CHAPTER 11

The Jasmine in the Fist: International Democratization Strategies in the Arab Spring and Beyond

Emanuela C. Del Re

Foreign Actors in the Arab Spring

Who was behind the 2011 revolution in Egypt? This has been a deeply discussed issue during and since the so-called Arab Spring.

The controversial WikiLeaks (2015) itself, probably with the ambition of putting an end to all doubts, has published its ‘truth,’ diffusing a secret document sent by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to Washington (“Egypt Protests,” 2011), with the intention of unveiling the size and impact of the American support to the protesters in the Egyptian revolts. Was it a non-spontaneous revolution that took place in Egypt, then? A revolution piloted by the United States through groups trained and tested in the past in other theatres?

In the document revealed on Assange’s website (WikiLeaks, 2015), which has winged its way around the world, there is also a reference to the story of a member of the Egyptian April 6 youth movement (hereafter referred to as April 6) pointing out that he took part in the Alliance of Youth Movements Summit in Capitol Hill in December 2008, meeting members of the U.S. government. Later he affirmed that on his way back home from the United States he was detained at the airport in Egypt by the then notorious State Security and Investigation Service (SSIS), today dissolved. He said that his notes were confiscated: in them he affirmed that there was a need to radically transform the Egyptian regime in a parliamentary democracy and also noted that various parties and opposition movements had developed an unwritten plan to enforce the democratic transition by 2011. In his notes, he affirmed, it was also written that April 6 wanted to overthrow the regime before the presidential elections. The U.S. Embassy in Cairo prudently affirmed then that this member of April 6 was making unrealistic affirmations and was not supported by the main opposition trends. What is certain is that the U.S. State Department itself in 2008 had announced in a press release the institution of the Alliance of Youth Movements Summit to promote freedom (U.S. Department of State, 2008).
It is clear that the events in Tunisia inspired the Egyptian protests, which came days after the Tunisian leader Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali was forced into exile by demonstrations in his home country. Nevertheless, in a more global dimension, the visit of the member of the Egyptian youth movement April 6 to Washington is significant and could demonstrate, as some maintain, that Washington was aware of plans to overthrow Mubarak’s regime as early as 2008. Or maybe, as others maintain, the trip of the April 6 member to Washington was aimed at training youth leaders to organize demonstrations and a movement of opinion that could peacefully lead to the overthrow of Mubarak.

The discussion on the influence of foreign powers in revolutions all over the world is heated and often becomes ideological and instrumental. One interesting example is a video realized by Patrick H. Hafner and Alexandre Steinbach in June 2011, entitled The Revolution Business. In this short film, the authors tried to demonstrate that the Arab Spring was organized by foreign powers through the work of people trained for this specific aim, affirming in the video itself that “they mainly operate in countries in which the western world has a clear interest. Hardly a coincidence it seems” (Hafner & Steinbach, 2011, 00:31).

The idea that the revolution was ‘made up’ to the point that some events were fake, organized ad hoc, with the clear aim of making the tension escalate, is creating a movement of thought that paradoxically seems to have the same intensity of the nonviolent methodological pattern that it criticizes, because it is perceived as imposed by external actors. This movement of thought is in fact spreading successfully at a global level in many societies affected by undemocratic regimes or internal conflicts, with varying expectations, strategies, and results.

Yet, the global discussion on the actual results and consequences of the operations allegedly organized to overthrow regimes, such as the one in Egypt, is surprisingly limited. Hundreds of posts in blogs and Internet forums, which this author has analyzed in different languages and in different countries between January 2011 and June 2013, show that what really emerges is the fear of a global leadership that decides the destinies of all societies: a sort of ‘applied conspiracy theory’ by which (a) the concept of training is interpreted as ‘manipulation’; (b) the concept of participation and influence of a foreign actor in a given local political situation is turned into ‘interference’; and (c) the outcomes of a population’s upsurge are seen as the driven ‘plot’ of the story, whose end had been already decided. The global political dimension of this movement of thought implies that all international crises can be analyzed according to this specific pattern.