



UN High-level meeting on Reform and Transitions to Democracy
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Remarks by Secretary-General of International IDEA, Vidar Helgesen

“Political participation and electoral reform”

Any democratic transition process is unique, and therefore any democratic transition provides learning points for others. On the specific subjects of political participation and electoral reform, Arab countries do not need to go far to learn lessons. Since yesterday marked one year since the Tunisian revolution, it is fitting to start by drawing some specific lessons from the remarkably successful electoral process in Tunisia, on which International IDEA has been commissioned to conduct a study.

- The drafting of the new electoral framework was remarkably more participatory and inclusive than any other case in the region – providing a space for negotiation and consensus and therefore trust in and legitimacy of the process
- The design of the electoral system was carefully considered and consulted upon; this was critical as it is one of the most important decisions a democracy makes. The proportional system adopted was suited to the country’s needs and resulted in the election of a broadly representative but not unruly assembly. In other countries we have seen far more convoluted systems designed in much less participatory ways and with results that do not fully reflect the actual composition and real choices of the people.
- The inclusion of women was addressed through quotas of women candidates in party lists. While far from perfect in its application, it led to a higher proportion of women being elected than in most established democracies.

- The independence of the electoral management body was critical to the credibility of the process. This is also the case for the Egyptian election. We can note that voter turnout was remarkably better in these countries than for example in Morocco, where the Ministry of the Interior continues to manage elections.
- A large number of political parties registered to participate in the process in Tunisia; this was clearly an expression of the long awaited opportunity to participate and freely compete.
- Looking forward, a final point is that the elected Constituent Assembly plans to televise its proceedings and provide for public participation. A recent statement by the Egyptian government that the new constitution should be ready in 8 weeks points to a very different approach which would render real negotiations and public consultations impossible.

So, Tunisia's process is not flawless and the way forward is not short of challenges, but the country has managed the first year of its democratization process in a way that sets an example.

It has only been one year though, and as I leave the Tunisian case for some general observations, my first point is exactly that of time and patience. The creation of sustainable democracy is a long-term process, and there is no pre-determined democratic trajectory. Europe has just marked 20 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wave of democracy which spread over the continent. Russia's elections have been consistently marked by fraud and the domination of the process by a single party. And look at Hungary today – the EU member state with a former democracy activist as Prime Minister, now accused of eroding democracy in the country through limitations placed on the media, judiciary and other institutions. Democracy can indeed not be taken for granted.

Secondly, at the global level, great strides have been made in the technical management of elections: today, this is not the difficult challenge. It is the integrity of the full electoral process, from one election to the next, which matters. This is a question of political will.

Sustainable democracy requires a level playing field between candidates, security for voters and candidates, free media, transparency on party campaign financing and recourse to an independent mechanism for appeals. In Latin America, there are many democratic elections, but the fundamental equality between citizens is still missing and the influence of crime and illicit funding on politics is pervasive. In Africa, many elections are held in countries marked by dominant party rule and super-presidentialism, and many leaders just refuse to give up power – by rigging or by stealing elections. And in the US, the role of money in politics seriously upsets political equality between citizens.

Thirdly, elections and participation both reflect the societies in which they take place. It takes time to build a democratic culture in which people engage as citizens, rather than subjects. If society is marked by a culture of autocracy - not just within politics - but within the family, education, media and social institutions, it will take decades to replace with a participatory culture in which a citizen has the right to question and disagree with political decision-makers. Where cultural traditions may conflict with principles of electoral integrity there are particular challenges to overcome through civic education and awareness-raising. At the same time, electoral reform can lead the way in breaking traditions of exclusion – quotas for the inclusion of women for example can often be successful in allowing women to enter political life.

Fourthly, the forms of political participation of the future may differ from what we have become accustomed to. Traditional political parties lack the confidence of voters, not just in the Arab world where political parties have been tarnished by decades of autocracy. But also in established democracies where citizens are taking to the streets in protest - at the same time voter turnout, especially among young people, is at an all-time low. Political parties are critical as channels of representation, but they need to fundamentally reinvent themselves in order to be vehicles for true participation and not just for party elites. Democracy must continue to evolve as a way of ensuring legitimate and effective representation, not least of women, youth and minorities. The countries of the Arab world have an opportunity now to experiment with different forms of political participation as the citizen-led movements which led change evolve into political actors –

the rest of the world may have many lessons to learn from what will happen in this region in the coming years.

Lastly, international actors can support electoral reform and strengthening of participation, but we must stop believing that technical fixes exist to what are fundamentally political issues. International actors have been providing so-called democracy assistance at the technical level in the Arab region for many years – but within the context of a geo-political framework which supported autocracy against the wishes of the citizens of the region. This needs to change. Democracy support will go nowhere unless it is a fundamental part of a coherent approach by international actors including foreign, security and economic development policies. International actors also need to have patience and take a long-term perspective – elections or constitution-building processes should not be rushed or conducted according to an external timetable, but should be nationally-driven processes. International actors should also adopt a ‘peer approach’ to democracy cooperation, in which the old donor-beneficiary relationship is consigned to the scrap heap and there is a genuine partnership and mutual learning and sharing of experience.

One issue to which international actors need to pay particular heed is economic inequality – therein lay the roots of the Arab Spring. Economic inequality has also been identified by the World Economic Forum as the major global risk in the coming years. In seeking to support the emergence of sustainable democracy in the Arab region, international actors therefore need to take into account economic and trade issues - rather than a purely technical focus on democracy assistance. If I can return to Tunisia, the big issue there now is not the need for democracy assistance, but rather the need to get the economy going. A major question is therefore whether Europe will respond to positive change in Tunisia in the midst of its own internal crisis – will it open its borders, encourage tourism and trade with its Arab neighbours across the Mediterranean? The coming years will seriously test the commitments which have been made by international actors in this area.

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