

## **Changes in the Arab World: Revolution towards democracy?**

**By Lionel Jospin**

The sudden uprising of people in North Africa and Middle East, against despotism and corruption and in favour of justice and freedom, is a major historical event. It is so for the countries involved. It can *become* so for relations between the Orient and the Western World.

Is this momentum irreversible? As a tendency, it is. Men and women that have broken off from submission in the face of authoritarianism and who have rejected the illusion of religious extremism will not retract. They have opened up a new path for themselves, turning to freedom for the individual and democracy for the people. They have made universal values their own; they have become an example for their people.

Will these struggles for new rights be triumphant everywhere and immediately? I am not sure. Success is possible in Tunisia or in Egypt. In Morocco or in Jordan, if sovereigns are wise, a shift towards parliamentary monarchies is conceivable. In Libya, the protesters will not win a civil war, imposed on them, without our help. In Yemen, in Bahrain, or in Syria repression can be the strongest for a while, as it is today in Iran, two years after the rigging of elections. Nevertheless, the democratic impetus of the "Green Revolution" has been precursory, and we need to make sure that the rounds, momentarily lost by people, will be played out again later on, victoriously.

Where do the upheavals come from? Necessarily from civil society because political parties were forbidden or repressed. Without a doubt the socio-economic conditions, aggravated by the global crisis, have contributed to them. Youth, the enlightened elements of middle and popular classes, have considered corruption and the hoarding of wealth by certain families or clans even more unbearable. In Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya and in Syria this factor has played its role.

But beyond social despair and economic demands there is a clear aspiration for freedom and a claim for democratic governments. This awareness has been encouraged by the emergence of an “Arab public opinion”, cognisant of itself. It is amazing to see that neither the argument of “foreign interference”, nor the Israeli-Palestinian question (unfortunately still unresolved) have been able to create a smoke screen. Protesters have concentrated on the task at hand, the national tasks. The valuable role of Aljazeera must also be highlighted. Its journalists, present all over the region and witnesses to all goings-on, introduced the culture of debate in the Arab world.

Naturally, demands for democracy bring up the question of representation. And where active parties, independent trade-unions and free associations cannot exist, representation remains an issue. Wherever the movement advances, political and institutional debates arise. And in the midst of a certain degree of confusion, it is natural for political forces to bloom and organize themselves.

Will religious parties be present? It is the logical outcome of pluralism, and a number of them are influential (particularly in Egypt), but it is clear that the events and developments we are witnessing do not have a religious inspiration. We can therefore think that those who are at the heart of these movements will keep the ambitions of others upholding a strict Islamic regulation of political and social spheres at a distance. As for the doubts expressed by certain people –doubts which I do not share– regarding the compatibility of Islam and Democracy, the historic period ahead could provide us with a positive answer.

Today, while forces in the East open up to shared values, it would be a paradox and a mistake for the West to close up. This risk, however, does exist. The fear of uncontrolled migrations is waved before us in Europe - and not just by the extreme right.

Certain political actors may also believe that despotic regimes are the best guarantees for stability, even if the current uprisings prove the opposite. It is necessary to fight these false ideas.

I do not know if we have to proclaim the “right to interfere”, but we have a “duty of solidarity”. The United States, Europe, and some Arabian countries are currently doing just this in Libya, on behalf of the United Nations and in response to the demands of a threatened population. The emerging powers (China, India and Brazil), have perhaps, appeared ambiguous, as they have been hesitant in exercising their new responsibilities. It is, nevertheless, positive that China, like Russia, has not

used its veto power at the Security Council, thus allowing for the adoption of Resolution 1973. Among the developing countries, we must also welcome the positive attitudes of the Arab League and the African Union.

The exercise of solidarity should go beyond the diplomatic field. Countries in democratic transition will need economic and financial support. Our political parties, our trade unions, our associations must, therefore, multiply their contacts with the forces of progress emerging in countries that are changing. In this sense and contrary to the logic of the “clash of civilisations”, fruitful exchanges could be developed between different cultural areas seeking to share common values.

As we all know, the mission of the Club de Madrid is to defend democracy across the world by the only means of dialogue. We may have anticipated the evolution of today when, through our missions, we sought to promote the right of association in North Africa and Middle East. In light of the changes taking place in the region, our Club has every reason to look for new partners to broaden and deepen its task.