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Egypt in transition - ready for democracy?

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Current Analysis

"Egypt in Transition – Ready for Democracy?"

Maya Janik / Cengiz Günay

Am 7. Juni 2011 organisierte das Österreichische Institut für Internationale Politik in Zusammenarbeit mit IDEAZ, dem Außenministerium und der Anna-Lindh Stiftung eine Konferenz mit dem Titel: „Egypt in Transition – Ready for Democracy". Es diskutierten ExpertInnen, ForscherInnen, PolitikerInnen und AktivistInnen aus Ägypten und dem Ausland über die Veränderungsprozesse und versuchten gemeinsam Ausblicke auf zukünftige Entwicklungen zu wagen. Wer sind die wichtigsten Akteure? Was ist für eine demokratische Transition notwendig und welche Rolle wird der Islam in Zukunft spielen? – so lauteten die grundlegenden Fragen. Die folgende Analyse beruht auf den wichtigsten Erkenntnissen, die aus der Konferenz gewonnen wurden. Das Nahost Forschungsprogramm des oiip verfolgt die aktuellen Entwicklungen in Ägypten und der Region weiter und bietet dazu laufend Analysen an.

On June 7, 2011 the Austrian Institute for International Affairs organized together with the IDEAZ Institute, the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs and the Anna-Lindh Foundation with the title: "Egypt in Transition – Ready for Democracy". Experts, researchers, politicians and civil activists from Egypt and from abroad discussed the ongoing changes and tried to outline future developments. Who are the major actors? What is necessary for democratic transition and which role will Islam play in future? These were the fundamental questions. The following analysis is based on the major insights gained from the conference. The oiip's Middle East Research program will continue to monitor Egypt and the region and deliver further analyses on developments.

The January revolution undeniably marks a watershed in Egypt's modern history. Inspired by the Tunisian uprising, Egyptians went in to the streets. Young people were the spearhead in the protests against the ossified Mubarak regime. The protest movement quickly grew. Protesters from all walks of life demanded the downfall of the regime, freedom, justice and the improvement of their economic situation.

Since President Mubarak's departure in February 2011, the country has been ruled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. From the onset, the military made it clear, that it had no intention to stay in power, but to "get the transition over with" as soon as possible. The Council put forward a roadmap and a tight time schedule for transition to a democratic order. The military's plan for transition included the establishment of a committee for constitutional reform which was assigned with the task to elaborate amendments to the constitution. These were then presented in a referendum on March 19. The committee's proposal was approved by a large majority of 77.2 per cent of the voters, while only 22 per cent voted against it.

Debates over the constitutional amendments split the protest movement. Not only political and ideological differences came into the open, but also divergences over how to manage the transition process appeared.

While some defended quick transition others called for time in order to guarantee real transition to pluralist democracy.

Secular, leftist and liberal forces have mainly argued for a longer transitional period, as this would allow new formations to troop together, built up party organizations and become more visible. Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist groups and the representatives of the old regime in contrast were to be found among those who defended quick transition.

While early elections would be a boon for established groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the old networks of the Mubarak regime, they would catch new formations flat-footed.

Representation in parliament has been extremely important as the amendments approved in the March referendum delegated the task of rewriting a constitution to a constitutional committee which will be appointed by a newly elected parliament. The

date of parliamentary elections, initially scheduled for September 2011 was postponed to November 2011.

The Supreme Council's handling of the transition process suggests that the army regards this process as a technical rather than as a political one. Concessions have been only made under massive pressure from the streets. While the protest movement had first welcomed the army, disenchantment with the handling of the transition process has grown. Protesters accuse the army and its head Field Marshall Tantawi of working for the continuity of the *ancien regime*.

The Egyptian Revolution should not be perceived as the end, but rather as an outstanding event in a troublesome transformation process whose outcome is open and difficult to predict. The conference organized by the oiip in cooperation with the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, the Diplomatic Academy, the Anna-Lindh Foundation and the IDEAZ institute aimed at discussing with experts from Egypt and Eastern Europe the obstacles and chances in the transition process and to pose the question; whether continuity will prevail over change? In a second panel we then discussed with Egyptian civil activists, politicians and analysts the question of what kind of change is to be expected.

Vladimir Gligorov spoke first reflecting the transition in Eastern and Southeastern European post-communist countries. Gligorov noted that knowledge acquired during the process, if only applied properly, could be of possibly helpful use to ease burdens of the Egyptian transformation.
Gligorov noted that there is a big difference between the recent Arab freedom movements and the post-1989 revolutions in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, as the post-communist transition was foreseen and its outcomes could be predicted. The first lesson post-communist states learnt, as Gligorov identified, is that the level of state legitimacy is very important for the success of the transition process. According to him, it was only a matter of time for the socialist regimes to collapse because their

state apparatuses did not seek legitimacy at all and were based explicitly on repression.

The second lesson drawn from the experiences of Eastern Europe concerns according to Gligorov the necessity of complete power changes after a revolution for successful systemic reforms. Gligorov stated that, in regard to the former communist countries, democratization was the only way in which power could have been redistributed fairly. Political discontinuity in terms of institutions, the political system and people in power is, as explained, indispensable in order to carry out economic reforms. Further on, Gligorov drew attention to the fact that democracy can be an instrument for continuity. Therefore, reforms, which decisively redistribute power over ressources, were essential for political discontinuity.

Another lesson that can be learnt from transition countries' experiences is according to Gligorov that gradual strategies rarely succeed. History has shown that usually a shock therapy is necessary in order to engender discontinuity. Nevertheless, Gligorov maintained that it is difficult to predict the result of such measures as there are different possible outcomes.

Furthermore, Gligorov discussed the role that nationalism and the military played during the transition of the European post-communist countries. The most successful transitions were characterized by the lack of radical nationalism and democratically elected governments being in control of the military.

Finally, Gligorov emphasized the importance of international anchorage for the success of the transition process. According to him, international influence is decisive for economic reforms and the transformation of the internal political structures. The role of the international community, especially of the US and NATO, may significantly influence the outcome of the ongoing transformation process in Egypt, like it was the case in Eastern Europe.

According to **Tarek Osman**, the January protests were first and foremost a rejection of the massive failures of the Egyptian regimes throughout the past sixty years. The uprisings are, as Osman argued, attributed to the three factors, deeply rooted in Egypt's social, political and economic development, especially over the last decades.

The first factor is the massive growth of the Egyptian population. During the last 30 years Egypt's population doubled, reaching more than 80 million. The crucial fact is that a half of the population is under 35 years old, and many of those are economically unprivileged and weary of the country's socio-political circumstances. The demands of these young people, including their longing for the end of Mubarak's rigid regime, provided a decisive impetus for the uprisings.

In order to understand the unexpected revolt, it is further important to bear in mind the fact that Egypt lacked *a national project* for more than 30 years. Both, Egypt's attempt to emulate Europe during the period of liberal experimentation from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century, as well as the Nasser's experiment strengthening Arab nationalism throughout the 1950s and 60s, failed.

The third relevant factor concerns Egypt's position in the Arab world and its awareness of how much influence political events in Egypt exert on the rest of the region. Tarek Osman outlined that Egypt's importance has always lied in its role among other Middle East states. The Mubarak regime, however, isolated the country, what consequently led to its position in the Arab world being increasingly weakened.

In the second part of his speech, Tarek Osman discussed the emerging political dynamics, most notably the apparent battle for power between different key actors. Given this reality, it is hard to predict, in which direction Egypt will move. Generally, as argued, three broad movements in the country are trying to get a grip on enough power to influence the future political reality. These actors are: the military and the financial centers; the Islamist movement, which lacks unification as there are distinctions between the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and many of its young members, conservative groups and liberal Muslims on the other

one; and finally the Liberals as the third actor that struggles for power after the January uprisings. Tarek Osman noted in this context that “liberal” does not necessarily reflect the western understanding of the term. Liberalism in Egypt, as stated, is defined as a sort of secularism. Challenges the liberal movement faces are its fragmentation, like in the case of the Islamist movement, as well as the lack of interesting rhetoric which would attract society’s attention on a greater scale.

Maye Kassem contended that although the revolution has broken the fear of authority, the authoritarian culture and political structure remain intact. Kassem warned of a possible continuity of the military rule. The military, as argued, is able to stay in power if it decides to. According to her, one reason why the Mubarak regime fell is that it has lost its legitimacy, what can be blamed on the lack of sound economic progress as well as Egypt’s declining position as a major player in the Middle East.

Another crucial issue which made the overthrow of the Mubarak regime possible lies in the alienation of the military and its steady loss of power during the time of Mubarak’s rule. Due to that, the army refused to intervene in the Egyptian revolt against the president’s reign, as they had nothing to gain by protecting the regime.

Kassem further emphasized the need for a useful strategy in order to profoundly change the political system of Egypt. Referring to the current debate concerning the necessity to change the Egyptian constitution, Maye Kassem stated that solely the change of the constitution does not lead to changes of the nature of the country’s political structure. The fivefold constitutional change in the years 1953-1979, as asserted, exemplifies this argument.

Conclusively, with regard to the upcoming legislative elections, Kassem drew attention to the fact that continuity may prevail over change if the members of the National Democratic Party (NDP), the former ruling party, find themselves back in the new parliament. They have not completely disappeared from the political scene, but

instead formed new parties, which will try to gain seats during the September elections.

The second round table focused on the crucial question in the context of the ongoing transition over what kind of change is probable and possible in the light of the country's social, political and economic situation.

Abou Elela Mady offered his views on the kind of democracy that may emerge as well as the limits of freedom. Elela Mady identified two factors in regard to the question of the possible kind of democracy in Egypt. Firstly, as argued, the presidential-parliamentary system would be the most suitable for Egypt because it offers the division of power between the president and the prime minister. The electoral system should be based on proportional representation. Secondly, the establishment of the rule of law and social justice are indispensable for a functioning democratic system. Mady stressed that the future parliament needs to deal with relevant issues as unemployment, education and health care.

Under the Mubarak regime, as elaborated, the problem was not the Islamic nature of law, but despotism and corruption of the ruling elite. Justice and freedom namely, as argued, are crucial for the Islamic principles, as it emphasizes the equality of people regardless of religion, colour or gender.

With regard to the limits of freedom Mady pointed out that the individual freedom cannot be contradictory with freedom of other members of society, as well as the majority has to respect the rights and freedom of the minority. Thus, e.g. the Muslims, who constitute the majority in Egypt, do not have the right to, for instance, deprive Christians of running for a public office. Mady professed that women and minorities should have equal rights and should be equally eligible to run for presidency.

According to **Esra Abdel Fatah Rashed**, not the difficult economic and social situation, but the Egyptian people's demand for freedom, justice and the collapse of the regime were the decisive catalyzers for the protests on Tahrir Square. As for the question whether social change is possible, Abdel Fatah argued that in fact it is, noting that in the light of the successful overthrowing of the Mubarak regime, everything is possible to the power of people. However, achieving social change will not be easy. In order to initiate a successful social and economic change, profound political reforms are indispensable.

For the purpose of freedom, justice and social and economic development, as stated, the rule of law and solid democratic institutions are needed. Another important aspect that needs to be considered with regard to social change is the establishment of a new education system, which will help to raise a well-educated generation capable of understanding the real meaning of freedom and democracy. Abdel Fatah further drew attention to the role of women in Egypt, strongly criticizing the ignorance towards their role in the society, visible most notably in their strong underrepresentation in political committees or even in the media when it comes to discussing issues of social relevance.

Abdel Fatah argued that Egyptian women should actively fight for their rights and participate in the political life, instead of just waiting for better days. Hence, the role of Egyptian civil society concerning the raising of people's political awareness is of essential importance. It should, as stated, especially now, with regard to the parliamentary elections, actively encourage people to participate in the political process.

Conclusively, Abdel Fatah stressed the high significance of international dialogue, not only between the governments, but also and foremost between the western and Arab civil societies and people.

Subsequently, **Tarek Osman** elaborated on the question whether Egypt is ready for liberal democracy. The advantages of the Egyptian liberal movement include the legislative and cultural heritage, as well as infrastructure and the political project of liberalism. Another important aspect is that the liberal movement has gained momentum. During the demonstrations, the Liberals were a relevant force which inspired most notably the young Egyptians to fight for change.

Challenges which Liberals face today may, among others, include the lack of real leaders, fragmentation, their weak constituencies, poor logistics and bad funding as well as their complicated discourse, which makes the connection with people very difficult.

A 70 years old problem of sectarianism does not work for the advantage of Egypt's liberal movement either, as the gap between Muslims and Christians has had harmful effects on the Egyptian society.

Tarek Osman argued that the development of democracy in general, is to a great extent attributed to the development of Egypt's economic situation. The power of the private sector in the country plays in this context a crucial role. For the first time in Egypt's economic history the private sector employs the highest number of workers, what gives people a better chance to become economically independent of the state. Although the capital markets in Egypt are partially controlled by people who stood close to the Mubarak regime, more than 70 per cent of the GDP is generated by the medium size business sector.

As for the question whether Egyptian people long for a liberal way of living, Osman argued that for the vast majority of the Egyptian society, being the middle class, liberal lifestyle, which also includes considerations and decisions concerning issues like for example abortion, is not that relevant.

Summarizing, the panel discussion featured several different points of view on the topic. The speakers presented a whole range of various perspectives and positively

contributed to the popular understanding of the protests in Egypt, including its driving forces, and their possible meaning for the country's future development.

The speakers agreed that it is yet unclear in which direction Egypt will go in the years to come. The result of the current struggle for power between different interest groups, and the outcome of the upcoming parliamentary elections may surely be a breakthrough in Egypt's transition. The roles of Egyptian civic society and internationally promoted dialogue, as in the discussion often emphasized, are of high significance for the establishment of a functioning democratic order in Egypt. Nevertheless, for now the country is facing many challenges emerging in its dynamically changing political reality. Disagreements over the country's political future and economic order have already become vividly clear. Many questions, most notably regarding the future role of the military or the development of the political character of the Muslim Brotherhood, still remain unanswered. So far the revolution has generally been perceived as successful. However, the future will tell for sure whether the mass protests on Tahrir Square have truly been a turning point in the country's history.

Panel Discussion, 7 June 2011

Welcome

Otmar Höll, Director oiip
Sabine Kroissenbrunner, Head of the Task Force Dialogue of Cultures; Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs

Panel I: Will continuity prevail over change?

Discussants:

Vladimir Gligorov, Professor at Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies
Maye Kassem, American University in Cairo
Tarek Osman, Writer, London/Cairo
Chair: **Corinna Milborn**, Writer and Journalist

Panel II: What kind of change? How to deal with pluralism in what kind of democracy?

Discussants:

Abou Elela Mady, Chairman El-Wasat Party, Cairo
Esra Abd El Fatah Rashed, Egyptian Democratic Academy, Cairo
Tarek Osman, Writer, London/Cairo
Chair: **Cengiz Günay**, oiip

Venue: Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, Favoritenstrasse 15a, 1040 Vienna

The panel discussion was organized by the Austrian Institute for International Affairs – oiip in cooperation with Ideaz – the Platform for Intercultural and Comparative Research, and the ANNA LINDH FOUNDATION and support by the Foreign Ministry and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna.