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Create no, one, or many democracies in the Arab world?

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Create no, one, or many democracies in the Arab world?

The West now has to prove how serious it is about its values

Bonn, 7 February 2011. First Tunisia, now Egypt! Recent events in Tunisia at least can already be called historic: the first predominantly peaceful regime change in any Arab country since time immemorial, if not the first successful popular uprising ever (the so-called "Revolution" of 1952 in Egypt was actually a military coup). And what is more, these events have neither been encouraged from abroad (just before Ben Ali fled the country, France had even agreed to deliver tear gas and bludgeons to the Tunisian government), nor were they dominated by an ideology or a central leader personality.

What will happen now in Tunisia? Four scenarios are conceivable: (1) The most desirable outcome would of course be the emergence of a pluralistic democracy (which would be the first at all in any Arab country – with the possible exception of Lebanon). (2) The country might, however, also slip into anarchy and civil war, in case the transitional government is not able to make a new beginning that a large majority of the population can accept. (3) In addition, the initial revolution could be followed by a second one, just as in Russia in 1917 or in Iran in 1979, where radical forces ascended and established a new authoritarian regime. This scenario seems unlikely at present in Tunisia, as the country's Islamists are less popular and more moderate than those in other Arab countries. They have more in common with Turkey's governing party AKP than with Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, Tunisia's Islamists might radicalise if the country's political and economic situation does not improve. (4) Lastly, it is also conceivable that the old regime reinstates itself. However, that is less likely at the moment, as the old regime appears to have severely alienated what is still the country's most powerful political actor – the military.

In Egypt, the situation looks different. The government has initiated talks with opposition groups, the leadership of the ruling NDP party has resigned, and President Mubarak will probably also resign before September. However, that does not

mean the end of the old regime. It still has a hold on key instruments of power. The army in particular has not yet distanced itself from the old regime – in contrast to the army in Tunisia – and it actually is not very interested in a genuine democratisation of Egypt, which would jeopardise its central political position and economic privileges. The army owns a number of manufacturing and service companies, which are outside of the official statistics, but generate a substantial income – to senior officers at least. These enterprises are given preferential treatment when it comes to taxation, import duties and the allocation of real estate.

In a way, the recent uprising has suited the army, as it has forced Mubarak to reject the faction of the regime that is more in favour of economic liberalisation, chiefly among them are his son Gamal and a number of businessmen in ministerial positions. These people have been a thorn in the side of those in the regime that are more in favour of state intervention and social balance, which includes quite a significant number of people in the army. Eventually the more liberal faction would have questioned the privileges of the army-run companies.

Unlike in Tunisia, the army in Egypt is still not only an element but an integral part of the regime. And if the army so chooses, the regime could easily reinstate itself (e.g. under the current vice president Suleiman). In this case, the Egyptian regime would also benefit from the fact that it has never based its rule on repression alone: While Ben Ali heavily relied on the police, the intelligence service and censorship and utilised his powerful position mainly to enrich the family of his wife, Mubarak gave material privileges not only to himself, but also to influential persons and groups in society, thus creating a connection between him and them (an instrument of rule that is known as 'patrimonialism' in social science). Quite a few of Mubarak's constituents are still loyal to him and his regime. For example, not all of last week's pro-Mubarak protesters were actually members of the security forces out of uniform. Private citizens who profit from him in power also got involved, because a change of government might infringe

on their privileges. Should the old regime survive, this balance between repression and patrimonialism could, of course, shift further towards repression.

In case that happens, popular uprisings in other Arab countries also might stall, and even for Tunisia such a development could have negative repercussions. This needs to be avoided at all cost, because democratising Egypt actually would significantly improve the chances of success for reform movements in other Arab countries.

It is for this reason that the West needs to make every effort to convince Mubarak to resign and encourage his successor to hold free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections. It is not enough to permit the participation of certain opposition groups such as the Muslim brotherhood. They, already fairly well integrated into the old regime, at least at a subordinate level, have as little acceptance among the protesters in Tahrir Square as Mubarak himself. If the West does not want to lose all of its credibility and that of the values it represents, it has to be willing to risk a temporary destabilisation in Egypt, even if that goes against geostrategic interests. For far too long the West has been involved in supporting Arab autocrats. Until recently, Egypt received US\$ 2 billion in military and development aid from the US every year, but it also has been one of the major recipients of German aid. Since Egypt is as such not a poor country, this level of German involvement can only be explained as a means to secure the West's claims in the Mediterranean, along the Suez Canal and neighbouring Israel. German arms exports were not suspended until ten days after the uprising had started.

At every opportunity, development experts have been warning of this day when the Egyptian people stands up and asks the West why it has for so long used its policies to stabilise the Mubarak re-

gime. And the longer this policy is maintained, the higher the likelihood will be that after a change-over, a new government might come to power that is as uncompromising in its rejection of the West as was the case in Iran after the fall of the Shah in 1979.

Of course the West should not take sides for one or the other party in Egypt, and that is definitely not what the Egyptian opposition groups ask for. They are too proud of themselves for organising these protests without support from abroad. But – as in the Ukraine in 2004 – the West can advocate the creation of a level playing field and ensure a peaceful settlement in this conflict.

And after that, the West should do what it can start doing right now in Tunisia: demonstrate that a country that has received generous support for years under authoritarian rule is considered eligible to such support all the more once it has embarked on a path towards democracy. Under no circumstances should the people in Arab countries get the impression that we punish them for democratic change. They should rather be given a perspective towards positive political and socio-economic development, in order to avoid a radicalisation of society. For example, Germany's party-affiliated foundations could support their Tunisian partners in setting up modern and competitive political parties, educate the population on citizens' rights in a democracy and assist in preparing elections. The EU should open up to exports from Tunisia and assist the new government in reforming the police, the judiciary and the administration, as well as in building up independent media. On the other hand, the West should on no account interfere into the internal struggle, which also means that it must accept any outcome of democratic processes, even if it does not like them.