

IN FOCUS
*Political Earthquakes in the Arab Region:
Implications for Human Rights, Peace, and Security Funders*

Synopsis from IHRFG and PSFG's Telebriefing, February 23, 2011

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In the past several weeks, an unprecedented wave of popular uprisings has swept the Middle East. Amid economic decline, rampant corruption, and oppressive rule, these uprisings have ended the 23-year reign of Tunisian dictator, Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, toppled the autocratic regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, threatened to overthrow the 41-year rule of Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, and stirred calls for democratic reform, social justice and human rights elsewhere in the Middle East -- a region that, more than most, has long resisted democracy and the rule of law. IHRFG and PSFG recently held a tele-briefing to discuss some key questions arising out of this recent upheaval.



Photo Credit: Reid Report

Judy Barsalou, Representative of the Ford Foundation in the Middle East and North Africa (based in Cairo), and Hanny Megally, Vice-President for Programs with the International Center for Transitional Justice joined us for an insightful discussion:

How will these challenges to entrenched authoritarian rule play out and what are the implications for broader issues of peace and security?

Civil Society

Hanny: The spark of revolution has touched people's imaginations and has begun to spread like wild fire across this region, which has many similarities in language, culture, and above all, a sense of suffering under oppressive regimes. There has been a blurring between monarchies and republics, with sons succeeding fathers. This is now not acceptable as people demand more substantial changes in power structures. Additionally, in the 2009 Arab Human Development Report, the major grievances were unemployment, social inequality, repression, and corruption, which are all systemic across the region. People are now focusing on changing long-standing systems across the region. Tunisia and Egypt have served as encouragement, but the recent events in Libya and Bahrain have been very discouraging and have had a negative impact on peoples' morale.

At the same time, it is important not to over-emphasize similarities across the countries because they are operating in very different contexts. In Bahrain, for example, there have been some reforms, with the older generations seeking further reforms, while the youth is demanding an end to monarchy. In Yemen, demonstrators in the street were able to obtain quick promises that there will be no succession to the throne.

Judy: The uprisings in the Arab world have displayed the important role of youth leaders. This reflects, in part, the fact that the Arab region has the highest percentage of people under the age of 15 of any region in the world, along with rising rates of university enrollment and youth unemployment. In Egypt particularly, an estimated 29% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 29 but some 31% are unemployed. This has resulted in situations where young people are increasingly feeling like they are leading lives without any future. We now see the emergence of savvy, well-organized,

and peaceful youth leaders. The youth leadership has finally come to the forefront after working in the margins for a long time. The biggest fear now in Egypt is that the people's demands will be ignored by security forces and/or political actors. There are, however, exciting new developments with the formation of coalitions and trade unions in a region where civil society has historically been heavily regulated and suppressed. While there is an urgent need to transform governing systems, there is a real hunger at the street level for economic and social rights. In a country with severe poverty, civil unrest may continue due to failing economic systems.

A next step is also to rectify the imbalance of power between the security sector and military on the one hand, and civil society, on the other. There is a strong surge now in civic engagement, but we are at the very beginning of a transformation process that will take years and even decades, with the outcomes uncertain. A sign of the incomplete process is the continuing fear of the "independent" press in Cairo to fully report on the ongoing wave of labor strikes in Egypt.

Accountability, Transparency, and Corruption:

Judy: The Ford Foundation is now focusing on building civil society skills to analyze government budgets and hold the government accountable. Moving forward, a big question is not just on how to prevent corruption on such a large scale but also how to make governmental operations and spending more transparent and accountable.

These societies have not yet fully focused on transitional justice, which can take many different forms, but we expect growing interest over time. As such, we need to enable local actors to evaluate different methods for promoting transitional justice that are suitable for each context. There has been an effort to erase history in these countries, and processes need to be put into place to recover lost memories and history. With regard to accountability, many people in the region feel that ministers of interiors, among others, should be held accountable just as much as heads of state, because they are viewed among the biggest offenders of human rights.

Hanny: There needs to be transparency in national budgets so that civil society is aware of where national funds are going. With regard to accountability, in Tunisia and Egypt there have been immediate efforts to investigate corruption and recent violations, and to discuss reforms. However, in Egypt, the situation is still murky. From what I have heard here in Cairo, the military does not want to take too many actions until power is handed to a civilian government in six months or so Egyptians say there is an immediate need for security sector reform prior to the discussion of accountability in Egypt.

What role can funders play in efforts to advance human rights, peace, and security?

Judy: Funders should be cautious as there is potential for flooding groups with too much money and diverting their work in the process. Funders should stay coordinated, work together, and fund in a smart way, taking into consideration the capacities of civil society groups. This is a difficult part of the world in which to operate. If donors do not have prior experience working in the Middle East, they might work from their strengths and focus on funding opportunities in the United States and Europe. For example, funders can grasp this opportunity to fund an active debate in the Global North around policy-making towards the Middle East. In addition, funders could examine the role of the media in the United States as it relates to the region. For example, there is limited access to Al-Jazeera in the United States, which provided the widest coverage of the events in the Arab region (noting, however, that al Jazeera's coverage was also compromised by inter-Arab politics). It is important to take time to think through funding strategies.

Hanny: Tunisia and Egypt took everyone by surprise. Civil society groups had to rework programs and figure out how to cope with emerging demands and activities. This has been problematic (especially when efficiency is important) where funds are earmarked. As a result, there need to be new strategies for working with donors. For example, some funders' processes may require 3-6 months for review and approval of grant proposals, while those working on the ground need funds within days or weeks. Setting up "emergency funds" are viable possibilities to this end.

Additionally, it is a difficult part of the world for funders given the controls on the freedom of association. Therefore, it is important to listen, visit, assess, and to keep in touch with people who have been on the ground for years. The issues now coming to the forefront are security sector reform and accountability. As a donor community, we need to think about

immediate projects as well as medium and long-term projects. We need to protect human rights defenders on the front-lines. Some options are to work through intermediary institutions or perhaps create a consortium of donors that could create new procedures to expedite the grantmaking process.

For more information or to learn more:

- 1) Listen to an audio recording and review the complete notes of the telebriefing, available in the member area of the IHRFG website: <http://www.ihrfg.org/member-area>.
- 2) Review the Arab Human Development Reports (2002-2009): <http://www.arab-hdr.org/reports/regionalarab.aspx>
- 3) "Let Mubarak Go": *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2011:
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/18/let_mubarak_go
- 4) "Looking Dictators in the Pocketbook": *Washington Post*, February 19, 2011:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/18/AR2011021805487.html>