

Democracy and participation in the face of global changes

The role of citizenship and human rights education

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Statement by May Elmahdi

Mayadin al-Tahrir (Egypt/Germany)

I am here today to discuss with you the challenges and the potentials of political participation and democracy in the Arab world in relation to regional, domestic and global developments.

But before starting diagnosing these challenges, I would like to make a fast flashback, as we are gathering today after roughly one and half year are gone since the first mass revolution in the twenty one century.

The beginning of the uprising in Tunisia marks the beginning of different uprisings and turmoil, not only in the Arab world, but also in the United States of America, in Europe, from Russia to Spain, to Azerbaijan.

Not only that; the Arab spring marks as well a new beginning of changing our way of thinking about the Arab world and dealing with it. It has changed our perception of the possibilities of mobilization, political participation and transformation even in authoritarian political systems.

We are gathering today to discuss the opportunities of democracy and participation in the wake of the economic, social and political turmoils the world has witnessed in the last two years. And I am sure we are seeing every protest, every demonstration and even every petition in a new light and with a new approach today.

The question, scientific researcher and observer were occupied with in the last century, was why the Arabic world was so democracy-resistant. This presumption has prevented them from seeing significant changes and transformations processes on the micro-level and has prevented them from watching out and preparing themselves for new challenges.

Before the Tunisian revolution, there were mass demonstration in the small City called Gafsa in 2008, that were brutally crack downed, but this event was rarely covered by the media and the scientific researchers.

Egypt has witnessed more than 600 strikes in the year 2008 alone. There were various demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes. If we just screen the activities of a sole social movement such as the so called “April 6” in Egypt, we will identify a large scale of a resistant spirits and activities of transformation, which we can’t compare with any other movements in the democratic political systems.

The wrong approach was driven by two wrong presumptions:

The first one was the belief that democracy - according to the western liberal model - is the sole result of a transformation process, and if this was not the case, we were not seeing the value and the potential of the such a transformation act or process.

The second presumption was that Islamic social movements were the strongest civil actors in these countries and the only actors able to mobilize and to make a change within authoritarian regimes.

This second presumption has distracted observers from understanding other, much more important civil political actors and has led some researchers to conclude, that the Arab world with its Islamic social movements is “the locus of ugly social movements”, as Joel Beinin was criticising the western approach.

And this presumption could also not bear up against the outbreak of the uprisings in the Arab world, as we saw in Tunisia: the forerunner in the Tunisian revolution were the unions of lawyers, journalists and young and the civic opponents.

In Egypt the Muslim Brothers declared from the beginning that they will not join the revolution and only after realizing the extent of the demonstrations they went to the street, also on the basis of rational choice calculation. But the fact is that the mobilization was also successful without them.

I apologize for this long critical introduction, but I think we have to diagnose the mistakes of these perceptions and approaches in the last years, if we are going to approach again this phenomenon and examine the challenges of participation and democracy in the Arab world today.

If we want to debate the challenges of democracy and of political participation in the Arab world, we have to first of all free ourselves from schemes and legal prejudices and secondly we have to identify the differences of the Arab countries.

Let us start with the challenges in Bahrain:

The challenges in Bahrain are related to geo-strategical issues. The democracy battle is not only against the Khalifa clan, but against regional and hegemonic powers. And here the battle of civil forces against the major powers is bound to fail.

The democracy battle in Syria as well has turned out from a civil democracy process to a battlefield between Sunnite and Shiite tendencies in the region and between the hegemonic camps in the Security Council of the United Nations.

In Egypt the battle against the old regime led to a split into three camps: the supporters of the civil state, the supporters of secular state and the proponents of the Islamic states. The battle inside the revolutionary camp has led to confusion and wearing down the democracy endeavurers and spirit.

In Libya, a country with material resources and a rough consensus to establish an Islamic state, we are witnessing another threat: a militant fight and claims for independency in different parts of the country.

Tunisia, where the forerunners of the Arab uprising were inflamed and inspired the civil forces of the Arab spring, we witness a democracy transformation on the base of secular constitutional frameworks that were founded by the Tunisian dictators who saw in the Islamic power forces the biggest threat. But the threat of ideology and the violence of the extremist Islamists are still casting a shadow on the democratic process.

And all these issues are interconnected with the financial crisis, the decline of economic growth in the Arab countries as a result of the instability and the political uncertainty.

On the micro-level we find a lack of political skills and competences of the young revolutionary power forces and civil actors and this lack of resources and political opportunities is a big obstacle.

The poverty in these countries, the extent of illiteracy of the population are further problems.

The poverty, the unemployment and the grievance were actually catalysts of the revolutions, but they could also be an obstacle, as we see in the outcomes of the Egyptian presidential election, where a large part of the people voted for the old regime in order to have stability that they considered not guaranteed with the emergence of Islamic forces. Another reason was the fear of Islamic fascism.

When we watch the challenges and the developments in the Arab world, I think we can't be too optimistic, but I think we shouldn't be too pessimistic as well.

I think you have to be realistic and cautious. We have to recognise the threats and the possibilities as well. We have to identify the domestic, regional and the global challenges, but also their dynamics and potentials and the threats that come with it.

We have to admit from my point of view that democratic transformation is not an ending process. And we have to be aware, even if we are seeing democracy as an outcome of a transformation process, that we can't measure it according to a liberal western norm, because this would exclude the biggest part of the world.

We have as well to support the small civil power forces and not to underestimate the dynamical power of civil societies and of the small transformation processes, which are occurring step by step. And we have first of all to see the diversity of the Arab world and the Arab societies.

I think the biggest challenge in the Arab world is not to change the regimes but to guarantee the frameworks, the structures and the culture for democracy and freedom. And political forces and the institutional structures can not and should not be the only guarantee of that, but the people, who have the awareness of democratic values and norms, who can protect these values in a case of a coup or legal institutional manoeuvres.

And that is our role as NGOS and a part of civil forces, to achieve this awareness in order to keep the civil society and the people awake for their rights and responsibilities.