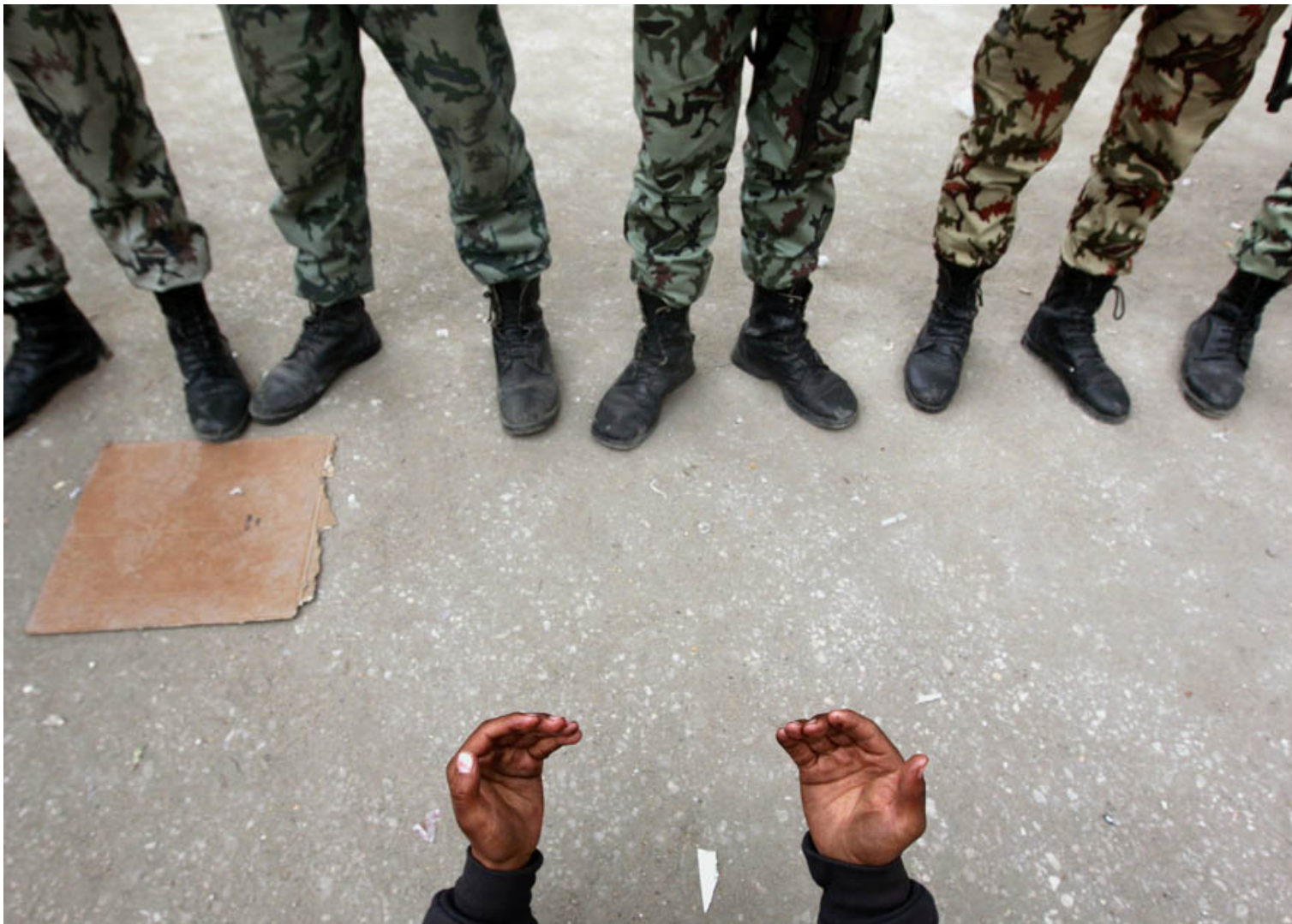


Christians and Muslims a year since the start of the Arab spring

Beirut (AsiaNews) – Everything began a year ago when a young Tunisian, Mohammed Buazizi, fed up by poverty and police humiliation, set himself on fire. It was 15 December, and like a wildfire on a dry prairie, his sacrifice burnt its way from country to country. It all happened because the Arab world is going through tough times. People felt pain and wanted change. All they needed was spark for the fire to start.



The Arab revolution spread unevenly, depending on the country. In some countries, people were better prepared. In Tunisia, people are stronger and more mature and their former regime did allow protest from time to time. Where the regime was completely dictatorial, as in Libya, an external intervention was necessary. In the Syrian case, the situation is even more complex and it is unclear whether a solution will be found or not.

In some countries, like Jordan, very little happened, probably because their situation is not as bad as elsewhere. In others, nothing happened because population is largely uniformed; for instance, oil-rich Saudi Arabia, where people live well but do not know what are human rights, freedom and equality.

The Arab world and its needs

In any case, unrest this year in the Arab world was caused by the fact that people's needs are not met. The first and foremost need or reason is poverty, which affects a good part of the population. However, the revolution was not their doing for they live in such grim conditions that the idea of revolution would not have crossed their mind. Others carried it out and they joined in, as in Egypt where 40 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. In Tunisia, the young man who set himself on fire was desperate because of poverty and unemployment.

The second reason is the dismal level of youth unemployment. In our culture, the inability to start out in life is a source of humiliation. Unemployment means the inability of forming a family. In Europe, reaching the age of 30 without one's own family is not a tragedy. In our countries, people start to think about creating their own family at the age of 20 with the expectation that they would have it by 25. But if you are jobless, that is impossible. In our countries, a man must be able to buy a house; a woman must bring the furniture. However, if they are unemployed, they cannot get marry and that is humiliating.

The third reason is ethical. It is the lack of dignity and freedom to express one's opinions as well as the level of inequality. This is especially true for intellectuals as well as the middle classes. Other forms of discrimination, not necessarily religious, also play a role.

Finally, television brings the rest of the world into people's living rooms. People feel backward compared to others and wonder why it is so. At the same time, they hear that the president, the minister and others are billionaires. All this creates a sense of injustice, which felt as something quite personal.

All this created a sense of frustration that led to the uprising.

Islamist victory

Initially, the movement began spontaneously, from the grassroots. It had no real leadership and today

we can see its consequences. Those who made the revolution did not reap the fruit of victory. They enabled others, who were better organised, to benefit for their work. It was such a setback, that some are already saying that it “wasn’t worth the trouble”.

I remain confident. Even though Islamists won, this step was necessary because it allowed other priorities different from theirs to come to the fore. Dignity, jobs, freedom, equality and democracy, were the reasons behind the youth-led revolution, not religion.

It is true that Islamists can now wield power. Now they can show that “Al-Islâm huwa l-hall!”, that “Islam is the solution” for everything. They will have to demonstrate that an Islamic system will solve the problems of unemployment, education, equality, democracy, finances, etc.

For the first time since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Islamists will exercise political power. It will be an important occasion to see in what areas they can provide concrete answers to real problems and in what they will not. It is also will be an important to see what type of Sharia they will implement, whether it will that of Saudi Arabia, where a woman was beheaded on witchcraft charges, that of Iran, which is blocking the country’s development, or some other versions. As for us, our view will depend on results.

What is certain though is that Islamists, especially Salafists, are using the Arab spring to impose their version of Islam. This was brought home to Tunisia (when they tried to impose the niqâb on women at Manouba University, the country’s best known institution of higher learning, and open a mosque near the campus) and Egypt (when many churches were attacked, crosses destroyed and soldiers assaulted women, leading to last Tuesday’s demonstration).

Education for democracy

In Egypt, the massive electoral victory (60 per cent) of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists now means that the former will have to prove that they deserve the electorate’s confidence.

Their victory was inevitable. After 60 years of military rule, the democracy was but a faded memory. Yet, more than 50 per cent of the electorate came out to vote, and that is positive. The turnout in past

elections did not go above 5-7 per cent. Egyptians refrained from voting knowing that the outcome had already been fixed. Under Nasser, the ruling party won 95 per cent of the vote with 5 per cent of voters casting their ballot.

Tunisia is a special case. Turnout in its recent election was at least 80 per cent. This is a sign that people are interested in politics and are prepared to participate.

Now it is time for young people to organise. Their societies and the rest of the world have taken the Arab Revolution seriously. But they need to plan and achieve unity; otherwise, all is lost. Unlike Tunisia, young people created dozens of parties in Egypt, splitting the vote and so they lost the advantage they had.

The 'Egyptian Bloc', a liberal party open to Christians and Muslims alike founded by billionaire Copt Naguib Sawiris, won 17 per cent of the vote. It is not much, but it is something.

This shows there is hope for the future. The movement must raise awareness among Egyptians about what is at stake. In addition to the economy, which is doing badly, it must focus on education. Egypt is particularly backward compared to other Arab countries. Its illiteracy rate is around 40 per cent (especially among women) and the quality of education is poor. This is why people vote according to religious affiliation rather than political analysis.

Despite attacks against churches, Christian-Muslim solidarity has given rise to a certain sensibility and movement for equality, hitherto impossible. Although minimal given the efforts, this is something positive.

The situation in Syria

Syria is where people realise the most what is at stake. Until recently, the Assad regime had appeared very stable. Now that situation is very serious and difficult. Information about is happening inside the country remains unclear. The bishop of Aleppo recently told me to be weary because what is said outside the country is different from what is said inside.

Nonetheless, some new things are emerging. For the first time, the Arab League took a clear position. It suspended Syria from the organisation and agreed to sanctions and more.

Of course, the League's position is somewhat ambiguous. Syria is an ally of Iran, a predominantly Shia country, whilst the Arab League is almost entirely Sunni. The Arab League's threats against Syria might thus be motivated more by this opposition than by love for the revolution. Whatever the case may be, Syrians for the past nine months have been willing to give their life to change the situation, and this is a truly new fact.

Syria has distinct problems, those of a totalitarian power structure facing an unarmed population. Neighbouring Arab countries are said to be providing financial aid to the rebels, but a Syrian or Arab mediator is needed; otherwise, there will be destruction.

For the first time, Turkey has come to the defence of Syrian rebels. Perhaps, it has its own hegemonic goals or maybe it is acting to meet its obligations as a Western ally. Or perhaps Turkey might want to promote itself as a model of moderate Islamic nation, despite its own less than stellar human rights record.

The situation in other countries

The future is uncertain in Libya. Islamist ideas are being articulated, but the country's main problem is how to reconcile its many tribes so that they work together for its development. With industry still in its infancy, it is unclear whether it can move forwards.

Saudi Arabia did not experience any uprising (since it was nipped in the bud by the military), but people still want some change.

By contrast, in countries like Yemen and Bahrain, a revolution did take place, leading to some significant changes. Neither can ever be the same.

Morocco too saw some volatility but no revolution. Fear was sufficient to initiate some social reforms. Even before this, the kingdom had modified its family law (Mudawwanah), giving women more legal rights.

All this suggests that people in the Arab world are seeking their own path.

What about Christians?

In general, Christians fear that Islamists will hijack the revolution. They, especially Salafists, scare us. A danger does exist, but cooperation with others is the only possibility to get the most from the situation. We should not be afraid. Naturally, working with the Islamists will be hard, but some Islamists have political plans and a desire to overcome their country's backwardness. We must remain watchful to show them when they cross certain limits, when they violate certain rights, etc.

Dialogue is possible and useful on certain social issues. It is time we help and support each other, and show more solidarity towards non-Christians, and vice versa. It is time to work together against illiteracy, poverty, disease, etc. In the field of education and health care, Christians have already shown their generosity and professionalism towards everyone, Christian or Muslim. I think it is possible to work together with most people.

At the same time, we must defend justice, freedom of conscience, the freedom to live our faith and proclaim it; this way, we can implement the principle of equality. Egyptian Muslims speak of the "best religion", an idea that finds application in the legal field. And of course, by best they mean Islam. For us, that is unacceptable.

Other forms of discriminations exist (men vs. women, rich vs. poor), and we must work against all of them, because they are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.

Personally, I am not afraid of an Islamic regime. I am however concerned about intolerance. Many Muslims are also opposed to the Salafists who aim at imposing their intolerant vision of Islam

(especially as it applies to women). As Christians, we cannot turn inward; instead, we must work with all those who are fighting for a society that respects human rights.

The Arab spring from a Christian perspective

Because they fear of the future, Christians tend to prefer regimes that are already in place. Such regimes are dictatorial in nature and that is a sin. If the government engages in violence, we must say that we are against violence, whatever its source, whether the opposition, ordinary citizens or the military.

We must say that we are for freedom, but not the excess of freedom that is bringing ruin to the West. We must be for equality and justice, for Christians and Muslims, for men and women. Now is the time for Christians to engage in cultural evangelisation, which is far from proselytising.

Unfortunately, the fear of Islamism is pushing Christians to turn to the past. Most of them do not want to get involved too much in politics; they just want to live in peace. However, as a Christian, it is my right and duty to be politically active.

Given this background, we can understand the position of Syria's bishops, who prefer the known over the unknown. However, the choice is not between good and evil, but between two evils . . . and the choice goes to the lesser of the two. Yet, our path is to say what matters.

Lastly, the West

The West has supported dictators and then ditched them. Now it is wavering. The West has been roundly criticised in Arab countries because of their reliance on countries like Saudi Arabia whose ideological foundations in the indirect source of Islamic terrorism. A country like the United States, which speaks about freedom and human rights, tends to be silent in the matter when it comes to the Saudis.

On Libya, Arabs believe the West was more interested in Libyan oil than in Libya's freedom. In fact, it got involved only against Libya (as it did against Saddam Hussein and Iraq) and not other countries. With Syria, the West is cautious because that country plays an important geopolitical role. . . . On Syria, the West is not unified and its position is not based on clear principles and values.

I am not an idealist. I think that each country will pursue its interests first. However, since the entire Arab world is caught up in the Arab spring, it would have been better to come up with ways of how to support (or not support) these movements.

The policy towards Israel, which is one of main causes of the Mideast crisis, is an issue that leaves Arabs dismayed, especially after they saw Barack Obama do a U-turn on the same day, first backing a two-state solution and then changing his position during Netanyahu's visit.

The same is true for his Cairo speech, which first conquered the Arab world, but was discredited months later when it became clear that his policies would not be much different from those of Bush. His credibility is now at all-time low. One has to be committed to principles in order to be a model for others.

The same is true for Europe, which is losing its religious and cultural identity. Unable to deal with its colonial past, it tries instead to hide behind a guilty conscience instead of showing that colonialism too had some value in terms of the dialogue of cultures.

In Europe, people are turning away from the local (usually Christian) religion. The relationship between Europeans and other world religions has become ambiguous. What is more, some governments appear at times to give preference to imported religions, whilst suffocating local ones. If France, for instance, denies its historical Catholic identity, it will not be able to deal with other religions. De facto, a form of schizophrenia has evolved, ranging from the secularisation of Christian festivities to the recognition of religions, other than Christianity.

For this reason, the Arab revolution can also help many young Westerners come to their sense. In Egypt and Syria, some people risked their lives for an ideal, that of a life of dignity, and for a whole people. How many people in Italy or Europe would be willing to do that?

