



## Conference Report “Partnership in Transition: The Nordic Countries and the Arab Spring:” Helsinki, 14 March 2013

### Introduction

The conference organized jointly by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, the Tampere Peace Research Institute and the EuroMeSCO research network sought to contextualize the on-going transition processes in the Arab world and to share Nordic experiences and models of democratic governance with countries in transition. To this end the conference considered the potential role of the “Nordic model” as a template and comparator for change in the Arab world and reflected on possible avenues of dialogue and cooperation between the Nordic and Arab countries. The conference also highlighted the need for greater attention and analysis of the problems and issues involved in regional transition processes amongst Nordic countries.

### Keynote Speech

The conference was opened by Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja. In his speech Minister Tuomioja explored the relationship between Nordic experiences with democratic governance and present challenges related to democratic change in the Arab countries. He started by outlining the main characteristics of the stylized “Nordic model” as including an emphasis on equal and open societies, the rule of law, respect for nature and the sustainable development, as well as strong support for universal welfare services. He argued that in particular social equality and inclusion, especially but not exclusively when it comes to gender, played a vital role in supporting the legitimacy of the political system and preventing economic exclusion.

He then sketched out Finland’s own development path from a poor, fragmented and underdeveloped country to the stable and prosperous democracy of today. Three key factors in particular played a role in the transformation of Finland following the bloody civil war of 1917: i) the prominent role played by women in political and public life and their role in exposing the social evils of the civil war era; ii) the importance of Nordic regional cooperation in serving as an example and anchor for change following the Second World War; and iii), domestic mechanisms in order to ensure the equality of opportunity for all groups, including the welfare state, education, tripartite cooperation between social actors, the use of ombudsmen and women participation.

While some of these Nordic and Finnish experiences are relevant for Arab countries encountering similar problems, Minister Tuomioja noted the difference in time scope, with the Finnish transition taking many decades, as well as the idiosyncrasies of all democratic transition processes. Against this background he cautioned that social change on the scale pursued by Arab countries is long and painstaking and that there were both positive and negative signs. Although much had been achieved, with open and free elections and an improved atmosphere for the freedom of expression, Syria provided a horrific example of a transition gone wrong, while other countries continue to face a multitude of political, social and economic challenges.

Despite the considerable differences in context and conditions of the Arab Spring, Minister Tuomioja argued that the Nordic model and in particular its emphasis on dialogue and consensus and on inclusion and equality could provide some inspiration for Arab countries when constructing the path forward. To this end, Finland has focused its own support to the Arab transition on promoting human rights and democratic governance, the rule of law, non-discrimination and gender equality in form of expertise, education and capacity building. Finland provides further support through the European Union, as well as by establishing a Group of Friends of Mediation at the UN together with Turkey to prevent human rights abuses and promote democracy worldwide.

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Minister Tuomioja concluded that although the challenges remained large, the Arab Spring provided an opportunity not to be missed for the region and the global community. In this process he considered dialogue between Nordic and Arab countries as essential means to share experiences and search for common solutions.

### **Panel I: Democratic Transitions: Challenges, Outlook and Prospects for Cooperation**

Andreu Bassols opened the first panel by outlining a number of commonly noted challenges to the transition processes in the Arab world. These include inter alia, the constitutional processes, security sector reform and reform of the judiciary, questions of transitional justice, the setting up of free and professional media and the creation of inclusive growth and social protection. Bassols asked the panellists to consider in their presentations how Nordic countries and the EU can help Arab countries responding to these challenges.

Larbi Sadiki noted in his presentation that democracy promotion is always, by default, a normative agenda, shaped by certain ideas and preconception. Democratic knowledge is important for transition countries and can come from outside, but also from previous experiences in the region. In considering the role that external players can play in the promotion of democratic knowledge in the context of the Arab Spring, it is important to go back to the origins of the revolution, namely the demands for dignity and social opportunity. Here there is a potential contribution for the Nordic countries to be made. While everyone appears to be in the business of selling democracy these days, even China, Nordic countries appear to have a moral advantage. As non-colonisers representing a widely acknowledged standard for open-democracies, Nordic countries have a unique platform to project their own ideas. In particular knowledge about how to promote inclusiveness and social justice are important in the region. However, Sadiki warned that Nordic countries should not romanticise the role of civil society in the region; given that secular western models of civil society do not apply to the region.

In his presentation, Vidar Helgesen underlined the need for long-term thinking and patience when considering the on-going transitions in the Arab region. As a starting point, democracy is always destabilizing and political turbulence is unavoidable. Constitutional processes can create ownership, but also represent a challenge to consensus. Clear and transparent electoral processes are crucial in order to establish trust and accountability, but too often elections are rushed and outcomes tainted. To avoid this, greater focus on the nuts and bolts of electoral management is required, including the training of poll workers and durable institutions. In this vein, external actors should focus on the establishment of transparent and accountable institutions. While the transitions might produce some actors and policies that Europeans do not like, in the long run what matters more are institutions and systems. Nordic countries in particular should focus on women's empowerment in terms of both economic and human rights and share their knowledge on political consensus building.

Simo Väätäinen discussed some of the main tools used for the implementation of transitional justice, including individual prosecution, truth seeking mechanisms, reparations to victims, reform of justice institutions and the vetting of justices and staff involved transitional justice processes. Väätäinen argued that these tools would have to play an important role in the future transition in Syria. Even though an ICC referral in the case of Syria appears unlikely, others options remained open. At the same time Väätäinen warned that there was a faked debate over promoting justice versus promoting peace and that justice should never be compromised.

Magnus Ekengren compared the situation in the Arab region with the situation in the Baltic in 1989–1991. Back then the withdrawal of Russia created a fragile situation, posing challenges of development, democratization and security. In that situation regional cooperation fulfilled an important stabilizing role, evolving in three stages. First, a bottom-up regionalization process driven by individual citizens created a regional consciousness. Second, a top-down stabilization phase led by governments responded to existing challenges by creating new regional partnerships and institutions and by strengthening the capacities through knowledge-transfer and exchanges. During the last normalization phase, the Baltic countries became part of the wider institutional framework, by joining NATO and the EU. This appears to provide a template for Arab regional cooperation.

In his comments, Risto Veltheim reminded participants of the complexity of regional events and developments and the importance of keeping these in mind when analysing the transitions. He also acknowledged that there was a danger of underestimating the difficulties of the transition processes and the need for a long-term outlook. Three issues from the debate required further contextualization. The role of religion had become central to the transitions, but might be a sign of a wider crisis of liberalism.

Women's rights are part of fundamental human rights and are absolutely central to the transition processes. There is an urgent need for the European Union to play a larger and more political role in the region to address pressing issues.

## **Panel II: Economic Challenges: Towards Sustainable Economic Governance**

Timo Behr opened the second panel, arguing that without growth, development and social justice, the prospects for democratic transitions were slim and that external actors played a key role in promoting growth.

The first presentation by Lahcen Achy focused on the problem of unemployment as one of the main factors in the Arab Spring protests. Achy noted that the MENA region had the highest level of youth unemployment in the world, which has been caused by a dramatic increase in educational levels paired with a failure of market reforms. While MENA economies have become more open in recent decades, the absence of market regulation and market institution fuelled crony capitalism, low growth and a lack of private investment. Arab governments responded to the Arab Spring protests by further increasing public employment and wages, which had little impact on unemployment but led to a huge increase in government deficit. In order to address labour market problems in the region, the response should focus on three issues. First, a better understanding on labour market problems with a particular focus on addressing low public investment and the gender gap. Second, a focus on non-labour market policies that increase labour demand, improve social spending and enhance social dialogue. Third, an emphasis on active labour market policies, especially education and on the job training. Nordic countries provide good examples when it comes to collective bargaining, social dialogues, etc.

Ziad Akl discussed in his presentation some of the economic challenges facing Egypt's transition process. Akl noted that most of these challenges derived from the neo-liberal reform policies implemented by the Mubarak government, which had had given rise to income inequality, high poverty rates, a rural-urban division and an ineffective labour market. However, with Egypt's 'pacted' transition driven by actors that are unwilling to implement major economic changes, such as the Egyptian military and the Islamists, these are unlikely to be forthcoming. While there is much talk of reform and the implementation of necessary austerity measures, these are impossible to implement due to their political implications. The risk is that in the absence of reforms, the economy will hit rock-bottom and the transition process will revert. In this situation, there is a great demand for action by external actors, such as the European Union. These actors need to build capacity and engage with formal institution, as well as implement strong conditionality measures to incentivize reforms.

Ilkka Lakaniemi provided a perspective on the regional economic situation from the private sector. He noted that although there were considerable problems that needed to be addressed - such as political instability, business regulation and the social contract - the region's demographic outlook and its potential for innovation and entrepreneurship also provided positive investment incentives. In order to attract private investment, what is needed is the development of an enabling business environment, as well as a wider vision for growth. With much of today's production and manufacturing conducted in Asia, this vision ought to focus on other parts of the value network and on creating regional hubs. Public-private partnerships and vocational training can serve as valuable tools to address some of the existing economic problems and to build up capacity. With Europe similarly lacking a 'story for growth' at this point, Lakaniemi argued that there was a previous opportunity to formulate a joint vision and growth strategy that could benefit both regions.

Anwar Esmat el Sadat in his comments underlined the urgent need to address the issue of subsidies in the case of Egypt and to improve the overall business environment to encourage investments. He further noted the severe social cost of long-term unemployment and expressed his hope that the next Egyptian government would have the political legitimacy to tackle the more structural long-term economic challenges of Egypt.

## **Panel III: Civil Society in Transition: Embracing Diversity and Building Bridges**

Tuomo Melasuo opened the panel by arguing that greater attention should be paid to local and communal levels of democracy in the Arab world - rooted in traditional forms of association - which reflect similar Nordic traditions of municipal democracy. A better integration of expatriate communities in the north-south dialogue could also help to build bridges and facilitate understanding. He also identified a need to enhance mobility between Europe and the Arab region, in particular through visas, in order to ease civil society exchanges.

Marc Schade-Poulsen outlined two challenges for Euro-Mediterranean civil society cooperation after the Arab Spring. First, the political identity of the Euro-Med has lost its relevance with civil society, not governments, now playing the main role in creating regional cooperation. Second, the cohesiveness in the Arab region has declined, as all countries have become more introspective and focused on domestic challenges. Despite this, cooperation is possible on two levels. There is an increasing case for asymmetrical cooperation between Arab countries on such issues as violence against women, political reform and human rights, with best-practices existing in the region that are of more relevance to civil society actors. At the same time, there is a growing number of issues, such as xenophobia, religion, gender and social and economic rights which are shared between European and Arab countries. The challenges for southern civil society in the foreseeable future are threefold: i) to deal with continued repressions, ii) to adapt to greater competition with political parties and trade union, and iii) to turn from a “force of protection” into a “force of proposition”.

Linda Säll discussed the issues of women’s rights in the region. She noted that while the Arab Spring revolutions had given new space for women, since then there had been a considerable backlash in terms of gender equality. Women participation in politics had declined dramatic in countries like Egypt and debates have been launched across the region on lowering the marriage age, reintroducing FGM and changing divorce law. In many cases, women groups have now to start over again, due to being association with former regimes. In this situation, women groups need support from the international community, including in terms of financial aid, capacity building and political support. Pressuring Nordic politicians is important, in particular because in some cases Nordic rhetoric on gender does not match action. Säll also raised the issue of conditioning aid in order to pressure governments on women’s rights and concluded that although democracy takes time to be established, this should not mean that the international community simply waits as things deteriorate.

Sari Varpama underlined the role of political parties and a functioning multi-party system in the consolidation of democracy. Parties are central in negotiating new democratic structures and Parliaments have the potential of being places of healing, as parties need to negotiate differences and make compromises. Depicting democracy as a western product is wrong, which can be seen amongst others by the high level of support for democracy in the Arab world. While democracy can never be exported, there is certainly a case for it to be supported Nordic models of multiparty governance and social dialogues can play a positive role in this respect. Outside support needs to be inclusive and should help create dialogue between different parties and actors. Varpama concluded by calling for long-term funding instruments required for the protracted transitions.

In his comments Sameh Fawzy argued that although civil society had been introduced in the 1990s in the Arab world, primordial ties continued to dominate and that the concept still had no real roots. He further observed several noteworthy trends with regards to civil society in the post-Arab Spring era: i) civil society still faced many restrictions and was considered with suspicion; ii) there had been a power shift away from civil society and syndicates to political parties; iii) institutionalized civil society had been weakened in comparison with non-institutionalized civil society, such as youth movements; iv) low politics issues have gained in importance compared with high politics; v) the focus of civil society had shifted to the local and communal level.

## **Conclusions**

Teija Tiilikainen thanked the audience on behalf of the organizers. Tuomo Melasuo reiterated in his concluding remarks that the democratic transitions in the region are a long-term process, but that there was no way of going back to the status quo ante. He also argued that the local and municipal dimensions would play an increasingly important role in regional politics in the future and that there was much that Nordic countries could learn from democratic transition processes in the Arab world. Finally, he highlighted the continuing relevance of the Euro-Mediterranean community in addressing common issues and problems in the transitions.