APATHY OR REVOLT: CHOOSING THE RULE OF LAW

EDITO

Serbia, November 10, 2024. The concrete canopy of Novi Sad station, recently renovated through opaque contracts, collapses. Fourteen people are killed.



Confronted with what feels like entrenched corruption and elite impunity, people across the country rise up, students at the forefront. It is "*a despair that turns into rage*" (reported words of a serbian policitian women, by Euronews on the 4th November of 2024) a fury that neither the resignation of the transport minister nor that of the prime minister can calm.

What the protesters demand is not a change of faces, but a change of system : a transformation of Justice and the State governance itself. This rejection of corruption and government inefficiency is far from unique: a year later, the same forces will topple Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli.

In authoritarian regimes without strong checks and balances, leaders escape the control of the governed. Neither accountable nor constrained, they become, in Thomas Hobbes's phrase, "a wolf to man": selfish and predatory, unrestrained by laws that serve the common good. The evidence is stark: under Ben Ali, his clan is said to have captured 88% of Tunisia's GDP; the Assad family controled an estimated fortune of over one billion dollars; and Putin's inner circle dominates key sectors of the economy.

Obscene and unrestrained under autocracy, corruption also infects democracies, yet more subtly. Hence the risk of relativism: the idea that in all systems ordinary citizens always lose. From relativism to apathy in the face of eroding rights, there is only a step.

In an ideal democracy, decisions are bound by law, and counterweights (an independent judiciary, a free press, a constitutional council, etc.) ensure accountability. In reality, that ideal is a horizon: something to strive for but never fully reach. Democracy remains imperfect, yet still the least imperfect of all political systems.

Over the past two years, often led by Generation Z crowds in Serbia, Nepal, Morocco, or Madagascar have chosen not apathy but revolt. A revolt that draws strength from two forces: institutions and popular mobilization. In a functioning democracy, public anger at elite capture can be channeled through legitimate institutions.

To borrow Barack Obama's words, *"Africa doesn't need strong men, it needs strong institutions."*

Such institutions ensure that elected officials serve citizens. Against the "*all corrupt*" mindset, they make it possible to hold accountable those who break the rules, even at the highest levels of power.

Yet no political system is flawless. Citizens therefore have not only a right but a duty to remain vigilant. Collective political action, spontaneous yet organized, must be ready to awaken at any time: to support democratic safeguards, or to step in when justice yields to backroom deals that protect the powerful. "*Universal suffrage has replaced the paving stones*," writes Victor Hugo in Les Misérables. Again, the legitimacy of revolt is clear: if the ballot boxes are rigged, no one can condemn the return of the paving stones.