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Empty words of revolution in Angola

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In most revolutions, four main elements are usually required to uphold a new social and political order: an uprising, with change in the institutions of the system, the need for an ideological change, mass popular support and a degree of violence. While it is still much too early to understand the social and political consequences of the protests in Northern Africa, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, it is also too soon to tag these revolts as revolutions, if taking into account the standards mentioned above. It would also be farfetched to equate these events with the 1989 revolutions by associating them with the domino effect concept. Whatever possible comparison between the two historical moments, the late protests in Northern Africa are deprived of an important background relating them to Europe's revolts, mainly the existence of a sovereign, common ideology – Communism – and of a political organization – the Communist International or Comintern. Yet, the media was quick enough to question the possibility of the supposed domino effect spreading to other regions. There has been substantial agitation in Angola and within the Diaspora, after an email circulated calling all Angolans to take the streets in Luanda and protest against the regime, under the banner “Angola says enough to 35 years of tyranny and bad governance”. The movement is anonymous, which does not carry much

political credibility, and the demonstration was an utter failure. Not only did it fail to gather the support of the most important opposition party – UNITA¹ – but was also devoid of popular support. It was an attempt to import the Northern African revolts into Angola. However, as much as the organizers feel their country is not ruled under the best governance practices, a contagious effect of the kind will not take place in Angola.

Firstly, there is an entirely different historical background to be accounted for between the two regions. Most Northern African countries have experienced decades of authoritarian rule under the same sovereign or ‘family’ of sovereigns. Their freedoms and liberties were often squashed in order to preserve the highly centralized, vertical order present in the political systems of these countries. When comparing these experiences with Angola's reality, one can barely find any similarities. Angola did not endure decades of authoritarian rule, but rather 27 years of divisive, bloody civil war, which only ended in 2002, a conflict still fresh in the memories of every Angolan generation. Angolans understand all too well what revolutions and disarray lead to. Only

¹ See Isaiás Samakuva interviewed by António Rodrigues, “Angola. A manifestação de 7 de Março é uma armadilha do governo” (*Í*, 5 March 2011), pp. 34-35.



nine years of relative peace have shown it certainly is a precious achievement, not to be spoiled by rudimentarily planned movements which might not bear any fruit at all. Even when poverty seems to be rising, alongside with population, and the overall living conditions deteriorating, Angolans do not react well to the idea of shaking the foundations of the peace that took so many years to build. Perhaps in time, Angolans might replicate the same wishes and take on the same battles that Egyptians, Libyans and Tunisians alike are waging, but today historical conditions are certainly not favorable to such an endeavor.

Secondly, there is the problem of the defining the future political order when a revolution is planned. When Tunisians and Egyptians took to the streets in protest, everyone was well aware of the problem at hand: lack of democratic rule, corruption and nepotism. Hence, the answer appeared to reside in the enhancement of democracy, transparency, rule and law and human rights. Democracy is indeed the worst possible regime, apart from all others. Yet, it poses an ideological duality: if the population is unhappy, then the answer lies in democracy, but if democracy already exists, the answer lies instead in more democracy. Since there is no real alternative, it is only a matter of improving democratic practices, rather than opting for another type of political rule. If indeed revolutions entail a degree of change in institutions, then they do not appear to have much validity when the circumstances are already democratic, albeit flawed.

Thirdly, when comparing the social indicators of Northern African countries with Angola, the numbers become self-explanatory. Education is less progressive and GDP per capita is much lower in Angola. This above all means that most Angolans will not be mobilized through the communication channels used in Tunisia and Egypt. One should not expect a significant number of Angolans – most of them poor – to start ‘twittering’, ‘facebooking’ and emailing to start a rally, when roughly 20% of males and 35% of females can’t even read or write. Furthermore, the surprise effect is all but gone and any authoritarian

leader across the world is expected to have studied the phenomenon, by taking ‘notes’ and carefully analyzing the why’s and how’s of each Northern African revolt and how it applies to their own reality and population. This explains why, two days before the scheduled March 7th rally in Angola, the party in power – the MPLA – organized a patriotic march, mobilizing between half a million and two million supporters across the country.

Finally, geopolitics do appear to count in Northern Africa. Having the free, developed world across the sea is nothing but a pressurizer in the region. Northern African countries have experienced the European Neighborhood Policy by receiving aid in exchange for reforms, carrots and sticks from the continental political actor. Its populations travel, work and have relatives living in the European Union (EU) space, which increases the desire for political change at home. Yet, there is no EU across Angola’s borders. Although there is a significant Diaspora living in countries like Portugal or the UK, they are often considered not to fully understand the Angolan reality by those who actually live in the country, which accuse the former of agitating politically while not staying around to experience the consequences of their actions.

Now, tensions between Angola’s largest political parties² are infusing fears of a return to open conflict, which is terrorizing the population who still remembers all too well what civil war represents. Hence, in the end, any possibility of mass popular support to regime change has been suppressed, leaving no room for revolts – violent or not – in Angola.

As it follows from above, the four elements mentioned as characterizing a revolution are not present in Angola. There was no uprising, no known alternative to replace the system’s flawed institutions, no ideological charge, mass popular support or even violent protest. Perhaps in the future the circumstances might reflect the type of social order which led Egyptians, Tunisians and Libyans to the streets. Still, that day has not come for Angola.

2 António Capalanda, “Angola: No interior há medo de nova guerra” (VOA, 6 March 2011).

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