

International Workshop

Oppositions and Transitions in the Arab World after 2011

Agadir, 11-12 November 2014

The first session: Rethinking Political Oppositions in the Arab World after 2011

The first speaker, Mr. Abdullah Saef, kicked off the panel discussion by presenting an analysis on the transformation that the left opposition went through in Morocco, especially USFP party. By using documents and articles from the last few decades, Mr. Saef explained the transformation of the USFP opposition to be a result of the dominance of interim priorities over ideologies. Reducing the ideological elements of this opposition has gradually led to abandoning its speech to break up with capitalism, or even referring to socialism and social classes narrative in its discourse. By stressing the fading of revolutionary trends of opposition starting from 1990s, he posed the question about a crisis of identity and values, especially in a time where neoliberalism principles have dominated the system. In summarizing, Mr. Saef explained the complexity of reasons behind this ideological failure. The diversity of political references and practices, participation, and the standards of historical and administrative parties in the political system, all these considerations make the understanding of opposition transformation a multi-dimensional phenomenon.



The second intervention, by Mr. Larabi Sadiki, was about re-building Arab democratic opposition, or how to be an opposition actor in the Arab world? Mr. Larabi first pointed out that engaging in this subject suffers from a scarcity of Arabic references, and a dominance of western reference that remains a supreme authority in defining the concepts. This structure created a gap by the projections that do not take into account the specificities of the Arab world. Mr. Larbi

stressed the importance of liberating the opposition from the negative character that has been associated with it as a result of authoritarian rule remnants. He also urged the need to expand the idea of opposition as a creative space for wisdom, rationalization and openness to morality and knowledge.

This will require its liberation from the pure utilitarian character, or reducing it to a political or ideological movement.

In order to build this kind of opposition, Mr. Larabi set up few parameters as follows: deepen the concept of opposition as knowledge, as a community project to keep up with reality, and overcome the gap between the local and the global dimensions, refine the opposition toward the public good, consolidate acceptance of different opinions and alliances, expand the horizon and relocate within the framework of ethics and values, and apply these principles in the practical side; bridge the gap between academics and politicians.

The third speaker, Mr. Abdelkader Lachkar, discussed the idea of opposition in Islam. He started by comparing methods of dealing with the opposition, between eradication and assimilation, then acknowledged the uniqueness of the Islamic experience in the Moroccan political scene being none of these two blocks (not eradicated nor absorbed). Mr. Lachkar posed the question about the legitimacy of opposition in Muslim countries, reviewing the elements of the answer, based on the principles of Islamic jurisprudence: the right to express opinions and differences in matters of policy, as the original legitimate sources (Quran and Sunnah) did not bring clear cut rules to the political sphere, but brought instead general rules (Shura ,justice, liberty, equality ..). Another fact is that the origin in contracts and transactions in Islam is permission, what is to be done is a duty. All of these principles reinforce the legitimacy of multiparty in Islam.

In summarizing his argument, Mr. Lachkar explained that the idea of accommodating opposition in the Islamic system is reflected in the adoption of a ministry of authorization (the Prime Minister in the modern sense, who is variable), while the permanent is the Imam (head of state). Finally, he emphasized that the legitimacy of the opposition in Islam depends on a genuine political pluralism, not only a multi-party framework, while taking in account the specificities of Islamic and Moroccan identity.

The fourth and last speaker, Mr. Mohamed El Hachimi, addressed the elements needed in order to build a conceptual framework for the idea of opposition. Mr. El Hachimi started by pointing out the fact that the subject of opposition is usually viewed as part of a larger problem, but not as a stand-alone problematic. He explained that the inability of Western analysis tools to understand and dissect the reality of authoritarian Arab regimes requires rethinking the concepts under which the idea of the opposition is understood since the sixties. To support his point of view, he cited the following objective reasons:

- The decline of powerful parties in the West and the emergence of other non-state actors that aspire influencing governance.
- The emergence of strong regional merged entities (the European Union as a model) has required rethinking the concept of opposition in the nation-states, and the level of exercising this opposition (state, Union).
- Weak parliamentary performance vs. more strengthening in the position of government.
- The separation between responsibility and reactions, and competition over representing people between the opposition and the government.

- The narrow view of the opposition as a shadow government (British model).

Mr. El Hachimi concluded from the above that there is a need to overcome the narrow understanding of opposition as being limited to parliamentary seats, because such an idea undermines the concept of opposition, and blurs many other forms of opposition aspirations. This raises the problem of marginal opposition, only because it is exercised from outside the parliament. Finally, he called for expanding the idea of the opposition to accommodate all critical ideas to government and all forms of peaceful dissents.

The second session: Oppositions: new actors, new roles?

The session started by the intervention of Mr. Rachid Touhtou, who addressed the theme "non-governmental governmental organizations vs. civil society in Morocco: two dialogues and one purpose only ". In this speech, he analyzed the associative phenomenon in Morocco, based on forms of oppositions that have taken place in civil society after the promulgation of the Moroccan Constitution in 2011.

The second intervention was presented by Ms. Isabel Schafer (Humboldt University Berlin) who discussed the theme of "political parties in Tunisia after 2011". Ms. Schafer posed a question on the emerging and fading oppositions after the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia in 2011, especially in the light of the new political landscape that has two dominant political parties: Ennahda Party (Islamist) and Nidaa Tounes party. Then she moved to analyzing the role of future Tunisian oppositions if these two major parties decide to engage in possible alliance. Finally, she concluded by discussing the question about the role of the Tunisian young generation in political parties and opposition.

The third speaker, Ms. Maryam Nassar, a political scientist from Mohamed V University in Rabat, spoke on "The new role of the political opposition in Morocco: reconstruction requirements and fragility of performance." Ms. Nassar analyzed the role of the political opposition in Morocco between the means offered by Moroccan law (constitution of 2011) and the reality of things in practice. She raised the problem on the lack of political programs of opposition; this later is characterized by fragility and the absence of any clear and precise political line. This problem arises when parties engage and switch political alliances with other parties in order to participate in government. Ms. Nassar concluded by raising the question about the purpose of the opposition in Morocco, is it only participation in power or it just a means to give those who are in power?

The fourth speaker, Mr. Anas El Gomati, addressed the issue of "Challenges of peace of Carnegie Endowment for Peace (Beirut) in Lebanon transition". Mr. El Gomati analyzed the issue of civil society being very weak and unstructured in Libya; such environment makes developing any effective political opposition a very hard process.

Since the late Kaddafi regime prohibited any political plurality, equally critical, political pluralism is very unlikely to be constructive under the pressure of civil war that erupted between various parties similar to what is happening in Lebanon (Beirut). Despite the creation of some parties such as "the Party of the

new Libya" and "the Libyan Socialist Movement" after the collapse of the Kaddafi regime, we are still far from identifying a real political diversity that could lead to the emergence of a political opposition.

The third session: Oppositions and Arab neo-constitutionalism

This session has brought diverse approaches to study the social movements in the Arab World, and how did it affect the political dynamics. The interventions focused on the experiences of countries that have seen changes due to the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The first speaker, Eba Nguima Nisrine, focused on the comparison between the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences at the level of constitutional reforms, after illustrating the differences between the two cases, she moved to explain the similarities based on constitutional remarks, at this regard, she cited how both the Egyptian and Tunisian constitutions contain the most important principles of electoral democracy based on integrity, and the citizens' role in choosing their own governments.

The second speaker, Mohamed Goleferni, has focused on studying the February 20th movement. He stressed the importance of this movement in renewing the mechanisms of analyzing the political opposition phenomenon in Morocco. To explain this point, he stressed two principle elements: the identity, and the dynamic of the February 20th movement in Morocco. He explained that there were contradictions at the level of both discourses and actions, that have contributed to the gradual disappearance of the February 20 Movement, due to the lack of coordination between its two major components: Islamists and leftists

The third speaker, Professor Abdelilah Amine focused on another important movement, which is the Amazigh movement. He explained how this movement has moved from being a cultural movement to a social one, this new identity, and institutionalization process was better explained by illustrating elements from the declaration of Agadir that constitutes a reference framework for the Amazigh movement. He concluded his intervention by posing a substantive question about the ability of the cultural or social Amazigh actor to move to the institutionalization and mass advocacy in the name Tamazight.

The last speaker in this session, Mr. Mohamed Homam has touched upon the position of Arabic language in the aftermaths of 2011 constitution. In his intervention, he approached the Arabic identity in its relationship with ideology, as it relates to religion and colonialism. By questioning the system of analyzing the position of Arabic language, he moved from speaking about a linguistic approach, to a sociological approach, at this regard, he illustrated the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu on the topic. He finally concluded his intervention by looking at the status of Arabic within the party reference for each of the USFP and PJD parties.

The fourth session: Oppositions as actors of transitions?

The interventions in the fourth session have focused on oppositions as actors in the political transition. The speakers have covered cases from many countries, and touched upon various aspects of the transitions taking place at the aftermaths of the 2011 uprisings.

The first speaker, Salam Kawakibi, initiated his intervention by trying to identify the concept of revolution. He pointed out that a revolution is defined by people who initiate it, at this regard, he explained how millions have come out in Syria which self identify the Syrian movement as a revolution. In explaining the opposition in Syria, he illustrated how this opposition has developed since the end of French colonization. In speaking about the new era with Basshar Al-Assad taking office in 2000, Mr. Kawakibi explained how the opposition elites started pushing for reforms from within the regime, and how the regime has always violently reacted to these opposition's attempts. In describing the Syrian revolution, Mr. Kawakri stressed that it is indeed a revolution of many actors, not exclusively an elite revolution. At conclusion, the speaker expressed his disappointment about the very modest support to this youth revolution from Arab and Western regimes alike, explaining that this is because the Syrian revolution has been incorrectly viewed as an Islamic revolution, not a people revolution for dignity and freedom.

The second speaker, Mr. Amr El Shobaki looked at the transition in Egypt and its future and challenges. He started by stressing the complexity of the Egyptian case, especially because of the absence of any agreed framework among political actors on the principles and vision of the transition after 2011. The speaker explained that the ambiguity of presidential authorities and constitutional framework for the political life in Egypt have contributed to a political polarization and bloody confrontation between various sects. In concluding his remarks on the Prospect of transition in Egypt, Mr. El Shobaki stressed the importance of mutual recognition between both conflicting parts, and overcoming the political discourse of rejection and exclusion that characterizes the political life in Egypt today.

The third speaker Khadija Mohsen-Finan from Sorbonne University has covered the Tunisian case. She started by pointing out the absence of party pluralism from the political life in Tunisia, stressing how Ben Ali allowed Islamists activism to balance the threat to leftist and socialist oppositions. By illustrating the modest role of the Tunisian opposition to push for reforms throughout the 1990s, the speaker has concluded that a real opposition did not exist in the official political framework; however, the Islamist opposition has been significantly growing with its leadership based abroad. After Ben Ali was forced to flee the country, the two major parts of the revolution have come into conflict, on the one hand, few political parties calling for protecting the constitution, and only rejecting the authoritarian regulations that Ben Ali has put in place for his own rule, and on the other side the revolution leaders in the streets that called for a new political framework to write a constitution from scratch. In reading the political compromises that took place between the Islamist movement and various leaders from the previous regime and other opposition parties, Ms Khadija concluded that Tunisia in fact has only "temporarily" overcome its crisis, and that the application of the new constitution may be difficult as it is a product of many compromises, but not a significant consensus.

The fourth and last speaker of the session was Mr. Abdelhakim Aboulouz, in his intervention, he look at the role of Salafists in the Moroccan transition. He started by pointing out that although Salafists movement has not been a major focus from researchers, it is indeed an important actor with a large national social network. It was only after the terrorist attacks of May 2003 that the Moroccan authorities have started interacting with the Salafists and their opposition movements as significant

actors in the political arena. Especially after releasing many Salafist leaders and the PJD positive attitude toward them being a major electoral mass.

On the other hand, Mr. Aboulouz explained how the Salafist discourse has been linked principally to religious advocacy and education, which reflects the absence of a significant political dimension of the movement. However, at the level of political involvement, the presence of politics in the agenda of Salafists becomes evident, the letter of Abdesalam Yassine as an example.

As for its relationship with other Islamist movements, the speaker has stressed that Salafists undermined other Islamists groups with support from the authorities.

As for its relationship with other various political parties, the speaker explained how many parties have reached out to Salafists to reconcile with them, to make use of their electoral power in the streets, this kind of reconciliation has played a significant role in the 2011 electoral victory of the PJD.

The fifth session: Opposition, Public Space, and Democracy

During the fifth session, the chairman has given introductory comments, and set up twofold dimensions of the public space as it relates to the revolution and the media: a virtual dimension, and a social dimension.

All the statements presented by the panelists focused on the theme of oppositions, public space, and democracy.

The first speaker discussed a series of questions relating to the role of the media in democratic transitions. One central question was about how did the media play a role in favoring the oppositions in a democratic transition? The speaker explained how the function of the media in a democratic environment should reflect its ability to represent all different trends within the community, protect society as a whole, deliver information to the public, and contribute to the unity of society by avoiding polarization.

The second speaker addressed the issue of how opposition can positively exercise its important role in the aftermaths of the 2011 events. The speaker stressed in his intervention that most of opposition groups in Morocco were established with the mission to govern in mind, not with the mission to play an opposition role. The speaker also emphasized that a democratic society cannot be built without establishing a balance between all political trends. He also pointed out how politics are not anymore played exclusively in the traditional platform, but also in the new social and virtual spaces.

The third speaker in this session discussed what he calls “a crisis of political communication among the Arab world opposition groups”. The speaker made a point that the absence of ‘a rational dialogue’ has been a major cause in the failure of the 2011 uprising in many countries. In his analysis to the Moroccan case, he explained how the dialogue between secularists and Islamists in Morocco has failed as a result of adopting a political narrative addressed strictly to their followers, but not the other party.

The fourth speaker talked specifically about the brotherhood position in Egypt. He discussed the hypothesis that Islamic movements are anti-democratic values. To test this claim, he stressed that the arrival of Islamists to power offers better opportunities to either reject or reaffirm hypothesis.

The fifth and last speaker addressed the topic of the new opposition actors in the Arab world after 2011. He explained how the political opposition has shifted from traditional political groups to average/normal citizens; he stressed how individual citizens started playing an opposition role through Internet and social networks. The role of this new opposition is being reinforced with the emergence of the new media tools, the speakers added.