected to the logic of globalised liberalism, to the extent of caricaturing the political racketeering of the military-Islamic-mercantile clans, the Political Islam in power in Sudan only contributed to a gruesome aggravation of all the problems.

The regime adopted just a "casual attitude" towards this drift by allowing the South war to peter out, by allowing all the western provinces (Kordofan, Dar Four) -- mainly Muslim -- and the Eastern Provinces (Kassala) to be governed by way of semi-secession. The regime's main concern has been to keep up appearances by remaining masters of the street in the capital and in the immediate neighbourhoods. Its principal achievement therefore consisted in creating the so-called "peoples defence" and "student security" networks recruited among the lumpen, to terrorise people, and nothing more, in the Iranian Pasdaran fashion.

The Achilles' heel of the system is its total absence from any form of legitimacy allowing for political succession. An Islamic power in Sudan other than the Brotherhoods will have much difficulty taking roots in Sudan, unlike Iran, where the "wilaya al faqih" is supported by a real national Church (Chiite in this case) established as an institution dominating the State, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, whose monarchy links up tribal legitimacy and that of the Wahabite version of Islam (or Morocco, whose monarchy is both national and religious in character).

The democratic opposition is not dead. It has survived all the brutalities of Political Islam. However, virtually all of its directorates have been compelled to go into exile in Egypt, which hosts the National Democratic Alliance of Sudan, created in Asmara in 1995 from the merger of all the parties and organisations prohibited in Sudan. Egypt, which has never thought of treating Sudanese nationals as aliens, has therefore received an indefinite number of emigrants estimated at two million at least (the majority being ordinary workers obviously fleeing their country's declining economic life). At any rate, the potentially powerful front has no programme enabling it to co-ordinate struggles -- which remain isolated, but frequent in the country -- and strengthen their capacity to crystallise into an alternative.

Based on a twofold national and religious legitimacy, the Moroccan monarchy encouraged guaranteed democratic breakthroughs so long as they pleased the King. Moreover, such initiatives have the advantage of not threatening the local dominant classes or the global system. However, it must not be

forgotten that the growing contradiction between hopes nurtured by these positive developments on the one hand and the symptoms of social crisis, which the system of options associated with the democracy in question does not even make it possible to attenuate, on the other hand, may cause a violent explosion one day.

Whereas elsewhere – in Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq for example – national liberation struggles were compelled to distance themselves from or even to oppose the local monarchies, in Morocco, things were different. Istiqlal – the movement’s conservative wing – which dominated the political scene for a long time and never became negligible even subsequently, intended to do nothing more than restoring Morocco’s sovereignty and monarchy. The modernist wing itself was compelled to hush up its possible points of view on the question of monarchy. At any rate, this modernist wing had many bases in the country. These included powerful workers’ unions that remained so, despite the erosive effects of economic liberalisation and unemployment, and even managed to safeguard their autonomy not only vis-à-vis the State (which never sought to subjugate them – since it was not a populist State!) but also vis-à-vis its political allies and defenders (UNFP, which became USFP, and the Communist Party, now PPS), the growing middle class itself, which aspires to attain portions of the power monopolised by the Maghzen (the Court), and the peripheral business bourgeoisie groups, which were themselves excluded from the Maghzen.

The phases of graduated concessions made by the Monarchy to these forces are well known: from the first parliamentary elections of 1963 to the constitutional amendments of 1962 and 1996, from the first “democratic” experiences (that is, in accepting that the government emerged from relatively fair elections) to the one that brought USFP and its leader, Abdel Rahman Youssofi, into the government in 1998, it is said that the system is developing into a parliamentary monarchy, which will preserve its religious aura. But, after all, the Queen of England is actually the head of the Anglican Church, is that not so?

The Moroccan authority therefore has no serious political problems. The Moroccan middle classes have no “problem of identity”, unlike the case of neighbouring Algeria. By the way, the Moroccan system has managed the cultural-ethnic diversity without provoking cleavages in the Nation, according to the traditional principle of duality between the Maghzen (urban areas and neighbouring countryside)/ Bled Siba (distant countryside, the majority being of the Berber stock), while the King renews tribal allegiance without ever touching the autonomy of the local chieftainships. In taking the initiative to promote Amazigi culture and language, the Moroccan system never considered that there could be a contradiction between Arabity, Islam and the Berber reality. Political Islam, which is trying to make a breakthrough here, just as it did elsewhere, is confronted with a Maghzen religious legitimacy, which it has been unable to call into question to date, at the very least.

On the other hand, however, the ruling power is confronted with social problems that are assuming increasingly serious dimensions, as none of the country’s successive governments, not even those that can rightly boast about democratic legitimacy, ever tried to get out of the rut of globalised liberalism. It is therefore not by chance if here too, the repeated explosions are the work of the urban poor, the new class of victims of modern capitalism _ explosions contained or repressed with violence amidst the silence of the leading democratic forces. But up till when?

Does the outburst of the forms of community life itself offer the possibility of bringing about a renewed inventive democratic process? We shall come back to this subject.