

'CHANGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: REVOLUTIONS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY'

By Wim Kok

- Perhaps one of the most salient elements of the recent uprisings and the changes these have already begun to bring about in North Africa and the Middle East, has been the role of communications technology, the Internet and the social networks - the telephone/telegram/printing press of this generation; the *public space* of the 21st Century; the space where power is today being sought and exercised by people.
- The speed with which the status quo has been challenged and, in some cases, has already started changing in these countries, has been staggering. This has led many to credit the Internet and social media for the revolutions.
- While the Internet and social media *have* provided citizens with a way to connect with each other, organize events, and share information during the uprisings, the Internet is not *responsible* for these revolutions – *people* are.
- Over the years we have increasingly recognized the difference and complementary natures of government and civil society and the way the two must interact in a truly democratic system. '*The people*', though, has normally been thought to fall largely within the latter, i.e., within 'civil society'.
- This is the topic I'd like to focus on tonight – the role of people and of civil society in recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa and the challenges ahead for both.
- Everything seems to indicate that we are witnessing a new 'wave' of democratization - the Jasmine Revolution, the Arab 'Spring', or the beginning of an Arab democratic moment. This 'moment', however, has not been sparked, by specific incidents of internal political strife or power struggles, nor by specific confrontations between the military and political power, as has been the case in many democratization processes. The recent uprisings have been sparked by long, unattended demands for reform and liberties, in the midst of an increasingly difficult socio-economic environment and social tensions accumulated over years. The motor has been *people power* – in the case of Egypt, for example, driven largely by middle-class youth.
- Suddenly, in the midst of authoritarian regimes that seemed unshakeable - strong, repressive, secure and apparently 'stable' – a tide of revolutions began in Tunisia, quickly spreading to Egypt and stirring uprisings from Morocco to Libya, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and even beyond.

- Developments in Tunisia and Egypt appear to have seeded a broad range of aspirations and revolutionary impetus in places as far as Zimbabwe, China, and even in Wisconsin and Europe.
- Taking the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings as a template, *people* are mobilizing to demand change.
- While a convergence of pro-reform, pro-freedom, pro-democracy ideals seem to have been aroused around the world as a result of events in North Africa, it appears to have been citizens and not organized civil society that have joined forces against a backdrop of poverty and disenfranchisement to express their grievances, claim the expansion of their civil and human rights and demand a change in political structures.
- Moreover, the movements that began in Tunisia and have so rapidly spread, are both unique and related. While protesters in the various countries are very diverse in their backgrounds and goals, they are all linked by their desire to unshackle the chains of authoritarianism that have long repressed them. They all share a desire for change - not slow, gradual reform, but rapid changes in political and power structures and in a State in which they had lost all confidence.
- It is still to be seen and will be essential for these individuals, initially brought together by a shared sentiment and desire for change, to come together in an 'organized' fashion to become that civil society that will be needed to balance and interact with government, in open, free, and hopefully, increasingly democratic systems in these countries.
- Above and beyond the wonders of communication technology, the events of the past months have galvanized and legitimized the work and the resources spent on strengthening civil society within the closed societies of the Middle East and North Africa – efforts intended to pave the way towards greater freedom, civil liberties and democracy in that region of the world.
- People and civil society have now spoken up and voiced their grievances, challenging and, in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, eventually toppling the regime; resisting in the case of Libya and Yemen; and persisting in several of the other countries.
- But a critical question remains. To what extent can the 'protesters' or agents of change we have seen in the North African and Middle East be considered '*organized civil society*'? Organized enough to respond to the challenges ahead, to interact and mutually engage with government and to play that role which we are all convinced civil society can and should play in a democratic transition and in a democracy? To what extent will they opt to take part in the political process and to become a political option that can

balance existing political forces, in the case of Egypt, forces like the military or the Muslim Brotherhood?

- Some will go the political route. Others will not. This is natural and healthy, but each will have to be prepared for and strengthened in the path they choose to follow.
- A well-developed civil society can be essential to avoid chaos, infighting and violent internal clashes that can lead to a political vacuum in the aftermath of the events. It can also serve to channel social demands towards more concrete political visions and institutions that can effectively implement much needed reforms and foster positive political changes.
- Organized civil society and civil society dialogue is necessary in a democratic society and even more so in a transition process during which, among others, they can help:
 - Shape the agenda during the transition, through targeted and effective advocacy, civic education; policy analysis and the formulation of concrete recommendations for reform;
 - Keep the momentum for change and democratic reform, while supporting consensus building and monitoring the transition;
 - Help open spaces for sectors previously excluded – formally or de facto - from the political and social debate, such as NGOs, professional associations, labor unions
 - Improve election-systems literacy and electoral processes;
 - Support legislative reforms;
 - Develop and implement advocacy, monitoring and public awareness initiatives in a number of areas, including human rights, civil liberties, social and development needs, transparency, the fight against corruption;
 - Ensure greater transparency and accountability on the part of decision makers at the local and national level;
 - Help prioritize community needs;
 - Engage with the private business sector to better link economic realities with the political reforms and policies being sought;

- These are but a few examples of areas where civil society can contribute in a democratic transition. Some of this is already beginning to happen in Tunisia and Egypt. The final outcome of uprisings in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, the confrontation in Lybia and the reaction to the reforms being undertaken in Morocco and Jordan will tell the tale. What will be the path the different regimes will eventually take in relation to their people. Will they adjust their ways to work with the changing landscape and the demands of their populations? How will they choose to deal with civil society and with the various programs that have sought to strengthen them over they years?
- Much needs to be done to further commit these countries to a truly democratic transition process and Europe should take an active role in supporting them. In this sense, the European Commission has already proposed that a commitment to adequately monitored, free and fair elections should be the entry qualification for participation in the Partnership for Democracy, as would closer cooperation within the ambit of the EU's foreign policy on security and in international fora on issues of common interest.
- On the civil society front, though, and recognizing that civil society dialogue is necessary in a democratic society and for the promotion of inclusive economic development, the European Union also hopes to expand support through a Civil Society Neighbourhood Facility that will develop further the advocacy capacities of civil society organisations. It will also be important to foster civil society coordination efforts in these countries; to scale up successful models, without demanding too much of organizations that are, in many cases, institutionally weak, and; to create measures of sustainability – institutionally and financially.
- Helping civil society assume its role and live its mission in a democratic society will be an important litmus test for the transitions we have begun to see in North Africa and the Middle East and we should do everything possible to support this process.