



How Can Central European Civil Society Assist the Egyptian Transition?

Briefing Note

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On June 6, 2011 DEMAS – Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights, together with its two member organizations EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy and Forum 2000 Foundation, organized a one-day seminar on the current state of Egyptian civil society and Egyptian – EU – Central European possibilities of transition cooperation. The representatives of Visegrad (Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Polish), Egyptian and Brussels based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foreign donors and relevant policy makers from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated in the workshop. The aim of this briefing note is to summarize the main issues raised at the seminar and to find possible topics for further EU – Egyptian cooperation.

At the end of 2010 a call for political, economic and social changes appeared in Tunisia. After a short period of time other countries in the MENA region followed. One of the most effective movements grew into a people's revolution (ath-thawra ash-shaabea) in Egypt where the strong voice of civil society pushed President Mubarak to his resignation. At this moment the Western world, impressed by the swift and effective changes, started to talk about the important role of civil society in Egypt, as if it was a completely new movement in the country. However, civil society had been functioning for at least two decades before January 25. The revolution was not only a question of the power of new media but it also represented broader social protest that has existed for several years with both social and economic demands. The Tahrir events that led to the changes did not arise unexpectedly, as might be seen from the European perspective. In this connection it is worth highlighting the activities of the Egyptian Movement for Change, so called Kifaya (Enough), which emerged in 2004 as a loosely organized group

of political activists and anti-Mubarak opposition politicians and makes up a large part of the political spectrum.

Following the Arab Spring the “democratic part of the world” started to see an opportunity to extend a helping hand regarding issues connected with a political transition from an authoritarian regime to a free one with democratic elements respecting regional specifics. Since the Czech Republic and other Central European countries (Visegrad Group) also went through a political, economic and social transformation during the last two decades, there are both positive and negative experiences that can be shared.

At the beginning of the Prague seminar, the following main questions were identified: Would the Central European transition experience be relevant in Egypt and the MENA region? What are the main issues and needs of Egyptian civil society? What kind of cooperation would be possible between the EU and Egyptian civil society from the short-term and long-term points of view?

Would the Central European transition experience be relevant in Egypt and the MENA region?

In general, it was agreed that the Central European transition experience is relevant and some aspects might be transferred to Egypt, as the Visegrad countries have significant experience with transition from non-democratic, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes to democratic systems based on the rule of law and a functioning civil society. The goodwill for cooperation with Central Europe, rather than with the old EU member states or the US, originates mainly from historical circumstances (such as the issue of colonialism or presence of occupational forces in the region) and a general atmosphere in Egyptian society. Especially when we talk about the Czech and Slovak Republics, former Czechoslovakia is still known among Egyptians for its linkages to Egypt in modern history (not in the sense of socialism, but in the sense of trade, industry and education).

Areas of possible cooperation can be identified in the framework of political and social reforms, such as reforms of the constitutional system, army, police, intelligence service, judiciary, media, education, political pluralism and the fight against corruption.

Strategies for sharing the transition experience need to be built on both positive and negative examples and sharing “lessons learned” rather than using the model of teacher and pupil. This sort of approach, by learning from one’s mistakes, can produce a better agenda for new countries in transition. The political revolution and democratic changes on the political level need to be followed by social and cultural changes within society.

What are the main issues and needs of Egyptian civil society?

One of the most important issues arising after the revolution relates to the question whether democracy is only about elections or whether elections should precede reform of the constitution. Due to a lack of political vision among professional politicians on one side and a high percentage of politically illiterate population on the other, it will be not easy to address this challenge and quickly find a definite solution. Regarding the lack of political experience amongst politicians, it must be noted that since 1952 there were only authoritarian regimes in Egypt. In the post-revolution period the number of politically illiterate people who also want to play a role in the new political life and who, therefore, create new political parties has increased. Due to the above mentioned reasons proper awareness raising activities through capacity building and trainings on both sides seems to be an appropriate approach. Especially when talking about a general public that needs to know about its rights and also about its duties.

The second main issue is a danger of frustration. The question is what happens if reforms are slow and not accompanied by quick, direct, visible and measurable success. It is understandable that people expect that political changes will bring certain economic growth. Systematic work with civil society explaining the difficulties with economic and social transition, as well as identifying a new methodology in bringing together democracy and socio-economic assistance will thus be one of the key aspects for overcoming such a period. In the near future it will be necessary to invest in civil society as the driving force of changes. Its main opportunities consist of its courage, dreams and ideas and recruiting young people. Functioning infrastructure is another positive aspect.

Thirdly, new media were used during the revolution as a weapon; however the power of governmental media and media supported by investments from the Gulf monarchies to stop democratic changes is still significant. Building alternative media and the reform of old governmental media assure their independence.

The last issue that should be mentioned here is the political and social role of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. From the Western point of view the Muslim Brotherhood represents a possible problem on Egypt's path towards democracy. Due to its broad support and long history in working within Arab society the Brotherhood will play an important role in the political and social life of the state. It will be necessary to count on them and continue to include them in the dialogue, as they want to share the fruits of democracy but at the same time they want to make political and social changes with stronger religious aspects. However it is important to underline that neither the Egyptian

nor Tunisian revolutions are Islamic revolutions, as was the case during the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979.

What kind of cooperation would be possible between the EU and Egyptian civil societies from the short-term and long-term points of view?

As for the short-term perspective, suggestions include assistance regarding the creation of new political parties, the establishment and professionalization of NGOs and building Egyptian civil society. In Egypt there is a large number of NGOs of great potential and skills and some of them with working infrastructure. To achieve more and to support their competitiveness on the international level, targeted assistance on particular issues might be useful. Lecturing and advocacy campaigns seem to be the most effective tool for starting an effective cooperation. Especially before the elections it will be important to teach the general public about its rights and duties and how to understand the large program of political parties.

From the mid-term point of view, projects focused on the further development of NGOs and civil society, as well as their accountability and sustainability will be necessary. On-the-job-trainings and fellowships in European partner organizations for both politicians and NGO workers are the best training methods because they can be tailored according to the recipients' needs. Also bringing together politicians, governmental officers and members of civil society (NGO workers, teachers, students or journalists) during these kinds of events would be a huge benefit for all of them as they might share their opinions, experiences and ideas not only during the training but also in the longer term. To achieve broader impact, participants should also train their colleagues in Egypt and transfer their knowledge and experience. Targeting EU policy makers through joint advocacy of EU and Egyptian NGOs is another inspiration for a mid/long-term cooperation.

A vision for long-term projects should be focused more strategically. Possible projects could be focused on the parliamentary system, constitutional reform, police and intelligence service, education and media. Due to offering such extensive expertise, such projects should be multilateral rather than bilateral.

Other target groups for highly specialized projects include women, Christians, Bedouins, handicapped people and other marginalized groups. If taking into consideration geographical aspects, the revolution movement in Egypt was very much centralized in Cairo and partly in Alexandria. This is the reason why it is necessary to engage other regions on a more intensive level. Project cooperation targeted at the Delta, Oasis or Upper Egypt will be essential.

Both EU and Egyptian NGOs have to be involved in the projects from the beginning. That means it is important that both sides have active roles in identifying common topics and priorities, writing project proposals and project implementation. Egyptian NGOs must play the role of full partner and not just of recipient; otherwise such an approach would create “project corruption”.

Financial help should not come to Egypt in one large sum at the beginning but should be gradual in steps. As far as foreign transition aid is concerned, a number of Egyptian NGOs will not be willing to commit themselves to receiving subsidies coming from Western Europe or the United States due to the above mentioned historical and political reasons. It seems the new EU member states, mainly from the Visegrad region, are better accepted and therefore will be more appropriate project partners through whom the EU or American grants can be channelled. Grant financing should be accompanied by funding schemes and NGOs should be trained how to use it.

The above mentioned suggestions should serve as a practical example for further cooperation of EU – Egyptian civil societies. It might help to identify topics and methods of possible future cooperation in the third sector, but also on the political level, as it is important to work with both elites and the wider society.

The revolution in Egypt was started by a young generation that represents more than one half of the population. However democracy is also about sharing responsibility therefore democratic ideas have to be shared across generations and gender and all citizens must be involved in the transitional process. As the new EU member states themselves went through such a process and gained both positive and negative experiences they might share it and thus help build the new Egyptian democratic civil society. Working together on common projects will create a joint EU-Egyptian platform which might serve in the future as a bridge to other countries in the MENA region.

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