

From Political Activism to Democratic Change in the Arab World Conference Report

The Program on Arab Reform and Democracy (ARD) at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law convened its third major conference on May 12-13, 2011. Entitled "*From Political Activism to Democratic Change in the Arab World*", the conference gathered together an impressive group of scholars, experts, and activists to discuss the past, present, and future of activism in the Arab world. Discussion focused on the recent revolutions that have erupted in the region and how these events reflect the evolving nature of mobilization efforts among Arab citizens. Experts on single countries were organized into five sessions – on Tunisia and Egypt, the Gulf, Syria and Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan and Morocco. A final roundtable discussion focused on lessons to be drawn for the region at large.

Associate Professor of Political Science at Yale University Ellen Lust opened up the two-day gathering. Lust suggested the importance of defining the key obstacles activists are confront during this period of transition in the region, from challenges of coalition formation, to coordinating on a set of demands and repertoires, resisting co-optation, and maintaining a clear distinction between regime and opposition, to preserving unity in the face of internal discord and factionalization.

The Impact of the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions

Conference participants painted a vivid picture of the changing face of activism in the Arab world. Consistently, a distinction between older generations, often co-opted by the regime, and the new generation at the heart of current reform movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, and elsewhere, was drawn. Larry Diamond, CDDRL Director, commented that the nature of these protests, region-wide, is fluid, fragmented, and often leaderless. Still, a number of distinct groups could be identified among the protesting masses: Nabiha Jerad, civil society activist and Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Tunis, emphasized the large role played by unemployed youth in Tunisia, and Daniel Brumberg, Professor of Government at Georgetown University, pointed to the urban middle class in both Egypt and Tunisia, whose apathy had been the foundation of the previous system and whose politicization spelled its demise.

Generally speaking, the new wave of activism in the Arab World is a regional phenomenon, with the events in Tunisia and Egypt shaping the nature of activism elsewhere. Nathan Brown, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University, explained that those revolutions have helped transform what people think is possible. For the first time, demonstrations in Palestine have been successfully organized independently of any particular group or movement. The success of these broad-based mobilization efforts reflects a strengthened belief in the power of non-violent resistance, according to Mustafa Barghouti, Member of the Palestinian Parliament.

There was also consensus that this younger generation of activists was making regular use of new associational repertoires to launch their movements. Michele Dunne, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, emphasized the role of civil society, particularly trade unions, in supporting mobilization efforts in Tunisia and Egypt. Munir Mawari, a Washington-based Yemeni journalist and representative of the Yemeni opposition in the USA,

described the impact that the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences had on the tactics used by Yemeni activists. Not only did secularists, the Brotherhood, Liberals, and Socialists align, but tribes, led by a new generation of leaders, began to play a distinct political role. Marwan Muasher, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, explained that events in Tunisia and Egypt helped Jordanian activists build momentum and unite the movement. This is in contrast to the Syrian experience where it was the regime's use of violence that effectively unified the movement, according to Radwan Ziadeh, Syrian activist and Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University. Sadly this unity is lacking in the Lebanese case, where mobilization efforts have remained divided along sectarian lines. Ziad Majed, Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at the American University of Paris, argued that the Lebanese case cannot be explained with reference to the absence of democracy or the lack of public and private freedoms; the main culprit is sectarian tensions and the overly rigid consociational system put in place to contain them.

Significantly, the wave of mass demonstrations in the Arab world marks a new era of democratization in the region. As Hicham Ben Abdullah, Consulting Professor at Stanford University and founder of the Moulay Hicham Foundation, explained, these movements are fundamentally post-ideological and patriotic in their orientation.

Overcoming Challenges and Responding to Regime Tactics

Creating and maintaining a unified voice is a clear obstacle facing activists in the Arab world. This is particularly difficult in those regimes in which power is decentralized and diffused. Consider the case of Saudi Arabia. Stéphane Lacroix, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Sciences Po in Paris, explained that activists do not always know who to target and, as a result, have difficulty coming up with appropriate slogans to unify various oppositional sub-groups. But even when the opposition's target is well-defined, divisions – whether socio-economic, sectarian or generational – must be overcome for it to have a major impact. Nathan Brown described that factionalization has been particularly challenging in the Palestinian case, undermining momentum as armed groups continually edge out civilian mobilization efforts.

Christopher Alexander, Director of the Dean Rusk International Studies Program at Davidson College, described how the real challenge in late 2010 in Tunisia for young activists was creating a mass following that would allow disgruntled elites to distance themselves from the regime. But Alexander was quick to point out that the contingent unity of action is not real organization. The heterogeneity of the activist community has created particularly daunting obstacles in the post-revolutionary transition period, as mentioned by Nabiha Jerad.

Ahmed Salah, executive director of the House of New Future Center for Legal and Human Rights Studies in Egypt, explained that the key challenge for protest organizers pre-January 25 in the Egyptian case was mass mobilization, as fear of reprisals kept most people at home despite widespread antipathy for the regime. When activists asked people what would encourage them to participate, the response was often “I would go if everybody else goes”. Thus Egyptian activists sought to create the illusion of a mass protest by gathering smaller numbers of protesters in narrow alleyways, leading to central gathering areas. In the case of the February 20 protest

march in Morocco, as Ahmed Benchemsi (journalist and visiting scholar at ARD) explained, it was the reverse: people showed up to the march just to see which other people showed up too.

Even when unity is achieved, it is often difficult to maintain, in the face of intense regime opposition. At times, regimes have tried to co-opt the opposition as a whole, as was the case of *al-Wifaq* in Bahrain, explained Laurence Louer, research fellow at the Center for International Research and Studies at Sciences Po. Its decisions to cooperate with the government after the 2009 Parliamentary elections and delay support for the demonstrations led to a split within and hurt its reputation among Bahraini activists. In Tunisia, Nabiha Jerad related that most traditional actors have been successfully co-opted by the regime. Regimes may instead try to play opposition sub-groups off one another, hoping to cause deep divisions. Amer Bani Amer, General Director of the Al-Hayat Center, described just such an event in Jordan, when the *Jayeen* split from the *Shebab* in order to discuss reforms directly with King Abdullah. But sometimes, regime tactics are not so nuanced. Maryam Al Khawaja, head of foreign relations at the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, described the Bahraini regime's strategy: name-calling, describing activists as Communists, Socialists, pro-Iranian, terrorists, or any other label they believe might garner Western support. Similarly, in Syria, Ellen Lust emphasized how the "foreign" label has been used by the regime to discredit the larger opposition movement.

Sean Yom, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Temple University, encouraged conference participants to consider the fact that regimes, not just activists, have repertoires – repertoires of recalibration in the face of opposition. In the case of Yemen, Munir Mawari highlighted that Ali Abdullah Saleh has learned key lessons from Hosni Mubarek's experiences in Egypt and has regularly made empty promises in order to appease opposition forces in the short term and buy himself time. But what is remarkable about this latest wave of protests, Larry Diamond noted, was that participants' tenacity would insure that "recalibration" would no longer suffice and that real reforms had become necessary.

Changing regional and international factors also have large impacts. Laurence Louer described how the Gulf Cooperation Council has come to play a constraining role as a means of maintaining internal stability in member states. Marwan Muasher described that even Israel wants the Syrian regime to stay because of the implications for its own security. The international community, and particularly the United States, has had mixed reactions to activism in the region. Ahmed Salah claimed that Egypt's relative opening in 2005 would not have happened if not for Bush administration pressure on the Mubarak regime, and that this opening later collapsed because of American retreat. Munir Mawari also pointed to the long role of the international community in supporting President Saleh in office.

Looking Forward

In the final session, participants addressed the future, discussing the challenges and chances for democratization in the region. Across the region, activists are experiencing a moment of fleeting powerfulness, but how to channel this into sustained change? Lina Khatib explained that activists need three key things in periods of democratic transition: organization, strategy, and an agenda. In Egypt and Tunisia, Christopher Alexander commented that while activism proved effective for pushing against the government, there is a lack of organization for constructing something to replace it. The inherent difficulties of building effective institutions and parties are exacerbated

by youths' resistance to participate in formal politics, both distrusting established elites (Nabiha Jerad, Ahmed Salah) and reluctant to create their own parties (Alexander). Michele Dunne explained that some of this ambivalence is due to a complete lack of effective politics during their lifetimes. Ben Abdullah contrasted the challenges facing Egyptian and Syrian activists: while the former have to shift from sheer mass mobilization during the revolution to organizational capacity during the transition, Syria is struggling to become a less organized, more mass-based movement in order to become an effective insurrection.

The problem for activists of moving from “young, romantic idealists” to achieving their goals is widespread, as described by Ahmed Benchemsi. He argued that in the absence of organization, activists need at least a strategy and agenda that involves a “superclaim”: a claim that is concrete, symbolically powerful, likely to be immediately satisfiable, and consensual. However, such development of organization, strategy, and agenda may be more realistic for some activists than others; Radwan Ziadeh was quick to remind that in Syria activists are largely underground and most protestors are concerned with their immediate safety.

Strategies beyond the tactics of popular uprisings were also discussed; Larry Diamond suggested that monarchies such as Jordan or Morocco, the most probable path to sustainable democracy would be through a negotiated transition, rather than a popular uprising. Ahmed Benchemsi added that such reform would only be possible if street protests were combined with calls for reform from the elite – an alignment requiring some degree of the organization and hierarchy of which activists are wary. Daniel Brumberg echoed this, reminding that movements need to have the capacity to overcome internal conflicts; cooperative transitions do not come with divided opposition.

Social divisions, whether along sectarian, ideological, or ethnic lines, continue to be a challenge for democratization across the region. As the temporary unity of the protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt dissolves, Michele Dunne questioned which mattered more for the trajectory of revolutions – the intensity of political activism or the degree of social cohesion? In some cases, these divisions are being used by regimes to delegitimize movements or reassert control. Ahmed Salah described how in Egypt sectarian violence could be used by the military as an excuse to extend emergency laws or implement more crackdowns, while in Bahrain, as Maryam Al Khawaja explained, the regime has attempted to paint the protest movement as purely sectarian. In other countries, these differences have made creating a movement of critical mass more difficult. Marwan Muasher reflected on the dearth of Jordanian and Palestinian-Jordanian cooperation, suggesting that creating the pressure necessary to create a constitutional monarchy would be impossible in the short term. Likewise, in Syria the regime depended on a similar “protection racket” for religious minorities (Daniel Brumberg).

Activists and academics at the conference were also able to compare and suggest tactics and strategies. Maryam Al Khawaja emphasized that civil disobedience is needed in Bahrain, though the level of repression and arrests has made this difficult. Similarly, Radwan Ziadeh advocated for a general strike in Syria, but cautioned that such action could not be guided from outside. Mustafa Barghouti described the plethora of tactics that Palestinian activists plan to use, from ground-level protest all the way to “diplomatic resistance” in seeking international recognition of a Palestinian state.

However, many participants also stressed that, at least in some countries, internal pressure might not be sufficient. As Lina Khatib explained, no matter how great the protest movements, sometimes there is “a wall that cannot be torn down without the international community”. Maryam Al Khawaja, Munir Mawari, Ziad Majed, and Radwan Ziadeh described that in the respective countries of Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, international pressure is key to changing the situation in favor of the protestors. Larry Diamond also elaborated on the scenario of an elite pact leading to more liberalized government and democracy, arguing that it would probably take a combination of domestic and international factors to force leaders to bargain such a transition.

Conclusion

Activism in the Arab world has changed and is changing substantially. But even countries in which protests have achieved the ouster of the former regime, achieving sustainable democracy is far from guaranteed. What is clear is that the rules of the game have changed for many countries, shifting the realm of the possible and offering new opportunities for activists. The ability of activists across the region to communicate, share strategies, and learn from each other to take advantage of these opportunities is crucial. In this vein, CDDRL’s Program on Arab Reform and Democracy will continue to report on and analyze ongoing changes to the nature of activism, and importantly, provide a space that fosters dialogue among the activist and practitioner world, the academic community, and the policy environment.