

spotlight europe

2011/05 – December 2011

Europe and the Arabellion in 2012

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A year after the start of the Tunisian rebellion, Europe's southern neighbourhood is in turmoil and in a state of upheaval. It is a paradoxical fact that the revolt by secular groups will bring Islamist parties to power for the first time. The transition from dictatorship to democracy is not a straightforward affair, and differs from country to country. Europe certainly has good assistance programmes, but there is a need for more courage and greater coordination.

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I

„Arab Awakening“

When Mohamed Bouazizi, a young Tunisian street vendor, set fire to himself a year ago on 17 December 2010, he probably did not suspect that his suicide would be the starting point for uprisings and revolutions throughout the Arab world.

The Arab world is a region with 300 million people. 50 percent of the population is under the age of 20. Young people, most of whom have an education and are not religious, overcame their fear of repression and became the driving force of the

uprising. They wanted to have educational opportunities, work and prosperity. They wanted to have political rights. They called for participation, justice and dignity. And they rejected the prevalent system consisting of dictatorship, nepotism and corruption.

The rebellion has ousted several members of the old guard - Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya, and Saleh in Yemen. And now the Assad regime in Syria is beginning to falter.

In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen the ousted rulers tried to establish hereditary dictatorships in which power was to be handed down to their sons. That did not seem to be much of a problem because economic growth, which was sometimes

quite sizeable, and the power of the secret services held out the promise of enduring stability. Yet the rulers overlooked the fact that large sections of the population, and young people in particular, were no longer prepared to accept their political paternalism and the unjust distribution of wealth. They even went so far as to start an uprising, "waking up" as it were and taking matters into their own hands, which is why most Arabs call their revolt the "Arab Awakening." We tend to prefer the word "Arabellion". The Arabellion shows the Arab world in a different light. Instead of looking up to the sons of dictators, the protesters have chosen different models. They are usually people from their own ranks, that is, citizens who are in favour of democratic values and just reforms.

II

The new Arabs

In this connection we should, for example, mention Moncef Marzouki and Hamadi Jebali the leaders of the Tunisian democratization movement. Both of them were in prison under Ben Ali. Free elections swept them into government. The secularist Marzouki is now president, and the Islamist Jebali is prime minister. But there is also Ali Al-Tarhouni, the Libyan professor of economics, who came back to Libya after 38 years in exile in America in order to help to rebuild his country as finance minister of the National Transitional Council. And the wealthy Egyptian entrepreneur Naguib Sawiris, who has founded a new secularist party called "The Free Egyptians." And Boualem Sansal, the recipient of the 2011's Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, an Algerian whose books are banned in Algeria.

Several women are among the new faces in the Arab world. They include Saudi IT consultant Manal al-Sharif, who was imprisoned because she drove a car and allowed someone to film her as she did so. Bassma Kodmani, an academic who, as spokeswoman of the Syrian National

Council, is working for change in her country, is another role model. And so is Yemenite Tawakkul Karman, the first Arab woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. It was awarded to the co-founder of "Women Journalists Without Chains" in October 2011 on account of her work for human rights in Yemen. In a symbolic gesture Karman dedicated the award to all those who had participated in the Arab Spring. The European Parliament honored 5 Arab human rights activists with its famous Sacharov-Price 2011. These new role models reflect the advent of a new political awareness.

III

How Much Religion in Politics?

The youthful protesters say that they are enjoying the new freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. A new pan-Arab "feeling for democracy" is spreading around the internet with the help of Twitter, blogs and Facebook. The foundation of NGOs and social institutions is leading to a renaissance of civil society. A new political awareness is reflected in free and fair elections, which are often being held for the first time, and the foundation of numerous political parties. The parties range from left-wing to liberal in the secular spectrum, and from moderate to fundamentalist in the Islamist spectrum. The secularists are fragmented, and are entering the elections with a plethora of parties and candidates. The Islamists, on the other hand, are focusing on two parties. The moderates, who accept the rules of democracy, say that their model is the AKP, the Turkish ruling party, and that they want to participate in the government. The fundamentalists such as the salafists reject democracy and pluralism out of hand.

The old power structures oppressed and persecuted both secular and Islamist groups, though Islamists were able to slip away into mosques, and performed charitable tasks in poverty-stricken areas that were neglected by the ruling regimes.

Thus they now have the backing of a network of sympathizers. Furthermore, Islamist parties have the support of foreign sponsors. And in times of great political turmoil the fear of impending insecurity and poverty is uppermost in people's minds, and large sections of the population have a profound longing for Islamic identity.

For such people Islamist parties also constitute a credible break with the old elites, for the former rulers were usually secularist and pro-Western, and ran the economy on the basis of the rules of capitalism. This helps to explain why the Islamist parties are winning the first free elections.

The new political parties will have to ascertain the extent to which religion can determine the constitutions and the nature of policymaking. It is to be hoped that this will happen in a political culture that evolves in a peaceful manner. At the same time there are two pressing and indeed fundamental challenges. A police force capable of delivering security on the basis of legal rules and regulations does not exist, nor does a prudent kind of social economic policy that will keep people employed and provide jobs. The electors will also assess the performance of Islamist-led governments on whether or not the police force is in evidence and does its job in an honest manner, and whether or not the economy can gather momentum and create employment opportunities. The social question is an urgent one. In Arabia 50 Million new jobs will have to be created by 2025.

IV

Between Opportunities for Democratization and Civil War

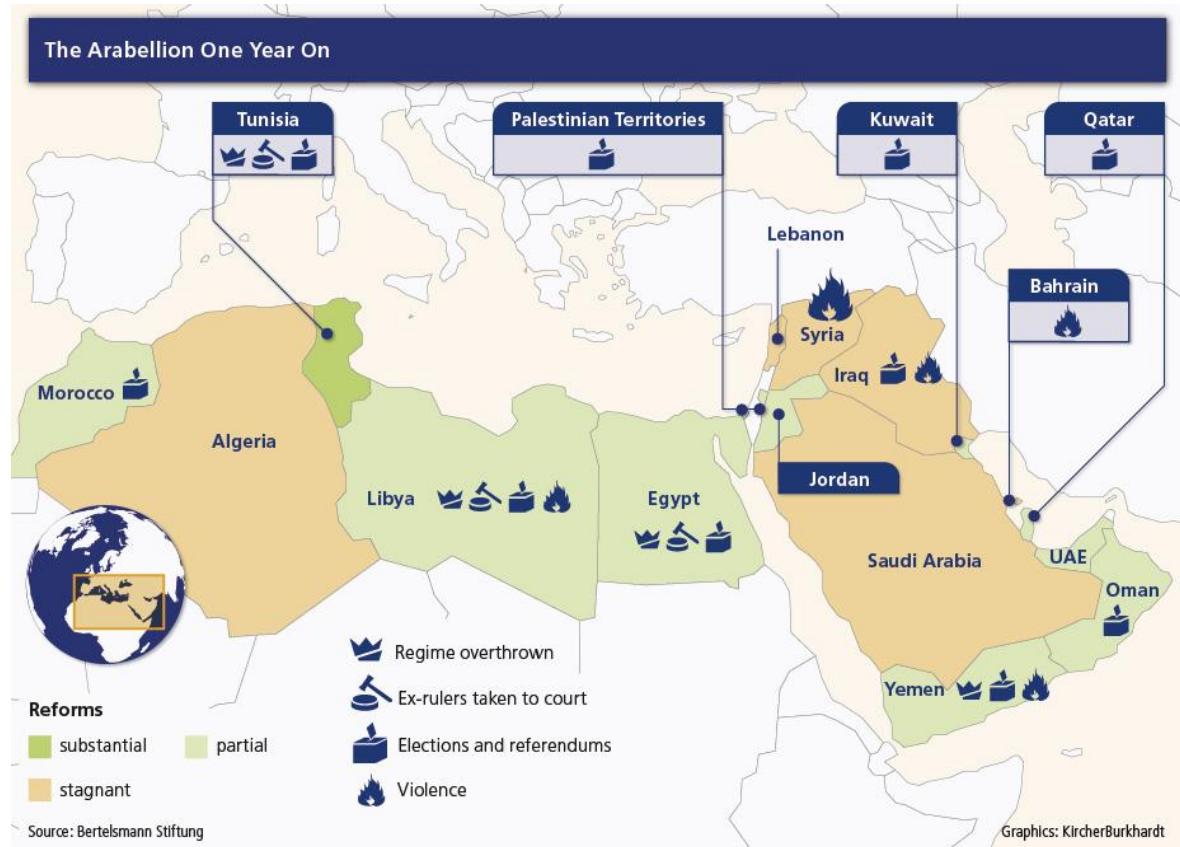
Although the protests have reached almost all of the Arab world, how they evolved, what they have achieved so far, and how they may have an influence on the future is very different from country to country.

However, it is possible to discern common trends and classify the Arab states into four groups: regime change by uprising, regime change by fighting, transformation by reform and stagnating countries.

Tunisia is rapidly becoming a model pupil in the political transformation process. At the end of October 2011 the moderate Islamist Annahda Party emerged as undisputed victor from the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The runners-up were two secularist parties. The two ideological camps have concluded an alliance, and a secularist has become president, whereas the prime minister is an Islamist. They intend to tackle the issue of democratization and the resolution of social issues together. The start of political culture in Tunisia has been characterized by a demonstration of respect for people with different political views. This is a good basis on which to build and get the economy back on its feet.

The electoral process in **Egypt**, which lasts for three months until the middle of March 2012, is complicated and overshadowed by deep-seated lines of conflict. The generals, the freedom fighters of Tahrir Square, the Muslim Brotherhood, the radical salafists and the old forces of the Mubarak regime are all jockeying for position. The armed forces want to protect their sinecures by evading democratic controls, and the Muslim Brotherhood is having to grapple with the anti-democratic salafists. After the first round of the elections the Muslim Brotherhood is in the lead with 36% of the votes, followed by the salafists, who have 23%. Salafists and ancien regime networks have been whipping up hatred of minorities, and especially of Copts, artists, journalists and politically active women. The rebels of Tahrir Square are keeping up their peaceful protests, which are designed to persuade the armed forces to hand over power to civilians. Since Egypt is at the heart of the Arab world on account of its size and significance, foreign countries are also involved in what is going on.

Algeria is stagnant on account of its longing for stability. The fear that a rebellion will lead to a civil war, as in 1990s, is



still omnipresent. Below the level of this fear threshold there is seething discontent, for Algeria is suffering from high youth unemployment and oppressive corruption. So it is only a matter of time before the yearning among young people for some kind of future erupts in the shape of an Arabellion – unless of course the ruling elite implements far-reaching socio-economic and political reforms in the very near future. Algeria can easily do this on account of its massive gas reserves.

Resource-rich **Iraq** is also stagnant and has a high level of corruption. On top of this a seemingly endless cycle of violence continues to rock certain parts of the country. Yet Iraq possesses democratic structures, at least in institutional terms. Despite the ethnic and religious tensions, the country has the potential for a democratic future. If this is to materialize, the political actors and political parties will have to assume more responsibility for the well-being of the country. And time is running out, for the last American soldiers are now leaving Iraq.

On account of the high level of legitimacy that some of them possess, the Kings of Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the Sultan of Oman, the Emirs of Qatar and Kuwait and the President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are in a position to introduce political reforms and participation more quickly and far more comprehensively.

Morocco: According to the new constitution, the King of Morocco is no longer “sacred” and it is his duty to choose a prime minister from the largest parliamentary party, who as a result of the outcome of the elections held in late November 2011 is Abdelilah Benkirane, the secretary-general of the Islamist Justice and Development party. However, the establishment has not promoted the integration of the youth protest movement and of various secularist parties. Moreover, nothing has changed with the regard to the monarch’s dominant position in the economy.

Jordan: The King of Jordan has been rather more timid. He has responded to the protests and demonstrations with a number of

cabinet reshuffles and announcements about impending reforms. The gap between rich and poor has continued to increase, as well as the conflicts between Jordanians of bedouin and Palestinian descent. Yet the King possesses the authority that is needed in order to implement a just electoral law and social justice, and to wage the battle against corruption.

The monarchies and emirates on the Gulf have modernized the economy and the educational system in a dramatic and model manner, and their people are now prosperous. In the next 15 years this development momentum will have to create 2.5 million jobs for the youthful workforce, and for this purpose it will be necessary to mobilize all sections of the population. It means that the rulers will have to grant participatory rights to everyone, and that includes the Shiite minorities. Prosperity does not exclude demands for political participation, something that has been demonstrated by low-key protests by young people and petitions submitted by intellectuals. The states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have the resources and the legitimacy to press ahead with greater political openness. **Qatar** intends to hold general elections in 2013 after having held local elections for the capital city of Doha in 2011. The Sultan of **Oman** has conferred legislative powers on a two-chamber parliament. The **United Arab Emirates** and **Saudi Arabia** are planning to have elected consultative bodies, and to confer certain powers on them. The Emir of **Kuwait** could strengthen the Kuwaiti parliament by legalizing political parties and accepting a prime minister from the majority party. This would enable him to respond to the protests in a positive way.

Unfortunately the Sunnite rulers on the Gulf are afraid of the hegemonic strivings of the Shiite regime in Iran, and this, after the suppression of the protest movement with the help of Saudi Arabia, is the reason why unrest persists in **Bahrain**. In this small kingdom there is no consensus between rich and poor and between the Sunnite ruling elite and the Shiites, who constitute the majority of the population.

Violence has dominated / continues to dominate the turmoil in **Libya**, in Yemen, and in Syria. Libya: After 42 years of the Gaddafi dictatorship and its blood-drenched demise in the wake of months of fighting there is now a provisional Libyan government under prime minister Abdulraheem Al-Kaib. He has chosen ministers from every region and every interest group. The government's first task is to prepare for the elections to a constituent assembly. Above all it needs to insist on the state monopoly over the use violence, for many of the militias do not want to surrender their weapons. Political participation by all, an intelligent type of federalism and a just distribution of wealth can help to bring about a peaceful transformation process.

Yemen: Since the resignation of President Abdullah Saleh his power structure, which is controlled by his family, has continued to make its influence felt. This is another reason why the country is still in turmoil. The fact that Saleh refused to resign for almost a year incited tribal conflicts and fighting, and overshadowed the peaceful mass protests for months. Forging a new political order for these warring parties with the help of elections and a constitution, and thus to hold the country together, is the difficult task facing Abdulrabbo Hadi, the new transitional president. If the country were to become a war zone dominated by tribal militias, it would have a catastrophic effect on the stability of the whole region.

According to information supplied by the United Nations, in **Syria** 5,000 people have lost their lives as a result of the violence unleashed by the regime of President Assad. Thousands of Syrians are being maltreated in torture cellars. Assad is no longer acceptable as far as his people and the international community are concerned. With the help of Turkey the fragmented opposition has come together in the Syrian National Council. Whether or not Syria, after Assad has gone, can embark on a completely new start in political terms and indeed on democratic reforms will depend to some extent on the duration and the course of the rebellion.

The Arab League is currently playing an important role in the transformation of Syria. It has imposed economic sanctions and exerted political pressure on the Assad regime.

The Council of the **Arab League** recently expelled Syria. This was based on a majority decision that was not supported by Lebanon, Algeria and Yemen. In pursuing this strategy on Syria, the majority of the members of the Arab League are concerned not only to end the violence, but also to repulse the influence of Iran. Saudi Arabia is the driving force behind these activities. In the Arab League the small Emirate of Qatar has played an increasingly important role as mediator and advocate of the Arabellion. Nor should one underestimate the stature of Nabil al-Arabi, the new secretary general of the Arab League. He would like the League in its capacity as a regional organization to do more to promote human rights and good governance.

V

The EU as Transformation Partner

From a European point of view it is good to hear that the Arab world is helping itself, for Europe currently needs to concentrate on resolving the sovereign debt crisis. Nevertheless the EU has a pronounced interest in promoting peaceful and comprehensive transformation processes in its immediate southern neighbourhood. Conflicts, wars or economic collapse can all have a direct effect on Europe.

In September the EU institutions initiated four new transformation support programmes within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

They comprise Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth (SPRING), measures designed to assist poor areas in Tunisia, the programmes that will give a boost to civil society, and the enlarged Erasmus Mundus Programme. In this way the EU wishes to do more to promote de

mocracy, human rights and the rule of law, to concentrate on cooperation with civil society, to increase the level of financial assistance, and to attach conditionality to the latter on the basis of the “more for more” principle.

Europe also wants to discuss sensitive subjects such as mobility and less complicated trade regulations, which will help the transformation countries. But these path-breaking pan-European initiatives, which are defined in the Council Decision dated 1 December 2011, call for effective coordination with national assistance programmes and the comprehensive support given by the national policies of the member states. They should not, as was often the case before the Arabellion, be countermanded by the diverging interests of the member states or by measures adopted in the fight against terrorism and illegal immigration.

A Trans-Mediterranean pact for work, education and energy, which has been proposed by Volker Perthes, would require the cooperation of the south European member states when it came granting visas and opening up the agricultural markets.

Civil society is in the process of being set up, and should not be overburdened with the numerous projects and ideas of potential donors. For this reason a marketplace of ideas where public and private donors and NGOs can interact and coordinate projects and initiatives would be a sensible idea. The European Endowment for Democracy, which is currently being set up, will support NGOs that are working to establish democracy in their countries.

In order to protect freedom of speech it is important to ensure that, as the EU Council has decided in the case of Syria, no software will be sold to regimes that spy on and seek to slander bloggers and network activists.

Since the Arab world is slowly beginning to rediscover the whole notion of political awareness, Europe must speak up courageously and in an unmistakable manner. It is important to criticize the attempts by the Egyptian military council and the salafists (and their supporters in

other countries) to stop the introduction of democratic procedures. The official recognition of the Syrian National Council is a path-breaking event. In view of the numerous elections in the Arab world in 2012 the EU should insist on the presence of international election observers. The Tunisian transitional government invited foreign observers, who included EU parliamentarians and NGOs, to monitor the

elections, and found that it had a positive effect.

VI

In the coming months

A glance at forthcoming events in 2012 shows that the EU, in addition to providing support for the transformation processes

North Africa, Middle East and Gulf Region. Important Events in 2012

<u>End of December 2011</u> US troops leave Iraq	<u>4 May 2012</u> Presidential and parliamentary elections in the Palestinian territories
<u>From 1 January 2012</u> Denmark takes over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union as part of a presidency trio with Poland and Cyprus	<u>May 2012</u> EU-GCC ministerial meeting
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Prosecution of Egyptian ex-President Mubarak continues	<u>June 2012</u> Elections for Constituent Assembly in Libya
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Prosecution of Saif al Islam al Gaddafi in Libya	<u>June 2012</u> Before 30 June presidential election in Egypt
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> After parliamentary elections new government in Morocco	<u>Expected in last six months of 2012</u> Referendum on new constitution in Egypt
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> UN decision on Palestine	<u>Expected in last six months of 2012</u> Completion of withdrawal of 33,000 US soldiers from Afghanistan
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Middle East Quartet efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian talks	<u>Expected in last six months of 2012</u> Formation of government in Egypt
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Formation of a Fatah-Hamas government of technocrats	<u>1 July 2012</u> Cyprus takes over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union as part of a presidency trio with Denmark and Ireland
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Syria . Activities of Arab League and UN Security Council	<u>14 July 2012</u> 4th anniversary of the foundation of the Union for the Mediterranean
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Iran . Activities of IAEA and UN Security Council	<u>August 2012</u> Parliamentary elections in Algeria
<u>Expected in first six months of 2012</u> Border conflict between Sudan and South Sudan	<u>August 2012</u> Probable Presidential Election in Turkey
<u>January – March 2012</u> Continuation and conclusion of parliamentary elections for lower and upper chambers in Egypt	<u>September 2012</u> UN General Assembly in New York
<u>21 February 2012</u> Presidential election in Yemen	<u>By October 2012</u> Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Tunisia
<u>February 2012</u> Parliamentary elections in Kuwait	<u>November 2012</u> Local elections in Algeria
<u>29 March 2012</u> Parliamentary elections in Iran	<u>November 2012</u> Presidential Election in the United States

in the Arab world, is going to have to grapple with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear programme. The fact is that these three Trans-Mediterranean challenges are interlinked. For this reason it is important to promote cooperation with and a division of labour among new actors in the region itself: Turkey, the Arab League and Qatar.

It is difficult to predict how the turmoil and upheavals in the Arab world will develop. From a European point of view there are bound to be gratifying and less gratifying moments. However, Europe should continue to construe the Arab Awakening as an opportunity and not as a threat, and do all it can to build bridges over the Mediterranean.

For Further Reading

Volker Perthes: Der Aufstand - die arabische Revolution und ihre Folgen, Pantheon 2011

The Arab World in Transition: Prospects and Challenges for a Revitalized Relationship between Europe and North Africa, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Policy Paper in the light of the 13th Kronberg Talks, May 2011

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[The Importance of Education in the Arab World, Carnegie Endowment, 1.12.2011](#)

[Bertelsmann-Transformation-Index](#)

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ISSN 1865-7451

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