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THE ARAB YOUTH AND THE DAWN OF DEMOCRACY

Michael A. Lange

The political upheavals which have been experienced by so many Arab nations over the past few months are due to the political mobilisation of large sections of the countries' youth, something which previously seemed unthinkable. In political terms this is hugely significant, as Egypt and Tunisia are not the only countries where over half the population is under 30 years of age.

A glance at the statistics shows that the average age of some Arab societies can even be below 25 and in Egypt alone there are more than one million school leavers each year. All these educated young people are looking for jobs so that they can realise their dream of building their own lives and being independent from their parents. But only very few of them manage to achieve this without difficulties. This is why over recent years these young people have been taking more and more interest in the future of their countries and above all in the progress of the nascent political reform process. Their hope is that political and economic reforms will lead to more jobs, particularly in view of estimated population growth rates in these countries well in excess of one per cent, and which in Yemen are even forecast to hit 2.9 per cent. Over the next few years more and more young people will be flooding onto the local labour markets.

For many years the Egyptian government in particular tried to defuse the political time bomb caused by these demographic changes by guaranteeing jobs for university graduates in the country's already bloated civil service. However, lack of economic growth and budget restructuring led to this policy being discontinued some years ago. It

would only be a matter of time before young, educated Egyptians took their demands for a better future out of their secure university campuses and onto the streets of Cairo and Alexandria. Before long they would protest more loudly and call on the government to take action. This is what has indeed been happening over the last weeks and months.

FEAR AND POLITICAL PASSIVITY

For many years studies by academic institutions have repeatedly shown a totally different tendency: for example a relatively recent study by the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS)¹ came to the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of young people questioned showed no interest in politics or political participation. Only eight per cent of those surveyed thought it was their duty as citizens to participate in the political process. The remaining 92 per cent were of the opinion that they gained nothing from such participation and therefore had no interest in political involvement.

Only around 60 per cent of the young people surveyed read a daily newspaper and almost 95 per cent knew nothing about the political parties and their policies. The few young people who showed an interest in politics could not identify with the goals of the existing political parties and felt their policies ignored in areas which were of interest to young people.

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The study identified two main reasons for this lack of political interest among the young people surveyed: "fear of politics" and "lack of family encouragement". More than 90 per cent of those questioned said they had a vague fear of being involved in politics, while more than 80 per cent said their parents would openly frown on any active political involvement. In such a climate of fear and lack of political participation, the majority of young people inevitably felt themselves increasingly isolated from society.

1 | Dina Shehata, "Youth Activism in Egypt," *Arab Reform Brief*, October 23, 2008, in: http://arab-reform.net/IMG/pdf/ARB.23_Dina_Shehata_ENG.pdf (accessed April 14, 2011).

Centralized decision-making is a major feature of Arab culture, as the head of the household generally makes all the decisions. This carries over into practical politics.

In another study carried out by the American "Center for International Private Enterprise", the author, Ahmed Abdel Halim, investigated the socio-economic and political factors which might explain young people's lack of desire to participate in the political process.² First of all he found that centralized decision-making is a major feature of Arab culture, and this was experienced by young people in the familial setting, as the head of the household generally makes all the decisions. This then carries over into the world of work and into the decision-making mechanisms of practical politics. As a result, in all levels of Arab society there is a tendency to pass the buck and not take individual responsibility for one's actions and decisions. In this kind of autocratic, paternalistic society it is hardly surprising that parents on the whole have always been hostile to their children, particularly girls, getting involved in politics, and indeed they still try to prevent it.

In this respect the Arab educational system is particularly critical because it has never completely succeeded in paving the way for young people to take an interest in politics, perhaps by providing them with political education. Until very recently, traditional Arab methods of education were not designed to raise political consciousness or encourage critical thinking, instead they concentrated on the unthinking repetition of predetermined "facts".

POLITICAL AWAKENING AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

Local observers estimate that the average age of the first opposition activists who demonstrated in Cairo's Tahrir Square was well below 40. So these "young" protesters (in Arab terms) were mainly part of that generation which grew up using the internet and modern social networks during their school and college years. More and more young people, particularly in Egypt, were influenced by the political protests of young Palestinians during the Second Intifada and began to take an interest in politics. This interest mainly had its roots in political events outside the country, but soon the young activists turned their

2 | Ahmed Abdel Halim, "Supporting Public Participation in Egypt," CIPE, February 22, 2005, in: <http://www.cipe.org/pdf/publications/fs/halim.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2011).

attention to domestic issues and the actions of their own government.

At first they were led by older former leaders of the Egyptian student movement such as Kamal Khalilm, who became a figurehead for opposition movements such as “Kefaya” (Arabic for “enough”), which still attract the support of today’s young activists. In 2005 many of these young supporters started their own faction within the movement, known as “Youth for Change”. Over recent months several hundred like-minded activists have joined forces with the original five founders of the movement and they played a large part in the protests on Avenue Bourguiba in Tunis and in Cairo’s “Liberation Square”.

This integration of a youth faction into the Kefaya movement has given young Egyptian activists the scope to act in unconventional ways and thus influence the attitude of the protest movement as a whole. They are keen to build contacts with like-minded people of their own age and use the internet and social networks such as Facebook to expand their political activism. They are making increasing use of Twitter and SMS to communicate and mobilise more sympathisers to join political demonstrations.

They have also focused predominantly on issues which affect their age group, such as the everyday problems of youth unemployment, housing shortages, relationship problems and family planning. They have recognised the connection between improving personal living standards and the necessary political reforms. Unlike the older protesters, these young activists are less concerned with general political goals relating to human rights, an independent judiciary and the lifting of emergency law, focusing instead on issues which directly affect young people. For example, how can young people starting out on their careers in “precarious” first jobs, earning the minimum wage of 50 Euros a month, afford to get married and feed a family, assuming they manage to get a permanent job in the first place?

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By concentrating on the everyday worries and problems of their own generation, they have been able to drag their contemporaries out of their political passivity and encourage them to take the initiative, get involved in politics and even join public protests. They have even pressing for young supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood to get more involved in activities such as those advocated by "Youth for Change", seeing this as a promising way to bring the different opposition factions together across all age groups.

This combination of religious rectitude and calls for democratic change has led many young people to consider the Muslim Brotherhood to be a party they could vote for, at least for the time being. This is because they are seen as the only real alternative to the old established NDP governing party and the few existing opposition parties.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's conservative stance, such as towards the role of women in society, they have been propagating an image of the career woman who abides by traditional virtues while at the same time being aware of her duties to society. In this way they

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are spreading the idea of a more modern Islam in tune with democratic values, an idea which is in line with the desire of many young people to live in a democratic system where rights and realities are not so grossly contradictory as they see them in some western societies. However, it would be quite wrong to assume that the majority of young Egyptians have made a political commitment to the Muslim Brotherhood. It is just that they are less hostile towards this movement – at least towards its younger members – than towards many of the older, secular, nationalist or socialist members of the other opposition movements.

The astonishing success of the Egyptian preacher Amr Khalid provides a further interesting sign of the growing desire for participation and empowerment amongst Arab youth. His TV appearances have quickly gained him pop star status, both in Egypt and all over the Arab world. "Televangelists" such as Khalid, who did not have had a traditional religious education, talk to young people in their own language and tackle issues such as flirting, dating and free time alongside the lives of the prophets and

the religious duties of Muslims. Of course these sermons cannot ostensibly address political questions, but their reference to the necessary “moral cleansing” of a corrupt society and their rejection of patronage and nepotism were an additional factor in encouraging the young activists to take a stand against the autocratic state in which they lived.

Khalid’s words succeeded in motivating young Arabs to take their lives into their own hands and give voice to their desire to serve the community. Many of his young supporters therefore looked for a compromise between religious conservatism and life in a modern, democratic society.

More politically-minded groups such as Kefaya then managed to use young people’s increased interest in politics to voice their grievances about society and to position themselves politically in such a way as to encourage other young people to take part in protests and demonstrations against the regime. The youth of Tunisia and Egypt in particular soon had to face up to the challenge of taking their destiny into their own hands and taking on the radical and permanent transformation of their country.

THE START OF THE UPRISINGS

So now just the slightest trigger was needed for these young people’s frustration and discontent to explode. This trigger was provided in the form of a Tunisian vegetable vendor who set himself on fire and thus ignited the Tunisian revolt and the downfall of President Ben Ali. This sent a signal that political change could be achieved through peaceful protests by young people. The “revolutionary” genie was out of the bottle and the ever-present fear of the security forces faded in the face of their desire for more freedom and self-determination. Now it was a matter of starting the process in their own countries.

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Over the last few weeks and months all the young activists in neighbouring countries who had been mobilised by events in Tunisia shared a common goal: to crack open the old regime and drive their leaders from office, to put

an end to nepotism and corruption and to send a strong message to the political establishment with a resounding “No more!”.

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The awakening of young Tunisians from their long period of political lethargy – with the Egyptians following hot on their heels – was quick and total. New methods of communicating and sharing information created a kind of internet sub-culture which particularly made use of new chat rooms. People shared information, encouraged each other and planned their next joint actions. Even young people whose families had largely profited from the established political system in their countries caught the spirit of reform, nay revolution, and called for the ageing despots to be expelled.

Most of the youthful demonstrators clearly came from the ranks of the middle classes, who had been suffering more and more from the effects of the financial crisis. Arab regimes had long realised the value of keeping the middle classes on their side by awarding them special privileges (jobs in the civil service). But as government and private business moved closer together (in Egypt) and government corruption increased in the form of the Mafia-like behaviour of the President’s family, it was only a question of time before this “state-supporting” middle class made up of academics, bureaucrats, business owners and small traders withdrew their loyalty to the regime and joined the peaceful demonstrators. If the Arab world’s autocratic political systems had not refused for so many years to allow this well-educated section of the population to have more of a voice in the political process, then their frustrated youth would not have ended up being the driving force behind social mobilisation and successful political uprisings.

DEMOCRATIC PROMISES

In the meantime various Arab states, particularly Tunisia and Egypt, have initiated orderly processes of political change. Other countries, such as Yemen and Libya, have descended into fighting which is close to being civil war, without any foreseeable route to a peaceful transition of

power. Other countries on the Arabian Peninsula are at the moment not the focus of world attention but they are trying to find their own way out of a crisis which has not passed them by.

In all these countries, young people are playing a crucial role in keeping the political pressure on the established autocratic regimes. It remains to be seen whether they will play a similarly prominent role in the more democratic system which it is to be hoped will result from these changes. The old ruling elites have not yet been replaced, and voters in Arab countries are not suddenly going to put their trust in young people to such an extent that future parliaments will be overrun by young representatives.

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For the time being other, mainly "older" protagonists will reap the benefits of this youthful rage – and it is to be hoped they will not forget those who were present at their birth. These young people will still have to fight a hard battle for more freedom, self-determination and political influence.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

A look at the demographic structure of Arab societies serves to feed this scepticism. In Egypt there are 4.4 million people in the 50-64 age group which largely occupies the top positions, as compared to 12.5 million in the 15-29 age group who are all hoping to follow in the footsteps of today's ruling elites.³ This ratio of 1:3 between the two age groups shows how there are three young hopefuls for every job which is likely to provide their desired standard of living. In Yemen and the Gaza Strip, with an average age of 17 years, this ratio is an almost-inconceivable 1:5. Tunisia can consider itself lucky to have a ratio of only 1:2.3 thanks to family planning measures introduced early on under Bourguiba. This gives it hope that it will be able to manage the imminent changes to its elite in a peaceful way.

3 | Gunnar Heinsohn, "Das große Töten der Jungen – Ägypten und die Demographie," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 4, 2011.

But if we look ahead still further, the future for today's 0-14 year-olds is less than rosy. If we compare these figures to the 15-29 age group, the "demographic time bomb" is only somewhat defused in Tunisia, with a ratio of 1:0.8. In Egypt and Yemen the ratio is still high, at 1:1.1 and 1:1.5 respectively.

ECONOMIC HOPES

It is unclear whether all these young people will be able to find jobs and attain a decent standard of living – and if not all of them, then which ones? A lot will depend on the economic growth of these countries. They urgently need to bring an end to political instability and the adverse effects on the economy brought about by the destruction of property, looting, work stoppages and loss of production.

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There is no guarantee that the countries affected will manage to reinstate economic growth and employment alongside their efforts to create new political structures. Over the last few years these countries have in fact enjoyed remarkable rates of growth, but at the moment confidence seems to be in tatters and there are economic problems due to the drop in tourism and the reluctance of international companies to invest once again in light of the looting and destruction.

The all-important visitor numbers to countries like Tunisia and Egypt have collapsed, and tourist hotels are reporting occupancy rates of five to ten per cent compared to the 80 to 85 per cent they normally expect at this time of year. Many younger employees in the hotel industry have lost the jobs they fought so hard to get. Unemployment is now much higher than before the uprisings. But it should not be impossible to rebuild confidence, particularly if a new democratic order promises lasting stability and exhibits a desire to rebuild which is coupled with optimism and a belief in progress.

However, if the new governments fail at this task, many people will think about leaving their countries while others will tend to look for simple solutions, such as: "Islam is the answer" or will fall for the promises of salvation made by new autocrats – or both.

The future holds enormous challenges in a globalised knowledge economy. This is particularly true for college and school leavers who want to – or have to – compete at an international level. The shortcomings of the Arab education system are well known. Some people believe the emigration of “superfluous” human capital is a solution to the demographic problems of the Arab world, but unfortunately at present graduates of Arab institutions have difficulty competing in the international market. Their examination results are considered to be a little dubious due to the manipulation that went on in the past in certain countries, with teachers awarding “special marks” to students. In the international market, all that counts is ability and motivation, not patronage and nepotism as has been prevalent until recently in countries such as Egypt.

Even if these dubious practices in filling job vacancies are brought to an end, it remains to be seen what other criteria will be used in certain Arab countries as a benchmark for filling the jobs which are in such high demand. Instead of the hoped-for fair criteria based on ability and motivation, an increasingly Islamised society may also be looking for attributes such as virtuousness and religiosity, which could have a significant impact on how jobs are allocated in the public services of these countries. This would surely then fail to produce the hoped-for increases in efficiency which are so important for Egyptian industry and bureaucracy.

Whether it is possible to arrest such a trend will depend on the social developments in these countries over the coming months and years. Iran is a well-known and unfortunate example of how citizens’ attempts to create a less autocratic future can not just fail but in fact may bring about the exact opposite result.