

# THE THREE PARADOXES OF THE ARAB SPRING

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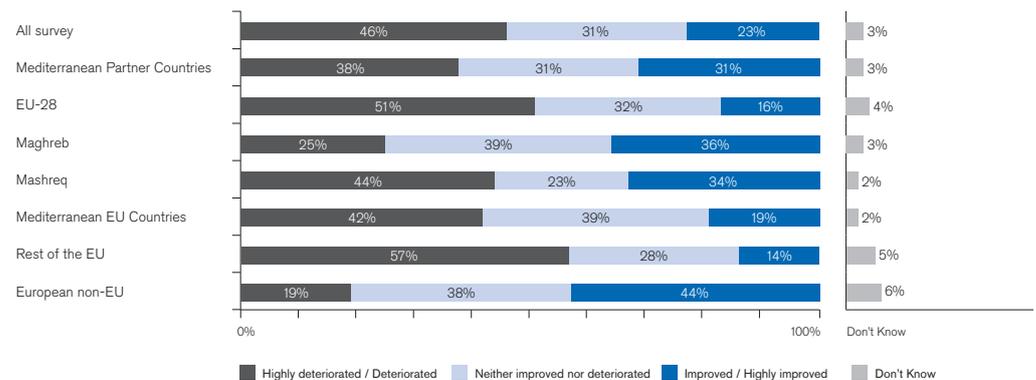
The Arab Spring brought with it much hope of progress on meeting popular demands for better standards of living, expanding democracy and freedoms, social justice and improving the status of women. The images of youth in the streets, the slogans that rallied people to the squares and the very active participation of huge masses of people were welcomed by much of the world as a sign of the end of “Arab exceptionalism” and the launch of another regional democratic wave that would join previous transitions in Europe, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Yet, the course of history chose to move in different, more complex, directions.

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Uncertain leadership of the uprisings was reflected in a political vacuum at the top, a lack of vision on the future and competition amongst new, inexperienced groups of activists, and between them and other institutions (e.g. the army and security edifice, *ancien régime* remnants and political movements and parties, both of the rising Islamic variety and others with older secular colours). Meanwhile, the assault on regimes that had over-lived their shelf life necessarily weakened state structures and opened space for underlying forces with economic demands or suppressed identities (e.g. religious, tribal and ethnic groups in Libya, Syria and Yemen). As state fragmentation and insecurity increased, there were measurable economic costs (e.g. in 2011, the growth rate of Egypt’s economy slumped to just over 1% from its previous growth rate of 5% annually in the last years of Mubarak). In some cases, the rapid rise of Islamic parties, seemingly intent on reversing social progress, including legislation protecting women and children, frustrated activists promoting human rights. In a historical context, the 200 year arc of intermittent progress towards building quasi-secular models of government in the Arab world seemed to be turning decisively backwards towards Islamic and Khedivial precedents from earlier centuries. The ISIS declaration of an Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq in the summer of 2014 fits into this pattern.

This landscape reflects the *first paradox* of the Arab Spring: the hopes of a progressive wave of democratization have ended with nostalgia for stability and the powerful role of the state, a fear of the retrograde forces of political Islam, and concerns by women and minorities that their rights were more vulnerable in the chaos of change.

**Graph 1: Assessing the improvement or deterioration in the last three years of the RECOGNITION OF MINORITIES; respondents from:**

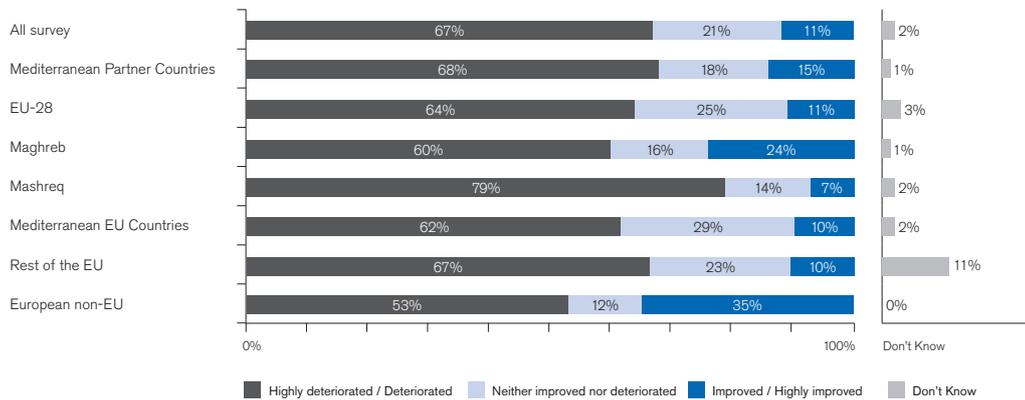


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

The *second paradox* is the resilience of structural factors that are not responsive to quick fix solutions, thus making governance even more difficult (witness the change of six Prime Ministers of Egypt over a period of three years or so). The challenges include the high percentage of youth, the high rates of unemployment, particularly amongst youth and women, the overall gender gap, the low literacy rates, the low allocations to vital services (health, education, social security), the addiction to government subsidies in addition to major population shifts to urban centers where slums bring a new political force to the streets.

**Second paradox: the resilience of structural factors that are not responsive to quick fix solutions, made governance even more difficult.**

**Graph 2: Assessing the improvement or deterioration in the last three years of the LIVING STANDARDS OF THE CITIZENS; respondents from:**

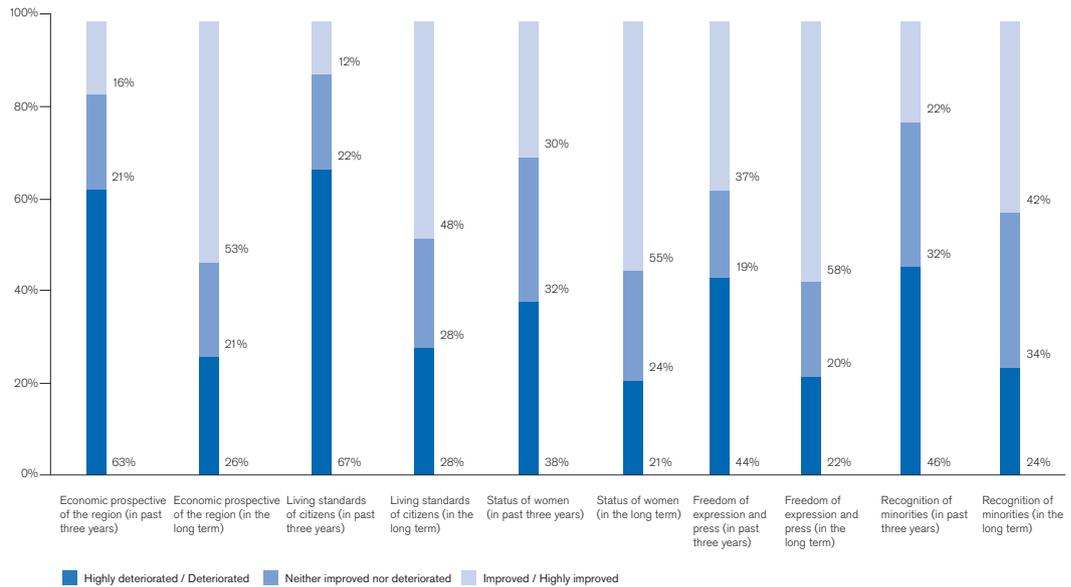


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

The *third paradox* is the sense of demoralization and despair clouding the mood of elites and the public in the region in contrast to the huge wave of optimism felt in 2011. Again this is based on perceptions of reality, including five, generally pessimistic trends in the Survey related to the socio-economic situation and future prospects.

**Third paradox: the sense of demoralization and despair in the region in contrast to the huge wave of optimism felt in 2011.**

**Graph 3: Comparing the improvement or deterioration in the past three years and in the long term on socio-economic elements.**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

**Future prospects**

**The Arab Spring has brought much hope for those seeking solutions for long standing societal problems in Arab countries.**

The Arab Spring has brought much hope for those seeking solutions for long standing societal problems in Arab countries. The mobilisation of various social groups, including youth, workers, slum dwellers and women established constituencies that demanded changes in legal and economic structures. Public space for protest, debate and political participation has expanded in most cases. But retrograde forces have also been unleashed, whether they be those seeking to destroy the old assumptions related to the role of the state, cohesion and citizenship (Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen provide stark examples), or those seeking to use the state to realise their dream of transformation to an Islamic State (as was the Moslem Brotherhood aspiration for Egypt), or indeed those forces representing the “return of the state” (the military-security structures, the media, big business, liberals scared of Islamic parties, etc.) as if nothing changed.

**The overall setbacks experienced by the Arab Spring, should not overshadow the positivism radiating from North Africa.**

The overall setbacks experienced by the Arab Spring, and the resultant sense of pessimism, should not overshadow the positivism radiating from North Africa, perhaps because of a more successful transition underway in Tunisia, or the wise pre-emptive reformist steps taken by Morocco, or the confidence based on the oil revenues of Algeria. It will be interesting to follow the economic course of these countries to see if this sense of confidence will reflect in higher economic and social achievements or if the structural challenges facing the region will prevail. More generally, for the region as a whole, future challenges will include developing democratic and stable democracies, dealing with security threats that threaten fragmentation and improving the economic situation to meet the demands of the high percentage of youth populations. Some longer term views retain the hope that change will come at the hands of new leaders emerging from the youth who participated in the Arab Spring. Only time will tell if this optimism rests on solid ground.