

**From Revolution to Democracy:  
Lessons for Political Transitions in the Middle East and North Africa**

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**Transitions Across the MENA Region**

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and in different phases of possible regime change. Tunisia and Egypt are already in transitions. They are heading towards elections and writing constitutions. Meanwhile there is active armed rebellion in Libya and active uprisings in Yemen and Syria. In Libya it is likely that there will be regime change and in Yemen and Syria as well. In Bahrain the rebellion has been put down but may not be over.

A few other governments are trying to buy off calls for change. Saudi Arabia is doing this financially. The leaders in Morocco and Jordan are trying to give political change from above. However, this idea has almost completely lost credibility. Both countries have different amounts of legitimacy from their people. However, they promised reforms ten years ago. People were more hopeful then than they are now.

Egypt is the pivotal state regarding successful transitions to democracy because of its role as a regional leader. Egypt is moving into a political transition with a rapid time table and elections in the fall. followed by a new constitution. Tunisia's transition is a little slower but is still moving rapidly.

**Egypt's Transition**

Egypt's process could be undermined by lagging problems, some of which are being discussed and some are not. The Economy is a very important issue. Egypt needs Economic reform and it needs the wealth to be shared equally. President's Hosni Mubarak's plan was for free market reform and while it did have some successes, those gains were not shared equally across the population. There is no new economic plan and without one, Egypt's progress may slow or reverse. Security service reform is another key

area. Egypt and Tunisia have both started this process by abolishing some of the worst bodies. However what is needed is a more thorough reform process.

### **Sectarian Violence**

There is also the Issue of sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians. About 10% of the population is Christian. The reminder is almost entirely Sunni Muslims. During the revolution there was a sense of solidarity. Different religions and classes came together. However, the current atmosphere is a bit of a Pandora's Box. This is not a unique situation, but it is troubling. Twelve people were killed in a poor neighborhood in Cairo when a church burned down. Interfaith relationships bring about tremendous tensions in Egyptian society and questions over the legality – and social acceptability of religious choice and conversion have been turning violent. There is also an economic piece to the sectarian violence. There is a lot of economic competition and jealousy, particularly in places where numbers of Muslims and Christians are relatively balanced. Churches become a point of conflict because the financial display of a Christian community building a church creates jealousy. There is a growing extremist Muslim presence which very assertive on these issues and very politically active. Some experts worry that the Saudis are funding these groups.

The government's response to sectarian violence has been inadequate. The general attitude to tensions is that they need to be quieted down and swept under the rug as quickly as possible. The government has previously feared that this issue is too hot to deal with and it has therefore never been opened up to public debate and civil society was never welcome in helping to work it out, which perpetuated the problems.

### **Lessons from Indonesia: Islam and Patience**

Indonesia went through an uprising similar to what we are seeing in the Middle East 13 years ago. Today, Indonesia has a functioning democracy and Indonesians are proud of their achievement. There have been three elections and four presidents in the last 13 years. Democracy is starting to deliver prosperity and economic stability. Indonesia's example has set a precedent of democracy taking root in Muslim-majority countries. Thirteen years ago Indonesia was where Egypt and Tunisia are today. The economic situation was even worse in Indonesia. Inflation was very high and poverty was more widespread than it is in the Middle East today. In a population of 240 million people, half of the population was very poor.

Indonesia encountered significant challenges on its road from revolution to democracy. There was religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in which thousands of people were killed. There was a conflict between locals and migrant workers and the rise of radical Islam which culminated in the suicide attacks in Bali in 2002. Indonesia's progress has been further complicated by insurgencies in three provinces, including the independence movement in Timor Leste.

In 1998, amid anti-immigrant violence, there were mass rapes of Chinese women. This tragic episode pushed women's rights into the foreground. A National Commission for the Protection of Women was created, pushing for the protection of women and promoting women in all sectors.

When Suharto left power after 32 years in 1998, a strong civil society was already in place to ensure that the power vacuum that ensued did not stop the political process. Elections were held in 1999 and a civil society leader was elected president. It took six years from the dictator leaving until Indonesia arrived in a stable democratic place. In the first six years, Indonesia had two elections and three presidents and there was a popular sentiment that democracy was not working. The economy worsened such that some people pushed for a return to dictatorship. However, after six years and two successful elections cycles, the economy improved and Indonesia reached democratic stability. In spite of Indonesia's many challenges, it has not fallen back into military dictatorship and it has not become a politically Islamic state.

### **Six Potential Lessons from South Africa**

#### **Transitions require time.**

There is always a tendency to try to make them happen faster. South Africa had a four year period between the release of Nelson Mandela and the elections. It really took four years as a minimum time to develop cohesion and political leadership and South Africa is still in transition today. When moving from dictatorship to democracy people are not used to participating in democracy and it takes time for a population to learn how to engage in a democratic process. South Africa held regular forums for people to come together and discuss issues to give intellectual leadership the sense that they are part of a new process. Longer time frames worked in South Africa.

#### **Political and strategic deadlocks can facilitate compromise and transformation.**

Where the balance of forces is relatively even, there should be an effort to keep it that way. Sanctions in Libya may be necessary to bring a balance of power. Sanctions were imposed on South Africa until elections to keep pressure on the government to continue moving forward. This led to compromise rather than scorched earth. International pressures can play a very useful role in keeping parties in equilibrium.

#### **Conflict and violence is an inherent part of transformation.**

It is impossible to move from authoritarianism to democracy without violence and death. The protagonists should agree on rules to limit this and to decrease violence, but eliminating it is not possible. Transition brings some violence with it.

#### **Transforming the police and military needs to be a top priority.**

Don't wait until there is a new constitution. Transformation of security is needed because otherwise the new government can use them to go backwards.

#### **It is also crucial to start with social economic reform.**

It needs to be an upfront task early in the process. Those who have been excluded in the past can at least feel hope. Economic failures can slow down progress and turn it around.

**Reforms and transformation should be generated internally and cannot come from outside.**

There is so much desire to pass on other success stories, like the ones here, but every country will have its own different circumstance. It is important for emerging democracies to learn from those who have already made this transition, but the success or failure of each state must be determined by its own citizens. Ideas must come from within and internally generated ideas need to be supported from the outside.