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# *The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?*

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*On June 20, 2012, the Wilson Center's Middle East Program hosted a meeting on "The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?" This publication brings together the talks presented at the meeting. Roberto Toscano and Daniel Brumberg expanded their original presentations, and Fatima Sbaity Kassem and Moushira Khattab kept their presentations in their original form. The speakers agreed that democracy is a process and that the transition from a long tradition of autocracy to democratic rule cannot be successfully achieved in short order. The process, they believe, will require patience and a period of trial and error in the countries of the Arab Awakening.*



## **The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?**

*Roberto Toscano, President, Intercultura Foundation, Italy; Former Italian Ambassador to Iran and India; and Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center*

One and a half years after the momentous events of the "Arab Awakening," the mood in the region, as well as public opinion worldwide, has shifted from elation to pessimism. In Egypt, what has emerged is an ominous, bipolar split between the military and the Islamists, which raises doubts about the possibility of a peaceful transition to full democracy. In Libya, the tyrant has been killed, but, in the absence of both state institutions and a structured civil society, armed militias are exerting an abnormal amount of power. In Tunisia, it remains to be seen whether its budding democracy will be able to withstand the onslaught of very intolerant Islamists. In Syria, popular discontent toward the tyrannical regime of Bashar al-Assad has turned into a civil war, with a horrendous human cost and unclear prospects for a solution capable of opening the way to both peace and democracy.

As written on Egypt: "February 11 [of 2011 when Mubarak stepped down] was the culmination of the Arab revolution. On February 12, the counterrevolution began."<sup>i</sup> We may still be confident that a process has started; perhaps we could still believe that, even if the "counterrevolution" was to prevail in the short-run, change will prove to be irreversible in the long-run. This was the case for the 1848 revolutions, which were apparently defeated but which eventually led to the triumph of nationalism and of constitutional government throughout the European continent.

### **Citizens and Believers**

Before, in the Arab world, there could be no real citizen since both traditional and modern dictators were able to divide the population between privileged cronies and oppressed subjects. Today, on the other hand, much of the powerful protest against corruption, privilege, and

repression is being led and organized by Islamist movements, which, though promoting popular and democratic platforms, tend to fuse the category of the citizen with that of the believer. Believers, on the other hand, do not constitute a demos but, rather, an ethnos defined by religious affiliation instead of race. Sectarian democracy, of course, is a contradiction in terms. And it is particularly disturbing to note that the resistance to the possibility of an Islamist state is carried out by sectarian minorities who are afraid that a triumph of political Islam will entail for them persecution or, at best, a status of second-class citizen.

Some analysts, with great resonance in public opinion at large, maintain that much of what is happening in the Arab (and more widely, Muslim) world is “about religion.” What we are seeing, however, is not a revival of religious faith as such but rather the powerful growth of religion as the foundation of social cohesion and political activity.

In the West, political modernization, and democracy itself, have been made historically possible by the gradual evolution of a secular state, ensuring the equality of all citizens independently from religion. But in the Muslim world, why has this not happened in the past and still is not happening today? Some will say that Islam is inherently fundamentalist or, more properly, *intégriste* (i.e. it does not recognize separate spheres of human reality and sees religion as all-encompassing –from ethics to politics, from dietary prescriptions to the economy). Every religion, actually, lends itself to possible “totalitarian” interpretations of religion – and this applies also to Christianity, definitely neither pluralistic nor tolerant until the Protestant reformation and the consolidation of strong nation-states.

But why is a secular approach to religion so weak in the Muslim world? In the first place, secularism has been identified with something “foreign,” harking back to the major trauma of the arrival in Egypt of Napoleon and republican (as well as *laïque*) France, which was perceived as a humiliation.

Besides, secularism in the Middle East has never been of the pluralist, tolerant, religious-compatible and even religious-friendly Anglo-Saxon brand – but has rather been presented, and seen, as an anti-religious, atheistic ideology. In the early 20th century, the ideologist of Turkism, Ziya Gokalp, when translating the French term *laïque*, used the word *la-dini*, which means “non-religious,” thereby making sure that believers would consider secularism unacceptable. More important, Atatürk – and later Reza Shah in Iran – applied this identification of secularism and systematic anti-religious modernization. Too often, even today, too many secularists (usually belonging to both cultural and social elites) love secularism more than democracy and, in order to prevent the power of Islamists, are willing to support or at least condone a military government.

The problem is that too often secularists are liberal but not democratic, while Islamists – at least the more moderate – are democratic but hardly liberal. In the Arab world, it is difficult to envisage a system that can be both secular, in the sense of a full separation between religion and the state, and highly religious at the same time (the American example is the most significant).

## **Democracy and the Rule of Law**

It is true – and this will remain true whatever the future political outcome – that the events of 2011 proved, against all “relativism,” that democracy, while not being a universal reality, turns out to be a universal aspiration. The “clash of civilizations” does exist, but it runs within each country and each society, dividing democrats on one side and authoritarians on the other.

In the West, however, we tend to make the mistake of reversing the historical and logical sequence between rule of law and democracy. We seem to have forgotten that democracy has been the late fruit of a long and difficult process of rule-setting and power limitation. The Magna Carta of 1215 was definitely not a democratic document, but a pact between a sovereign and a group of what today we would call “warlords,” aimed at reducing conflict through the common acceptance of rules and limitations. And – fast forward – who would maintain that 19th-century Britain, with its limited property-based electorate, was a democracy?

Democracy comes after the law and on the basis of shared rules, not vice versa. The rule of law before democracy opens the way to democracy. Democracy before the rule of law is a delusion when not a mere fraud.

## **Democracy and Civil Society**

Not only did the events of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt give a boost to the hope that democracy would advance everywhere, but they also strengthened the conviction that this could happen through processes that were internal and not imposed from the outside. Societies could become “open” without being “opened.” George W. Bush was wrong, and Tahrir Square was right.

Since then, Libya gave a very different signal, further strengthened by the situation in Syria. In the presence of regimes and leaders capable of applying extreme levels of violent repression, no popular revolt can succeed. Libya was, indeed, “opened” – and in Syria, the situation has evolved in the direction of a civil war, prompting calls for external intervention presented (as in the Libyan case) as “humanitarian” but actually aimed at putting an end to the slaughter by achieving regime change.

It is not, however, only a matter of repression. What we saw in Tahrir Square was a powerful surge of civil society. In the West, we saluted those events and rejoiced. Of course, in that there was a lot of sincere solidarity, but our reaction was also shaped by our ideological preferences.

In the post-Cold War world, the struggle for democracy has been often perceived as a contest between democratic civil society and a non-democratic state. Given skepticism on institutions (tainted, for some inevitably, either by authoritarianism or by demagoguery and corruption), the space for democracy has been widely identified outside the state, in the free and plural formation of associations, NGOs, and movements.

We have forgotten that dissent and civil society activism are essential, but they should be seen as a necessary premise of – and not a substitute to – democratic action of a political kind, aiming at new rules and new institutions.

Thus, our enthusiasm was doomed to be followed by disappointment. Commenting on the defeat of “Egypt’s incredibly brave Facebook generation rebels,” Thomas Friedman has written:

“They could organize protests and demonstrations, and act with often reckless courage to challenge the old regime. But they could not go on to rally around a single candidate, and then engage in the slow, dull, grinding work of organizing a political party that could contest an election, district by district.”<sup>ii</sup>

But it is not only a question of organization. In Egypt, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the military, are capable of exerting a strong appeal based on powerful, concrete needs felt by the majority of the population.

Islamists throughout the Arab world are extremely active on social issues and are perceived (for good reasons) as closer to the people, less corrupt, and less elitist than the liberal democrats we in the West tend to focus upon and identify with. Resentment toward elites is a very powerful force, and Islamists are extremely capable of appealing to it, especially with conditions of inequality, deep economic hardship, and social discontent. The strength of the Islamist movements is largely dependent upon their focus on the issue of “social justice.” Radical Islam cannot be defined as “socialist,” but definitely as “social,” with much attention devoted to a combination of public welfare and charity aimed at reducing inequality and ensuring basic living standards to all. Liberals in the Middle East (not only in Arab countries, but also in Turkey and Iran) seem not to be fully aware of this. The fact is that demands for democracy and human rights can rally sustainable majority support only insofar as they are linked to issues of concern for the common citizen – issues of an economic and social nature. Democrats do not have to choose between political liberty and economic justice, quite the opposite. As a matter of fact, as proved by the remarkable series of Arab Human Development Reports by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in the Arab world, economic “backwardness” is directly linked to political and cultural factors: bad governance, injustice, lack of rule of law, cronyism, insufficient scientific and educational effort, and, last but not least, the exclusion of women from active participation in the economy. According to these reports, Arabs are poor because they are not free and live under arbitrary rule.

As for the military, their appeal is essentially derived from their offer to deliver security at a time when people are afraid and disoriented in a situation of growing lawlessness and threatening chaos. Fear of chaos is even more powerful than economic discontent or resentment of oppression. If the alternative to dictatorship is violent anarchy, most people will choose dictatorship.

### **Which Democracy?**

We might agree that “democracy” today is an unbeatable brand name. At the same time, however, if we care about substance and not just appearances, we should be aware of two possible political options that, while preserving the outer trappings of democracy, tend to actually empty it of its real political meaning.

On one hand we see the spreading of “authoritarian democracy” (where the adjective tends to void the substantive). Russian sociologist Dimitri Furman, when describing “Putinism,” has written about “imitation democracy.”<sup>iii</sup> The democratic process (elections, political parties, etc.) is preserved, but power is substantially unchallenged and rests on a combination of populism and well-targeted repression. The post-Mubarak military in Egypt, to give just one example,

will never speak against democracy and are talking legality and constitutionalism; yet one is justified in fearing that theirs would be indeed an “imitation democracy.”

The danger, however, does not lie only in authoritarian, pseudo-democratic regimes but also in “dictatorships of the majority.” When we speak about democracy, we imply constitutional democracy, pluralism, respect for minorities, and the separation of powers – liberal democracy, in other words. Islamists might perhaps be defined as democratic. What certainly they are not is liberal or pluralist. In Iraq, the demise of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of majority rule was followed by such deterioration of safety and rights for Christians that many of them left the country. Many Syrian Christians fear that the same will happen if the dictatorial Assad regime is overthrown. Aristotle identified “ochlocracy,” i.e. mob rule, as the degenerate version of democracy (in parallel with the dyads monarchy/tyranny and aristocracy/oligarchy). Never has this been as relevant a warning as it is today in the Middle East.

Having warned against “imitation democracy” and “mob-democracy,” we should also warn against another deeply distorted approach to the question of democracy: a sort of one-size-fits-all approach that has unfortunately been a fallacy, frequently characterizing Western ideological militancy in favor of democracy.

Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* starts with the famous sentence: “All happy families are happy in the same way; all unhappy families are unhappy in their own peculiar way.” As far as politics is concerned, we should turn this around and say, “All democracies are democratic in their own way; all non-democracies tend to resemble each other” (insofar as their repression, use of political police, rhetoric, propaganda, “doublespeak,” and even aesthetics).

The path will be long and difficult, but Muslims in general – and Arabs in particular – have indeed awakened and have started moving toward democracy. By that, they are moving toward systems of legality, citizenship, individual freedom, civil society pluralism, social justice, and social mobility. Such systems respect minorities and are characterized by full recognition of religion in public space but without any claim to political monopoly. In this sense, and only in this sense, can we say that the Arab Awakening is irreversible.

So, is democracy a “mirage”? If we mean by this that it is a figment of the imagination, one could say that it is not: history proves otherwise. But perhaps democracy is indeed a mirage in the real sense insofar as a mirage is not a hallucination but, rather, the optical distortion that makes us see (real) things closer than they actually are. We could then say that there are still many miles of harsh and dangerous desert to cross before reaching the verdant oasis of democracy. But, actually, the trip will never end since democracy is not a fixed destination but a process, which serves as a reminder for us living in countries that call themselves democracies.

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<sup>i</sup> Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, “The Arab Counterrevolution,” *The New York Review of Books*, September 29, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Facebook meets reality,” *The International Herald Tribune*, June 11, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Interview with Dmitri Furman, <http://www.polit.ru/article/2004/12/26/furm>



## **Egyptian Democracy: An Attainable Goal or a Mirage?**

**Moushira Khattab**, *Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; Former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics; and Former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt*

The January 25 revolution that inspired the world has been quite a roller coaster ride. As a result, Egypt is going through a very rough period of transition. These days, the eyes of the world have turned to Egypt once again following the country's first democratic presidential elections. To analyze the situation, we must backtrack a little.

Given Egypt's historical significance – coupled with its critical mass and status as the region's cultural hub – its current struggle against the complex issues it faces will undoubtedly set the tone for the region. Egyptians were holding their breath for the official outcome of the second and final round of presidential elections.<sup>i</sup> As important as it is, the presidential election is not the challenge. The real challenge is setting the unshakable foundation for democracy.

When Egyptians from all walks of life took to the streets in January 2011 demanding change, they had clearly reached a boiling point. So immense was the focus on reaching that initial and seemingly unattainable goal of former President Hosni Mubarak stepping down, that it almost appears as if the entire country has been somewhat thrown into disarray now that it has been achieved. Sixteen months after Mubarak was toppled, the country still seems to be struggling to come to grips with the reality of life in an Egypt without Mubarak. The revolutionaries, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, the liberals – in fact all stakeholders – and, above all, the mass population still seem to be caught in a daze of figuring out how to best use their newfound and hard-earned freedom.

I will begin by giving some insight into the political scene and the main players in Egypt today.

### **First: Constitutional Disarray**

The most recent developments in Egypt have led some analysts to describe the Egyptian case as constitutional disarray. After Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011, the SCAF suspended the constitution of 1971, with the exception of six articles that were picked for amendment by an appointed committee. The amended articles were put to referendum in their totality. Again, without going back to the people, the referendum was followed by a constitutional declaration that went beyond the amended articles. The constitutional declaration set the rules governing the transitional process, the parliamentary and presidential elections, and the selection of the constitutional assembly mandated to rewrite the constitution. The parliament, which was elected in a much talked about free and fair election but which was deemed unconstitutional, was dissolved on June 14,<sup>ii</sup> only two days before the second round of presidential elections.

The time allotted before parliamentary elections was too limited to allow for the establishment and consolidation of new political parties. Only the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic groups were prepared with a full-fledged apparatus and huge financial resources that used mosques to disseminate their propaganda, among other tactics. Religion was massively manipulated as a tool. Liberals blamed the SCAF for what seemed to them like a deal with the Brotherhood. Despite the many concerns, Egyptians accepted the outcome of the election. Egyptians were proud of their democratic landmark achievements. Another positive aspect of the parliamentary elections was that they took place as scheduled and were widely regarded as being open and transparent by local and international monitors – a first for Egypt.

## **Second: The Muslim Brotherhood and Other Political Islamist Groups**

Egyptians have always had a love-hate relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. From their early days under British rule – where they would often resort to political assassinations to express discontent with their consistent oppression – to their apparent under-the-table dealings with the Mubarak regime, they have always been waiting in the wings for their chance to rule the country. Long considered to be the largest and most organized political group, even though it still remains officially outlawed, the Muslim Brotherhood finally earned its right to govern when it won an overwhelming majority in Egypt's first ever free and fair parliamentary elections in November 2011. Though they claim they represent the revolution, their performance was out of tune with youth demands for dignity, social justice, and freedom. No bill was presented to ensure an infrastructure of constitutionality and justice.

The Brotherhood also failed to see that the revolution was all about the economy, job creation, and poverty alleviation. The parliament did not allocate any session to engage in a serious discussion on possible solutions. It did not even consider the widely known strategic answer to these demands through reform of education. Parliament ignored the fact that poor quality education lies at the core of youth unemployment and poverty. University graduates lack life skills that make them attractive commodities in the labor market. Rote learning must give way to critical thinking that prepares youth for competition and for democracy as well. School curricula need major revamping to meet realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead of debating such crucial issues, the Muslim Brotherhood's performance, along with that of their Salafi colleagues, was mediocre to say the least. Whether it is their prioritization of issues that focused on revenge rather than moving forward or their total disregard for matters at the heart of Egypt's crumbling economy, their performance was dismal. Rather than focusing on passing laws that would usher in economic growth and confidence, they prioritized decriminalizing female genital mutilation (FGM), abolishing women's rights, and banning toys they deem offensive over the more pressing social and economic reforms or the worsening security situation. They have consistently showed an unprofessional and narrow-minded approach. Their failure to act under the dome of Egypt's parliament was further compounded by a number of personal scandals that dogged its members, ranging from corruption to indecent public behavior.

At a time when Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court handed down a ruling that put an end to their brief time in parliament, what is most striking about the recent turn of events is that the Muslim Brotherhood seems to have lost a considerable amount of credibility and public support as the court's decision was widely welcomed by both supporters and opponents of the revolution alike. The Muslim Brotherhood is now bolstering its efforts to push its presidential

candidate as the candidate of the revolution, while it is a known fact that they did not really have a noticeable presence during the early and crucial days of the revolution.

### **Third: The Revolutionaries**

I hesitated quite a bit before using the term “revolutionaries” because everything to do with the revolution has been used and abused in recent times in Egypt as a way of remaining trendy. Being associated with the revolution now seems to be the quickest and most guaranteed way of gaining public favor and support. The sad truth is that those who triggered the revolution are not heard.

### **Fourth: The Outcome of the Transition**

There is no doubt in my mind that we have made progress as a country since the revolution. People have finally found their voices, and the barrier of fear has been torn down for good. Egypt will not have another authoritarian leader simply because the people will not allow it to happen. When we assess the progress that has been made, however, things become less clear. On the positive side, Egyptians seem to be slowly getting the hang of free and fair elections. They went to the polls to choose their new president in the fourth elections since the revolution, and there is general consensus among local and international observers that they have all been free and fair elections – a first for Egypt after decades of rigged elections were very much a part of life. For the first time since the declaration of the republic in 1954, the president will come to office with a majority of 51 and not 99.99 percent of the vote. People watch vote counts live on TV as it happens in a process, which, I am proud to say, is very transparent.

The transition to democracy, however, goes much deeper than holding successful elections. Democracy needs to be thought of and approached as a philosophy and a cultural mentality rather than an occurrence – more of a journey than a destination. A big part of democracy is learning to accept the outcome, no matter what. Freedom is giving people the ability to choose who lead and govern them whether it is the president or parliament. The concept of democracy is one that needs to be engrained into people’s minds and one that must become a natural reflex and not something that requires effort. It needs to exist in every facet of life and not just when choosing members of parliament or the president. While Egypt has made considerable progress toward democracy since the revolution, a lot of work still lies ahead. Many groups remain marginalized, such as women and Christians, to name but a few. Despite women playing a pivotal role in earning Egypt its chance at democracy, the tide has turned against them, and they are now being deprived of a chance to set the foundation of key transitional justice processes. Christians remain worriedly unsure of their future with the advent of Egypt’s next president. While many presidential candidates tried to ride the revolution and claimed to be its representative, none truly were (more so in the presidential run-off elections). However sad, it does not justify boycotting the run-off elections and even going beyond that to promote boycotting so as to dissuade others from voting. Eighty-five million Egyptians are likely to pay the price over the next four years.

Another important aspect of democracy is that you cannot change the rules of the game you agree to participate in. Before the first round of elections, none of the 13 candidates agreed to join forces thinking they were above it, and confident they would achieve success on their own.

Once the first round results were announced, however, some of the eliminated candidates called for the abolition of the election results, the disqualification of the two finalists, and the establishment of a presidential council to eventually take control from the SCAF. What kind of message does this send to a candidate's electorate when one day he is promoting democracy by running in the elections and then calling for open protests in Tahrir Square to nullify the elections after finding out he lost?

At the time of the conference (June 20), Tahrir Square was full of protesters voicing their opposition to the latest round of constitutional amendments announced by the SCAF. I had little doubt that when the victor was announced in the presidential elections, we would see many protests in Tahrir regardless of who won. This can be attributed to the very close nature of the vote where early indications show each candidate had garnered 50 percent with a margin of error of 1 to 2 percent.

Egyptians are about to discover that democracy is a journey not a destination, and it is a philosophy and a way of life that will take time to be engrained into people's mindsets by default. It needs to exist in all facets of life – in a marriage, family, workplace, and at the national level. It is based on mutual respect, equal representation, and, above all, inclusion. Whichever way you look at it, the marginalized sectors of society are not marginal. Women are marginalized yet they represent a full 50 percent of the population. Children are marginalized yet they represent the biggest single group of the population. Christians may be relatively small in number, but the overlapping societal groups could provide for remarkable electoral power and influence if used correctly.

Thought Egyptians may stumble along the way, the most important thing is to march forward and not look back when we do stumble. I am confident Egyptians are on the right track and we will eventually achieve success. The hardest first step of breaking the barrier of fear has been achieved and we must continue. The political wrangling reflects a growing maturity and Tahrir Square remains the strongest player. It will continue to be the watchdog. It may be manipulated and abused by some political powers, but every day it is getting wiser and more immune to exploitation. I will close by quoting Rami Khouri, who wrote,

Egypt this week is a country in post-revolutionary turmoil and deep transition, without a governance system. But it will be fine. It will emerge from this transitional moment in better shape than it has been at any time in the past two generations -- because the Egypt that will configure itself during the coming phase will enjoy the unprecedented quality of being a country that has been defined and shaped by its own people.<sup>iii</sup>

The enormous power of populist legitimacy that was unleashed in January 2011 and that toppled the government will now regroup and reassert itself in more complex and institutionalized political forms than merely demonstrating in public squares.

On January 25, 2011, a baby was born, which will eventually grow into a mature adult known as democracy. This baby is growing fast and is learning to use its newfound voice. At the same time, however, it is also going through growing pains. As Egyptian democracy grows and seeks to develop its own personality, it is likely to face some challenges that are very likely to be overcome and that will help shape this personality. A fitting example of this is the recent constitutional disarray I previously highlighted. Yes, this is an issue, but Egyptians will get through it, and it will only make them stronger as they show admirable determination to use

their newfound voice. Over the past 16 months, Egyptians have managed to convert Tahrir from a transportation hub to a symbol of their struggle for freedom and their quest to nurture democracy. As long as Tahrir exists, Egyptians will keep going back to it until they get things right and in so doing they discover that with their newfound power comes great responsibility. They must know when and how to use this power and I have no doubt that they will do just that. I am confident that Egyptians will continue on their journey to democracy and will continue to impress the world as we have been known to occasionally do over the course of 7,000 years.

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<sup>i</sup> On June 24, Mohammed Morsi was declared Egypt's new president by election regulators:

[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/mohamed\\_morsi/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/mohamed_morsi/index.html)

<sup>ii</sup> On July 19, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi annulled the Supreme Court's dissolution of the Islamist-dominated parliament: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Jul-09/179842-mursi-annuls-egypt-parliament-dissolution.ashx#axzz21YwwsCki>. On August 3, Egypt's top court rejected a decree by Mohammed Morsi to reinstate the parliament it had dissolved: <http://www.firstpost.com/world/after-egypts-top-court-ruling-mursi-headed-for-face-off-with-army-402963.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Khouri, R. (2012, June 19). The Egyptian Military's Two Big Mistakes. *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*.

<http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=191>



## Is Democracy a Mirage in the Arab World?

*Fatima Sbaity Kassem, Former Director, UN-ESCWA Centre for Women*

I will address the very important topic of democracy in the Arab world, which is on the minds of all Arab activists and the global community at large. First, I will cite a few facts and realities of the post-2011 Arab uprisings, or the "Arab Awakening" as a more appropriate description of the ongoing events in the Arab region. Then, I will respond to the primary question posed, "Is Arab democracy a mirage?" by addressing two controversies of import: (1) Is Islam incompatible with democracy?; (2) Is it "Arab exceptionalism" that is at the root of the prevailing democratic deficits in most Arab countries? I will conclude by flagging a few of the challenges facing democratization in the Arab region.

At the outset, I wish to clarify our understanding of what is "democracy" or "*demokratia*." Literally, it means "rule by the people." Democracy is a process and not an end in and of itself. It re-shapes and re-structures itself to allow for the provision of the common good to all citizens on equal footing, in as much that is possible. Democratic practices adapt continuously to emerging and imminent interests of individuals, institutions, societies, and polities in order to ensure economic growth, political equality, distributive justice, and human and national development. Adam Przeworski links development to democracy in that economic development does not necessarily lead to democracy but sustains it.<sup>i</sup>

Democracy is premised on the principles of freedom of choice, expression, and association; equal citizenship; and inclusion of all (for example, Greek democracy excluded women and slaves – interestingly, an anti-democratic Plato questioned this practice). It is also premised on free and fair elections, a peaceful transition of authority, right of contestation, separation of powers, accountability, and transparency.

In a democracy, political inequalities among citizens are reduced to a minimum (if not eliminated) in terms of capacities and opportunities. Effective participation of citizens is ensured via equitable distribution of economic resources, positions, and opportunities as well as knowledge, information, and cognitive skills. Democratic practices are not uniform across consolidated democracies. Democracy is practiced differently in different countries with respect to a host of Cs: choice, consensus, conflict management, communication, competition, consultation, citizenship, and courts. The reality is that representative democracy and full equality remain elusive and untenable in many so-called “fledgling democracies.” There is no perfect model of democracy.

### **Facts and Realities of the Post-2011 Arab World**

The first Arab Human Development Report, published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2002, highlighted three key deficits in the Arab world: freedom, knowledge, and women's empowerment. It predicted that development would be untenable until these three deficits were overcome. Given this informed prediction, the popular uprisings that swept the Arab region in 2011, a decade later, should not have been a total surprise. Alas, human beings have short and selective memories.

The Arab activists – young and old, women and men – in the freedom squares called for regime change and reform. They called for freedom, dignity, political equality, and social justice. These popular social movements and revolts proceeded without planning, organization, and appointed leadership. Further, the uprisings were not guided by “ideals, ideology, or political platforms,” in contrast to those witnessed two centuries ago, referred to as the “European renaissance.” A number of these Arab countries, for example Libya, did not maintain functioning public institutions. In principle, long-standing institutions are essential to protect against chaos and ensure peaceful transition without risking a breakdown of the process of democratic transition.

In the wake of this watershed, one can only admit that the current situation in the Arab region is foggy with a huge overcast, which prevents clear prediction on what the future holds for these countries. Nevertheless, there are emerging realities in the post-2011 Arab Awakening that should assist us in making some sort of an informed analysis.

(1) The transition in the Arab countries is irreversible. The wall of fear from despotic rulers and repressive regimes is broken. The voiceless became vocal. The toppling of despots speaks volumes and, I argue, raised the fears of other autocrats in the region. In an attempt to pre-empt a similar fate and as a show of goodwill vis-à-vis the peoples, the autocrats were inspired to adopt reforms and/or co-opt their subjects – and I refrain from referring to their peoples as citizens – by distributing land, funds, or favors in the true manner of rentier economies and

feudal lords. In order to force their subjects into submission, as some political observers predict, “Regimes will have to resort to something bordering on genocide”<sup>ii</sup> – think Libya and Syria.

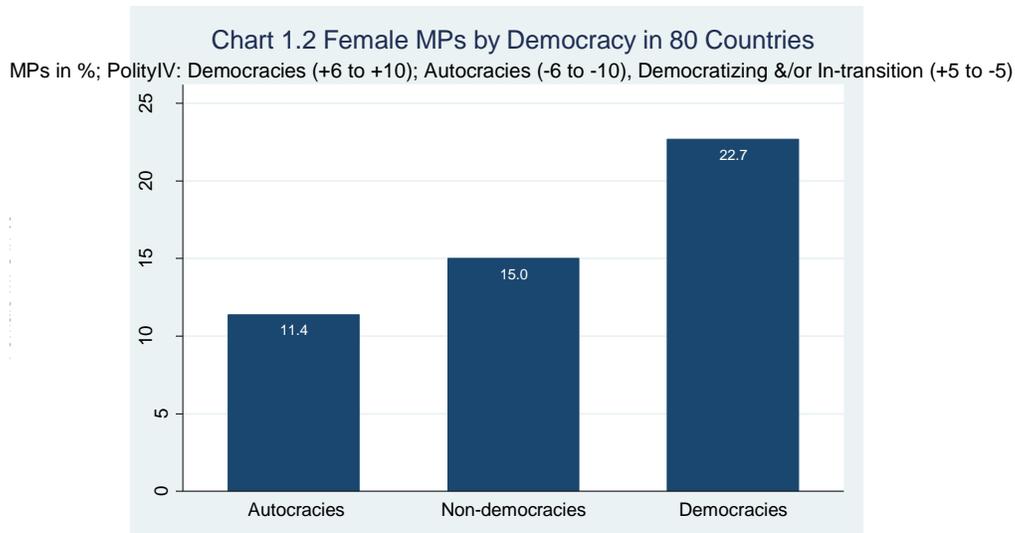
(2) The road to democracy is bumpy, thorny, winding, and long. Nevertheless, this will not dissuade the people from pursuing their strife for equal rights and citizenship, social and redistributive justice, and human development. The people’s aspirations for change and reform will not wane. They are adamant and will continue to gather week after week after the Friday prayers in the freedom squares. The transitional councils are now accountable to the people and are obliged to respond promptly to the people’s demands. Witness Egypt and the outcome of the recent presidential elections. I have no doubt that the activists will march to Tahrir Square if they see that their revolution is hijacked by the military or the Islamists.

(3) The older relationship of dependence on the West has inevitably and irreversibly changed. The activists’ apprehension of foreign intervention is heightened, especially as they have come to recognize and reject the West’s friendly relations with military institutions (i.e. Egypt). They are more comfortable seeking home-grown, not Western-imposed initiatives. They see the West as juggling between values and interests. They call upon the West to be even-handed – especially with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and to the support they continue to accord to autocrats in the Gulf. They demand from the West to practice what they preach.

### **Is Islam Incompatible with Democracy or is it Arab Exceptionalism at the Root?**

Scholars like Samuel Huntington, Jonathan Fox, and Steven Fish have argued that Islam is inherently undemocratic and is not compatible with democracy. They provide empirical evidence of the prevalence of democratic deficits in most of the Arab and some non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries, pointing to the marginal status of women therein. In a similar vein, others also argue that some world religions (Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism) are at least in some ways particularly hostile toward women.<sup>iii</sup> Fish specifically maintains, “The station of women ... links Islam and the democratic deficit.”<sup>iv</sup> The observed pattern of inherent discriminatory and non-democratic practices is manifested in these countries’ political institutions and, he argues, is behind the sub-standard status of women and their low representation in public office. However, the differentiation by religious family suggests that different religions have different consequences for female empowerment and leadership, and that even the influence of the same religion on women is not uniform or a constant.

Looking at female representation, one observes that almost all democracies have high levels of female representation while autocracies invariably have lower or no female representation – if they maintain parliaments or similar democratic institutions in the first place. There is general support for the argument linking political regimes to female representation. However, one also observes that there are underachievers within democracies (e.g. Japan, Ireland, and Luxembourg) and overachievers within autocracies and non-democracies (e.g. Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, and Kyrgyzstan). These variations call for an explanation, which an argument based solely on differences in political regimes does not seem to provide.



Sbaity-Kassem, F. (2012) Can women break through? Women in municipalities: Lebanon in comparative perspective. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 35 (4), 233-255

Therefore, taking Arab and non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries in comparative perspective, one finds that a number of non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries rank high on the Freedom House indices and Polity IV democracy scale like Indonesia, Senegal, Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bangladesh, as well as Comoros, Djibouti, and Lebanon among the Arab countries. Additionally, in most of these countries, one finds that women and men are given equal opportunities and that female parliamentary representation is comparable to that in most developed countries. Also, in certain non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries, women are heads of state and government. Given this empirical evidence, we can conclude that (1) Islam is not incompatible with democracy; and (2) Islam is no bar to gender equality.

If this is the case, then is “Arab exceptionalism” a valid explanation for the prevalence of democratic deficits in the Arab countries, as the UNDP Arab Human Development Report claimed a decade ago? Scholars like Al Stepan, among others, interested in Islam and/or the Arab region question the Huntington-Fish-Fox argument of the incompatibility of Islam with democracy. They note that it is not Islam but “Arab exceptionalism” that should be investigated. I beg to disagree with Stepan. The reality of the Arab Awakening has ruled out claims of “Arab exceptionalism.” These popular movements calling for social change are no different than the revolts in Europe, the Balkans, and Latin America. While conceding that each country in the universe is unique and has its specificities, I maintain that the Arab world, as a collective entity, is not *sui generis*, and argue against the perception of “despotic orientalism” in the Arab world. The perception that culture and traditions – conflated with religious practices – render democracy ill-suited for Arabs, dissipated with the 2011 watershed events. There is no “Arab exceptionalism.” This is a reality now, but that does not imply that the road to democracy in the Arab countries is paved with roses, or will be an easy journey. There are many challenges facing Arab democratization.

## What are the Challenges to Democratization in the Arab Countries?

Democracy needs democrats; i.e. democratic culture needs to be built in individuals and in institutions. The reality is that the majority of public institutions and political parties in the Arab region are non-democratic in their inner structures. These are hierarchical, centralized, and personalized. They lack institutionalization and fail to follow basic tenets of democratic practices in decision-making and transitions to leadership.

There are five main criteria to be met for democratic transitions to succeed and for democracies to become stable and consolidate, according to Robert Dahl, the father of democratic theory<sup>vi</sup>:

- (1) Leaders must not employ violent coercion to maintain their power;
- (2) Foreign intervention must be at a minimum, and there are no foreign armies on national soil;
- (3) A modern, dynamic, and organized pluralist society must exist;
- (4) A political culture and system of beliefs that is favorable to democracy must prevail; and
- (5) Conflictive social cleavages must be maintained at a tolerant level.

Thus, the main risks and challenges to democratic transition in the Arab world may be summed up as follows:

- (1) The risk of the military or the police taking over and the role that these institutions will play in the new polities and societies;
- (2) The risk of exclusion: women and minorities (ethnic groups or religious sects as Christians in the Muslim-majority countries);
- (3) The risk of breakdown into chaos, violence, and/or civil conflict;
- (4) The risk of hostile foreign intervention; and,
- (5) The risk of Islamists becoming the main actors – drawing the constitution in their own interest and holding on to power (i.e. failure to introduce democratic practices of leadership transition).

Are the fears from Islamists founded, and would this jeopardize democratic transition?

Islamists of varying religiosities are winning democratically-held elections. We saw this in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Egypt. However, these parties are more interested in solidifying their foothold in the new polity than in hijacking the revolution. They are fully aware that if they do not stand up to people's expectations, they will be thrown out in the next round. This is a wait-and-see game now in Egypt. What is sure now is that the Arab people will not sustain autocratic rule again, unless they are forced by the military.

- (6) The ability to meet the high expectations of the people pursuant to the success of the revolts. The revolutions are all about freedom, dignity, and social justice. People believe that their lives will witness substantial improvements as they start enjoying their freedoms and participating in decisions that affect their lives. But few socio-economic benefits are likely to be achieved in the short term. Managing these high expectations is what the transition to democracy is all about. But, this is not so simple nor is it a set formula. Thus, it is important to (a) draw a new constitution that guarantees freedom, dignity, social justice, human rights, and equality among the citizens; and (b) adopt economic policies that ensure growth, create jobs, fight corruption, and reduce poverty.

Some ways to mitigate these risks, including the risk that a country may revert to autocracy, include:

- (1) Ensuring that there are effective transitional justice mechanisms that address the legacies of former regimes;
- (2) Taking steps to reinforce social cohesion and overcome conflicting social cleavages (minorities, ethnic groups, and sectarianism);
- (3) Strengthening the role of the judiciary in upholding the rule of law and safeguarding human rights: a strong and independent judiciary; and,
- (4) Ensuring that (in the medium term) transparent governance systems, well-functioning and democratizing public institutions, and lower levels of corruption will level the playing field and boost investment and growth.

I will conclude with few words of caution:

- (1) Regional and global powers will find it more costly to challenge emerging democracies. It is not inconceivable that, five or ten years from now, a vibrant democratic culture and fully-functioning democratic institutions will be firmly established, at least in Egypt and Tunisia. Moreover, a stable and democratic Egypt may well trigger another wave of democratization in the region.
- (2) In this next round, there will be no hastily fleeing despots and life-long rulers. Regimes will either willingly reform to pre-empt change, or they will viciously fight back to smother the first signs of protest.
- (3) As Arabs reinvent themselves, their partners and supporters in the West will have to revisit their foreign affairs strategies and policies toward a more even-handed approach vis-à-vis the Arabs. This is especially needed in connection with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. They should realize that they do not call the shots anymore. That is: it is not “our way or the highway.” They must accept, tolerate, and reconcile with a new and reformed Arab world.
- (4) There is no Manichean dualism and orderliness – not all democracies are good and not all non-democracies are bad. Countries and regimes must be placed against a continuum in as far as democratic practices are concerned. The transition to democracy is tenuous and does not happen overnight; it is a heuristic process of trials and errors, a learning curve. In his seminal work *Democracy and its Critics*, Robert Dahl concludes,

“For the story of democracy is as much a record of failures as of successes: of failures to transcend existing limits, of momentary breakthroughs followed by massive defeats, and sometimes of utopian ambitions followed by disillusionment and despair. Measured against its exacting ideal, the imperfections of any actual democracy are so obvious and so enormous that the palpable discrepancy between the ideal and reality constantly stimulates unbounded hopes that the ideal may somehow be made real.”<sup>vii</sup>

Arabs have made their choice. They are determined to construct a better world. It probably will not be a replica of a Western-style liberal democracy. But if the West can live with such a vision, great partnerships can be forged.

It may take five years, but the Arab people will rise again. There is no going back. The wall of fear is broken once and for all. Democracy in the Arab world is not a mirage. The path to

democracy may be tenuous and thorny. Nonetheless, home-grown Arab democracy will eventually prevail.

The Arab people are ready for change. Can the global community accept that?

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<sup>i</sup> Przeworski, et al. (2000). *Democracy and Development; Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, "Reconciling with the Newer Middle East," speech given at "The Economics of the Arab Spring" conference, 12 September 2011: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/64836389/Reconciling-with-the-Newer-Middle-East-Rima-Khalaf>

<sup>iii</sup> Norris and Inglehart (2000); Janine Astrid Clark and Jillian Schwedler (2003); Donno and Russett (2004); Mark Tessler (2002)

<sup>iv</sup> Fish, M. S. (2002) Islam and Authoritarianism. *World Politics*, 55, 29

<sup>v</sup> Stepan and Robertson (2003) An Arab More Than Muslim Electoral Gap? *Journal of Democracy*; and their debate, "Arab, Not Muslim, Exceptionalism" (2004) *Journal of Democracy*, 14 (4);

Donno and Russett (2004) Islam, Authoritarianism, and Female Empowerment: What are the linkages? *World Politics*, 56, 582-607.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (1989)

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid: 312.



## The Long Road to Democratic Transition in the Arab World

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There is a big difference between democratization, per se, and the dynamics of "transition." Transitions are an open-ended affair. They can set the stage for moving from autocracy to democracy, or they can break down and lead to a reinstalling of autocracy and/or domestic conflict and even war. Certainly, each Arab state that is now going through its second "Arab Spring" is at a different point along this continuum. There is a dynamic of one kind of transition or another everywhere. Whether democracy will be a mirage or something different is another question.

Transitions require two dynamics: first, from above, a significant "cracking of the state" between softliners and hardliners, or, if you like, between those ready to entertain some measure of reform and those adamantly opposed to all reform; and second, from below, between radicals driving for an entire transformation of the system and moderates willing to settle for more limited reforms. Obviously, for a transition to democracy to occur, regime softliners need to be sufficient in number and organization in order to have leverage, and opposition moderates need to have a similar degree of leverage. The two reinforce one another, thus keeping the ball moving forward – even when regime hardliners threaten to intervene and even when opposition radicals are not happy with the pace of change.

That is the theory, and it hinges on a number of assumptions that do not always work out very well in the Arab world. First, with the exception of Tunisia, regimes have not exhibited very significant splits – or at least splits in which the line between so-called softliners and hardliners is clear. Even in Egypt, the split between the military and the cronies of the former president was real, but the military has never envisioned much more than the most limited of reforms. Whether that perspective has changed over the last six months is an interesting question. More importantly, from the vantage point of opposition groups, the split between radicals and moderates is not over the pragmatics of economic or political power; it is much more about existential issues of national identity. In some cases, where such a split pits small minorities – which would otherwise lose out in any open political contest (as in Bahrain and Syria) – against one another, the prospects for any kind of pact between regime and opposition is very small indeed.

Elsewhere, where the divide pivots around ideological issues (e.g. Islamists versus non-Islamists) as in Egypt and Tunisia, forging a regime-opposition accommodation or pact is difficult, although not impossible. Such a pact requires a readiness from Islamists to provide “credible guarantees” to non-Islamists that assure the latter of real representation and participation in any democratic government. This is the kind of guarantee that Tunisia's Ennahda party offered non-Islamists and which Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood – under threat from the military – might finally be willing to give to non-Islamists. Egypt's President Mohammed Morsi has, in fact, proclaimed his support for power-sharing, but whether he can make this happen is another matter.

The observations noted above suggest that the nature of any transition – and the prospects for a dynamic of democratic transition – depends not purely on leadership skills, though important, but much more on the nature of the previous regime. We see this in a quick contrasting of the cases of Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, the military was a political and business enterprise that was linked closely to the ruling apparatus. Given its political nature and its deep interests, following former President Hosni Mubarak's February 11, 2011 downfall, it worked hard to secure a place as the central arbiter of the transition. The split in the opposition between Islamists and non-Islamists enhanced the logic by which all groups looked to the military for support, thus allowing for a transition tightly controlled by the military. By contrast, the military in Tunisia was apolitical and did not attempt to save the regime after it fell following former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's ouster on January 14, 2011. Moreover, more than a few years before the uprising that led to Ben Ali's fall, Islamists and non-Islamists were striving to form a common front. Thus, the institutional and ideological incentive for coordination between opposition groups was very strong from the start, and this has allowed for a relatively smoother transition in Tunisia.

In neither case is democratization a mirage. But, to use a metaphor from a fellow panelist in this meeting, what the various players actually see when they approach the political landscape up close differs considerably. Barring an escalation of Salafi violence, Tunisia is likely to move from transition to democratization in the coming year or so. For Egypt, the transition will hit many bumps and obstacles and, thus, will probably take a good decade or more.

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