

ARAB SPRING IMPACT ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Introduction

The report “Arab Spring impact on human development in the Middle East” tries to analyze how the Arab spring influenced the human development itself, in the following countries: Egypt, Palestine or Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

However, among these countries only Egypt has experienced the Arab spring, whereas Syria, which underwent an uprising influenced by the Arab Spring, is at the moment going through a civil war with heavy intervention of foreign elements. For what concern the other above mentioned countries (i.e. Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan) none of them experienced the Arab Spring.

It is important to give a definition of “Arab Spring”, as we should have a clear idea of what this term means, before starting to analyze furthermore the report.

The Arab Spring is a term meant to describe the revolutions against dictatorships that began in Tunisia in 2010 and continued in Egypt and Libya, all of which ended up with the fall of the regime. The term spring is used to define a liberation from the dictatorship and the blooming of a new democracy. Other countries that were inspired by the Arab spring were Syria (whose revolution, as mentioned previously, turned into a civil war), Yemen and Bahrain. Those countries did not achieve an Arab Spring, as their dictatorial regimes are still in power.

As for the countries that experienced the Arab Spring, they are now going through a different phase of the revolution. Specifically, in the case of Egypt, which is analyzed in the report, the country went first through a new phase of the revolution against the Muslim Brotherhood, then through a second phase – which Egypt is living now – that sees the army back in power fighting the Muslim Brotherhood and with the liberal civil society losing its momentum.

Causes for the Arab Spring

The report lists among the causes of the Arab spring:

- According to valuations of the International Labor Organization (ILO), in 2011 the rate of unemployment among youths in the MENA region was around 27%, while the overall unemployment rate was around 10%.
- a large quantity of youths, with a high level of education, so completely aware about their rights, but with no job. This, mixed with the lack of personal freedom and democracy, led to the uprisings that took place from the end of 2010 in different countries of the region.

The rate of unemployment alone cannot explain the Arab spring. The overall unemployment rate in Italy in 2013 is 12.90% (source: tradingeconomics.com), whereas in Spain unemployment raised to 26% in 2013 (source: financial times). These figures are higher than the ones reported for the overall unemployment rate in the MENA region. It is then clear that the unemployment data alone are not enough to explain a revolutionary process.

The report states that it considers “some technical data like the Human Development Index (HDI), the ratio of people living with less than 1,25\$ a day, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life expectancy and the ratio of maternal death”.

However, in order to have a broader perspective, additional factors should be taken into account such as low quality, irregular, low wages jobs, social exclusion, measured with the long-term unemployment rate, and to look at issues such as corruption, rigid labor market policies and a mismatch between education and skills required by employers. Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration the human poverty index as an indicator of the standard of living in a country, which take into consideration deprivation of longevity, measured as a percentage of the individuals with a life expectancy lower than 40 years, deprivation of knowledge, expressed as a percentage of illiterate adults and deprivation of decent living standards, which doesn't consider only the percentage of the population living below the poverty level, but also the percentage of population without access to health services.

The report should give a better explanation of "lack of personal freedom and democracy", which were one of the main reasons that triggered the revolution. In the case of Egypt, the report should take into consideration also minority rights, in particular of Copts, who started mass demonstrations in Egypt against the dictatorship already in November 2010, before the official start of the Arab Spring. Only a short paragraph is dedicated to Copts in the chapter on Egypt, but there is no mention of their involvement in the Arab Spring.

It should be noted that in the last 15 years, with the launch of new satellite channels, people living in Arab countries had access not only to the propaganda of regime, but also to a new information, which often challenged the dictatorship, as in the case of Al-Jazeera. People started to see the free of censorship reality that surrounded them with new eyes. This communication phenomenon mixed with the worsening of the economy is for sure the trigger to the Arab spring that should be analyzed.

Egypt

On the chapter on Egypt, the report start by describing the overthrowing of former Muslim Brotherhood (MB) President Mohammed Morsi as a "coup d'état". It should be acknowledged that the term "coup d'état" is not accepted by the whole Egyptian population. While mainly the pro-MB militants describe the arrest of Morsi as a coup, many liberal activists and coptic activist describe it as a new phase of the revolution. According to the famous Egyptian writer Alaa Aswani, one of the founding member of Kefaya, what happened in Egypt was not a military coup. "I am trying to explain what is happening in Egypt. [Gen.] Sisi warned Morsi, giving him a week to leave power as requested by the people, and [only] then had him arrested. We cannot say that this was a coup, because everything was done transparently. June 30, 2013 was a revolutionary wave supported by the army, that's all. Ultimately, it makes me optimistic for the future". (source: Mediapart, France, October 16, 2013). The report to be balanced should describe all positions in the country.

The report continues by describing the army as the only responsible for the instability of the country, as if the reality in Egypt was a monolithic one. Violence in Egypt was not only used by the army, but also by MB militants, who threatened especially the Christian community. Furthermore, the report doesn't mention the increase of Islamist terrorism, which is one of the main reasons of the dropping of tourism in the country.

On the paragraph concerning communication, it should be mentioned that after the fall of former dictator Hosni Mubarak hundreds on new TV channels and media outlets were launched in Egypt.

This is a very important achievement of the Arab Spring, even though the country doesn't have yet a full freedom of expression. The case of satirist Bassem Youssef should be mentioned.

Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

Palestine did not have any Arab Spring. The few demonstrations that occurred in this area had no impact and no one in Palestine took them seriously. In the paragraph concerning the economic situation there is no mention of corruption, which is very high in the PLO. The report also doesn't mention terrorist activities by Hamas militants (i.e. launch of rockets against Israeli towns) and the education system in Gaza. There is actually a difference between the education level in the West Bank and the one in Gaza. The last paragraph of the report mentions that the Muslim and the Christian community in Palestine enjoy good relations. This is not completely true. It is known that Muslim fundamentalist are intimidating the Christian population in Bethlehem.

Israel

The report mentions that the 2011 demonstrations that took place in Israel were inspired by the Arab Spring. Several international media reported the same thing. However, this is not true. The demonstrations in Israel were inspired by the Spanish *indignados*. They were protests against the economic policy of the country and did not have as a goal the fall of the government. Furthermore, an agreement was found between the government and the leaders of the protests.

The last paragraph on human rights has few unclear sentences. For example: "Bedouin citizens of Israel who live in 'unrecognized' villages suffer discriminatory home demolitions on the basis that their homes were built illegally". This sentence mentions that the demolitions are "discriminatory" and then states that the "home were built illegally", which makes it unclear for the reader. The sentence is followed by the following explanation: "Israeli authorities refuse to prepare plans for the communities and to approve construction permits, and reject plans submitted by the communities themselves". This sentence needs a footnote, as opinions on this controversial subject are multiple. Furthermore, the explanation given in the report was challenged by Israel's government spokesmen.

The report also mentions restrict policy for migrant workers. This is true, but it should be mentioned that Israel is not the only country in the Middle East to have restrict policies on this issue. The report also doesn't mention the fact that Israel (as other Middle Eastern countries) has no civil marriage and the burden of the ultra-orthodox population on the secular one.

Lebanon

Lebanon did not have an Arab Spring. As mentioned in the report, the political situation in Lebanon is deeply linked to the one in Syria. However, the actual political crisis that Lebanon is living started in 2005 with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The report should mention it and describe how that assassination impacted the last 9 years.

Syria

As mentioned before, the uprising in Syria turned into a civil war, with heavy intervention of foreign elements on both sides (i.e. government and rebels). The civil war in Syria is becoming a sectarian war and the report should tackle this issue.

Jordan

Jordan did not have an Arab Spring. However, in 2011, Jordan has seen a growing wave of protests and calls for reform by citizens. The protests were led by the Islamist movement, which dominates the political opposition, and by the popular protest movement, which encompasses numerous pro-reform organizations. Also prominent in the protest movement were organizations representing Jordan's tribal population, which for decades was considered the powerbase of the Hashemite regime. In recent years, this population has developed a growing sense of resentment and discrimination as a result of the economic policy advanced by the Jordanian king. The Salafiyya-Jihadiyya in Jordan also expressed support for the anti-government protests. At the moment, the strongest opposition to the government is represented by the Islamist movement. The report should mention who the players are in the anti-government protests.

Besides the personal status code, the report should also mention the nationality law. As in the case of Lebanon, women don't have the right to pass on their citizenship to their children.

Conclusion

This report is a comprehensive beginning, but needs some more work in order to be focused on the essence of the Arab spring and its impact.