

'Transition to Democracy' Conference

1–5 June 2011, Cairo

The study of the process of democratisation has been through many stages, varying in accordance with the given study's subject of interest. In the past twenty years the main focus has been the social and political changes in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. Do the social protests and political changes in the North African countries signal a new stage in the study of democratic systems and political culture?

After thirty years of autocratic rule, Egypt, inspired by the success of the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, experienced a popular revolt in the beginning of 2011. The protests were motivated by popular demands for such values as freedom, greater social justice, transparency, accountability, and economic security.

The historic events that the Mediterranean region has experienced in recent months, in particular in Tunisia and Egypt, represent an important challenge for a number of civic organisations, such as the Anna Lindh Foundation, an institution of intercultural dialogue in the region. The Anna Lindh Foundation, co-financed by the European Union, proved to be very flexible and prompt in reacting to the unexpected historical shifts in Egypt and Tunisia. The foundation launched an initiative that puts forth a comprehensive programme of activities developed in 2011 and addresses issues related to intercultural dialogue and democracy through its National Networks. The initiative, called *Believe in Dialogue, Act for Citizenship*, is primarily aimed at the exchange of good practices and fostering debate about citizenship and democracy among cultural operators, non-governmental organisations, media, and young activists at the Euro-Med level, but also at interacting with the local community by organising parallel events in universities and trade unions and media operators.

In the framework of these activities the foundation organised the 'Regional Training Seminar on Intercultural Dialogue and Social Change in Egypt', which took place from 2 to 5 June in Cairo. The main goal was to bring together representatives of civil society organisations in the Arab world to reflect upon the recent developments in the region from an intercultural perspective, while strengthening their knowledge and skills to develop the capacity of their organisations as civil society actors in the democratic and social transition and to act as multipliers on the local and international levels. Special attention was paid to the challenges of youth leadership and to the use of social media and new technologies in information and communication. The seminar brought together fifty civil society activists together with heads of the Arab network from seven different countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia.

The first day of the seminar was devoted mainly to sharing the experiences of participants from different countries about their work in NGO and other voluntary groups in their specific national context. Primary attention was paid to their possible role in the ongoing social and political transformation, especially as transmitters, for instance, of civic culture and democratic principles. The discussions were followed by practical simulation activity.

The second day was more theoretical. The morning session was dedicated to the role of mass media in the political and social changes and the possibilities of their use in the area civic participation. It is important to note that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were both accompanied by intense media coverage and unprecedented use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube), for example, to organise the demonstration gatherings. This has opened up space for greater and more in-

clusive contributions and for wider and deeper scrutiny by citizens and outside observers. In the afternoon panel discussion four invited speakers presented their views on the role of civil society in the democratisation process. Markéta Sedláčková from the Institute of Sociology of Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic presented the theoretical frame of the democratisation process and described the transformation process in the Czech Republic in the last twenty years. The General Director of the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, Azza Soliman, gave a very passionate speech stressing the need to overcome old habits—not only concerning women—and to establish a new and open mindset to create an open society. The third speaker, Ahmed Naguib, an activist and member of the Egyptian revolution steering committee, opined that democracy should not be viewed as an alien element in Arabic countries, as, for example, both Tunisia and Egypt have their own history of civil society. Although he admitted that the starting economic and political situation in the country is very difficult, he encouraged the participants not to let anyone tell them that their country is not yet ready for democracy. At the close of the panel Emel Kurma, the Executive Director of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Turkey, presented an assessment of the contributions of the participants and the results of some activities implemented by the trainers during the first day of the training devoted to the Citizenship through Intercultural Dialogue. The ensuing discussion raised a question about the dangers of just a 'formal democracy', such as the problem of simply overthrowing the icons of the old regime but not of the regime itself. The panel showed that democracy and civil society are not just theoretical concepts for the participants but that they have a very clear vision of how to put these concepts into practice, despite the many challenges of the current economic, political and so-

cial situation in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries.

The Czech embassy in Cairo decided to take an initiative in the seminar. Besides the participation of a Czech expert on democratic transition in the panel session, the Embassy hosted the closing ceremony, where certificates were handed out, in the presence of the Executive Director of ALF, the Deputy Head of the EU Delegation, and the Chief of Cabinet of the Secretary General's Office. The Czech ambassador, Pavel Kafka, gave a speech recalling the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic, which took place more than twenty years ago, and compared it to the ongoing events in Egypt in terms of the same hopes, demands, and the longing of the people for freedom and justice.

This seminar organised by the Anna Lindh Foundation is not an isolated example of such a thematically oriented conference. For example, at the same time, on the 5 and 6 of June, Cairo hosted an international forum on 'Pathways of Democratic Transitions: International Experiences, Lessons Learnt and the Road Ahead'. The forum was organised by the United Nations Development Programme and the inaugural speech was given by His Excellency the Prime Minister of Egypt Essam Sharaf. The purpose of the two-day forum was to create a platform for the exchange of experiences and knowledge of countries that have transitioned to democracy and particularly for sharing the lessons learnt from Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia, to help enrich the current debate on democracy and development in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Arab region. The forum provided a platform for sharing the comparable experiences of those who led transitions in their own countries and input from experts on transition.

It must be admitted that the political system in Egypt and other adjacent countries remains fragile and there is always the

possibility that the noble goals of the demonstrators will be overshadowed by a partisan fight for power in a post-Mubarak republic. But with this in mind I think that such events that bring together policy makers, political parties, civil society actors,

scientists, and other experts from different countries can be a means of supporting the process of democratisation in the region.

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