

Promoting Political Pluralism in the Middle East

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Mar 26, 2018

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Brief Analysis

Civil society figures and experts discuss how reform efforts have fared in Morocco, Tunisia, and Iraq, focusing on socioeconomic metrics that are still lagging behind political progress.

On March 14, The Washington Institute held a Policy Forum with three regional civil society figures visiting the country under the auspices of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue: Aboubakr Jamaï, a Moroccan journalist

and dean at IAU College; Lobna Jeribi, founder of the think tank Solidar Tunisia; and Oussama Sghaier, a member of Tunisia's Ennahda Party. They were joined by Bilal Wahab, the Institute's Wagner Fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ABOUBAKR JAMAI

Morocco's current circumstances should be studied through the lens of 2011. The prevailing view is that the country's government has been able to ride the wave of the Arab Spring. Comparing Morocco to states like Libya is not valid because it is not a failed state; moreover, stable states can change to unstable states very quickly, as seen in Tunisia.

The best way to differentiate between stability and stagnation is to look at metrics such as youth employment, poverty, and equity. Morocco's youth unemployment index has worsened since 2011, with the most recent government statistics putting it around 45 percent. For decades, the state's ability to provide employment has been diminished, so it is the private sector's role to provide jobs by supporting entrepreneurship and business opportunities.

Another telling metric is political participation. For example, the participation rate in Casablanca's local elections was only 28 percent.

To improve these metrics, Morocco should develop institutions that incentivize entrepreneurship, which could in turn create jobs and foster stability. The country also needs to decide whether it will seek a constitutional understanding between secularists and Islamists as an alternative to its current government.

There is some good news in Morocco. First, the protests held there after 2011 were both unexpected and peaceful. Second, the country's two most important Islamic movements, al-Adl wal-Ihsan and the Justice and Development Party, both agreed on the constitution's freedom of conscience clause.

LOBNA JERIBI

Tunisia has made huge steps in building democracy. It has a progressive constitution that highlights freedom of conscience, women's rights, and human rights—a major accomplishment achieved by all of the country's civil society members.

The revolution was built on two main principles: dignity and freedom. While Tunisia was evidently successful in achieving freedom and political liberty, socioeconomic development is still lacking. Building political institutions has consumed all the resources needed for socioeconomic reforms; while consensus has worked on the political side, it has failed in other sectors. Therefore, new mechanisms are needed to reform the economy. The danger is that Tunisians will associate democracy with poverty, making them less inclined to actively support further revolutionary measures.

At the same time, the decentralization process has opened up real opportunities. For instance, 52 percent of the candidates in the next local elections are young people, giving them a chance to learn important lessons about the political process.

OUSSAMA SGHAIER

Tunisia is doing a good job, but it faces the same challenges that normal democracies face. Democracy is not easy for Tunisians; they are not used to such a political system. Yet Tunisia is a better example of regional democracy than other states because its transition period was not dominated by simple majority parties and groups.

The country's main challenge is to foster freedom and dignity. Freedom implies political liberties and well-developed political institutions. Dignity implies socioeconomic reforms for the marginalized people who demanded

better living conditions in 2011.

It is not easy to make economic reforms in a newborn democracy because such changes affect many stakeholders; for instance, labor unions have already rejected several proposed measures. Reforms might also take years to be implemented after parliamentary approval, putting the capacity of new democratic institutions under question.

Even so, some of Tunisia's economic metrics are making good progress compared to 2011. The United States has an important role to play in supporting this progress, in addition to its ongoing counterterrorism assistance.

On the political front, the Ennahda Party has dissociated itself from other political Islamic groups. In fact, Ennahda believes in democracy that makes it stand apart from other Islamist groups; party members consider themselves Muslim democrats.

BILAL WAHAB

The U.S. attitude toward promoting pluralism in the Middle East seems to be either full engagement or full disengagement. America has been very good at nation-building in Asia (e.g., Japan and South Korea) and Europe (e.g., the Marshall Plan). Today, Washington seems increasingly convinced that nation-building does not work in the Middle East, but Iraqi Kurdistan stands as a successful counterargument.

The United States supported the Kurds when they rose up against Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s, creating a safe haven to protect them from the Iraqi army. The Kurds then held elections to form a government that still exists today, introducing competitive politics in northern Iraq.

When civil war broke out in Iraqi Kurdistan, America did not abandon local leaders, but instead brought them to Washington to make sure that this model of nation-building would survive. Moreover, when the Iraqi government attacked the UN-imposed safe haven in 1996, the Clinton administration retaliated by firing cruise missiles at Baghdad. The United States once again helped Iraqi Kurds when they were attacked by the Islamic State in 2014.

This is an example of how a small but steadfast investment in the region can yield a reliable U.S. partner, while at the same time benefiting the local population. Iraqi Kurds have embraced political pluralism because of the U.S. commitment, and they still hope that this model will result in a more developed region.

Too often in the Middle East, the social contract forces citizens to accept major tradeoffs. Sometimes they are asked to choose between liberty on the one hand, or stability, security, and economic development on the other. At other times they see a political landscape dominated by exclusive religious parties. For Iraq's upcoming elections in May, however, parties have largely changed their discourse, since religious banners are no longer relevant to a population focused on demanding economic development and reforms.

This summary was prepared by Yasir Zaidan. ❖

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