

The tragedy of poor populations

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Revolutions are always made by the people, but very often the people are defeated in the end. When I make this assertion, I think of what will happen after the revolutions in Tunisia and in Egypt, and after the bloodbath that is taking place in Libya. Revolutions may be rebellions against the “old regime”, such as the 1789 French Revolution and the 1917 Russian Revolution, or they may be national unification revolutions, such as Bismarck's in Germany and Garibaldi's in Italy, or they may be national liberation revolutions, such as Gandhi's and Nehru's, in India, and Mao Zedong's, in China; and they may be national affirmation revolutions, such as the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

But when is the people finally victorious in those revolutions? It is not easy to answer this question. Their greater hopes are never achieved. But it is impossible to deny that people advanced in each one of the revolutions I mentioned above, except for the Soviet one. We should however set aside the major revolutions, and think of the nationalist revolutions in developing countries – in the successful ones, such as Kemal Atatürk's in Turkey, in 1922, or Getúlio Vargas' in Brazil in 1930, and in the great number of revolutions that eventually failed.

The great tragedy of poor populations, like the Middle East ones who are now rebelling, is that they will only win if the new governments are capable of leading their countries to the national and capitalist revolution and therefore to development. But those populations lack a strong civil society similar to the one existing in rich and middle-income countries. In the Middle East there has been many liberation revolutions or national affirmation revolutions, but only a few succeeded. Some were crushed by imperial powers, such as Mossadegh's revolution in Iran, in 1955, or Nasser's, in Egypt, in 1967. Others, at the opposite extreme, did not prevail because the winning politician or military soon became associated to imperial powers and to corrupted local elites and was also corrupted. That was the case, for instance, of Ben Ali, in Tunisia, or of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Others still, as Qaddafi's Libyan revolution, initially intended to liberate the people and, therefore, faced strong opposition from Western powers, but eventually they also detached from the people and became corrupted, and their leaders were then accepted by Western powers.

Is there a solution for this tragedy of poor populations? Yes, there is, but it is a difficult path. They are strong at the moment of revolution, when they mobilize and often become heroic, as we see today in the Middle East. But later they lose cohesion, and they make room for the domination of old elites and foreign interests. Each people must be organized as a nation and must be able to impose their national will, but poverty and the low level of education are an obstacle to it. The alternative is to rely on a leader who is morally committed to his people, but this depends on luck or fortune – a beloved goddess, on whom we cannot rely.