The Arab Spring: why are we concerned?

Strasbourg, 3rd July 2013

Two years after the beginning of what has been commonly called the “Arab Spring”, in the middle of deep turmoil as we can see every day now, it seems quite relevant to carry out a first survey. Is there already a second revolution in Egypt? Will Syria survive to the actual chaos? Is there any chance Libya will recover one day?

The questions are so numerous and the answers so mysterious, that it actually is a bit difficult to understand what is really going on. I will try to analyse these events by concentrating on three questions: What happened? What issue for the local population? To what extent are we Europeans concerned?

1/ The “Arab Spring”: what happened?

2011 will remain a key turn point. The planet Earth was shaken and regimes overthrown. The rotation axis was literally changed by the Japanese earthquake and the geopolitical map got upside down. Tectonic plates and ocean rumbling in Asia, population grumbling in North Africa and the Middle-East. Astounded and helpless, we contemplated both nature’s and people’s outbursts.

This “Arab Spring”: the first reaction was of course to rejoice. Decades of tyranny imposed by force, amidst terror and corruption, were opening into a real crave for freedom. The population, most of it being young, wanted to breathe and get out of an exacting and static society. “Here it’s Jurassic Park” I was told, to describe a fossilized life. No social promotion to expect, no changes to foresee, life was a “long static river”.

But even worse, these countries were, and still are, rich. The devilish kleptomania of the rulers had finally exasperated everyone. It was unavoidably going to explode. So, was it totally unexpected?

Some people imply military coups as in Tunisia or Egypt for example. It will be interesting to observe how the army will react in the future, and if they haven’t, in fact, conserved the real power. But it is clear that there has been, in the same time, a real drive for more freedom.

What changes have these events brought about for the people generally, and for minorities in particular? In reality, it is still too early to draw a conclusion, especially as the conditions vary from country to country, but already the strengthening, and even the take-over of governments by extremist groups like the Muslim brothers or the Salafists can be noticed. As a consequence, religious freedom is weakening, and subsequently or in the same time, political freedom also.
2/ Which consequences for the local population?

In fact, all the Muslims of these countries are not necessarily extremists, or favourable to the Islamic radicalisation tendency of their society. Part of the population oppose such a move, and even demonstrate publicly, as we can see, but it remains difficult for them to express counter-current ideas, as the dynamics are thrusting forward into a permanent extremist wave. Many think the Arab spring has been hijacked.

For the minorities, whatever they may be, difficulties are becoming more acute. In the midst of Islam itself, the increasingly violent fighting between Sunnis and Shias are making a compromise difficult, if not impossible. The most part of Iraq’s actual victims are the results of Sunnis and Shias fighting.

Unfortunately, this tension is spreading as rapidly as wildfire in all the Middle-East, the Syrian conflict intensifying the antagonism. Influential preachers exacerbate resentment by their talks, full of hatred, calling strongly for holy war. Sadly, the Middle-East did not deserve even more tensions than those already existing.

As for Christians, they are an ultra-minority and mostly foreigners in Tunisia and Libya. In Egypt and Syria however, they are locals, and significant minorities, between 5 to 10 % of the population. At the beginning of the civil war, there weren’t noteworthy clashes, but it must be observed that conditions are worsening rapidly, and religious freedom, already restricted, is more and more scoffed, allowing people to conclude that the Arab Spring has turned prematurely into an Islamic winter.

In Syria, as soon as they started, the riots seemed a catastrophe for Christians, some of whom feared it was a recurrence of the Iraqi scenario, not to mention an Armenian-like genocide. Starting from a local political opposition, events rapidly turned into an international conflict, in which various actors joined in to settle their disputes, through a massive inflow of foreign mercenaries, generally Sunni fundamentalists.

Syria being at the heart of the Shia belt (Iran and Iraq to the East with a Shia population majority, Lebanese Hezbollah to the West, an “Alawite” minority considered to be a Shia sect governing the country in the centre) it draws to it the world’s Sunni champions such as Saudi Arabia (official champion) and Qatar (competing for leadership).

Considering petrol and gas interests, importance of Qatar investments in Europe, the “New Middle-East” project designed to disintegrate the existing Arab states into small confessional states, Western powers have sided with the Sunni crusade and find themselves unanimously joined up to bring about the destruction of the country, if it was not for Russia’s stand – traditionally Syria’s ally -, and for China. These two countries are less and less tolerant to the western intrigues, covered up by pompous statements.

Whatever, today the whole Syrian population is trapped into a deadly fight, and the first victims, in case the regime falls, would eventually be the “Alawites”, certainly followed by the Christians. Is the Sunni majority able to plan how to bring about unity amongst the various rebel groups, once the regime is overthrown? There is ample reason to believe that the Libyan scenario will be repeated, the unity of the country being at this point an unattainable dream.
In Egypt, matters were already complicated since several decades. In 2010, just before the Arab Spring, the former Copt Patriarch, Chenouda III, mentioned the murder of 1800 Christians and 200 acts of vandalism carried out against Christians during the past thirty years. Things have deteriorated since.

Assaults against churches particularly St Mark’s Cathedral in Cairo at the beginning of April, attacks against citizens, arbitrary condemnations, following “supposed” blasphemy are now frequent, such as three weeks ago against a Christian teacher compelled to pay an 11,000 € fine (that is equivalent of 18 years of her salary). Christians live in fear, and nobody or nothing can ensure their defence today.

3/ To what extent are we Europeans concerned?

Whoever we are, we cannot remain indifferent to the sufferings of an important part of the Middle-East population, be it Syrian, Iraqi, Egyptian or other. But Europe, as an entity, is also directly concerned by these events, taking part very near to its coasts.

The geographic proximity, the great numbers of Muslims in certain of our countries, France in particular, and their family ties with North African people cause any change in that area to be extremely touchy. Even if Egypt is further away, and Rabat and Algiers seem peaceful for the time being, there still remains the Tunisian experimentation – and whatever happens there, can only influence the rest of Maghreb.

What we are facing is certainly a struggle between Islam and modernity. What will come out of this confrontation? And what will be the effect on religious freedom? For the moment, the obvious short term conclusion is that religious freedom is under heavy pressure.

It seems the trend is theocracy, but it also seems that not everybody is ready to cope with that. Theocracy is not forcibly suitable to all, especially young people – the major part of the population – who have demonstrated publicly for more freedom. If the military dictatorship is replaced by a religious dictatorship, the dream for more freedom just disappears.

How shall the French and European Muslims react, if the Muslim fundamentalists succeed in spreading all over the Mediterranean South? How shall they react to the evolution here, already underway? How shall we react – particularly our political authorities – in presence of this turnover? It’s now obvious: this is not a “future prospect”, but already an existing situation.

Conclusion

Be it for us or for the people of that area, one can only hope that the “Arab Spring”, and the endeavour for a progressive society, which was its trigger, comes quickly to a result, including more freedom, political and religious freedom.

One can also hope that French and European Muslims, who are more and more in contact with democracy, and benefit from a different way of living than that of the “South”, take part in this result in a more active way.
Finally, one should also hope that Christians won’t disappear from the Middle-East. Their link with the Christians here in the West and their faith, which is based on the equal dignity of all and the love of their neighbours, should be considered as assets in these changing times and therefore should be protected instead of being harassed. They also have something to say for the Arab spring to finally become a positive event.

I hope the European parliament understands this and will support them, not because they are Christians but because they can really help the society in the Arab world to overcome this crisis.

Marc FROMAGER