

Freedom, not Frontex

There cannot be democracy without global freedom of movement

The dynamic of the Arab spring is emanating into the entire world. The movements of revolt in the Maghreb encourage and give hope, not only because despotic regimes that have been believed invincible were chased away. Although the direction of further developments remain open it is obvious that the domino effect of the Tunisian jasmine revolution swiftly brought back the old insight that history is driven from below. The struggles are directed against the day-to-day poverty as well as against general oppression, they are as much about better living conditions as they are about dignity, in short: “bread and roses”.

The incredible days of Midan Al-Tahrir, the Liberation Square in Kairo signify the quest for new forms of self organisation and grassroots democracy. The desire for equal rights, autonomy and a share of the economic wealth is also mirrored in the boats crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe: today casting off from Tunisia while during the last years from North and West Africa . “Exit” – to claim one's freedom of movement and to migrate in order to find a different, better life, and “Voice” – to raise one's voice and struggle locally, are not contradictory, they are rather mutually intertwined.

This was even more obvious during the upheavals of 1989. The vote of the feet catalysed the protest movements against the oppressive regime of real socialism. The wall fell because the people enforced their freedom of movement. This makes the rhetoric of freedom by western politicians appear even more dishonest, as it is exactly these politicians who employ the threatening scenario of a flood to characterise the movements of migration from and across Northern Africa and to the end of legitimising the deployment of Frontex, the European border agency.

The governments of the EU have courted and supported the North African rulers, and showed a hesitant and slowing position towards the movements of revolt during the last weeks. This policy is not only driven by strong economic interests, but also due to the grown collaboration in the control of migration. The more effective a despot functioned as a watchdog for the externalised EU border regime, the more he became an important “partner”. Movements of migration from Africa were to be stemmed by any means necessary.

Thousandfold death and suffering, not only at sea, but also in the deserts and in the detention camps were and are the consequences of this nefarious complicity. The sub-Saharan migrants, who today are victims of pogrom-like persecution in Libya, have been systematically disenfranchised by the regime of Gaddafi and were subject to arbitrary abuse and maltreatment. The EU paid millions to the Libyan dictator and delivered surveillance technology. A similar cooperation exists with the Moroccan ruler, and until recently with the Tunisian regime. The Arab revolutions mark a potential collapse of the EU's brutal project of exclusion in the Mediterranean.

Through a media campaign spreading fears about the collapse of migration control, the increased aggravation and militarisation of the EU border regime -- symbolised by Frontex -- is being legitimised. The European border agency adds to and extends the national control systems, which have aimed at the deterrence and the criminalisation of movements of migration for many decades. Frontex will be deployed vis-a-vis the North African coast, as it is already the case at the West African coast and at the Greek-Turkish border.

The fact that Italy is given overall control for "Operation Hermes" is consequent and shockingly honest: as a result of the collaboration between Berlusconi and Gaddafi in recent years, countless acts of unlawful push backs were carried out in the Mediterranean. Italy performed a master piece in breaking all refugees' conventions. And it is not by chance that those who save the lives of the boat people are being criminalized, as the cases of Cap Anamur and the Tunisian fishermen whose trials are still ongoing, show.

Migrants are seeking protection or a better life in Europe. They move against a gap of wealth and prosperity, rooted in Europe's neocolonial relations of dominance and exploitation towards Africa. Therefore Europe's universal claim of freedom and democracy must be measured against its treatment of those who demand equal rights by migrating. Frontex stands for the expansion of a deadly border regime – there is no place for it in a free world. Death at the external borders could be history by tomorrow. However politically there is no will to do so. Instead the EU authorities are waging an outright war at the external borders.

Within the EU disenfranchisement and deportation are part of a racist daily life. "Integration" is used as a means of pressure to enforce assimilation while exploitation in the low wage sector persists. However resistance and insistence thwart the selective manner in handling migration and challenges a system containing inequality and the lack of liberties. It is not by coincidence that in these turbulent times 300 Maghreb migrants went on hunger strike in Greece demanding their legalisation. Struggles for the right to stay as well as migrant strikes are flaring across Europe, since 15 years ago Sans Papiers in Paris – especially those from Africa – went public with the demand "Papers for everybody".

The departures occurring in Northern Africa demonstrate what is possible. They refer to a new Arab World, a new Africa, a possible new Europe. They refer to new spaces of freedom and equality, to be created in transnational struggles: in Tunis, Kairo or Bengazi as well as in Europe and in the movements of migration, crisscrossing both continents.

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