Conference Report

Building Bridges: Towards Viable Democracies in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya

Fourth Annual Conference of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy

at Stanford University – March 28-29, Tunis.

The Program on Arab Reform and Democracy (ARD) at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) convened its fourth annual conference, and first to be held in the Arab world, on March 28- 29, 2013 in Tunis, Tunisia. The conference was organized in collaboration with the University of Tunis, El Manar and the Centre d'études maghrébines à Tunis (CEMAT). Entitled *"Building Bridges: Towards Viable Democracies in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya"*, the conference engaged leading scholars, policymakers, and practitioners from all three countries, as well as international experts, to reflect comparatively on the process of democratization in each of the three countries. Dr. Lina Khatib, leader and co-founder of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy opened the conference with a reflection on its title, "Building Bridges", saying that "only through building bridges across social, political, and economic lines can we reach an understanding of how democratic change in the Arab world can be supported". The conference discussions that followed in turn focused on the various elements of transition towards democracy, highlighting contextual challenges and encouraging space for knowledge sharing. Over the course of the two days, speakers shared their experiences and addressed specific key issues, including political coalitions and Islamism, constitution drafting, national dialogues and civil society, economic policy, and Arab relations with the USA and Europe.

The conference also launched a new ARD research project on pluralism, political participation and citizenship, a fitting framework for the discussions that alluded to the importance of fostering an open, political debate among citizens in the Arab world. This framework includes recognizing plurality within these societies, instituting a legislative system that grants all citizens equal rights, and accepting that differing viewpoints are inevitable in any democratic society.

The conference played an especially marking role in Tunisia as it brought together two leaders of opposing political parties, notably President of the ruling party Ennahda, Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, and President of Nida Tounes, Mr. Beji Caid Essebsi. The two leaders are known to represent two different visions for Tunisia's transition towards democracy, and their speeches, moderated by HRH Prince Moulay Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui of Morocco, who is a Consulting Professor at CDDRL and one of the co-founders of ARD, illustrated the urgent need for "building bridges" across ideological divides during sensitive periods of democratic transition in Tunisia and the Arab world more generally if social cohesion is to be maintained.

Political Coalitions and Islamism

As Islamist groups are playing an increasing role in the transitions of Tunisia and Egypt and also in Libya, the place of religion in government was a central subject throughout the different sessions. In his opening address, Sheikh Ghannouchi presented his view of a modern Islamic and democratic Tunisia that he believes Ennahda embodies and that the Tunisian people support. The three party coalition that Ennahda is currently part of, he argues, and the establishment of a National Constituent Assembly (NCA) comprised of various political parties and independent actors, is a testament to his party's ability to establish a democratic system that reconciles modern values with Islamic modern reform. Opposition leader, Mr. Essebsi, firmly disagreed with the benevolence of this notion, affirming in his speech that Ennahda aims to Islamize Tunisian society. Professor Larry Diamond, director of CDDRL at Stanford University, urged politicians to create a conducive political ecosystem wherein opposition forces are respected and parties refrain from using destructive political language.

Sheikh Ghannouchi's and Mr. Essebsi's speeches were joined by an address by public intellectual Dr. Samir Morcos, who in November 2012 resigned from the post of assistant for democratic transition to the president of Egypt. In Egypt, an expedited constitution writing process has left a divided vision for Egypt's future, and in his address, Dr. Morcos expressed concern about how this lack of reconciliation between different groups and the rule of one single party, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, will affect progress made at the beginning of the revolution.

The concern of Dr. Morcos about how the dominance of a single Islamist party might affect the course of his country was one shared by other panelists, notably Mr. Essebsi, who made a strong distinction between a secular government and an absence of religion within society, emphasizing that Tunisia has been a Muslim country for 14 centuries. In response, Mr. Said Ferjani, spokesperson for Ennahda, attempted to quell any assumptions that his party pushed for the insertion of sharia law or the concept of complementarity of women to men in the Tunisian constitution. To give further credibility to the prevalence of this debate, Law Professor at the University of Carthage Dr. Slim Laghmani explained that debate over the fundamentals of Islam and secularist notions was prevalent in Tunisia, contributing to the slow process of the constitution's drafting amongst members of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly.

As countries continue to form governments and create ruling coalitions, the role of Islam within government will continue to be debated, particularly as it pertains to each country's constitution. But ultimately this debate must be placed within the context of the developing political process in each country as rival political groups try to assert their power—despite Mr. Essebsi's criticism of Ennahda, he acknowledged that it is part of the political landscape in Tunisia and that its members are not enemies. Similarly, Sheikh Ghannouchi acknowleged the place of his political rival by unexpectedly staying in the room to listen while Mr. Essebsi gave his speech. And while Mr. Essebsi regarded Ennahda's coalition with parties whose political ideologies are fundamentally different from its own as "unnatural", he attributed this to the governance challenges faced by the coalition after its member parties ascended to power, blaming the coalition arrangement for stalling the constitution drafting process. The indirect exchange between Sheikh Ghannouchi and Mr. Essebsi sparked a wider public debate in Tunisia, beyond the conference itself, about the need for political leaders to transcend rhetoric through concrete action to steer the country in the path of democratization, especially as society faces increased polarization.

Constitution Drafting

The drafting of a constitution is an exercise Tunisia, Egypt and Libya all agree is essential. None, however, agreed on the best or most efficient way to do so. The three countries have adapted different methods of writing their constitutions after their respective revolutions, inevitably influencing the course of each country's transition towards democracy.

In Egypt, a constitution was completed by December 2012, resulting in a permanent presidency and permanent institutions. Professor of Public Policy at the American University in Cairo, Dr. Emad Shahin, explained that because of the leadership of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the constitution's drafting process was accelerated, consequently rendering the legitimacy of institutions controversial, exacerbating a general sense of mistrust and moving different political parties further from consensus. Another marking characteristic of the Egyptian constitution is the privilege allotted to military institutions to try civilians in their own, independent judicial system.

Professor Laghmani explained in detail the constitution drafting process in Tunisia, noting too its lack of consensus and repetitive assembly member absenteeism. The process has now surpassed its one-year deadline and it remains unclear when the constitution will be finished. What is clear, however, is that the average Tunisian citizen is impatient for the process to be completed, experts are underwhelmed by the quality of the first draft, and constituent assembly members are pressured to complete the final constitution in time for the next elections. Further, as emphasized by NCA representative Mrs. Mabrouka M'barek, the NCA also acts as a legislative body responsible for numerous roles that require more time than had been originally allotted to the assembly. Unlike Egypt, the NCA in Tunisia is working under a temporary government whose mandate ends when the next elections take place.

This leads to an essential question about constitution drafting that many speakers raised: how fast should a constitution be written and how much time should the process be given to ensure the writing of a document that is fully representative of a country's citizens? In Libya, there has never been a constitution, and there still is neither a constitution, nor established institutions. Dr. Salwa El Daghili, Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Benghazi and member of the National Transitional Council in Libya, argued that the appointment, rather than the election of constituent assembly members would be a more effective way to produce sustainable constitutions, as the inclusion of experts and women would be ensured.

Today in Libya, the main challenge lies in the existence of a National Congress that does not respond to some of the immediate needs of the Libyan people, as identified by the Libyan conference speakers, both from the perspective of offering a viable legislative system and of representing the voices of marginalized groups. The latter, Dr. El Daghili stresses, is one of the most important considerations to take when electing a constituent assembly, as well as one of the most significant impediments the assembly will face. Added to that are geographical, regional, and ethnic specificities that are unique to the Libyan context and that make consideration of the sharia concept for example, less of a priority than it is in the Tunisian context.

The element these three countries do hold at equal value is the inclusion of a preamble in the constitution that delineates equal human rights.

National Dialogues and Civil Society Performance |

Political Participation, Pluralism and Citizenship Rights

The role of political culture and political behavior in society were a recurring subject of debate throughout the conference. President of Tunisian civil society organization Al-Madanya, Lotfi Maktouf, argued that the existence of a viable political culture allows for a functional democracy that fosters open debate and gives room to opportunity. This is lacking in Tunisia, he said. Without it, the definitions of key concepts such as pluralism and citizenship remain ambiguous. Dr. Salwa El Daghili reiterated this point, blaming the impatience of Libyans for political stability and their high expectations of a functional government and a working constitution on the lack of a viable political culture following decades of effective de-politicization by the Qaddafi regime. However, these expectations and ongoing discussions actually indicate that there was never a total absence of political culture in either of these societies, as Dr. Ibrahim Awad, Professor of Public Policy at the American University in Cairo, stated. Even under an authoritarian regime, many citizens harbored political opinions while others found ways to voice their opinions when given the freedom to do so. This is indicative of the existence of political culture, even if it is not fully cultivated yet. These elements, how they are nourished and how they evolve affect national dialogue, contribute to the formation of informed citizens and help define the concepts of pluralism and democracy. Civil society plays an important role in this process. Prof. Dhafer Malouche from the University of Carthage presented statistical data in support of this argument, with findings from surveys in Tunisia showing that citizens who were involved in civil society activity were more likely to vote, to join political parties, and to seek further information about politics.

During his presentation, Dr. Charles Tripp of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies noted the reemergence of the public and the re-appropriation of the public domain as unifying factors in each of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt during their transitions. This demonstrated that within a true republic, or a public state, pluralism and citizenship rights cannot be disentangled and that strong institutions that serve the interest of the public and reinforce rights of the citizens are a necessity. Furthering the notion of pluralism, Dr. Tripp emphasized the importance of recognizing the plural nature of the public, which in addition to being an integral part of a democracy is also the best way to guard minority groups.

Recognizing pluralism as one of the principal challenges during these transition periods, Dr. Salwa El Daghili continuously spoke of the emergence and reemergence of groups in Libya who have had an impact on the development of the country. She mentioned the various actors in the political scene, the different tribes, the rebel groups and the civil society representatives whose roles in determining the fate of their country remains unclear. The same situation is relevant in Egypt and Tunisia, where additionally, opposing secularist and Islamist groups must coexist, especially after Islamic political parties have been elected to power. To many, this represents a significant threat, and "the only bridge," stated Mr. Lotfi Maktouf, "is civil society, which can help achieve connective citizenship, pluralism and political participation". Dr. Faraj Najem, Professor at the University of Benghazi, emphasized that pluralism and social cohesion are also achieved through an inclusive political process that does not exclude *a priori* even those previously affiliated with ousted regimes, adding that any viable democracy must have a place for political oppositions who should be given the space to play a role in governance.

Economic Policy

Throughout the conference, panelists and participants highlighted the importance and impact of the economic dimensions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. While acknowledging parallels among the three countries, namely the issue of subsidies and a lack of sector diversification, all speakers noted the variance in economic ecosystems, with particular mention to Libya and its overwhelming supply of oil. With no real long-term debt, no dependency on donor loans, and a favorable investment grade in international credit rating, Libya's economy seems to have the fundamental ingredients for vibrant and healthy growth, as long "as we can get a few things right, " said Sami Zaptia of the Libyan Herald. However, decades of underinvestment and a culture of immediate entitlement represent a threat to Libya's future economic growth and stability.

As with Tunisia and Egypt, long-term economic policies targeting job creation, increased investment, access to markets, regional integration, and strengthened financial institutions were advanced as necessary steps to future economic sustainability. Economic development is the first objective, noted Dr. Hafez Ghanem from the Brookings Institution. Investment in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurship programs, particularly in the service sector in Egypt, were presented as necessary solutions to the countries' economic challenges. According to Prof. Ibrahim Awad, additional focus should be placed on entrepreneurship and investment in the private sector so that governments can upgrade productivity to scale up the income in the private sector and increase opportunities for employment. In addition, for both Tunisia and Egypt, countries depraved of natural resources, austerity and macro-stabilization policies are imperative to address issues of debt and foreign reserves. These policies must be pursued in tandem with programs that tackle corruption and support youth entrepreneurship and small businesses through capital, technology, and access to markets. Such a dual-policy approach, as long as it's well articulated and explained to the citizens, may make it easier for the public to accept increased austerity measures and economic hardship in the short-term.

In this era of austerity, many speakers asked about the role of outside investors and foreign partnerships. Dr. Mongi Boughzala, professor of economics at the University of Tunis El Manar, suggested that the United States and Europe be considered as partners who have their own interests, but whose technological advancement is necessary to the development of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. As these countries continue in their transitions, panelists both cautioned about the risks involved with lengthy transitions, including Dr. Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, economist and policymaker in Tunisia, and remained hopeful that governments in North Africa will solve their own economic destinies, as noted by Anas El Gomati, Founder of the Sadeq Institute in Libya.

Political and Economic Relationships with the USA

The political and economic relationship among these three countries and the United States and Europe came under intense debate during the two-day conference. At play was the role of "the West" and the balance between autonomy and foreign assistance. From an economic vantage point, panelists analyzed the role of loans and programs of international financial institutions during a country's political transition.

In discussing the overarching economic and geopolitical concerns of the US and the EU in North Africa, speakers noted the salience of the following: regional arms proliferation, increased extremism, bilateral relations with Israel, the geopolitical role of oil, increased terrorism and the growing prevalence of Salafism. On a regional level, panelists also discussed the issue of porous borders among all three states, particularly regarding Libya and the causative effects of its revolutionary fallout on an increase in violence and arms smuggling, especially amongst its southern neighbors. In light of these regional security concerns, participants, notably Mr. Salman Shaikh of the Brookings Institute, cautioned the US against its policy of "leading from behind," arguing that such strategy could be more accurately dubbed "leaving behind." The primary interest of the US and EU should be in ensuring growth of democracy, betting on a process rather than trying to pick winners, as expressed by Prof. Larry Diamond.

In discussing future manifestations of a political and economic relationship, Mrs. Mabrouka M'barek of the Tunisian political party Congress for the Republic (CPR) advocated for a middle ground approach that appropriately balances neoliberal economic policies with a focus on local sustainability. Echoing these sentiments, Mr. Anas El Gomati also called for increased regional integration and partnership as a means of overcoming shared economic challenges. This integration, cautioned Salman Shaikh, must be intelligently managed, as a belief in regional leadership, and the alliances therein produced, could encourage polarization throughout the regions. As the US and EU seek to better understand their role in the region, they should focus on promoting greater regional cooperation, instead of solely relying on their historic allies and understood shared interests.

Additionally, the Arab transitions have come at a time when the US is shifting its sights to Asia and when eighty-five percent of the energy exported flows in the direction of East and not West. Despite this tendency, Europe and the US should encourage a more inclusive political project. From the point of view of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the US and EU should be viewed as strategic partners that can be capitalized on depending on the country's own interests and values. In addition, according to Dr. Amr Darrag, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt, working towards a general framework on foreign and economic policy can play a positive role in reducing political polarization within countries.

Challenges and Moving Forward

As this transitory phase continues to evolve in each of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, panelists and participants voiced cautious optimism about the future of these three countries. The fundamental challenge, as understood by Professor Larry Diamond, will be in building a system of mutual security, often done in the form of a constitution, whereby all actors come to trust the commitment of the other to play by the rules of the "democratic game" through the creation of an elite political pact. In reaction to the debate over what type of governing system a country should implement, Professor Diamond reiterated that choosing the appropriate representative system requires deep contextual knowledge, adding that this debate of presidential vs. parliamentary system can be meaningless in the absence of an electoral system. Democratic states, once created and consolidated, require strong institutions, rule of law, monitoring, and accountability to contain and preempt corruption.

In relation to Europe and the US, a key goal and challenge, as encapsulated by Salman Sheikh, is to support the advancement of fundamental values including freedom and rights, such as women's rights, and the right to peaceful assembly, and inclusion of civil society in these countries, especially when strategic interests of foreign states do not necessarily align with the democratization process. Both the "West" and the governments of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt should support those democratic and pluralistic ideals and equitable economic policies as demanded by the citizens of those countries.

The transition process for each of these countries has been and will continue to be challenging. As each country continues in its process, many speakers voiced support for greater regional development integration and partnerships as a means of facing the challenges ahead, affirming the conference's mission regarding the importance of "building bridges". Prof. Mongi Boughzala articulated the need to be optimistic in order to carry on in an uncertain and complex setting, saying, "the challenges are huge, but the dream is not over. To achieve this dream we need this dialogue and bridge building. We need spaces for analysis and mutual recognition".

The Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University will continue its mission to support the existence of an intellectual space for analysis through its events, publications, and engagement with multiple stakeholders in the Arab world and outside.