CEMOFPSC

Centro de Estudios de Oriente Medio
Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura

VII CEMOFPSC SEMINAR:

THE TRANSITION IN THE NEW ARAB WORLD: A CHALLENGE FOR EAST AND WEST

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Instituto de Empresa

SOME CONCLUSIONS

This seminar was planned in the context of the "Arab spring" that is shaking the Middle East and North Africa since the early months of 2011 and that it has mobilized millions of young and grown up people, citizens of different Arab countries, claiming for freedom and dignity. These revolutions have succeeded in overthrowing and shaking many of the leaders of autocratic regimes in the region. It should highlight the role of new technologies and media that have contributed to be known as the "Revolution 2.0" and has been developed on the basis of technology and globalization. All media and new social networks, blogs, Facebook and Twitter as well as satellite television, have been part of this movement which is already irreversible.

The day that the CEMOFPSC seminar was celebrated in Madrid, 6 June 2011, the situation was different in each country. This event brought together some actors and witnesses as well as leading experts on the matter. They offered testimonies and analysis of this new situation in the Arab world that has surprised everyone for its fast extension and propagation.

The speakers' speeches and the debate among participants to the seminar enable us to draw the following conclusions:

Some participants argued that the old concepts have become obsolete, there has been a change in the Arab world that claims for new ways of relation. The old regime have collapsed and therefore it has to be designed a new order. The support or the acquiescence of the Western powers to dictatorships or autocratic governments have come to an end. It is time for a convergence in attitudes and democratic position between Europe and the Arab world. Others, however, stated that the positions and policies adopted until now simply have to be adapted, with the premise that development and democracy cannot be imposed.

The speakers presented the subject as it follows:

1. The diversity of sensibilities and realities within the Arab World are hindering the process of change towards democratic states, however, there is a Windows of opportunities to achieve it and put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

2. This diversity poses the question: Will the Arab world be able to act as a regional unit, with a single political and economic system?

3. Finally, revolutionary movements seek to overthrow dictatorship regimes and they have proved its ability to do it (Tunisia and Egypt). However, will they be able to dismantle the old system and build strong democratic institutions?, or on the contrary, will they bring a shift toward more radical regimes of religious justification, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia?

The overview in such a diversity as the Arab world is very difficult. Arab revolutions must be analyzed from within, from the Arab mind. An attempt to reduce the "Arab spring" to a common denominator could lead to serious mistakes of interpretation.

The debate analyzed the role of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question. Some assured that this issue is also the product of the former dictatorial regime sponsored, or at least accepted by the Western World. The collapse of it will positively affect the solutions. A new attitude toward the conflict will be decisive to move towards the transition. The new generation of young Palestinians refuses to be manipulated for the benefit of internal political problems.

Others believe that you cannot separate the Arab revolutions from the Palestinian revolution and the creation of a Palestinian state. Only the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict

will stabilize the region. Meanwhile, the Arab world will continue against the policy of the West and it will be difficult for the Arabs to trust the West.

According to some experts, the approach to the Israeli-Palestinian problem after the revolutions could be a key issue, the policy should focus not on hatred of Israel, but on defense of freedom / dignity of the Palestinians. Otherwise, it may encourage hatred of Israel as either cause or consequence of the Palestinian issue without forgetting that for the Islamist movements the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will always have a deep religious connotation.

The strength of the social movement was not the only aspect of the Egyptian revolt, all political affiliations were represented with their agendas and goals for the future. At first the lack of leadership has been the main force for the success of the revolution and today it is one of the main challenges of the transition.

The transition in the Arab world is presented as a struggle between challenges and opportunities, the process is trapped between the hope of change, the fear of failure and the counterrevolution. They have overthrown some of the leaders but the establishment and the system remain.

The role of the army and security have been discussed; the audience came almost to agree with the idea that they are fundamental components to the balance of any system of governance and adapting their roles to the new order is crucial to ensure its sustainability and avoid the counter-revolution, as it happened in Iran after 1979. Some participants recalled the clutter and chaos that Iraq suffered after the collapse of its army and security forces, following a decision by the American forces.

The army and security institutions may be well considered, respected as soon as they undergo to democratic political institutions. However, the process of dismantling these traditional institutions, heavily settled, will be long. In any case, the first step should be holding free elections.

To support the process of transition to democracy, it could be helpful for future elections in Arab countries, the presence of international observers who guarantee the transparency and democratic charater of the elections. The presence of a Monitoring Committee for the elections, within the previous 3 or 4 months, would provide credibility to these processes. This is to accompany the real architects of the transition. The EU should only act as an umbrella, without participating directly in political and/or electoral outcomes.

This point of the analysis was qualified by the following argument: most of the Arab young revolutionaries do not demand to follow the steps of the West neither does the West lead

that change. A good number of them have lived and been educated in the West, and admire its achievements, especially in economic realms and share fundamental principles on human rights and freedoms, but are not convinced of the goodness of its lifestyle, its relativism, its secularism, usually unacceptable to them, or loss of values, such as those relating to family, while rejecting his self-centeredness or its interventionist policies regarding the Arab and Islamic world. Will be changed this without changing Western policies?

For some, one of the true dangers of the revolution is the dominance of sectarian-religious sentiments that could lead the transition towards a situation similar to Iraq. While others warn that sectarianism is more on the eye of the beholder than real on the ground.

Some participants pointed out that Islamist and Salafi ideologies may play a role in the political future of the countries in transition; many are identified with traditional religious elements also manipulated by some parties of political Islam as the Muslim Brotherhood. But despite this, some think that it should not be violated, under any circumstances, the fundamental right of freedom of expression, and thus Islamist discourses will circulate calling for the establishment of a traditional Islamic society. It is possible that political Islam win elections and constitute Islamic states.

Should we assume that the democratization of Arab countries will be a long process of learning and development, not without dangers?, is it the price it has to be paid for the establishment of democracy?, Should we blindly trust the system?, do we only have to wait until the societies become mature and change for themselves? There was not unanimous answer to these questions.