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Can We Build Together, and How?

→ Arab Reform Initiative



epa04980228 A student member of the Islamist Ennahda speaks during the opening of the Second Conference of Youth Ennahda University in Tunis, Tunisia 16 October 2015. EPA/MOHAMED MESSARA



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Report on: the second workshop _ Beirut 10th-11thApril 2009

The discussion was divided between four sessions held over two days, addressing the following issues:

- **From confronting injustice, repression and the monopolization of power to the need to go beyond the existing consensus.**
- **Commitment to political democracy as the way to build and facilitate coalitions.**
- **The scope given for social issues.**
- **The issue of foreign relations.**

The discussion was based on numerous papers on these subjects, which are available on the Initiative's website.

From confronting injustice, repression and the monopolization of power to the need to move beyond the current consensus.

In this session, it was emphasized that the political forces, in agreement over the need to confront repression, have as their goal the broadening of the public domain as fundamental reform demand, through the restoring of their ability as social actors to participate in it. The aim of this participation is to gain political effectiveness, the necessary condition for providing instruments of peaceful change. However, the repression being practised is a major obstacle on the road to dealing with the existing authorities, and the struggle to get rid of it quickly clashes at different levels with the state, authorities, and the ruling group, transforming it into what appears to be a threat to the very existence of the regime. This requires the coalition forces to move beyond the goal of confronting repression towards thinking more comprehensively, of forming programmes for a transitional phase where they may be able to take the shape of a constituent organization.

However, this raises the question of strategies, since these forces appear to be scarce, unprepared for the struggle for change and engrossed in daily tactical thought or in protecting themselves from repression, negating the very purpose of their existence. Furthermore, these coalitions urgently need to specify what it is



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that they want at this particular moment: dialogue with the authority, development of the political regime or constitutional reform etc., because that is to be the basis for the programme and organization building they support. Therefore it is a question of having clear priorities in addition to the need to answer two questions: First, are these forces fighting for the sake of reform or for the sake of providing conditions for reform? Second, who is carrying out reform? Most of these forces are daughter organizations originating from the current authorities (meaning that they are not opposed to them), and therefore it is necessary to consider the possibility of working to overcome trends within the authorities, making them channels for the realization of reform. Finally, it is not only the role of the political forces but also that of society that must be considered in realizing change.

The issue of foreign relations

The order of the sessions was changed, due to the fact that Doctor Rafik 'Abd al Salam was prevented from entering Lebanon. He was going to make a presentation on "Commitment to political democracy as a model for building and facilitating alliances", but this was delayed until the second day, and instead the question of "the issue of foreign relations" was addressed in the second meeting.

There was agreement that the issue of external intervention was a matter of urgency due to America's declared plan for "the new Middle East", and because of the invasion of Iraq, and the blow to the heart of the regime ruling there through this intervention. After a discussion of the conceptual link of sovereignty and the Sharia, and emphatic recognition of the fact that this problem came about as a consequence of the internal failure to bring changes, the researchers agreed that what the vague "external" means here is overpowering force rather than political relationships, some of which have a reciprocal character (the solidarity of world unions with workers' strikes happening in Egypt etc.) and are founded on known, entrenched traditions in political life. Thus a definition of the ambiguous term "external intervention" was formed in the discussion, based on reality rather than just abstract principles. A two-part definition was made: that it is radical intervention aiming to bring about change via an external agent or through its action, and that this action does not lie within the domain of legitimate political relationships, but infringes upon national sovereignty and is a concept that should



be universal. In contrast, political relationships, in their various types, cannot be criminal or considered to be negative.

The scope given for social issues, and the extent to which coalitions are able to agree upon them

Four contributions were presented on the extent to which a consensus has been reached in these coalitions on social issues, and to be precise, among the Islamic groups. The examination began with a study of the situation in Egypt (the Muslim Brothers), Morocco (Al Adl wal Ihsan), Tunis (al-Nahdah and before it the experience of the movement 15-20) and Lebanon (Hizbollah). The foremost shared conclusion was that the Islamist movements have not formed a consensus on social questions going beyond charitable solutions or supporting the issue of rights. Also, the Islamist movements have not tried to establish a theoretical basis for their consensuses on social issues in accordance with an Islamic authority, that is, according to a socio-economic philosophy. This is for numerous reasons, among them the class affiliation of the majority of their support base, the idea of the “unity of the Umma” and “the universality of Islam”, and putting political considerations (national emancipation for Hizbollah, comprehensive change for the Muslim Brothers) above social considerations.

Despite this, some indices are noticed: al adl coming before al ihsan in the name of the Moroccan movement, with al ihsan having a spiritually more elevated meaning, and efforts of the former 15-20 group in Tunis to form a law for complete emancipation. It was shown from papers and discussion that the Islamic groups, of their various types, are cautious of forming manifestoes that are leftist in the traditional sense, fearing that they may facilitate the spreading of leftist ideas themselves. But it was clear, in contrast, that agreements on social demands had been realized in some places, especially when imposed by the needs of the popular movement – in Egypt and Morocco – on the ground without a theoretical background. From this emerges one of the shortcomings of the Islamists, that while there are factors that could facilitate a joint approach, cooperation has not progressed except on the issues of Palestine and Iraq.

Commitment to political democracy as the way to build and facilitate coalitions



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Finally, the subject of the commitment to democracy in building the coalitions themselves raises many points, the first relating to the need to distinguish between what is propagandistic and what is political in the Islamist movements. To be only the second is the ground being approached by the Islamist movement in its coalitions, which makes it equal to other non religious movements (undistinguished by the intensification of religion or divine law), as well as agreement on the possibility of defining the sharia as “inspiration for a group of general purposes” and not as the law...

It is this subject that forms the bridge to the third workshop that will be held in Morocco July 2009, which will discuss equality of general political rights, equality in personal rights and freedom of ways of life.



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About the author



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About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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