

Winds of Change

Revolution has come to North Africa, but can it bring lasting transformation?

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One of Africa's biggest questions remains unanswered. Will the political upheaval sweeping across North Africa lead to sustainable democracy and development?

After all, most revolutions do not. Will the uprisings we have witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya change the status quo and transform the leadership, economic trajectory and social relations in those countries for good?

At the heart of these protests are issues relating to social justice, equality and dignity. What we have seen in North Africa and beyond are young revolutionaries taking up arms against 'resolutions' such as Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi — long-serving dictators who make a habit of declaring resolutions that are never implemented.

It's not surprising that the youth have become disillusioned, leading them to create and devise innovative ways that would force pluralism and democracy down the throats of the Mubaraks of this world.

The global shock waves were first felt when Khaled Said was beaten to death in Alexandria on that fateful day, 6 June 2010. Said's friends organized nationwide strikes paving the way to what eventually happened in Tunisia, when the unemployed graduate Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself in protest against the unjust and unmoving government.

This, the Jasmine Revolution, sparked similar protests in Egypt, led in particular by the youth. Wael Ghonim, a popular Google executive, started a Facebook campaign dubbed 'We Are All Khaled Said'. The rest, as they say, is history.

The fires of protest have since engulfed the North African and Middle Eastern region, including Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Sudan, Jordan and Syria among others. But, as has been witnessed of the

Tunisia and Egypt uprisings, these revolutions haven't led to the transformation of the state apparatus. Instead, martial law has been imposed in Egypt, and in Tunisia the old guard still runs the show.

We are faced with revolutions that have opened up the space for democratic participation but are still very much unclear as to whether they will lead to real democracy and actual development. To be sure, these countries need to be prepared for hard work ahead, as building a democracy is not an easy project or a short-term engagement. It takes many years of hard work, contestation and compromise to get a politically and economically egalitarian society with all the constitutive elements of a democratic nation.

Civil society and the private sector have a critical role to play in this regard. Indeed, the majority of these societies were tightly closed prior to these revolutions. Human rights defenders were persecuted, the media space was tightly regulated and advocacy groups struggled to have their voices listened to. But now, with these events, there are real opportunities for genuine public-private partnerships based on societal values and collectively harnessed for the betterment of these different societies.

These countries have a lot to learn from sub-Saharan Africa where civil society formations have for many years struggled with their governments to open up a space for engagement. A cross-regional perspective is needed to respond to the needs of those left behind after the revolution and the defeat of the resolutions.

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