PROMOTING AND PRACTISING GOOD GOVERNANCE AS A MEANS OF ADVANCING PEACE AND SECURITY: DRAWING LESSONS FROM RECENT EVENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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Introduction

The year 2011 has seen profound changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and the Syrian Arab Republic – generally referred to as the "Arab Spring" – signal a new beginning in the regional order. They appear to restore the self-esteem and to some degree the sense of community of the Arab nations. The uprisings denounced dictatorships as former subjects became citizens by standing up against moral, religious and institutional oppression.

Also during the course of these developments, States have been able to redefine themselves in the new order. By establishing a truly democratic society, these States can become examples for the MENA region and the Arab world and gain unquestionable esteem.

It is widely argued that a prerequisite for promoting and practising good governance is the adoption and implementation of the essential ingredients of a democratic society. The following are generally considered to be the prerequisites of a constitutional State: a widely accepted and agreed constitution, from which stems a legal framework of institutions, practices and procedures; the organization of transparent, free and fair elections whereby political parties compete for political representation of the people; and a system of checks and balances. Ideally, these preconditions lead to the institutionalized consolidation of political power. Furthermore, it is considered that in order to advance peace and security through good governance, the political, economic and social institutions established within this framework, as well as all national resources, should be utilized to benefit the people and serve the national interest.

This report first looks at how good governance can serve to advance peace and security in society from a theoretical perspective. By exploring the background and causes of the uprisings in the MENA region, this report will attempt to draw valuable lessons from these events. It will also look critically at the parallel often drawn between the events of the Arab Spring and the 1989 events in central and eastern Europe, examining similarities and differences in the changes that have had such a profound impact on that region.

Good governance defined

Good governance is a broad concept generally used in the development sphere to describe how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources in order to guarantee human rights in a society. The term "governance" has been applied to describe the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented in a wide range of areas, hence we speak of corporate, international, national, or local governance.

In the political context, the concept of good governance often emerges as a model to compare inefficient and viable economic or political institutions or environments. It is worth noting that due to the fact that in recent decades the most "successful" governments in the contemporary world have been liberal democratic States concentrated in the western hemisphere, these countries' institutions often set the standards by which to compare other States' institutions. Therefore, the model of good governance might not take account of historical, social, and cultural differences, thereby yielding a simplistic comparative analysis. Or, as governments across the world generally believe in or claim to apply the concept of good governance, cultural differences might conflict with the standards set by the international community.

Although many international organizations have provided their own definitions of good governance, limiting the meaning of the term to a set of requirements that conform to the organization's agenda, all definitions refer to the process of exercising power.

The International Monetary Fund encourages the promotion of good governance in all its aspects, including by ensuring the rule of law, improving the efficiency and accountability of the public sector, and tackling corruption, as essential elements of a framework within which economies can prosper. It stresses that corruption within economies is caused by the ineffective governance of the economy, with either too much or too little regulation.

The World Bank defines good governance in the context of reforms aimed at improving control and management over economic and social resources. It underlines three aspects of society which, in its view, affect the nature of a country's governance: (i) the type of political regime; (ii) the process by which authority is exercised in the management of the economic and social resources with a view to development; and (iii) the capacity of governments to formulate policies and effectively implement them.

Another international organization with economic development on its agenda, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, defines the concept of governance as the use of political authority and the exercise of control in a society in order to improve the management of resources for social and economic development. The definition - albeit vague - is unique in that it mentions the responsibilities of the public authority in establishing the framework for economic activities within a society, its role in optimizing the distribution of wealth and the nature of the relationship between ruler and ruled.

In the past decade, the European Commission, the executive body of the European Union (EU), established its own concept of governance, by which the term "European governance" refers to the rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised at the European level, particularly regarding openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. These five principles of good governance reinforce those of subsidiarity and proportionality. The Commission stresses that each principle is important for enhancing democratic governance. They underpin democracy and the rule of law not only in the 27 Member States, but apply to all levels of government – global, European, national, regional and local.

The United Nations promotes reform through human development and political institution reform, attributing eight characteristics to good governance: consensus-oriented, participatory, based on the rule of law, effective and efficient, accountable, transparent, responsive, and equitable and inclusive.

According to the UN definition, good governance ensures that political, economic and social priorities are based on a broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are heard in decision-making on the allocation of development resources.

In light of the above-mentioned definitions, it can be said that good governance has to do with the way power is exercised, either in the public domain or in a corporate environment. In the pursuit of good governance, the ruling authority derives its legitimacy either through popular election or appointment. Either way, it should be responsible to those that elected or appointed them and exercise their power in an efficient, transparent and accountable manner. Good governance should be understood as responsive governance that entails the functioning of efficient and accountable institutions, as well as rules and laws in all areas of the public domain (public administration, politics, economics, social affairs, corporate matters, the judiciary, etc.) that promote development, the rule of law, a fair and efficient system of justice, and the efficient delivery of goods and services to the benefit of society. In order to allow people to take part in decisions that directly impact their lives, the institutional framework should also provide for broad participation of the public in economic, social and political processes, including participation in free and elections. In this context, it is crucial that governance be transparent and that people have easy access to information, on the basis of which they can make sound decisions.

Good governance as a means of advancing peace and security

Vast empirical evidence has revealed a positive correlation between the various features of good governance and the level of peace and security in society. Traditionally, security was defined as the safety that a State (or organization) could provide to its citizens (members) against acts of external or internal violence. Security also entails measures taken to ensure such safety, i.e. the State's efficiency in organizing the institutional protection of its citizens. Generally, such protection involves institutional defence forces, but also a constitutionally-based legal framework established to ensure the rule of law in society. Lately, security has also come to encompass the social and economic well-being of the people, which the ruling authority can secure through good economic governance in order to achieve economic progress and accountable, transparent and efficient management of national resources. It is hence all of the above-mentioned factors together that contribute to peace and security within a community. Consequently, the lack of good governance puts the peace and security of society at risk.

Peace and conflict prevention are essential to good governance and there is a clear and direct causality between the two concepts. It is argued that those who are ruled under good governance with all its attributes, and thus who enjoy economic prosperity, the rule of law, respect for human rights, social cohesion, peace and security, are less likely to cause a threat to peace by waging war or inciting civil disorder.

As shown above, there is a direct link between peace and security and people's political, social and economic status in a society. It is equally true that political, social or economic instability is likely to result in a lack of peace and security, and hence deeply impact on good governance. Consequently, not only is it true that good governance enhances peace and security in a society, but also that peace and security help nurture good governance.

It is widely recognized that efforts to improve good governance can in turn lead to enhanced national, regional and global security and peace. At the national level, a government that pursues the objectives of good governance, i.e. ensures that democratic institutions function properly, establishes a system of laws, practices and procedures founded on a strong constitution, respects human rights, guarantees an accountable and transparent political system through adequate checks and balances and free and fair elections, and secures an efficient economic structure, helps secure peace and security.

At the international level, a global partnership is required to attain the objectives of security. Initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 at the UN Millennium Summit by 189 Member States contribute to global peace and security by promoting good governance. The Millennium Declaration calls for the promotion of peace, security and human rights, the elimination of hunger and poverty, and the importance of and right to education in the context of sustainable growth. It also highlights that peace and security are essential and integral to good governance both locally and globally.

Background of the uprising in the Middle East and North Africa

The uprisings in the MENA region, commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, were triggered by protests that started in Tunisia on 18 December 2010 following the tragic act of Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in protest against the corruption, brutality and ill-treatment of the police. The Tunisian "Jasmine Revolution" resulted in the toppling of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011.

Shortly after the fall of President Ben Ali, a series of protests broke out in Cairo, Egypt, with protesters demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. He was overthrown on 11 February, ending his 30-year rule. These events in Tunisia and Egypt played a major role in the wave of uprisings sweeping across the MENA region, resulting in a series of revolts in Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.

In the case of Libya, the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi resulted in an outright civil war, with a fierce and protracted battle between Gaddafi's forces controlling the western part of the country and the rebels dominating the east. The rebels established the Transitional National Council (TNC) in Benghazi, the rebel stronghold in the north-eastern part of Libya on 5 March, 2011. Following the NATO intervention, as well as UN Security Council resolution 1973, authorizing a full air blockade over Libya in order to protect civilians, by 22 August the Libyan rebels had invaded Tripoli.

Causes of the uprisings

Among the numerous and complex causes underlying the uprisings, the single event that triggered the wave of revolts sweeping across the region was the self-immolation on 17 December 2010 of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit and vegetable vendor, whose mobile cart was confiscated by the police because he did not have a vending permit. In Tunisia and Egypt, the primary cause of the uprising was the economic and social disenchantment of the population, in particular the youth. Protesters initially demanded economic reform, lower unemployment and an end to corruption. The high proportion of young people among the unemployed is noteworthy, particularly in North Africa, where they represent close to 70 per cent of the total population[1]. If one considers that out of a population of 83 million in Egypt, the majority of people live on less than US$ 4 US a day, that approximately 20 million live on less than $ 2 and

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[1]   For example, in Algeria, 90 per cent of the unemployed are under 35, while in Egypt, 87 per cent of the unemployed are aged between 15 and 29.

another 20 million earn about $ 2, one can easily understood the extent of the frustration that was caused by the economic reforms[2] introduced in response to the 2008-2009 financial crisis. It should, however, be noted that reforms aimed at liberalizing the North African economies in 2003 already caused a lot of social tension, and that the financial crisis only exacerbated the problem. Rising food prices[3] in the world only added to the suffering of the population.

Some analysts point out that the countries in question – apart from Yemen – are not among the poorest in the world. Hence, the political elite would have been able to stop or at least slow down the impoverishment of the masses by distributing national wealth more equitably, even taking into account the population explosion in these countries. This point is best demonstrated by the steps taken by the prosperous States in the region, in response to the sequence of events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The Emir of Kuwait declared, for instance, that all citizens would be given a sum of US$ 3,599 until March 2012, and foodstuffs were distributed free of charge. Similarly, the King of Saudi Arabia announced that he would be spending US$ 35 billion from the kingdom's reserves on welfare. Gaddafi, prior to the outright civil war, also resorted to handouts.

Apart from social and economic demands, there were also political motives underlying the popular revolts and uprisings. The protesters primarily demanded the end of authoritarian regimes and the resignation of their long-serving leaders (Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi). But they also called for free and fair elections and the elimination of censorship and barriers to the enjoyment of human rights across the region. It must be noted that elections had been held in Egypt in November 2010 and the majority of the population was already greatly dissatisfied with the results, partly due to allegations of election rigging and the unjust electoral law. Hence, the political demands were very pronounced from the very beginning of the Egyptian uprising. On the other hand, in Libya, due to the complexity of tribal relations in Libyan society, as well as its loosely structured political system, the political demands of Gaddafi's opposition are less clearly articulated and remain largely vague. Bahrain constitutes a separate and unique case. Although the majority of analysts speak predominantly of a religious conflict based on Sunni-Shiite differences, the root of the problem has more to do with the political and social discrimination of the Shiite majority in a society ruled by the Sunni minority, compounded by frustration caused by the relocation of Sunnis to Bahrain, who were granted citizenship in order to artificially alter the ratios in society. The military intervention of Saudi Arabian-led forces, based on the decision of the Gulf Cooperation Council[4], backing the Bahraini Government's action against Shiites in March 2011, further escalated sectarian tensions in the Gulf kingdom.

Several countries in the MENA region also tried to avert popular revolts by resorting to political manoeuvres. As a result of the Tunisian and Egyptian events, the President of Yemen – in power for 30 years – announced on 2 February that neither he nor his son had any intention of running for re-election in 2013. On 22 February, the Government of Algeria lifted the state of emergency introduced in 1992 and in February, the King of Jordan promised a number of reforms. On 10 March, the King of Morocco introduced wide constitutional reform. These are just a few examples of the pre-emptive political moves that were made in the region.

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[2]   Economic reforms included the slashing of State subsidies on vital goods such as petrol, electricity and bread.

[3]   Based on World Food Programme statistics, between 2003 and 2011, the price of meat rose by 70 per cent, the price of milk increased 2.3-fold, the price of grain increased 2.5-fold, the price of oil and grease increased 2.8 fold, and the price of sugar increased 4.2 fold.

[4]   An alliance of six Sunni Persian Gulf countries, which agreed to provide military support to each other in case of external attack on any of the States. As the uprising of the Shiites can hardly be interpreted as an external attack on Bahrain, the legitimacy of the Saudi-led invasion remains questionable.

Another cause of the uprisings in the MENA region has to do with the geopolitical or geostrategic position of the countries involved. Although this is an indirect causality, it is important to note that a common characteristic of the uprisings was a degree of anti-western sentiment. Some analysts argue that the cause of this lies in the West's uncritical support of the authoritarian regimes of the region, which brutally oppressed their own people, but willingly served western interests.

The Tunisian "jasmine revolution" took place in a country that played a strategic role from the perspective of the EU. Tunisia was considered by the EU to be part of a buffer-zone at a time when radical Islam was on the rise. This role, as well as economic cooperation, secured Ben Ali's position, and allowed the EU to turn a blind eye to the lack of democracy in Tunisia. Apart from oil, Libya had a similar role, and also helped the EU, in particular Italy, stem the flow of African immigrants. However, neither Tunisia, nor Libya – as opposed to Egypt – has ever had a role of strategic importance from the perspective of the United States or the security of Israel.

For the past three decades, the international community has considered Egypt a US ally not least because it signed the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty. The strategic importance of Egypt can be demonstrated by the volume of foreign aid it received from the USA. Between 2001 and 2010, the United States allocated more than one third of all its foreign aid to Egypt and Israel. In 2010 alone, Egypt received more than US$ 1.5 billion aid from Washington, 1.3 billion of which took the form of military aid, and only 250 million economic aid.

The Mubarak regime cooperated with Israel for years, even sharing the information gathered by its secret service to help keep Hamas under control and keep the peace between the two countries. It is thus not surprising that both Washington and Jerusalem are keen to have a pro-western government in Egypt in the post-Mubarak era. The question is whether following free and fair elections in Egypt later this year, the pro-western and pro-Israeli stance adopted by Mubarak will be retained. The strategic importance of the Sinai Peninsula, the Palestinian issue and the security of transport across the Suez Canal are all strategic issues on which the forthcoming Egyptian elections will deeply impact.

Lessons learned from the events

As explained above, economic impoverishment, unemployment and corruption triggered what was fundamentally a socio-economically-motivated uprising in the region. Data and the reactions of rulers in the region give an indication of the enormous social inequalities that exist in these societies. The final outcome of the changes the MENA region is currently experiencing will depend largely upon whether the new governments can radically change the poor system of redistribution within their societies, which has led to vast tensions in society. A new system of distribution and higher employment levels are crucial for achieving a more equitable allocation of national wealth and resources. This should be the single most important move in tackling the everyday problems of poverty, corruption, access to health care and education, as these difficulties lead to scepticism and loss of faith in democratic institutions and democracy itself.

This process of democratic nation- and institution-building will no doubt take time. The experience of central and eastern European countries – a region with little or no previous democratic experience – has shown that the building of democracy is a time-consuming process, particularly given that power relations in society are in flux. Far-reaching and extensive changes are required to constitutions, electoral systems, laws, regulations and processes related to political parties, the judicial system, the media, the involvement of civil society, the establishment of independent government watchdogs, trade unions, etc. Most importantly, the mindset of people – both ruling and ruled – needs to adapt to the circumstances of a democratic system.

Consequently, the main lessons of the Arab Spring are the urgent need to improve people's economic conditions and living standards and the need to introduce democratic reforms that are inclusive, i.e. based on the will of the people, which is expressed through free and fair elections. A democratic system should also respect human rights and be founded on the rule of law. A democratic system is best suited to freedom of expression, equal opportunities for all and equal treatment of all groups in society.

An additional lesson of the popular uprisings is that regional peace and security cannot be secured in the long run by regimes that do not serve their own peoples' and nations' interests, and that seek outside compromise to remain in power. A resolution adopted unanimously by the 124th IPU Assembly in Panama on 20 April 2011 affirmed "the rights of people and countries to determine their own political future" and recalled "that democracies should reflect a diversity of histories and cultures". This should serve as a lesson for all proponents of democracy: that it is always the people themselves who have the right to determine their own political future based on the cultural and historical specificities of the nation. Western powers should remember this when attempting to influence the outcome of elections in the region.

Conclusion

For decades the MENA region has been characterized by authoritarian regimes, which took the form of dictatorships, absolute monarchies or religious republics. The protracted reign of these regimes deprived their people of political participation, and suppressed all opinion and thought that was deemed as opposition to the incumbent ruler. Various causes explored in this paper have now brought to the surface the opinions and thoughts of the formerly oppressed people, which in turn demonstrates that authoritarian oppression cannot be used indefinitely to guarantee peace and security. It is only through good governance, and by practising all the facets of good governance discussed in this paper, that peace and security can be achieved in society.