THE DOUBLE BIND OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

EDITO

"At moments of historical turning points such as ours, the personality and temperament of individuals (…) matter and can change the course of events."

Movements fighting for democratisation in authoritarian regimes a priori require a strong personality who stands firm, who accepts risk openly, who brings together and catalyses forces of resistance: as a credible interlocutor, they become an accelerator of mobilisation, a rallying point for activists, and embody an alternative national narrative.

"The leader is the mirror of collective courage, when without them the movement would remain invisible."

A charismatic leader, capable of inspiring others to follow, must embody the struggle. Yet this very figure of leadership creates a structural tension within pro-democracy movements: while collective legitimacy implies that decisions should emerge from consensus, the imperative of effectiveness and the need for a clear direction sometimes force the leader to decide alone—paradoxically reproducing, in miniature, the authoritarian logic they seek to oppose. This tension between necessary democratic processes and the need for efficiency and representation must therefore not remain a blind spot in democratisation movements.

Beyond this aspect, if a movement relies too heavily on a single leader, it becomes vulnerable in the event of their assassination or imprisonment, as illustrated by the cases of Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara, Amilcar Cabral, Ernesto Guevara, or more recently Succès Masra, who has been detained by the Chadian regime for nearly a year.

"A movement that survives only through one man is not yet a movement, but a personal hope."

The leaderless revolutions led last year by Gen Z avoid this pitfall, as one cannot cut off the head of a movement that has none. However, this mode of mobilisation makes democratic transition more difficult in the event of success and regime collapse, as state structures typically rely on figures of authority: in Nepal and Bangladesh, Sushila Karki and Muhammad Yunus were respectively appointed with the agreement of protesting students… whereas in Madagascar similar youth movements failed to put forward one of their own, notably due to the absence of a chosen representative.

Thus, the time of struggle requires a committee (in this case with secure online coordination via the Discord platform)… but after regime change, a figure is needed—one endowed with legitimacy, charismatic authority (as already described by Weber), and mechanisms ensuring accountability: the media-facing leader embodies, mobilises, and speaks on behalf of the movement, while a small inner circle shapes strategy away from public attention.

This deliberate duality appears to be the operational solution to the latent tension inherent in the role of leadership. And the answer naturally varies depending on context: in a regime of total repression, collective anonymity provides protection, whereas in an electoral façade regime, the visibility of a leader is essential to lend credibility to the alternative.

The most robust model seems to be that of a spokesperson leader rather than a sole decision-maker: a public figure connected to a structured collective, whose decisions are deliberative and whose mandate is revocable. The movements that have endured best are also those that, in parallel, invested in autonomous local structures: neighbourhood committees, trade union networks, and organised civil society.

In fine, the leader should not be the condition for the movement's existence. At best, they should be its temporary expression.