

The Middle East in the aftermath of Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt

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Mrs Kodmani participated in a conference at the International Center for Research and Development in Ottawa on February 15, 2011. Below is an outline of her talk.

The factors that led to the insurrections across the Arab countries to and successful revolutions in two of them are now well known. Among the key factors are 1/the youth bulge, 2/the global economic crisis that made the social injustice unbearable, 3/ the management of all tensions through security means or the securitization of social and political issues, and the last and probably most decisive is the level of corruption, or the organized rapt of national resources by kleptocracies.

Among the triggers of these revolts, I think Wiki Leaks played a role that we underestimate. The use of extreme words to describe Arab leaders such as “mafias” and “predatory governments” in cables written by professional foreign diplomats was an eye opener for public opinions and elites critical of their governments. They were using the kind of language that radical opposition activists only used so far. This sent two messages: first it dealt a fatal blow to any belief that change could come gradually, from the top driven by governing elites who would end up understanding that their long-term interest is to reform their systems seriously; second, it raised the threshold of the accusation against those same leaders, basically criminalizing their behavior. It is important to note that this impact was the same across all the Arab world.

I want to introduce our discussion today with comments on the following four points:

- 1- I will discuss what begins to happen within the political system the moment the insurrections start, in other words the mechanics that trigger a set of complex dynamics leading to the demise of regimes, two so far and possibly others to follow**
- 2- The early days of what we can call struggling transitions in Tunisia and Egypt**
- 3- The “domino effect” that the media has been asking about since the first days of the Tunisian revolution and is now a reality and whether there are compelling signs that allow us to anticipate where it can stop**
- 4- Where the outside world can help and where it cannot help**

I - The mechanics that lead to the demise of regimes

Mass protests of the kind we are witnessing across the region introduce a new player into the power game, the People, who changes the equation. The eruption of the public sends shock waves upwards to the power structure and turns the heat on any underlying tensions and rivalries bringing them to the surface. It forces each of the other players to come out in the open and make its fateful choice. In face of peaceful demonstrators, they are forced to choose between turning against the leader or against the people. In Tunisia and Egypt and now in Libya, the demonstrations drove a wedge between security forces and military forces.

In both Egypt and Tunisia and now in Libya, we discovered that the regimes had alienated too many groups, not only their populations but also the influential groups within the dominant sectors around the power systems, including the business sector where there was competition between ‘national capitalists’ (those who invest and create jobs in the country and have a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the government) and the ‘crony capitalists’ linked to the most corrupt figures in government, between well connected big corporations and smaller businesses; within the judiciary, the unions, and opposition groups who were willing and did participate in the game of politics as defined by the governments and could have been used as mediators and finally within the armed forces.

We have seen approximately three decades of economic reforms in both countries and about seven years of ‘gentle prodding’ from outside powers to promote political reforms. Opposition forces were all willing to accept gradual change so long as the process was advancing. But the time came when most governments either refused to introduce any changes altogether (Tunisia, Libya) or decided to close the system again when it needed to (as in Egypt or Bahrain) where the regime was always confident that it could open and close the political space as it pleased. The loss of any hope in the possibility that governments might bring about real change triggered the psychological shift among people: so far governments were seen as reluctant or unwilling to change, they naturally became The Problem itself and therefore the target of the uprisings.

II - Struggling transitions start in Tunisia and Egypt

Both countries underwent revolutionary processes and have now started difficult transitional phases. After successful mobilization in a peaceful and civic fashion, it is now representation and participation that need to be organized for a democratic system to emerge. Both countries face four major immediate or short-term challenges.

1- Developing democratic institutions:

- The national expertise exists in both countries for crafting new constitutions, new political party laws, new electoral laws. Regarding constitutional reform, the composition of constitutional commissions indicates that the Islamist movements are a full party in this process. Their participation will serve as a first test of their flexibility and willingness to compromise on the place of religion in the Constitution
- The demands for democratic governance affect all institutions. Old leaders are under attack everywhere, there is turmoil inside all public institutions: political parties including opposition parties, the security sector, the professional and labor unions, the media and cultural institutions. This is what indicates the revolutionary nature of the uprisings, with a strong generational component to them.

2- The challenge of the return of the army to its professional role and bringing back a civilian government

In both Tunisia and Egypt, the army is the player who in conjunction with the street protests, made the revolutions possible. The military drew the line between the regime and the State, between the pillars of support loyal to the regime (security and police forces) and those protective of State institutions, when they chose to cease to defend the regime and to protect what it saw as the legitimate State instead.

In Tunisia the army did not participate in government and stayed outside the political game and the process of privatization of the state by the ruling elite.

It withdrew from the political process immediately and reverted to protecting the security of the country inside and outside.

In Egypt, the role of the army over the last forty years has been that of king-maker. Mubarak tried to take this role away from it and clearly lost its support in the last decade. The army took control of the situation two days before Mubarak stepped down in what looked to many like a military coup. In fact, it sought to avoid taking upon itself the decision of the demise of Mubarak to the last minute and encouraged street riots to push the president to the brink. There is every indication so far that the army does not seek to govern directly.

After Mubarak's fall, the army finds itself in the role of re-building the Egyptian polity altogether. This exposes it to all sorts of challenges and is likely to wield tensions and divisions.

There are fears that the military will stop halfway along the road to democracy in order to protect their own interests. State institutions are already staffed in large part with men in uniform (all governors, heads of public enterprises,

ministers' cabinets). Will the army accept the full investigation of violations of human rights and of cases of corruption? Will it agree to a de-militarization of state institutions? Will it seek to salvage some of the structures of the Mubarak regime such as the National Democratic Party?

3- Social and economic demands: These are more challenging in the case of Egypt than in Tunisia. Everyone in Egypt knows that if social demands are spontaneously and fully expressed, they can be a source of explosions and instability. The military are already saying that social protests are creating chaos. They don't want to find themselves in a situation where they are not able to stabilize the country, and they cannot engage in negotiations with social forces now. Public policies to redefine social protection will be high on the agenda but the critical question is who will carry the social demands and fight for them, how the mobilization of workers and the recent labor activism we have witnessed will be reflected in a democratic setting.

4- Representation for participation:

The mobilizations of a diverse set of actors and the successful coordination on the ground between them determined the pattern of change in both Egypt and Tunisia. It is the 'voice of the people' principle that prevails within public opinions in both countries. The biggest challenge by far is how these different components of the revolutionary movements will organize themselves to be properly represented. For now, the mobilization of protesters in the street to put pressure is continuing for lack of effective representative structures.

- The revolutionary movements have bred new leaderships with some individual leaders starting to emerge. After their successful mobilization, how will youth groups and women be represented.
- The biggest challenge will be the organization of the democratic expression of social demands: there is a vital need for strong credible labor unions. They are the natural forces that should articulate social demands and serve as interlocutors of the government in social negotiations. The emergence of such unions will play a vital role as countervailing forces in face of the Islamists who will emerge otherwise as the main representatives of social demands. Formation of political parties, revival of the old ones, quotas for women, new labor and professional unions are all urgently needed.
- The lessons from other countries that underwent democratic transitions in the last few decades are important sources of inspiration. In Portugal for example, the role of political parties from the pro-democracy camp

was crucial. These parties were virtually non-existent only one year before the revolution. The one well-structured opposition force was the outlawed Communist Party, established in 1921. In spite of their weakness, the democratic political parties were able to stage huge demonstrations, mobilize hundreds of thousands of people and keep political transition on track, thus successfully pushing through alternatives to the undemocratic thrust of the Communist Party. Support for the creation of pro-democracy political parties in Portugal was the main priority of international cooperation programs, particularly European foundations.

III – Contagion: Who is next?

Two key factors are likely to determine whether sweeping mobilizations are likely to occur elsewhere and the shape they might take:

1/the stability of the regional environment and perceptions that citizens might have of the risks of domestic change implying unpredictability and instability: Tunisia enjoyed a fairly stable regional environment; Morocco opened up its political system after two decades of stabilization of the Western Sahara conflict; Egypt is at peace with Israel since the eighties and Jordan since the mid-nineties in spite of many other security challenges; in Syria on the other hand, society fears the impact of regional instability and government works towards maintaining those fears. This continues for now to act as a powerful deterrent to domestic uprising.

2/Fear for the stability of the national entity: Tunisia and Egypt are with Morocco the most homogeneous Arab societies. The risks of fragmentation in other countries are real. Most countries have multi-sectarian societies where some groups are dominant and others discriminated against and bad governance has increased those risks in most cases: Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the small Emirates.

3/ A third factor is the capacity of existing regimes to respond to the challenges from societies. While uprisings are springing everywhere, regimes are forced to respond. At this advanced stage of the protests, they need to respond with sweeping reforms that allow for genuine participation. For example, **Jordan** and Morocco seem to have a stronger capacity to respond while **Algeria** is less likely to be able to adapt. Most importantly, the regimes, monarchies or republics alike need to show a clear intention of fighting corruption, not just as a deviant practice by some but as a deeply ingrained system. This needs to change. Here again, the example of Spain under King Juan Carlos is an interesting experience to look at.

How much the outside can do and how it can play a useful role?

- Supporting the formation of pro-democracy political parties is critical. The reference to the Portuguese experience here is important: strengthening democratic trends within societies and helping political forces from different ideological backgrounds to develop 'rules of engagement' in the democratic process
- Channeling the social demands: there is space for sustained collaborations with networks of labor and professional unions. For example, helping a left-wing party to emerge in Egypt as the existing one has lost all credibility and there is a strong leftist trend in society that would be a natural political house for social demands. For now, no political force has cared to articulate those demands and developing a coherent social agenda, not even the Islamist movements. It is clear that the healthiest representation of these forces would be a labor type of political party
- Need to accompany the democratic transition process with: 1/constitutional safeguards that mitigate the risk that one force reaching a majority government seeks to change its democratic nature: for any change in constitution two third or three quarter majority is perhaps the answer, instead or in addition to a referendum; 2/electoral laws that don't magnify anyone's electoral weight (as happened in Algeria)
- Islam and Islamism: Islamists are part of the political landscape and will continue to be. We can only acknowledge this and not only accept it but recognize Islamist parties as legitimate partners the moment they abide by democratic rules. It is likely that Islamists will be divided once exposed to real challenges; many say this was a revolution for freedom, not for religious constraints to be introduced on societies; others say we have already entered a post-Islamist era. This may all be wishful thinking by many in the West.

I don't expect society to be more religious; in fact it is more likely to become less religious with less of the religious discourse in the public space and more involvement of citizens in political and social struggles. Under authoritarianism the religious conservative discourse dominated public space; it was encouraged by the government (as a convenient anesthetic). Non political Islam was becoming more dangerous than political Islam; because there was no space for debating and organizing around real issues (social, political), the discourse was all about good and evil, the West as non-believer, infidel and decadent and the moral order, thus stunting freedom of expression and cultivating intolerance and irresponsibility.

- Socially sensitive governments are most critical in the coming period. There needs to be a different approach to development rather than remedial measures to poverty that we have seen over the last decade and a half. This is a challenge that the transitioning countries cannot face alone. They will need the support of

major countries of the north and the international financial institutions. Outside actors should however focus more on empowering actors rather than policies; actors who can carry agendas and be partners in negotiations with governments.

Conclusion

As a result of changes in regimes, the regional picture is likely to look more nationalistic based on Islamic values and discourse; a kind of Muslim nationalism as in Turkey. But this does not mean that the countries will seek to question the strategic orientations taken by the regimes: for Tunisia, cooperation with Europe on security matters and active pursuit of a closer association with the EU; for Egypt, the peace agreement with Israel and the strategic relationship with the United States.

This will also be very much influenced by the attitudes of outside powers towards democratic forces emerging. The reactions of China and Russia for example are not likely to raise the image of these two countries among Arab public opinions. While they pay a heavy price in confronting their authoritarian rulers, the societies are attentive to expressions of support from abroad. Supporting the movements is a good investment for the future.

I cannot resist bringing back the awful memories from 2001 to say that a decade ago the Arab world started the new century with the monstrous attacks that drew the attention of the whole world, suggesting that it was capable of the worst. All analysts and policy-makers understood that the region was in a historic impasse. Now the region starts the second decade of the century with peaceful insurrections and the youth of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Algeria, are articulating legitimate demands using the vocabulary of universal values. They deserve help to succeed in breaking the historic impasse.