

The Mediterranean: A Laboratory for Global Changes

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The Mediterranean region is in turmoil. Many countries around the Mediterranean have been shaken by protests, unrest and upheaval. Youth movements have brought down governments and dictators and social protest movements are challenging neoliberal austerity programs. The region has become an epicenter for a global social and political crisis and a laboratory for new forms of social and political mobilization. Interestingly, there have been only few analyses which have tried to link unrest in the Arab world with the developments on the northern shores of the Mediterranean. But the reasons for protests in Siliana, Tunisia, were not that different from those which urged people to go into the streets of Madrid, Sofia, Nicosia, Tel Aviv or Istanbul. Based on the idea that developments on both shores of the Mediterranean indicate a common systemic crisis, the following paper delves into the backgrounds and identifies reactions and consequences. Some parts of this paper are based on an international panel discussion organized by the Austrian Anna Lindh network under the lead of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, held in Vienna in April 2013.

The Political and Economic Crisis in the South

Globalisation has affected all countries, but the effects on the developing nations of the South have been particularly drastic. Globalisation was connected with the end of the state-centric development model. It has been gradually replaced by a neoliberal model premised on the dictates of the market and the preferences of supranational organizations (Adams, Dev Gupta and Mengisteab 1999: 1). Neoliberal conceptions found their way into the Arab world from the 1970s on. However, state-led economic liberalization did not evolve into political liberalism. Neoliberal

restructuring programs did not diversify either political or economic power centers. As the regimes held all ultimate powers in their hands, their highest representatives, including the ruling families, directed privatization and regulated access to the national market through the granting of licenses. Hence, economic liberalization under authoritarianism fostered cronyism and helped supply clientelistic networks with financial benefits and buttressed neo-patrimonialistic, monarchic presidential systems. Under these conditions, the bureaucracy, the ruling party, a dependent judiciary and the security forces were reduced to powerless agents of these corrupt and autocratic power systems.

Economic liberalization also did not help reduce poverty, but widened the social gap. The Tunisian experience showed that there is no positive linear correlation between economic growth, the reduction of poverty and the improvement of human development indicators (Hurt, Knio, Ryner 2009: 307). From a macroeconomic perspective, the Tunisian economy was doing remarkably well before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Economic growth had averaged 5 percent per annum since the 1990s. Tunisia was hailed as a success story, not only in the MENA region, but in Africa as a whole. This was mainly due to perceptions of business-friendly government policies and a favorable macroeconomic environment. According to the World Bank's *Doing Business Report 2010*, Tunisia was among the top ten most improved economies in terms of business regulation. The country was praised as a model for private-sector competitiveness (International Institute for Labour Studies, 2011: 40). However, in reality, a steady decline in capital accumulation in the public sector could not be compensated by a rise in private investments and with annual growth rates between 4-5% the country could not create new jobs and reduce unemployment (Hurt, Knio and Ryner, 2009: 307). Economic liberalization policies did not support the increase in developed industries, but it supported the region's global function as a location for labor intensive production (AFDB Group, 2012: 28).

Despite constant growth rates, the social gap was widening and regional disparities were becoming stronger. Opportunities to obtain a satisfactory job, invest in dynamic sectors, and make a career have been unevenly distributed. Private sector job creation remained concentrated in low-skilled employment, while private investment (both domestic and foreign) was relatively low and tightly controlled by the government. Pervasive corruption hindered economic development and often played a role in job recruitments in the public and private

sectors. Youth unemployment was particularly high among university graduates.

Additionally, countries in the southern Mediterranean became affected by the economic crisis in Europe. Due to the austerity measures in European countries, remittances from citizens living abroad – a major source of national income – dropped severely. Rising food costs were another sign of economic stress: “As of 2008, the average Tunisian household was devoting nearly 36 percent of its domestic budget to the purchase of basic foodstuffs for home consumption. A comparable figure for the United States at that time would be less than 7 percent” (Schraeder and Redissi 2011, 7).

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Economic restructuring meant the state's slow and covert withdrawal from public services. Simultaneously, a new “social pact of informality” gradually replaced enforceable citizen rights. Institutions such as trade unions or syndicates were increasingly replaced by or merged with informal networks based on kinship, neighbourhood, origin or religious affiliations (Harders, 2008). The state's almost total withdrawal from welfare and social policies led to the rise of un-institutionalized and hybrid social activities, particularly among the disenfranchised. Silent encroachments such as the land take-over, illegal constructions or street vendors selling their products illegally in the streets have challenged the authority of the state (Bayat, 1997: 55). At the same time, Islamic welfare and charity organizations gradually compensated the state's eroding welfare services. Particularly in remote and neglected areas, Islamic organisations gradually replaced the state institutions' fading authority (Günay, 2012).

Thus, economic restructuring not only limited the government's scope of action in directing and influencing social policy, but also its authority and hegemony. Ideologically vacated, political institutions such as the ruling party dwindled to mere patronage networks increasingly dominated by business elites. More than political parties in its classical term, the ruling parties were a conglomeration of individuals who sought proximity to the regime. Elections were a farce. Gerrymandering, manipulations and fraud guaranteed that the ruling parties always had strong majorities within parliament and that the opposition was tamed (Günay, 2008: 300).

Countries such as Tunisia and Egypt were ripe for change. Despite rigorous police surveillance and political suppression, the mass protests that led to the toppling of the authoritarian leaders did not come as a surprise. After all, there had been various indications for growing unrest amongst different layers of society. From the early 2000s on there were scattered reports on increased trade union activism and spontaneous protests. Because of the close relationship of trade unions with the regimes, they often took the form of wildcat strikes (non-official strikes). The occupation of a textile factory in Mahalla al Kubra in the Nile Delta in Egypt in 2006 has been considered as the real beginning of the "revolution" that would later overthrow long-term President Mubarak in February 2011.

New Forms of Participation

While political analysts have put emphasis on the aspects of political repression, they have often underplayed the social and economic elements and they have ignored the structural and societal changes connected with economic restructuring. In that context, Larbi Sadiki argues that revolution is not only about economic as-

pects; not only about "bread", but about *moral-ity*. He further adds that "the Arab-revolutions have not been intellectual ones (there are no intellectual founding-fathers), nor have they solely been caused by socio-economic aspects, in fact they are about a *distribution of power*, they are challenging the powers which are in charge of democratic knowledge." "Revolution is a puzzle, it is unfolding as we speak," Sadiki explains and emphasizes that the intellectual Arab-revolution has just started (Sadiki, 2013).

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Democratization theorists such as Stepan and Linz have defined democratic transition as the agreement that a government comes to power as the result of free and fair elections, on the authority of this government to generate new policies and on the fact that executive, legislative and judicial powers generated by the new democracy do not have to be shared with other bodies de jure such as the military. However, despite the fact that political parties of all shades regarded elections as the only game in town, the democratic transition processes in the aftermath of the revolutions have been rather unsatisfying.

The crisis of the distribution of power has persisted. More and more people have been frustrated. Post-revolutionary realities depart from what Stepan describes above. Hala Galal argues that in the political landscape of post-revolutionary societies, election results have often been influenced by those who are wealthy and have power. They have dominated the party-building process as well as the media (Galal, 2013). As a consequence, the political party landscape of the post-Arab Spring era has been informed by fragmentation, po-



"Indignados" protest in Madrid (Rafael Yaghoobzadeh / News Pictures / Contacto).

larization and petty politics. Islamist parties, often well-entrenched in society through their broad social and informal networks, were the only ones that could take advantage, besides the non-elected bodies such as the military and the bureaucracy.

In democratization literature, civil society has often been highlighted as an important prerequisite for the establishment of a truly democratic system. Saad Eddin Ibrahim defined civil society as an optimum channel of popular participation in governance. He argues rather optimistically that the reinforcement of civil society also implies values and behavioral codes of tolerating and accepting others and a tacit or explicit commitment to the peaceful management of differences among individuals and groups sharing the same public space

or state (Ibrahim, 1995: 28-29). However, civil society in the form of voluntary associations is essentially dependent on a state under the rule of law, but also a certain economic independence and a benevolent attitude. In countries of the southern Mediterranean Western-type CSOs generally have upper and upper-middle-class constituencies. They could hardly reach out to other constituencies. Quite often their activities have been perceived as elitist.

Besides a rise in civil society organizations, often neglected by foreign observers, countries in transition have experienced the emergence of new forms of social and political activism. People with different political, social and cultural backgrounds have come together and formed platforms. Often this has been on an individual basis, without membership lists

or any other registrations. The activities of these new platforms and initiatives range from social responsibility projects to environment issues and political claims. Galal highlights in this context young lawyers defending people who have been tried at military courts (2013). Gianluca Solera gives another example for a platform where people from different backgrounds work together. He mentions the party Tayar al-Masry (Egyptian weave), where Salafists, secularists, Christians and others work together.

Similar Developments on the Other Shore of the Mediterranean

A similar example of a cross-ideological coalition of likeminded people is the so-called platform for protest against eviction law in Spain. “Since the beginning of the economic crisis in July 2008, 171,000 families have been displaced through house evictions, dying a ‘civil death’” as Iván Molina Allende puts it (2013). Molina Allende points out that similar to the crises in the southern Mediterranean, the crisis in Spain is also a crisis of the system. It is a crisis of representation. He adds that Spain has still been suffering from the continuation of the same structures of power of the Francoist system. Molina Allende mentions the authoritarian attitude of the government as one of the major causes of the political crisis. According to him, the 15th of May 2011, when people flooded into the streets, was a moment of rupture where a deepening of the political crisis took place. It was a moment when social movements were radicalized. Fabian Unterberger argues that activists regarded the uprising as an assembly, rather than a demonstration. “In these assemblies demands were developed, and ideas collected. They turned into a forum. Everybody could participate in the decisions of the movement. According to Unterberger,

it was impressive that the movement not only criticized the situation, but also tried to develop alternative ideas. Moreover, the movement spread into several places, expanding into the *barrios*” (2013).

The slogans and demands of the mainly young people who initiated the Gezi Movement did not fit into the traditional patterns and schemes of Turkish politics

Similar developments could be observed during the so-called *Gezi-Protests* in Turkey in June 2013. The slogans and demands of the mainly young people who initiated the *Gezi* Movement did not fit into the traditional patterns and schemes of Turkish politics. Their messages were not against conservatism or Islam, but they challenged the neoliberal urban gentrification projects and the paternalistic and authoritarian self-understanding of the state and its representatives (Günay, 2014). Hence, the mass rallies were not only directed against the ruling AK Parti, but also revealed dissatisfaction with the whole political system. Comparable with the Spanish *indignados* movement, *Gezi* protesters occupied the public space. They held *semt* or neighbourhood assemblies where anyone who wished to could participate and debate local and global issues. What Larbi Sadiki calls the “Public Square Ethos” offers new opportunities for democratization. In that regard he claims the redefinition of democratic transition (2013). These new forms of protest and organization point at profound political and societal changes to come.

Conclusion

The societies of Mediterranean countries have been exposed to neoliberal restructuring and austerity measures. Socio-economic transformation has been going hand in hand

with the erosion of state institutions and the increasing informalization of state-society relations as well as of forms of self-organization within society. Overcharged state institutions often equipped with authoritarian self-understanding have been increasingly unable to respond to the demands and expectations of transforming societies. From the economic and political crisis in the countries bordering on the Mediterranean new forms of activism and self-organization emerged. Forms of protest, the demands for participation, a change in politics and the distrust in established institutions often perceived as corrupt are rather similar. In that sense, the Mediterranean is not only a laboratory for the crisis of a neoliberal political and economic system, but also a laboratory for the new dynamics, ideas and forms of association that might emerge from this crisis.

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