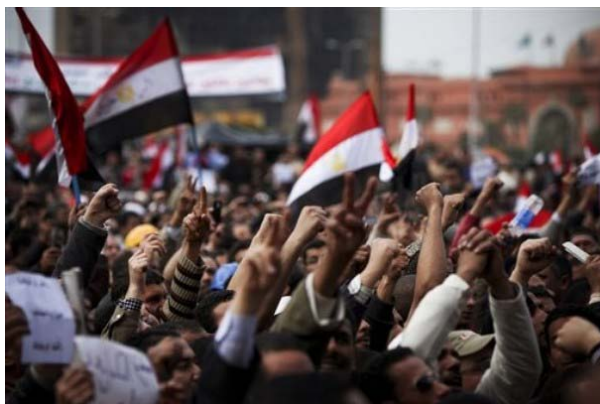IN FOCUS

Ideas Can Also Kill:
A Way Forward for Human Rights Grantmakers in an Era of Arab Transformation[1]

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In the first months of 2011, bullets fired by police and/or army forces in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria killed thousands of people as they struggled to overthrow their despotic regimes.

Behind the scenes of this bloodbath, long-standing theories and beliefs that were fundamental in prolonging the lifespan of these collapsing regimes have also crumbled. In this context, grantmakers and the international community need to revise the ideological underpinnings and strategies that have prevailed until now.

The **first** of these theories claimed that *authoritarian rulers were the guarantors of stability* throughout the region. Nonetheless, the uprisings demonstrated how the systematic, decades-long eradication of the rule of law rather strengthened the elements of chaos in these nations. It was these regimes that institutionalized the seeds of instability by blocking all possible paths for reform from within, and by deploying instead armed gangs of supporters and thugs prepared to punish dissenting voices outside any legal framework.

The **second** theory held that *Islamists were the sole alternative to authoritarian regimes* in the region. This theory was indeed well sold to the international community and has added years to

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[1] This article is an edited version of the author's introduction of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies' annual human rights report on the Arab region: *Roots of Unrest*. To read the original version, please visit: http://www.cihrs.org/English/NewsSystem/Articles/2825.aspx.

these regimes' lives. Nonetheless, the liberal slogans demanding freedom, dignity and justice that dominated the uprisings have discredited this theory. Islamists did participate, but did not emerge as the "alternative" in these revolutions, nor do they possess the institutional capacity and basis to be the alternative, at least in the foreseeable future.

The **third** theory, stemming from an implicitly racist belief, claimed that *democracy and civil and political rights, as opposed to economic and social rights, were not a priority for peoples of the region*. The revolutions have categorically removed any basis for this belief. The protestors in Tunisia, whose uprisings stemmed from social grievances, quickly began voicing explicitly political demands that led to the toppling of the regime; the Egyptian revolution, meanwhile, was a political occasion par excellence, and the political target was crystal clear: the police state. Despite different political contexts, the progression of events has not differed significantly in other countries; "the people want to topple the regime" is the slogan that has unified revolutionaries in the Arab world.

The **fourth** theory stated that *the religion of the majority-Islam-is incompatible with democratic values and human rights*. Based on this theory, democracy and human rights advocates in the region were urged to reconcile themselves to this "objective fact" and moderate their goals and demands accordingly. They were told to accept the principle of cultural relativity over the universality of human rights. Nonetheless, on January 25, Egyptians gave an unequivocal response with their blood. It was summed up by a regular Egyptian citizen on CNN in the early days of the revolution: "We only want the same rights you have."

The **fifth** theory posited that *human rights were an issue of an elite group in this region*, of concern only to a handful of out-of-touch liberals and secularists who belonged to human rights organizations that survived on funding from outside their societies. This theory disregarded the thousands of daily complaints received by human rights groups from the poorest and least educated segments of society, many of which were written in halting, broken prose. The definitive response to this theory, however, came from the millions of people from different classes who took to the streets and who proved the universality of human rights aspirations.

The proceedings of the year 2011 have shown that these theories were always dead, but waited to be buried under the feet of revolting peoples demanding freedom, equality and dignity. Peoples in the Arab region have been fighting not only their most obvious enemies, but unwittingly the conventional theories that have reinforced authoritarianism over the years. The international

community and donors must, first and foremost, take a clear stand in support of Arab peoples' legitimate claims and consequently evaluate the effectiveness of their funding policies and strategies in the region in accordance to these claims – the claims of local actors – and not in accordance with failed notions and theories. For a more detailed discussion on the role of the grantmaking community, please see Chapter 4, *The Logics of the Donor Community,* from the report entitled *Democratic Change in the Arab Region – State Policy and the Dynamics of Civil Society:* *http://www.scribd.com/full/59127297?access_key=key-2kvxq3fz0wim07987e8c.*

Resources for Funders:

- Read Bahey eldin Hassan's complete introduction of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies' annual human rights report on the Arab region: *Roots of Unrest*: http://www.cihrs.org/English/NewsSystem/Articles/2825.aspx

- Read the report: *Democratic Change in the Arab Region – State Policy and the Dynamics of Civil Society: http://www.scribd.com/full/59127297?access_key=key-2kvxq3fz0wim07987e8c.*

- Listen to the audio recording of IHRFG's telebriefing, *Political Earthquakes in the Arab region,* and review the complete notes of the telebriefing, available in the member area of the IHRFG website: http://www.ihrfg.org/member-area.

- Review the Arab Human Development Reports (2002-2009): http://www.arab-hdr.org/reports/regionalarab.aspx.

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