

More Questions, No More Dichotomies: the Arab World and the Storms of Change

The North African and the Middle Eastern uprisings has been the hottest debate of the recent international political and economic agenda. On December 17, 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire right after his cart was confiscated by the police. Bouazizi's self-immolation was not solely an act of protest against the deteriorating economic conditions, high levels of unemployment, increasing food prices and poverty in the contemporary Tunisia but it was an act out of dignity, which have been one of the major keywords associated with what has been happening in the region of oil, gas, mining and infamous authoritarian regimes.

The revolts of Tunisia ending up with the overthrown of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali which led to his exile in Saudi Arabia spread to the other countries of North Africa and the Middle East. In Egypt after weeks of protests, Hosni Mubarak was reluctant to resign while a long period of struggles has been marking Tahrir Square one more time in history as a symbolic space. In Libya the Muammar Gaddafi's response was faster and more brutal with the help of his army and foreign mercenaries while insurrections still continue today. The civil unrest has also been going on for a while in the other countries like Yemen, Jordan, Iraq and Bahrain as well. While each country has its own particular national histories, the common point of these unique experiences has been the demands of change toward more democratic governance, economic and social justice and freedom of expression. It is no doubt that recent turmoil in this region spanning from Morocco to Iran, will have serious long term effects not only for the politics of 'Muslim world' but also for the global economic and political system. In terms of conceptualizing these uprisings, a critical shift in the understanding of macro scale social movements and authoritarian regimes with what political scientists used to call “the domino effect” is a common expectation.

The insurrections in the Arab world had brought on several questions on the international scale: the possibility of a 'foreign intervention', if it is

necessary to prevent mass massacres or if it is a violation of the nations' right to self-determination; Turkey as a democracy role model for the region or as a bad governance case to take lessons from; Italy's contradictory and indecisive position against its former colony Libya; Venezuela's questionable take on Libya's Gaddafi, whether it is a friendship alliance against “a common enemy” or just a distrust to popular media; to name a few. Discussions around these question marks put upon the region are growing rapidly every day that goes by.

From all these different views on the recent events, some common critical points coined from the beginning of these uprisings as lessons to learn or questions to be answered and also as future projections. One expectation from these uprisings in terms of their repercussions on the international political culture is to smash the stereotypical Arab citizens' images resembling a contemporary version of the 18th century orientalist paintings whose political spectrum is nothing but two opposite poles of military authoritarianism on one end and radical religious fundamentalism on the other. This expectation has also brought the necessity of questioning the ideas of 'civil society' and democracy in this region, which were once confined to the 'western' ideals of liberty, freedom and autonomy.

It is undeniable that the scattered nature of the mobilization in the region brought advantages of recognizing a collective identity of belonging and solidarity. But it would be early to conclude on the future of the political climate where the question of “what happens now” seems to replace the instantaneous ardor for a possible revival of the revolutionary spirit that has been being longed for. Even if we agree upon the term 'revolution' for explaining the recent turmoil, what Egyptian feminist organizations remind us is that whatever happens from now on, it will not be as progressive as we all would like to hope, unless it is inclusive of all the diverse groups who took part in these stormy movements of change.

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