

Is the recent Arab Awakening lost?

When a Tunisian peddler set himself on fire on 18 December 2010, launching the Arab Spring, many were taken by surprise. In 2014, a new and progressive constitution has been ratified in Tunisia. The Tunisian people left dictatorship behind and started a new democratic process. This resolve should serve as an example to the other nations in the Middle East and elsewhere facing similar challenges.

One transition after another has struggled or failed to produce governments in the region that can respond to citizens' longing for freedom and opportunity. There seems chaos in Libya where violence and kidnappings are increasing and internal stability is lacking. In Syria, the longing for freedom, human rights and democracy, moved quickly into a brutal civil war which resulted in an incredible humanitarian catastrophe. Since March 2011, more than 150.000 Syrians have been killed and more than 2.5 million have been displaced or live as refugees outside the country. A soon end of the fighting seems not yet likely. Lebanon and Jordan, and partly also Turkey, risk to be destabilized because of the huge number of Syrian refugees and the political complications for those countries of the Syrian civil war.

The recent Arab Spring became in fact a Second Arab Awakening.¹ The "first" Arab Awakening began in the mid-19th century. That awakening took the form of an intellectual revolution in which a wide array of Arab thinkers started questioning the control of distant Ottoman despots over their nations and criticizing their own limited contact with the outside world. Their calls for intellectual, economic and political change laid the groundwork for a new Arab world, eventually resulting in a wave of independence struggles in the 1940s and 1950s.

Nevertheless, that so called First Arab Awakening also failed. In the end, colonial autocracies were replaced with domestic one. New regimes, some of them military rulers or one party ruler, paid little attention to developing political systems whose checks and balances guaranteed access for all. The Arab region is characterized by decades of political failures. Unrealized political and economic expectations, the failure to solve the Palestinian issue, and the unwillingness to provide good governance marked the post-independence era in the Arab world. In many cases, political Islam emerged as the only alternative to one-party rule.

Political transformation usually takes decades, not years. The wording "Arab Spring" implies expectations of an immediate transition from autocratic regimes to democratic one. Islamic parties, such as in Egypt, filled in the gaps of people's expectations. Their rise has been expected. They alone had the pre-existing organizational capabilities required to run nationwide campaigns.

¹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/01/21/not-losing-arab-awakening/gyz0?reloadFlag=1>

In Egypt for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood scored in the elections. But their position in decision making was confronted with realities and they were not able to deliver what was mattered most such as democracy and freedom. In fact, hatred for the Brotherhood is expressed by so many in Egyptian public life. The Muslim Brotherhood as a movement is withdrawing into itself, but it is not directing its members to pull back from society; it is behaving like an angry but active outsider.

Recently 683 Egyptian citizens were sentenced to death in what is seen as an unfair mass trial. Judges unanimously sentenced them to death for alleged violence and involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood.² This is the second mass trial within five weeks. According to Amnesty International those sentenced lacked basic fair trial guarantees. Those sentences against political opponents should be strongly condemned because it does not contribute towards a stabilization of the political situation in the country.³ Meanwhile, Egypt also lost its capacity in playing a leading diplomatic role in a much divided Arab League.

It will take years to build the foundations of political systems that actually defend democracy and preserve its basic tenets year after year. It is a process in which some countries will succeed, others will struggle, and yet others will fail. The main question is: which elements of society will lead the transformation?

According to several, the real hope rests with a new generation, the youth who started it all in the streets and are far more committed to the principles of democracy than their elders. It will also take years to establish the organizational capacity to achieve a lasting break from the past. This Second Arab Awakening needs to be an assertion of universal values: democracy, pluralism, human rights. Only when societies and their elected leaders truly embrace tolerance, diversity, and the peaceful rotation of power, participative democracy and inclusive economic growth will the promise of a new Arab world be realized. The Second Arab Awakening just began and will not be realized in one generation's time.

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² <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/egypt-mass-death-sentences-executions-muslim-brotherhood>

³ <http://www.fidh.org/en/north-africa-middle-east/egypt/15249-egypt-s-alarming-repressive-context-mass-death-sentences-and-a-court-ban>