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# Tunisia, Egypt and the Arab World

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## ***Tunisia, Egypt and the Arab World***

Without doubt, the protests seen these past few weeks in the Arab world will represent a before and after in the history of the Middle East and in the minds of this young generation who have opted for non-violence to demand dignity and respect from their political leaders.

This is a generation with pragmatic demands, a generation which is not interested in ideologies. Their slogans have not called for intervention from the West. For the first time, the people in the affected countries are holding their own governments directly responsible for corruption and they are protesting in favour of democracy. Neither are these youths leading the protests in the name of Islam. What we have seen proliferate in Internet are messages advocating the end of an illiterate Egypt. Many are already mobilizing to have the country awarded the next Nobel Peace Prize.

Although these premises do not imply that the protesters are secular, it is clear that they clearly differentiate between religion and political ideology. This generation wants dignity and respect. The pacifism of their protests is proof of this.

The same is true with nationalism. Although many feel a strong sense of belonging to their countries, the flag of nationalism has not been waved in their demonstrations. Thanks to Internet, they have a very broad view of the complex and globalised world in which they live. The social network revolution has encouraged new ways of interrelating and it has completely changed the mechanisms used to disseminate information. In a matter of seconds, they can now access an entire world which was previously very far away.

This does not mean that these protests have occurred exclusively due to Internet. Egyptian society had already taken to the streets to protest regional situations such as the Second Palestinian Intifada and the War in Iraq. Also, Mubarak's 2005 constitutional reform through which he extended his six-year

term for the fifth time and established that his son, Gamal, would succeed him in office gave birth to the “Kefaya” protest (“enough is enough”) against the government. In the last few years, police repression and the rise in food prices have also sparked numerous protests and demonstrations.

However, thanks to the platform provided by Internet, this activism, combined with Ben Ali’s departure from office in Tunisia, allowed young generations in the region to feel optimistic once more and to believe that a change was closer at hand than they had imagined. Protesters did not need political spokespersons to know what was happening. This lack of political leadership was also the primary motive behind the movement’s success. There was no political leadership at which the government could aim its repression.

Although dispersion became a challenge for demonstrators in the Egyptian protests, this same dispersion may now become the primary obstacle to moving forward. The demonstrators’ clear objective has already been met: removing Mubarak from office. The opposition now has to overcome the present ambiguity and translate it into clear demands for the Army to undertake major reforms with as much transparency as possible.

This and not radical Islamism is the primary challenge Egypt will face in this transition: ensuring stability and safety (as many citizens demanded on the last days of the protests) and combining them at the same time with the economic, political and social reforms demanded by the opposition.

It is worth remembering that democratic transitions are very complex processes. Ben Ali’s departure from Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak’s in Egypt are the first of many steps that will have to be taken on the long road towards democracy.

After three decades of dictatorship, the Egyptian political landscape will take time to resettle and form. The Society of Muslim Brothers is the only organised player in the entire Egyptian political spectrum. Although this group would only receive 30% of votes if elections were held today –implying that consensus between parties would be needed to govern– many groups in the opposition,

including El Baradei, advocate a slower paced transition. This would give them greater manoeuvrability to organise better. Contrarily, there is a risk that the country may find itself firmly rooted in stagnation.

Both Europe and the United States must use whatever tools necessary to help Egypt to institutionalise democracy and support civil society. That said, both must avoid monitoring the transition and positioning themselves in favour of one or another player.

In Europe we have the Union for the Mediterranean, an initiative which includes the 27 EU member States and 16 countries on the southern bank of the Mediterranean in Africa and the Middle East, all under the same umbrella. This Union's specific projects in business, education, health, energy and culture are especially relevant at this time.

During the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, the economies of both were seriously damaged. These two countries need money, infrastructures and advice from peers on carrying out reforms. The inability to foresee events over the short/mid-term may reduce trust within financial markets and further punish these countries whose challenge is to create a dynamic economy for a young and educated though unemployed population.

The United States can also play an important role, especially in Egypt, given the considerable support it provides the country's Army. For the time being, the latter has taken positive steps forward, for example, provisionally arresting three former ministers (Interior, Tourism and Housing) along with the steel-industry magnate, Ahmad Ezz. But there are still important challenges ahead. Amongst the most pressing are the need to put an end to the state of emergency which has existed in Egypt for three decades and to establish negotiations which include prominent civil figures. These negotiations should include all the political players and be charged with setting a date for new elections as well as carrying out constitutional reforms. All this would help the people perceive that change has indeed occurred and in a transparent fashion.

For its part, Israel will also have to adapt to the changes amongst its neighbours. Hosni Mubarak's departure has caused uncertainty and fear in Israel with the loss of its great ally in the region and a clear bastion in the peace process.

Egypt will, without doubt, maintain its peace treaty with Israel, but its foreign policy may shift (similar to that seen in Turkey) in order to better respond to Egyptian public opinion, sensitive to Israeli policies towards Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. This situation may lead to current Israeli policies becoming unsustainable and forcing the government in Tel Aviv to seriously reconsider its policy and strategy towards the region.

The Arab-Israeli conflict does not suppose a dividing line in the region, though we should not underestimate it or address it in a decontextualised fashion. This time, a double-edged policy cannot be permitted in the region, for example, a policy celebrating Tunisian and Egyptian demands for democracy and dignity, on the one hand, while members of the UN Security Council continue to veto efforts to condemn Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, on the other.

If there is decisive support for change, then that change must be in the entire region. We must bear in mind that vetoes kill hopes, and there is a lot at risk. The scenario is still unpredictable and uncertain, as occurs with opinions, emotions and governmental strategies. The greatest challenge to achieving real and long-lasting change in the region is for successful transitions in Tunisia and Egypt. Contrarily, the populations of other countries in the region –greatly inspired by Tunisians and Egyptians– may think twice before taking to the streets and demanding good governments and democracy in their countries.

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