

2nd Conference

Africa
53 Countries
One Union
The New Challenges

Washington DC, June 15-16, 2011



SESSION 1

A CHALLENGE THE ARAB SPRING IN NORTH AFRICA AND IT'S RAMIFICATION ON THE CONTINENT

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The Arab Spring in North Africa, starting in January 2011 in Tunisia and spreading to Egypt, came as a shock to many observers in and outside the region.

The regimes in both countries were thought to have been stable and secure, enjoyed a reasonable state of economic growth, with a well-established and financed police force, and robust international support. The shock of the revolutions was amplified by the widely held perception that both Mubarak and Ben Ali enjoyed a broad base of support as they were generally believed to be benign leaders of their people.

After the demise of the Soviet Bloc and the democratic transitions of Eastern Europe which witnessed very dramatic changes in internal and external polices of those countries, many thought that this would be the model for the Arab world to emulate. However, it was generally thought that it would be a decade before the Arab world was ready for such a transition. Accelerating the pace of democratization it was believed, would pave the way for extremist religious parties to assume power, leading to a radical shift in the foreign policy orientation of key Arab states. It was thus believed that the international community would have to wait until any meaningful political reform could occur in the countries of the region.

But all were wrong. They have not followed the rising discontent in populations due to poverty, unemployment and above all the denial of their basic human rights and the marginalization of great segments of the society from political participation which was the privilege of the few on the top. The accumulation of these problems, left unaddressed by a state of political inertia, lead to a creeping legitimacy crisis that eventually culminated in the explosion of revolutionary change that swept away decades of authoritarian rule.

The revolutions were driven by a critical mass of youth who in the end managed to topple the existing regimes and usher new hopes for political freedoms for their societies. They used their knowledge of modern communications technologies to mobilize and reach out to the rest of the population capitalizing on the widespread resentment of police brutality, endemic corruption, rigging of elections and the deep divide between the pillars of the regimes and the rest of the

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people. They succeeded in getting the support of intellectuals, professional groups and especially the poor who were thought to have accepted their marginalization out of fear of the police apparatus.

That the revolutions were conducted peacefully is a testament to the vibrancy of civil society, and the degree of civic consciousness in both Egypt and Tunisia. Also critical was the fact that both countries had developed national institutions that enjoyed a high level of credibility that stood apart from the regime. In Egypt especially, the military, the judiciary, and large parts of the bureaucracy exhibited a professionalism and independence that made the state immune from the type of highly personal rule common in almost all other Arab countries.

Similar attempts of similar public demonstrations in other parts of the region in order to unseat unpopular regimes are not yet successful, especially in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and others. The regimes are resisting giving up and they are determined to quell by force of the army and the police any popular manifestations leading to pervasive violence that threatens to develop into civil war, in some cases endangering the very existence of the state itself.

Despite the tremendous promise of the Arab spring however, the challenges are immense. After the successful uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, both countries witnessed a dramatic economic decline, many factories were forced to close, and sectorial demonstrations are a daily occurrence crippling economic production. It seems that a great segment of the people are in a hurry to enjoy the fruits of the revolution, believing that getting rid of the regime will immediately lead to their economic betterment and standard of living. At the same time there are also many who believe that economic hardship is a small price they have to pay to gain their freedom and dignity.

Nonetheless, there are strong reasons for optimism. The interim government has moved quickly to address widespread economic grievances, despite the heavy burden this imposed on the national budget. Equally significant are the steps taken towards political reform, including the referendum on an interim constitution, a revision of the electoral and political parties' law, and the beginnings of serious reform efforts for the internal security services. The foreign minister has indicated Egypt's readiness to join all international human rights conventions, including the International Criminal Court. And despite the widespread calls for justice and accountability for the crimes perpetrated by members of the former regime, there is still a strong desire that this be done strictly in accordance with the law and the guarantees of due process.

In Africa the picture is mixed. Some think that what is happening in the North of the continent is particular to this region and will have little effect on the rest of Africa. They are wrong, because the ingredients of those popular uprising are there in different parts of the continent, which started to see similar manifestations. However, they are still in the early stages. Other North African countries and the rest of the continent have already received the message and started to introduce reforms. Others are accelerating the pace of their adoption of democratic and multi-party system, freedom of the press and gatherings, etc...

The spring in the North Africa, in order to be successful and sustainable, has to be economically viable and lead to a drastic decrease in the number of unemployed and extreme poverty. The response of the international community and especially the industrialized countries is so far positive. It recognizes that they have a stake in seeing this part of the world proceed on the right

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path, but we are waiting to see that their promises of aid will actually materialize without the usual conditions.

My assessment is that the Arab spring will ultimately succeed, but it will take time, patience and understanding from friends in the outside world. The fever of the Arab spring will ultimately infect those who are thinking they are still immune to it.

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