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REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE 'DIGNITY REVOLUTIONS':

How Middle Eastern Activists perceive Popular Protest

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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Table of Contents

Introduction[1]

At this seminar, the darkest and gloomiest perspectives on the Middle East and its future were offered by speakers coming from non-revolutionary countries like Holland. Maybe you have to live through a revolution to fully appreciate its promise. (*Reinoud Leenders at the wrap up of the seminar of April 18th, 2011 at the University of Amsterdam*).

This policy paper provides unique perspectives from Middle Eastern activists who are part of popular protests across the region. The recommendations are based on their perspectives and addressed to the EU at large, the European Commission (EC), the Dutch government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in order for them to best support the democratic transitions in the region. These perspectives were the subject of lively and inspiring debates at a seminar at the University in Amsterdam on April 18th, 2011 and advocacy meetings on April 19th and 20[th,] 2011 with Dutch and European policy makers in the Hague and Brussels respectively. At the seminar activists from Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Morocco and Syria discussed with Dutch academics and practitioners from and outside the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia. The idea for organising this seminar surfaced during internal discussions on the Arab Spring within the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia. Ever since the eruption of popular protests, we have been witnessing an avalanche of analyses from 'experts' in the Western media on the roots of revolutions in the region. However, largely lacking were the perspectives of people who were the key drivers of these protests. For this reason we organised the seminar and advocacy meetings, and we produced this policy paper. The paper does not and indeed cannot present the perspectives of all activists involved in the popular protests. But it certainly presents the key conclusions and recommendations of the seminar and subsequent advocacy meetings, and therefore provides a platform for these activists to share their stories, perspectives and recommendations with policy makers, academics and activists in the Netherlands and the European Union. In this way we aim to make a modest contribution to the global debate on the Arab Spring and hope to assist activists, academics and policy makers in the region and beyond to better comprehend the complexity of transformative changes that re-configure the political landscape of the Middle East. Accordingly, I will pay attention to the conceptualization debate, i.e. how do we make sense of Arab Spring. The second part will address the role of new social media in this spring. Thereafter, I will reflect on the collapse and/or sustenance of several 'fear factors', before going into the relation between economic development and democratisation. Finally the conclusions and recommendation of the activists will be presented.

Arab Spring: Revolution, Revolt or Refo-lution?

How do we make sense of the Arab Spring? In short, which *R* of the *three Rs*, i.e. revolution, revolt or refo-lution[2] reflects its reality? Is this simply a semantic issue? And, most importantly, will the Arab Spring lead to democracy? Revolution refers to pre-planned protests that lead to fundamental and institutional changes in power relations; revolt-or uprising- is a refusal to obey or disorder. In contrast, Asef Bayat's concept of 'refo-lution' represents the paradoxical combination of revolution and reform in a process that aims at structural changes but through the overhaul of existing structures, in short revolution through reform. Accordingly, Paul Aarts from the University of Amsterdam opined that this spring is not a revolution in the strict sense of the word, but at best a refo-lution, i.e. developments so far only led to changes *within* the regime and not (yet) to *regime change*. In line with Thomas Carothers's insights, he advised to look at four "indicators of likelihood" to assess democracy's long-term prospects: (1) substantial level of economic development and low concentration of natural wealth; (2) developed coherence and capability of the state; (3) low presence of identity-based divisions; and (4) some degree of historical experience with democracy. Taking all this into account, democracy's long-term prospects for the region indeed seem rather slim – though, of course, one shouldn't give up hope. Yet this view is heavily challenged by the overwhelming majority of activists themselves, who perceive it as deterministic and detached from the context in which the protests took place. While activists recognize that Mubarak and Ben Ali have been deposed but the regimes that sustained them are in one way or the other in place, this doesn't deny the fact that a fundamental change has happened, namely that millions of people poured into streets and demanded regime change - and in the case of Tunisia and Egypt even managed to depose dictators who were thought to be 'here and here to stay'.

Referring to the millions Egyptians who took to the streets, Salam Kawakibi from Arab Reform Initiative noticed that:

> *Why don't we want to recognize it is an Egyptian revolution, when in the heyday of protests 12 million people took to the streets? We must recognize their right to say this is a revolution.*[3]

In the same vein, Hibaaq Osman from Karama (a regional NGO dedicated to the improvement of women's rights) remarked:

> *This is what it is, people call it a revolution. This is work in progress. I've never heard of a revolution that was finished anyway.*

While recognizing that transitions to democracy are not linear, and might even take decades and success is by no means guaranteed, the Tunisian trade unions and human rights activist Massaoud Romdhani asserted that:

> *I'm not going to get back to the term revolution. We didn't believe it was going to happen. The most important thing was that I stood against dictatorship. Certainly we need to be*

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[2] Bayat, Asef, *Paradoxes of Arab Refo-lutions*, www.jadaliyya.com (accessed on 14 March 2011)
[3] In the same vein, Reinoud Leenders from university of Amsterdam asserts that 'it took the French revolution decades before it brought about 'democracy'. Still, in 1789 people called it rightly a 'revolution'.

vigilant to get this process to the end, to democracy. After the fall of Ben Ali, we managed through sit-ins, pressures and protests to get former regime elites out of the government and to push for constitutional changes. People believe in and want democracy. The chances of democracy are not slim, they are there.[4]

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[4] Taking these perspectives from the region into account, it is more relevant to approach the situation in the Middle East through what Charles Tilly calls 'revolutionary situations'-those moments in history when everything seems possible-rather than analysing it from the angle of the inherently unfinished business of 'revolution', *Revolutionary situations: changing the world for good*, Colina Barker, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=25845, (accessed on 18 October 2011)

Triple Revolution

The activists argued that their societies have undergone structural socio-economic and political developments that paved the path for a *triple revolution*. Despite their differences, the countries in the region over the past five decades show some common and irreversible social transformations that have incrementally led *notonly toone but to a triple revolution*; respectively educational, gender and political revolutions.[5] While recognizing the differences, the Tunisian revolution is illustrative for the region. In the words of the Tunisian activist Massaoud Romdhani:

> *Ex-president Bouguiba was authoritarian and not elected. Yet he invested in both high education and women's rights. His policies in these two sectors led to the participation of women in high education coupled with rising awareness of their rights. These developments played an important part in the increased awareness of highly educated and average citizen of their socio-economic and political rights and paved the path for the revolution. The lack of social upward mobility and high unemployment among highly educated men and women as well as conspicuous corruption and cronyism further exacerbated the sense of social deadlock, disposition and pessimism: every year 80,000 young men and women would graduate and enter job market but without job opportunities.*

The gradual triple revolution resulted in the proactive participation of women in protests side by side with men. In this regard Hibaaq Osman referred to the revolutionary situation in Tahrir Square in Cairo:

> *Women brought blankets, food and were twittering the developments to the outside world. That was a total break down of the cliché image of the 'passive Arab women'. They were participating in the protests side by side men and chanting: freedom, dignity and social justice. These were not ideals for intellectuals, but rather translated into their realities. Women were really there. There were no sexual harassment, no one was saying: you are not good enough to stand there.*

Therefore the proactive participation of women and youth -secular and Islamist alike- in the revolutions reflect their increased politicisation and political awareness. This is a structural development that should be seen and recognised by Arab Spring sceptics and those who dismiss the latter as not being truly revolutionary, since both youth and women are playing, and will probably continue to play, a pivotal role in the transition to democracy. Despite numerous obstacles to democratisation, these structural socio-economic developments show that the demand for a dignified citizenship is shared across the political and social spectrum. Naturally, this does not exclude the probability of reversals to (soft) authoritarianism since transition processes cannot be assumed linear. Yet the push by political activists, civil society and citizens generally for the adoption of (more) liberal constitutions, the lifting of emergency and martial laws, the struggle for the gradual independence of judiciary and media, and the establishment of independent political parties, -trade unions and -business associations, will slowly but steadily democratize the region. Taking into account the differences between the countries and societies, this will occur in different modalities and paces. Notwithstanding varying outcomes, inevitable counter-revolutions and setbacks in the future, the activists are convinced these revolutions have changed the Middle East and North Africa for once and for all. They are adamant the region is unlikely to ever go back to the pre-14th January

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[5] EUISS Report Number 9, *The Arab democratic wave, How the EU can seize the moment*, p.41. March 2011.

2011situation when the likes of Ben Ali and his cronies were getting close to 99% of votes in sham elections and referenda while trampling on the basic rights of their citizens.

No Leaders but a Leading Idea

It was argued at the seminar and advocacy meetings that the term dignity (*al-karama*) has been resonating throughout the region as the underlying pillar of popular protests. This has to do with the fact that decades of dictatorship, economic failures, crony capitalism, corruption and cultural decline have stripped the average citizen of their political, social and economic rights as dignified human beings. As a result, the region reached a political and social deadlock for decades wherein feelings of incapacity, helplessness and incapacitation *('ajz)* proliferated.[6] Yet against this background it was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia that triggered mass protests and transformed the region. By his self-immolation Bouazizi captured and symbolised the deep sense of dispossession of the peoples of the region. That is why the word dignity has become the meta-narrative of these revolutions, one that is shared, produced and propagated by all political and social groups, secular and Islamist alike. Indeed, the sense of collective dispossession and the joint embrace of dignified citizenship allowed these revolutions to be largely leaderless. Furthermore, the activists remarked that what makes these revolutions unique is the type of loose networking that brought about the ad hoc alliances, which at times joined forces for common actions, and at other times departed. As a result, no particular political and social groups have managed or wanted to take the lead of these uprisings, even though it can still be argued that (secular) youth are the driving force behind them. The political and social protests over the past 11 years in Egypt are an illustrative example of this model of *loose leaderless networks*. According to Egyptian activists Bassem Fathy and Israa Abdelfattah:

> *The seeds of the Egyptian have been sown by socio-economic and political protests between 2000-2010. Protest movements aimed at different political, social, economic, internal and external objectives such us support to the second Palestinian intifada, protest against Iraq war and against the extension of Mubarak's rule and the projected succession by his son Gamal, and the improvement of the socio-economic situation of lower classes. Key proponents of protest movements like Kefaya and the April 6 Movement were cooperating on an ad hoc basis on one or more of the aforementioned common goals at certain points in time, then this cooperation came to an end, in order to start all over again, and so forth.*

The emergence of loose leaderless networks, of course, was also partly due to the fact that decades of dictatorship had prevented the emergence of a unified opposition front. Contrary to conventional wisdom and against all odds, this proved to be a blessing in disguise for the revolution. When the revolution erupted, there were simply too many key actors to identify one single leader and repress or co-opt the movement accordingly.

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[6] See also: Kassab, Elizabeth, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective,*http://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-14488-9/contemporary-arab-thought (accessed on 19 October 2011)

Revisiting Revolution

The above analysis should humble and encourage us to reflect on and revisit the concept of revolution as we know it. Indeed it is high time for a paradigm shift since the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions -among others- are apparently still our key reference points. We still employ the latter *a priori* to analyse uprisings that may not fit into our analytical approaches. Such a paradigm shift would reflect the diversity of revolution models by realizing and recognizing that a revolution does not always need to be pre-planned with the involvement of a distinct and identified leadership, but rather may be the cumulative result of the gradual emergence of loose, leaderless networks.

Not a Twitter Revolution

An often-heard misconception about the dignity revolution is that it is a Twitter or Facebook revolution. For sure social media have played and still are playing --as in the case in Syria-- a pivotal role in political mobilization, awareness raising, lobbying and networking in the run up to and during the revolutions.

The "We are all Khalid Said" Facebook campaign is illustrative of the power of social media in mobilizing large segments of the Egyptian society against police brutality.[7] Khalid Said was a young Egyptian man who was beaten to death by police in 2010. The online dissemination of footage of his disgruntled body caused an unprecedented popular outrage and outcry against police brutality in the run up to the revolution. Yet despite its unprecedented capacity to mobilize popular anger against authoritarianism and corruption, online activism did not manage to bring Mubarak down prior to the eruption of the 25th revolution. A decisive day in this respect was 28th January when the regime cut off internet and phone services. In response, millions of people poured into the streets to participate in the protests but also to see for themselves what was going on and to look for their children. Arguably, this unwittingly constituted the unplanned exceptional revolutionary momentum that sealed the fate of the regime. On top of this, this momentum would not have emerged without the Tunisian precedent, which brought home the message that people's power could bring down an Arab autocrat. The Egyptian activist Bassem Fathy eloquently elaborated the unintended outcome of the decision of Mubarak to cut off internet:

> *On the eve of the revolution, nobody mobilized the masses, nobody expected the revolution. I had one meeting before the 25th January with leftist activists. Were we going to start from the poor places, or in cities, what were our demands? One day I was in charge of the logistics of a sit-in. And this was just 12 hours before the revolution. We thought: don't worry, we are going to be with 2000 people. We thought it was impossible to repeat the Tunisian revolution in Tahrir Square. On 28th January, we said yes it is a revolution, but we didn't plan it, we didn't organize it, it simply happened. The ordinary people were moving everywhere and chanting directly against the regime.*

Similar dynamics were involved with regard to the role of social media in the ongoing Syrian revolution. The online activism is at the moment the 'life line' of this revolution through covering, documenting and disseminating the human rights violations committed by Assad's regime. Yet it is people's power on the ground in Syrian cities, towns and villages that defy dictatorship by pouring into the streets day in day out despite a sustained brutal crackdown. It was argued at the sminar that social media and internet amplifies events simply because even events in small, remote places get into the spotlight. Social media and internet also speeds up events exactly because everything is so quickly disseminated to audiences. That being said, internet use, although it has been rapidly growing, still is small in some place such as Syria: yet there still is a revolution. In fact, people use additional means of communication, primarily through extended family ties in a country where a lot of internal migration has been going on over the last few decades.

In short, the dignity revolution is not tweeted, but rather is the result of people pouring into streets, facilitated by twitter and facebook.

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[7] www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk

Collapse of One Fear Factor, Remaining of Four Factors

The dignity revolution marks the end of 'Arab exceptionalism' and the collapse of ordinary people and activists' fear for Arab autocracy, its killing machinery and myriad security services. However, this is only the beginning of the end of the culture of fear that has relentlessly and carefully been cultivated by dictators for the past 50 years. Perhaps the most commonly used logic in this sense has been Arab autocrats 'argument' of 'either me or chaos'. Demolishing the remnants of the fear factory and countering the culture of fear are daunting tasks that are expected to take decades. The activists at both the seminar and advocacy meetings emphasized that the democratic transition in the region is therefore fraught with four fear factors: fear of Algerianization, fear of Iraqization, fear of the 'authoritarian majority', and fear of conformity. The Algerian civil war in the 1990s between the authoritarian military --that refused to accept the election results and winning of an Islamist party-- and Islamist armed groups, as well as the refusal of the international community to accept the election victory of Hamas in Palestine (2006), are stark reminders of the ramifications of the exclusion of Islamist parties and the refusal to accept election results that might bring them to power. This fear factor also reflects the anxiety of people in the region and the West about Islamic parties that, once they have won elections, they will bring an end to democracy: "one man, one vote, one time".

The fear of Iraqization refers to the replacement of an authoritarian and corrupt elite with another authoritarian and corrupt elite playing on sectarian and/or ethnic divisions. Iraqi activists Yanar Mohammed and Falah Moradkhin bitterly acknowledge that:

> *In the past we had one Saddam, now we have 1000 mini Saddams.*

Recent research by the think tank FRIDE supports this perspective.[8] It reveals that international actors too heavily approach transitions to democracy through the lens of deal making between elites to the detriment of essential institutional rules and reforms. FRIDE refers here to the Iraqi democratic transition process in which the international community has invested huge efforts in pacting politics between elites at the expense of strengthening the building blocks of a nascent functioning democracy. Inadvertently, this has strengthened the power of Post-Saddam political elites to reproduce rentier state effects, patterns of patronage, corruption and co-optation of civil society. In all, according to Iraqi activists "Iraq's dysfunctional democracy is the model not to follow and emulate in other democratic cases of transition" even leaving aside the problems associated with the legality of the war and occupation that brought an end to Baath authoritarian rule. The fear of an 'authoritarian majority', in turn, deals with the anxiety of the 'coalition of minorities' that think they will be the losers of regime change. Nowhere is this anxiety as apparent as in Syria today. Here the 'coalition of minorities' comprises of Alawites, Christians and Druze along with some Sunni elites attached to and benefitting from the regime. If the Assad regime falls, these groups think they will lose out politically and economically, while fearing shrinking religious freedoms. Indeed, their fear for an 'authoritarian Sunni Muslim majority' to take over power, if the regime was to collapse, is one of

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[8] Youngs, Richard, *What not to do in the Middle East and North Africa*, P.3. Policy Brief N.70-March 2011, FRIDE.

the main obstacles to the full embrace of the Syrian revolution by the 'silent majority' of these groups, even when many activists from these minority groups are actually involved in the revolution. Last but not least, fears are that conformity to dominant conservative social values will stand in the way of improving women's rights and private civil liberties, such as the right to choose one's faith, religious liberties, the right to give nationality to children, and gay rights. The Lebanese activist Rani Fazah succinctly put it as follows:

> *If you don't confirm, the system pushes you out. I fear for my private and civil liberties. We are facing a mountain of fears, but what is important is that the masses are ready to counter these fears. But the process is very agonizing since we lack the mindset and institutions to face these fear factors.*

Particularly on women's rights, activist Hibaaq Osman (who is based in Cairo) at the advocacy meetings referred to the set backs since the fall of Mubarak:

> *Even though women were actively participating in the protests they were highly underrepresented in leadership roles, women rights are not taken into consideration in constitutional reform and women are not represented in reform committees, no civic state is guaranteed, political participation of women is too low and women's issue are not taken into consideration and into the agenda of the protesters in general.*

The Tunisian activist Massaoud Romdhani eloquently elaborated Algerianization and conformity fear factors:

> *Euphoria might sometimes fade away and be replaced by worries. Sometimes you think it is easier to topple a dictator and difficult to establish a democratic polity. You have to know how to use the money when you win the jackpot. Our relation with the 'other' is what we are trying to establish. Now we realize we are not all democrats. We don't want the experience of Algeria, we don't want a military take over but we also don't want Islamic extremism. Now there are Salafists, their number is not big, but if you deal with people who don't believe in democracy it is hard to settle them down. How to deal with the 2 million people who were members of Ben Ali's party? How to establish trust with police and tackle rising criminality and insecurity? How to deal with immigrants who return home? But we also took important decisions, the most important one is that the election lists of parties must be equally divided between men and women on the basis 50/50, and this is a revolution within a revolution.*

Next to the deeply rooted demand for democracy there also are models of hope and pockets of progress drawn from the region itself that might provide recipes for facing these fears. Accordingly, activists repeatedly referred to the Turkish model as an example of a polity that managed to bring about a historic reconciliation between a secular state and an Islamic society, between democracy and Islam.

Economic Development and Democratisation

The activists repeatedly asserted that an underlying factor for the eruption of the dignity revolutions is a combination of political and economic injustice. These two injustices are indivisible and inseparable. Therefore, the dignity revolutions are *both* against Arab political authoritarianism *and* highly critical of the ways in which these regimes have pursued neo-liberal economic reforms over the last two decades. Despite some macro-economic successes, exemplified by Egypt topping the 2008 list of reformers in the World Bank's Doing Business rankings, the overall end result, throughout the region, has been the enrichment of entrenched elites without significant 'trickle down' effects to the bulk of the population.[9] In short, in most countries of the region political and economic elites are mostly overlapping. Henceforth, support for political liberalisation and political rights cannot and should not be separated from support for social-economic rights and a just model for economic development. This model must tackle the nexus of political authoritarianism and economic injustice, address the monopolization of the economy by entrenched and emerging political elites, end cronyism, chronic corruption and co-optation, and generate employment opportunities for youth and women. Foremost, this means providing an enabling environment for the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, both of an informal or quasi-formal nature, as such enterprises provide for the livelihoods of a vast majority of the population throughout the region. In sum, activists emphasized that the prospects for democratization are dim, politically speaking, if poverty, widespread socio-economic injustice persists.

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[9] Sullivan, John D, *Rethinking Development Assistance in the Middle East*, Policy Brief, February 23, 2011, POMED.

Conclusions

At both the seminar and advocacy meetings activists asserted that the Arab Spring is the cumulative outcome of a triple revolution the region has witnessed over the course of the past fifty years. They noticed though that the 'mother of all mistakes' is to read this spring with analytical glasses of the past that shaped our thinking about the region. They also recommended it is high time to take off the 'analytical veils' that have prevented us from seeing the impact of transformative, irreversible social developments that led to this spring. Foremost, this should humble us to revisit the concept of revolution as we know it in addition to our stereotypes and clichés of the region. It was clear at both the seminar and advocacy meetings that the roar, readiness and demand for democracy coming from Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Sanaa, Manama, Bagdad, Benghazi is loud and clear. This should once again humble us to embark on two paradigm shifts, i.e., from democracy promotion to accompanying transformative changes initiated and led by the peoples of the region, and from the notions of 'passive Arab subject' and 'Arab Exceptionalism' to 'Tahrir Square Republic' that symbolises Arab citizen's determination to bring down dictators, unity between Muslims and Christians, women empowerment and participation –secular and Islamist alike- in *square politics* and *deep democracy* alongside and with men. The road to democracy though will be bumpy and at times bloody. The emerging states will probably be a mix bag of democracies and soft or liberal authoritarianisms. Yet the demand of democratic forces and citizens for and determination to achieve a new historic social contract based on responsive, inclusive and accountable political and economic systems are stronger than ever. And exactly this crucial factor should inform and form the foundation of EC, the Dutch government and European civil society organisations' thinking of and support for democratisation in the region. This requires patience -a lot of strategic patience from Europe- but also quick actions to accompany transformative changes. In the context of the dignity revolution activists advised that there is an urgent strategic need to: 1) prioritize support to programmes that address the remaining fear factors, 2) target political liberalisation and economic development as part and parcel of one transition package that should aim at achieving responsive, inclusive and accountable political and economic systems. Therefore the activists called for an active European engagement to support the tough democratisation processes by taking to heart the aforementioned two paradigm shifts.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations for the European Commission, the Dutch Government and European NGOs.

At both the seminar and advocacy meetings the activists acknowledged the tough road ahead and emphasized that the European Union at large can and should play a proactive role in supporting the transition processes in the Middle East. In particular they recommended the EU to have a long term support strategy that tackles the remaining four fear factors and addresses both political democratisation and economic development as part and parcel of one transitional support package. They stressed that only this coupling of politics and economics will ensure that the underlying causes of the dignity revolutions are addressed and tackled in a sustainable fashion. Specifically, the activists presented the following recommendations:

How to face fear factors:

o To counter the Algerianization fear factor, adopt an inclusive approach towards all political and social actors. Particularly this means engagement with Islamist political parties and civil society that adhere to peaceful democratic rules of engagement and renounce violence. In case they win free and fair elections, the results must be recognized and political pressure must be put on governments to accept these results. This is the onlyoption that ensures the credibility of Europe's support for democratic transition and may prevent the reoccurrence of Algerian civil war of 1990s and Palestinian civil war of mid 2000s. As a matter of fact this is not a new recommendation, but this is the time to be implemented. Lessons learned from these two historic missed opportunities must be taken on board fully and wholeheartedly. Join regional and international lobby efforts that address this sensitive topic.

o To address the Iraqization fear factor, priority must be given to institutional reforms that pave the path for the emergence of a real nascent functioning democracy through strengthening of civil society watch dogs that aim at combating corruption of emerging political elites, insist on internal democracy of ruling and opposition political parties. As a matter of urgency lessons learned from Post-Saddam dysfunctional democracy must be taken to heart.

o To counter the 'Sunni authoritarian majority' fear of religious/sectarian minorities in Syria, encourage and facilitate inclusive dialogue between majority and minority groups with the aim to address mutual anxieties and agreeing on broad principles that ensures equality before law and national, religious and constitutional rights of minorities. Also encourage and facilitate an inclusive dialogue between domestic and diaspora opposition as well as between diaspora groups with the aim to agree on broad principles for post-Assad Syria.

o To counter the conformity fear factor, support should be given to activities that aim at improving individual rights and liberties (e.g. right to choose faith, right to give nationality to children), rights of minorities-religious, ethnic, sexual- and women's rights.

How to tackle women's empowerment:

o Women have played a pivotal role in the revolutions. Yet as the Egyptian case clearly shows, revolutionary gains do not automatically lead to post-revolution improvements of women's rights. It is therefore imperative to remain vigilant about setbacks and help improve women's real, meaningful and productive participation in democratic transitions. This could be realized through ensuring participation in commissions that aim at setting up new constitutions as well as meaningful participation in government and parliament.

o Join and support efforts of civil society that aims at preserving improved women's rights enacted by fallen autocrats such as Ben Ali and Mubarak. Conservative Egyptian social and political groups now dub these rights as 'Suzan Mubarak Rights' in an attempt to discredit them.

Whom to partner with:

o Don't pick a priori your 'usual suspect' partners. Don't make the 'usual' mistake of distinguishing between 'moderate'/'democratic'/'secular' and 'fundamentalist'/'undemocratic'/ Islamist actors. The only criterion for partnership should be adherence to peaceful democratic rules of engagement and therefore there should be an a priori distinction between democrats and non-democrats. As Alvaro De Vasconcelos convincingly argues 'what is really significant is the process itself and not the participants'.[10]

How to address political and economic injustices:

o Acknowledge the negative impacts of neo-liberal economic reforms pushed by EU (and US) on these countries and therefore there is an urgent need for rethinking this model and adapt it to the economic realities of the region.

o Support *both* political democratisation and economic development programmes- particularly for youth and women- as part of *one democratic transition package* that should aim at creating and expanding job opportunities and educational reforms that aim at promoting skills that are needed in the private sector. Economic components of such programmes *should* be linked to political activities that aim at participation in decision-making, holding governments accountable and combating corruption at national and local levels through partnership with independent business associations and –trade unions.

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[10] EUISS Report Number 9, *The Arab democratic wave, How the EU can seize the moment*, March 2011.

How to deepen knowledge concerning transitions in the region:

o   It is paramount to prioritize partnership with regional researchers, think tanks and universities that aim to conduct academic- and evidence-based research on the prospects for and pitfalls of transitions to democracy and reverse transitions from democracy to authoritarianism.

o   Provide support to lessons learned efforts that aim to learn from Turkish model of democratic transition and reconciliation between a secular state and an Islamic society.

o   Support people-to-people programmes in Europe that aims at enhancing mutual understanding between both sides of the Mediterranean and presenting the profound changes happening in the Middle East to European public opinions. This could be done through provision of platforms for civic activists and researchers from the region to share their stories, analysis, insights and perspectives with the public opinion and policy makers.

About the Author

Kawa Hassan works as Knowledge Officer at the Hivos where he coordinates the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia. Prior to this assignment, he worked as Senior Programme Officer South Asia and South East Asia at the Dutch INGO SIMAVI, Programme Manager at the Swedish/Norwegian INGO FORUT and Field Coordinator at UNDP in Sri Lanka, Project Officer Iraq at the Dutch INGO Ikv Pax Christi. Within the framework of this programme he published the Policy Paper *Rethinking Civil Activism in the Middle East: Agency without Association?, The Netherlands and the Middle Eastern Uprisings: How to Accompany Transformative Changes* (Policy Paper to the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs)*, Hivos and Arab Uprisings: Insights Revisited* (article in newsletter, issue 3)*,* the article *The 'Jasmine Revolution': The Fall of Arab Berlin Wall?, Insights of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia* (article in Knowledge and Change booklet) and contributed to the Policy Paper *Beyond Orthodox Approaches: Assessing Opportunities for Democracy Support in the Middle East and North Africa.* He holds a Master's degree in political sciences (specialisation international relations) from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands and studied English and German at Almustansyria University in Bagdad, Iraq (khassan@hivos.nl)*.*

About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The policy paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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