



“Arab World is Changing” conference comes to end in Egypt with huge Arabian Participation

Alexandria (Egypt) - “The Arab World is Changing” conference ended in Palestine Hotel in Alexandria after two consecutive days of fruitful meetings (December 12th and 13th 2011). The conference was organized by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) and Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and aimed at analyzing the developments in the Arab World.

Arab researchers from Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen and Bahrain joined to talk about the attitudes of various political forces from the Arab revolutions, how Arab immigrants see it, the future of pluralism, civil-military relations and last but not least the role of media in the Arab revolutions.

The opening speech was delivered by Dr. Ismail Serag El-Din, Director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and Basma Kodmani, ARI Executive Director, in the presence of two guest speakers; political researcher Ibrahim El-Houdaiby and political activist George Ishaq, Kefaya Founder.



Serag El-Din tackled the process of constitution-making in Arab countries that witnessed revolutions, showing that Arab constitutions must fight the intellectual rigidity that dominated the constitutional thought in the past. These new constitutions shall take the Arab world to a new future. He added that we must think out of the in-term of constitutional thought. Old constitutions must not be reliable in the process of new constitution-

making, as it is supposed to solve the present and future problems, he said.

Serag El-Din called for rethinking various concepts like citizenship, and how expatriates can participate in their countries politics; further pointing to civil society which has become a key player in general policy-making. He spoke about the importance of determining mutual principles of managing resources under the new constitution. Many problems can be solved in light of such constitutions, including the problem of the water from the Nile between Egypt and Nile-Basin Countries.

On the other hand, Basma Kodmani stressed on the importance of moving from the term “Reform” to “Change”. She stressed that Arab countries will never accept reform instead of change any more after the radical change in Tunisia and Egypt.

She further added; that no one can set a vision on the path of transformation in Arab countries, pointing that youth have their own vision, but societies still not have full confidence in them.

Kodmani spoke about the Syrian revolution, pointing that discussions now are about the international role in revolutions and how to deal with them. She confirmed that international pressure with all its variation has a great benefit as long as it doesn't impose certain agendas and leave revolutionists in control. She further

pointed-out that the Arab League has initiatives to renew its role; to play a role in managing the crisis and retrieving stability. "This is a vital role, as it becomes more effective, it weakens the restoration for other organizations outside the Arab region." She said.

She added that Syrians are trying to learn from Tunisia and Egypt mistakes, by creating new forms of escalation in their peaceful revolution.

Ibrahim el-Houdaiby spoke about the emergence of "the New Elite" in the Egyptian revolution; part of it is a coalition. It will lead to the production of some of the Old Regime practices, mentioning that these practices produced people's disrespect, incompetence of compound thinking, simple thinking, choosing the wrong battles and mixing the problems of past and future.

El-Houdaiby further assured that the new constitution must focus on vital issues like economy, foreign policy, etc without looking at artificial problems focused on by the elite. He spoke about the importance of producing new elite over the coming period, to be born of moderate bodies like Municipalities and Syndicates. These bodies will help in creating new leaders and effective entities in the society. "Municipalities are very essential, they make politicians live with the citizens daily real problems" he said, giving the example with Rajab Tayyip Erdogan who came out of the Local Council in Turkey, when he was first the Mayor of Istanbul till he became Prime Minister.

He criticized the lack of vision of those who consider themselves political movements like coalitions and movements that only aim to topple the regime. He said that the main issue now is not the priority of elections or constitutions, but getting the Military Council out of power as they have no democratic legitimacy, especially after they violated the constitutional amendments and extended the Emergency Law, adding that the revolution did not reach to power yet, but it's important to merge between both elections and sit ins. he also refused boycotting the elections under the rule of SCAF.

From his side, Ishaq stressed that there is no dialogue with those who kill their people. He said that the first demonstrations for Kefaya started on 12-12-2004, pointed that Kefaya changed the culture of fear, and seized the right to demonstrate and criticize the President. Ishaq said that he is optimistic about the future of the revolution in Egypt, stressing that it will create a new phase in Egypt's history. In addition, he called the intellectuals to take to the streets and talk to people instead of talking to them from closed rooms.

In the First Session "Arab Revolutions, to where? Path Reflections", Ahmed Gamal, the Deputy Head of the Nasserist Party, spoke about the gap between policy practitioners, professors and academics concerned with studying the society transformations. He added that Islamists, and not Copts, are the first to seek the aid of foreign countries like the Gulf.

Dr. Amal Karami, Tunisian Researcher, spoke about Tunisia saying that freedom of speech is a new comer in the Tunisian community, mentioning that it started in Twitter and Facebook, then was transferred from the virtual space to audio/visual media, which was freed from self-control and subordination of official power, although there is another kind of loyalties emerging.



She mentioned the Tunisian experience in establishing entities responsible for penalizing every one engaged in corruption without any calls for boycotting. She called for moving to the period of “Transitional Justice”, saying “we penalize then forgive...”.

According to Karami, the Tunisian revolution is relapsing and drafting away from the democrat path due to the conflict about the concepts of democracy, citizenship and political participation. Each party interpret these concepts from his own point of view, monopolizing the term “the people want”.

Tunisian researcher said: “we are in the middle, the Tunisians are confused. We broken one dictator, and others emerged”.

She added that Al-Nahda Party ran into elections with a civilian agenda, then they talked about “sixth succession”, before they retreat saying that their speech was addressed to Al-Nahda Party followers, which referred to the two speech levels, according to Karami.



The Second Session “Civil - Military Relations in Arab Revolutions” was delivered by Gamil Mattar, a journalist, who started pointing out that Islamic-political culture hallows the army and the Ottomans were devoted to that; giving the army over-the-average privileges. “We have to uphold the army high in society, when some army-men joined civil life they dealt with civilians as a lower class that should obey orders as if civilians are mindless.” Mattar said.

Whereas Salam El-Kawakibi, a Syrian researcher and Research Director in ARI, said that Arab armies widely gained their legitimacy through various forms of national liberation as the Algerian Army and confronting the Zionist project, like are the armies or Arab Ring countries. Finally, some armies gained their legitimacy by certain ideologies that it later revolted against as in Iraq.



El-Kawakbi added: “There is more positive difference for the sake of Tunisian army than that of Egypt. The first was marginalized by the ruling power headed by one of the army men who was aware of the coups danger, yet the Tunisia army had a positive patriotic attitude when it refused to be a mean of oppressing protesters. On the other side, the Egyptian army stood in the side of the revolutionists to maintain this reverend security institution and to avoid any division within the army, though it did not support the revolution demands.”

He expressed that the Syrian army nowadays is defending the regime not the country. He pointed out that the army has been weakened for the benefit of the police state in order to dominate.

General Sameh Seif Aliazal, Security Expert and President of Aljumhuria Center for Political and Security Studies, , assured that there is no desertion or division within the army and that it is internally unified. He added that the army did not support Mubarak, but it demanded that he leaves. “I refuse any accusation of treason without clear evidence” he asserted.

He highlighted that no one of the Armed Forces will be part of the next political system and that by the end of next June, SCAF will break up with politics. On a comment on Al-Selmy's Document which is intended to be a super-constitutional document giving the army some privileges, the General confirmed that it was response to

some calls to reduce soldiers' pensions once they take power. He said that the current pensions are not up to the level of honoring those who paid their lives for the country.

Haider Ibrahim, Sudanese Researcher and Head of the Center for Sudanese Studies in Khartoum, talked about “the future of diversity under Arab revolutions” saying that Islamists cannot manage dealing with minorities in Sudan. He drew attention that the failure in understanding non-Muslim culture leads to the separation of the Sudan.

“My problem is not closing bars, but closing minds” he added. “Islamists have to respect personal freedoms and bring up the young on respecting woman whatever her choice of what she wears.”

Priest Andrea Zaky, Under-Secretary of Evangelical Community in Egypt, said “Democracy cannot be exercised in a religious-divided society. It is based on the presence of a dynamic majority and minority. But to see this majority or minority becoming static is where Copts fears lie.”

“The 25 Jan. revolution freed the Church in Egypt as it introduced the educated secularist to the table.” Zaky said.

In the last session on “The condition of media during Arab revolutions”, Aly Aldery, Bahraini Critic, said “Media in Bahrain while covering February 14th Movement viewed political diversity as treachery. It considered any anti-regime citizen a traitor with foreign agendas. Media also fabricated and falsified reports and international statements.”



“Media in Bahrain has converted from diversity to autocracy service. Official media punished all media personnel who supported the movement; imprisonment, torture, dismissal, etc. The Ministry of Mass Communication for instance dismissed 50 employees from its service.” Aldery asserted.

Yasser Abdelaziz, an Egyptian Media Specialist, discussed what he called “Medializing the Egyptian Revolution”. “Instead of transforming facts and broadcasting information about the revolution through media, the revolution got into the news and many celebrated superstars who participated in the Revolution turned into presenters” He said.

“The New Media is increasingly affecting widely with lies and rumors.” He said. He asserted that forms of media possession in the Arab World are one of the main reasons behind the errors in the Arab media. For instance, state-run TV in Egypt committed full crimes during the revolution because it focused on serving the government, not the people.



All the submitted documents and participation in the conference will be soon available in a book at the Arab Reform Initiative and Bibliotheca Alexandria.

To contact ARI : contact@arab-reform.net

The Arab Reform Initiative is a network of independent Arab research and policy institutes, with partners from the United States and Europe. Its goal is to mobilize the Arab research capacity to advance knowledge and develop a program for democratic reform in the Arab World which is realistic and home grown. The Initiative also aims to produce policy recommendations that can help promote reform in the region.