

Keynote Address by Foreign Minister Tuomioja at "Partnership in Transition: The Nordic Countries and the Arab Spring" Seminar in Helsinki on 14 March 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to have the opportunity to open this conference Partnership in Transition: The Nordic Countries and the Arab Spring. The on-going historic changes in the Arab World, and the concept of partnership, are topics of particular interest in today's world. Countries are more and more inter-linked to each other and cooperation is the only way to effectively respond to challenges in a globalized world.

I wish to give you a broad overview of the topic since I know that there are several experts coming to speak and discuss the theme in more detail in the upcoming sessions.

In my speech, I will concentrate on the partnership and the links between two seemingly different worlds, Nordic Countries and the Arab Countries. Furthermore, my aim is to explore the relationship between the Nordic experiences, deriving from the construction of our societies, and the present day challenges related to the democratic changes in the Arab countries. Thus I will make some observations on the similarities, differences and interaction between these two processes.

Let me first make a few conceptual notes on the presumed Nordic model, a common archetype, which can be promoted, and subsequently also perhaps duplicated.

It should be pointed out, that the Nordics did not invent the model by starting out to implement a common vision of society. It was rather visitors and observers from outside the Nordic countries who noticed that the Nordic countries began to have quite similar approaches in building their welfare states and who came up with the name the Nordic model for this. Only much later did the Nordic countries themselves start to use this term.

Today it makes sense to speak of a Nordic model when we take a holistic view and I wish to highlight certain values and features that Nordic people appreciate. This should of course not be taken as a depiction of the empirical Nordic reality, which still is very much carved out by each of the Nordic countries on their own, pursuing their own distinct set of policies and solutions to serve the best interests of their citizens.

However, our Nordic experiences could be relevant and informative also in the context of the Arab Spring. Some common building blocks are vital for the pursuit of democracy under any circumstances, in spite of the fact that all democratic processes are of course particular and unique.

The Nordic countries share many similar characteristics and common values. In comparison with the rest of the international community, we are known for our relatively equal and open societies, stable and functioning democracies, the emphasis placed on the rule of law, respect for nature and sustainable development, and the strong support for universal welfare services.

Nordic societies are perhaps best-known for their relative equality, both in terms of opportunities as well as distribution of wealth and income, but also not least when it comes to gender. Concrete, effective execution of the principle of non-discrimination, and the inclusion of all groups in the functioning of the society, are seen as enormous assets, contributing to our well-being and enhancing the perception of social justice, which is vital for the legitimacy of the political system.

Social equality and inclusion are just as important from an economic standpoint. Economic vitality requires trust, and trust can only be built upon mutual respect. It makes good economic sense to keep everybody onboard, participating and active. When the proportion of marginalized people exceeds a certain threshold, there is a risk that the system becomes dysfunctional. This is an accurate description of one of the social forces that gave rise to the uprisings first in Tunisia in December 2010, and then in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere.

In certain ways, the events of the Arab Spring resonate with the history of Finland. At the time of independence in 1917, Finnish society was characterized by large unemployment and poverty, which were related to a global economic depression resulting from the First World War. Economic inequality was stark, and there was a deep feeling of political disenfranchisement by a large segment of the population leading to a disastrous polarization of our society. The result was a cruel and bloody civil war that left deep wounds which took decades to heal.

What transformed Finland from a poor, fragmented and under-developed country into a stable, prosperous democracy was to a large extent the social reform programme that was launched after the civil war.

Women played prominent roles in exposing the social evils that had to be dealt with, and in finding the means by which to correct them. They were able to bring these issues up for discussion in the media but also as Parliamentarians. Women had gained the right to vote and the right to stand for election in 1906 as first in the world – largely thanks to the tireless efforts by the men and women activists in the women's rights movement.

When it comes to the setting up of the present welfare structures in the Nordic region, it began in the Scandinavian countries already in the thirties and gathered momentum after the Second World War, and leaped forward in the 1970s and 80s, by which time also Finland, originally lagging behind her Nordic neighbours, had also become firmly a member of the Nordic family in this respect as well.

The post- World War 2 decades were also the golden era for the development of the official Nordic cooperation. A few examples of the historical milestones of the cooperation include:

The establishment of the Nordic Council in 1952; the common labour market in 1954, the Passport Union in 1957; the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971, votes for Nordic citizens in local elections in 1976, the Nordic Language Convention in 1987, aiming at securing the possibility to use one's own (Nordic) language in contacts with the official institutions of the other Nordic countries and Nordic Social Convention (1994), providing for equal treatment in questions related to social security legislation. This means that the Nordic countries had established the kind of borderless citizens' community long before it became part of the EU.

One of the most important lessons that we have learned in the Nordic countries is that it is necessary to set up specific mechanisms that ensure the equality of opportunity for all social groups. These include the various ombudsmen and the tri-partite cooperation among the government, labor unions and the employers in social policy. Supporting women's participation in the political and economic life outside the home, as well as providing equal opportunities for education to everyone, should also be mentioned. Some of these mechanisms are being discussed also in the context of the democratic transitions in the Arab countries.

One of the biggest differences between the Nordic and the Arab experiences is clearly the time scope. The need for democratization and economic reform in the Arab countries is immediate, while the Nordic countries have built their democracies and welfare models over decades, if not centuries.

The 'Arab Spring' has lasted now for more than two years. On the one hand, it has brought and is bringing historic changes to the Middle East and North Africa. On the other hand, it has been a sobering experience for all.

It is important to remember the situation where the region found itself in December 2010 when the avalanche of popular protest became unleashed in Tunisia. In many countries, all meaningful efforts at political change had been suppressed for decades while social problems and tensions were steadily increasing.

In the aftermath of the revolutions, political systems and economies need to be rebuilt and a new democratic culture established. All this while people are engaged both in redefining their national identities and in overcoming poverty, unemployment and other social inequalities in their daily lives.

Against this background, it is not surprising that not all the goals set by the reformists have been achieved within the first 24 months. Social reform on the scale that the Arab countries are seeking to achieve is a long, painstaking and often painful process without quick fixes or fast returns.

The conflict in Syria is a horrific example of a transition process gone wrong. What began as a peaceful call for reform turned very soon into a prolonged and increasingly violent conflict. We do not know how long it will still take before the Syrian people can leave this behind and start reconstructing their lives and their country. It is obvious, however, that when this day comes, they will need strong help from the international community, also from the Nordic countries.

Some things can and should be done immediately. Humanitarian assistance is self-evident, as are the efforts in the political arena to bring the conflict to a speedy end. At the same time, we can help in laying the ground-work for the new, post-conflict Syria. One focus of the Nordic contribution could be helping the Syrians construct and empower a well-functioning civil society as a central element of a democratic society.

The Arab countries continue to face many challenges. At the same time, it also pays to recall all the positive changes that have taken place as a result of the Arab Spring:

In Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Jordan, elections have been held that have accurately reflected the preferences of the electorate. Several countries have reformed their Constitutions entirely or in part. The freedom of assembly and the freedom of expression can be exercised to an unprecedented degree in several countries. The number of new political parties established in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere is proof of the expansion of political space. Cooperation with the outside world in sensitive areas such as constitutional reform and the monitoring of elections has also widened.

Coming back to the Nordic model, I think one can conclude that it has served its citizens well, blending security and continuity with flexibility and a capacity to adjust and re-learn. The inclusive and universal nature of the publicly funded social services aims at keeping everybody on-board, while the education system provides the population with the necessary knowledge and skills to prosper even in the midst of the increasing global competition.

Negotiation, dialogue and a spirit of compromise are essential to getting things done. People are motivated to accept difficult reforms only if they feel that they are included in the decision-making process and are united on the need for change. This is true especially when setting up the basic elements of the political system, such as Constitutions, but also when it comes to more practical questions related to e.g. reforming the economy. This is the basic motivation for the pursuit of consensus, which is a basic tenet in the Nordic political culture. While often tedious and time-consuming, it is effective in producing a sense of ownership and thus social stability.

Notwithstanding the relative success of our democracies and the welfare models so far, the Nordic countries are facing several big challenges in the future. How shall the comprehensive welfare system be financed when the population is growing older and the need for different services will increase? How to maintain the high employment levels that the social system requires in the face of fierce competition in particular from the rising economies? And how to stop xenophobia and unhealthy nationalism that are on the rise in some parts of the society?

These are relevant questions also for the future direction of the Arab Spring, as the citizens expect living conditions to improve at pace with the process of democratization.

Finns and other Nordic populations are aging. In the Arab World, however, it is the energy of the young people that has burst through. The reforms undertaken in the Arab countries should focus on channelling this energy into making civil societies vibrant; setting up genuinely participatory political decision-making processes at all levels of the society; and creating equitable economies where especially the youth can find decent employment.

The same argument can be made also when it comes to women. It is impossible to create a prosperous and stable society while placing constraints on the contributions that one half of its members are allowed to make. The social history of Finland is a case in point as described earlier. Moreover, international human rights law affirms that women have the same rights as men irrespective of history, culture or social conditions.

To summarize, the crucial building blocks of the Nordic societies are inclusion and equality; the prioritization of education and knowledge for all, universal solidarity and social security, which allow for the society to adapt to changing conditions, and the constant emphasis on dialogue and consensus. The context and the conditions of the Arab Spring are of course completely different, but I hope that our experience can be of some inspiration when constructing the path forward.

It is against this background that Finland has decided to focus our support to the transitions in the Arab countries on the promotion of respect for human rights and democratic governance, the rule of law, non-discrimination and gender equality. I note with satisfaction that many others in the international community have come to the same conclusion.

The Finnish contribution to the democratic transitions in the partner countries comes largely in the form of expertise, education and capacity-building. In terms of financial resources, it amounts to some 42 million euros in 2012-2017.

From a European perspective, stability and prosperity also in our Southern neighbourhood is vital for our own well-being. While we as partners to the Arab countries can and should be active agents for positive

change, our proper role is a supporting one. It is the people of the Arab countries themselves who should decide where their future lies. This is the core message of the Arab Spring

I believe the greatest strength of the Nordic Countries lies in our ability to listen to our partners and engage in a genuinely equal partnership. Some of the challenges faced by the Arab societies today are the same that other countries have had to deal with in the past or are facing right now.

Within the remit of the United Nations, Finland has vested significant efforts into developing a global normative framework for mediation together with Turkey. Our two countries have established a Group of Friends of Mediation, encompassing 43 member states and organizations, and formulating the UN Secretary General's Guidance for Effective Mediation. We believe this initiative can have a significant impact on preventing future serious human rights abuses and promoting democracy world-wide.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The obstacles to overcome in creating democratic political systems and healthy, equitable economies in the countries of the Arab Spring are indeed great. However, this should not be allowed to obscure the unprecedented opportunity for comprehensive positive change that the Arab Spring provides for North Africa and the Middle East, and indeed the global community as a whole.

This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. As for me, I remain optimistic and believe that the incredible courage, determination and energy shown by the people in the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring will gain them the safe, dignified and prosperous future that is their right.

Dialogue between the Nordic countries and our partners in the Arab Countries is essential as the means by which we can share experiences and search for solutions together. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to the organisers of this conference for providing us that opportunity. I look forward to an intense exchange of ideas that will guide and inspire us as we deepen the partnership between the Nordic countries and the Arab World.

Thank you.