

Funder Learning Visit to the Arab Region Tunis 8-10 May 2012

The Story of Revolt and Movement-Building in MENA

Through personal testimonies and visual media, human rights defenders from the region shared their experiences of building a movement for change.

Speakers:

- **Soha Abdelaty**, Deputy Director, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
- **Elham Saudi**, Director, Lawyers for Justice in Libya

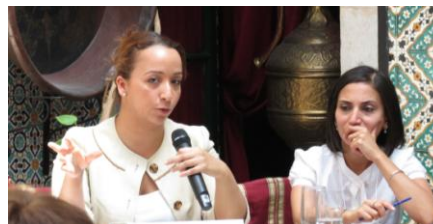
Moderator:

- **Shalini Nataraj**, Vice-President for Programs, Global Fund for Women

Soha Abdelaty began by speaking about how, in 2005, Hosni Mubarak put forward amendments to the Egyptian constitution regarding elections. Civil society groups boycotted the referendum and the Mubarak regime responded by hiring thugs who sexually assaulted some of the women. In this instance, the International media was present, but the regime didn't seem to care. We didn't think this type of situation would ever happen again.

Six years later, we are working on a similar case of sexual assault by the state. In March 2011, the Egyptian military arrested 17 women and other protesters at demonstrators in Tahrir square. The arrested women have said that the virgins among them were all subjected to virginity testing in an open space by a military doctor.

Mubarak's tactics and violations are still institutional and she remains cautiously optimistic. Ms. Abdelaty never thought she'd see Mubarak resign in response to people taking to the streets.



December 2004 saw the first anti-Mubarak demonstration in Egypt. There had been previous protests, but they were focused against United States foreign policy or against Israel. This change, from focusing on external issues to internal issues, was very significant. A group of largely apathetic young Egyptians formed the April 6th movement. From 2007 onward, it became apparent that there were more than just a few hundred demonstrators who utilized unconventional weapons, such as social media.

One incident that garnered a lot of attention was the killing of a man who was beaten by security forces in front of bystanders. Social media played a big role in bringing this to light by circulating before and after photos quickly.

Ms. Abdelaty feels as though letting the military take control over the transitional phase was a great mistake. Currently all of her work is reactionary - monitoring and documenting military

abuses. Egyptians didn't know that much about the military before the revolution in 2011. In just one year, 12,000 citizens stood trial by tribunal. Not one single military officer has yet been found accountable.

On the positive side, Egypt has had some free and fair elections. There is an executive (Supreme Council for Armed Forces), and legislative and judicial processes. This is a start for a balance of powers, but they need to be institutionalized.

If the governing body of Egypt has functioning institutions and proper oversight, the more extreme Islamist suggestions will not become law. There is a need to reach out to female constituencies on the ground that voted for the Muslim Brotherhood and ensure that they don't support setbacks in women's rights.

There is also a need for reform of state institutions with result based accountability. Reform of the judiciary needs attention, which is made clear by the fact that in all of the investigations led by the prosecutors office, not 1 military person has been found accountable for all of the violence.

They brought both the 2005 and 2011 cases of sexual assault to the prosecutor's office. The 2011 case went to military tribunal, yet even with lots of evidence and 4 eyewitnesses, no one was found accountable.

Elham Saudi spoke about three specific turning points in Muammar Gaddafi's rule, all of which impacted the people of Libya.

- April 7, 1976: Gaddafi started university killings. People were forced to watch the hangings of dissidents on university campuses. Also, Libyans living outside of Libya were targeted and killed.
- June 26, 1984: Killing of Sadik. In the midst of a comedy show, Gaddafi televised the killing of a young activist who had attempted to depose him. He was hung at sunset in Benghazi public stadium on national television.
- 1996: Abu Salim prison massacre. Abu Salim was the main prison in Tripoli where political dissidents were taken (including a lot of Islamists). Many prisoners died of malnutrition and various illnesses. The prisoners rose up and demanded that ill persons be taken to the hospital, sparking an altercation between prison guards and prisoners. Following a negotiation, the prison agreed that ill prisoners would be taken to the hospital. Instead, everyone on the bus to the hospital was killed. Other prisoners were brought into the courtyard and killed by snipers. 1,270 people were killed. For years, the massacre wasn't made public and Libyans didn't know what happened, thinking that their loved ones were still living in prison.

February 15th, 2011: Gaddafi went to Benghazi and pre-empted revolution by arresting all those he saw as threatening or revolutionary, including a lawyer representing the families of victims of the Abu Salim massacre. In response, all of the judges and lawyers went to the streets to

demand his release. The lawyer was released the following day, but 153 people were killed in the square. Protests then broke out in Tripoli and Misurata. Three points about the revolution:

- 1) The revolution belonged to the Libyan diaspora as much as to those in Libya
- 2) Lawyers were some of the leaders of the revolution. Dentists were actually the number one profession among the rebels
- 3) It was different than Egypt or Tunisia, Libya didn't have institutions or civil society

Many members of the diaspora went to fight in Libya (even if had never been to Libya before). As many Libyan lawyers had no knowledge of international law or human rights law, they brought lawyers out of Libya for training and then sent back to investigate and report on the situation. In order to communicate with each other, they would draft an email and save in the draft folder and then ask others to log in to read it.

Facts about Libya:

- Libya has a small population so transmitting information is relatively easy. The drawback of this is that everyone knows everyone else, so they know who supported Gaddafi and it will be harder to forgive.
- Young population – courageous, reckless. 70% of the population was born under Gaddafi regime.
- Libya has lots of natural resources: tourism (longest coast on Mediterranean), agriculture, gas
- There is no public transportation system and no systematic healthcare.

Key issues in Libya currently are: legal reform, elections, long history of torture, sexual violence during conflict

Recently passed laws:

- Law against the glorification of a dictator (One cannot speak positively about Gaddafi and cannot criticize the revolution)
- Total amnesty for anything done in the name of making revolution a success

Discussion

Q: Do you have one “don’t” do this and one “do” do this for funders?

Please, don't rush to fund. Libya has had no civil society in 60 years. NGOs are only just starting to crop up now. The worst thing that could happen would be for Libya to be flooded with money. Funding must be responsible, and must be done with proper due diligence.

In Libya, you see the same faces at all human rights conferences and workshops. We need to engage with local NGOs that aren't at these conferences. A lot of money to date has been distributed from the top down. More attention must be given to bottom up work.

Q: How can we support women's rights in the region?

In the collective thinking of the Egyptian population, women's rights are mixed with Mrs. Mubarak, and were utilized by the dictatorship to manipulate the regime's image. One reaction from the population was to remove women's rights in order to get rid of the regime. Ms. Abdelaty does not think that the Mubarak regime achieved much in terms of women's rights. Her organization had great issues with the quota system. The government would say that it was able to push down maternal mortality rates, but this is only true in Cairo, and rates are still high across Egypt. The government launched a huge program to combat female circumcision, but the numbers are still quite high, as it is a culturally embedded practice. Instituting new policies will not affect change. Work must be done with women on the ground.

Libya is a country where everything needs to be restarted from scratch. There is a misconception in Libya that women had rights because Gaddafi had female bodyguards. Libya is a very culturally conservative society. People are fed up with people being told that Islam is negative force, and there is danger in politicizing Islam. Religion has helped to keep communities together, and so one shouldn't approach women's rights from position of criticizing faith or Islam. Women first started wearing hijabs to distinguish themselves from Gaddafi's bodyguards. Gaddafi banned beards, so men grew beards in protest, not for religious reasons. You must look beyond the image. 60% of Libyan university graduates are women.

Q: Advice for those on the outside in supporting higher education in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia?
Role of universities in the next generation of human rights activists?

Regionalism is an issue in Libya. Politically, Gaddafi disenfranchised the east. There is a very strong movement for the creation of an autonomous state in the east and a movement for decentralization across the whole country. Libya is comprised of 6 million people spread over a large area. All of these divides resulted from Gaddafi's propaganda. Revolutionary studies is central to the current curriculum, but the entire educational system and curriculum needs restructuring. For example, teachers still lead students in singing Gaddafi anthems, because that's all they know. Libya does have a large population of younger generations and it is encouraging to see student-led movements.

Comment: It is important for donors not to think that one project is going to solve all of the problems. Instead, think about specific activities that might be of support, coordination is key. This does not mean forming a grand plan together, but identify one piece to work together on.