The Making of a New Narrative in the Middle East

By Randa Slim, February 16, 2011, The Huffington Post

Both Tunisia and Egypt's populist revolutions are still in their infancy and it is too early to say whether they will succeed in revitalizing civic and political life and lead to democratic regimes in either country. However, their ripple effects on the political landscape of the Middle East are already being felt. While there are limits to transferring any model of political change across the different Arab countries, it is fair to say that the changes in Tunisia and Egypt have already dealt a heavy blow to old myths about democracy and political transformation in the region. A new political narrative is in the making. There are four themes in this emerging narrative.

Democracy is a universal human right, not a Western idea.

While Egyptians were staging disciplined and peaceful demonstrations demanding that Hosni Mubarak step down, Egypt's former vice president, Omar Suleiman, appeared on TV to announce that "Egypt was not ready for democracy." While totally out of touch with what was unfolding on everyone's TV screen and demeaning to all Egyptians courageously standing up for their rights, this statement reflected the beliefs of other Arab autocrats and monarchs. On January 31, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, whose family has ruled Syria since 1971, was asked by the Wall Street Journal about the pace of political reform in his country. His reply: "... we have to wait for the next generation to bring this reform." In Syrian political code, this means "not on my watch." What these authoritarian rulers fail to appreciate are the stirrings of every human soul, be it Arab or Western. President Obama beautifully articulated this reality when he quoted Martin Luther King: "There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom."

Clearly, Egyptian democracy faces a bumpy ride. Whether the Egyptian military will live up to its promises and cede political power to civilian rule is still to be determined. However, we are already witnessing Egyptians and other Arabs debate what type of democracy Egypt should have. Until now, Arabs have been presented with a false choice between democracy as defined by the West (sometimes introduced by force as was the case in Iraq), and the lip-service democracies of most Arab governments that are, in fact, repressive and corrupt. Tunisia and Egypt have shown us that there is a third way -- an Arab way. To them, democracy in its essence is the right of the people to live their lives, and decide their fate without heavy-handed control by a police state. Democracy should be defined by the freedoms it guarantees to its citizens, including the freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom to form political parties, and the freedom to establish a strong society that is free of fear.

Non-violence can work.
Countries such as Iran and Syria, militant movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas and extremist groups such as Al Qaeda have long espoused violence as the only means to achieve change and right historical wrongs. If non-violent protests were to lead to a democratic transition in Egypt and Tunisia, this would seriously undermine this narrative. A democratic regime that emerges from a non-violent populist movement would have more authenticity and credibility than Iran's theocrats or Syria's autocrat or Hezbollah's militants in reframing the popular debate about the use of violence in bringing about internal change and redressing historical injustices. Democratically-elected regimes that include relatively moderate Islamist elements such as the Muslim Brotherhood would also gain more leverage in challenging the claims of extremists such as Al-Qaeda to act on behalf of Islam.

The Islamists are part of the solution, but Islam is not THE solution.

The Islamists did not instigate these protests in Tunisia or Egypt. In Tunisia, the agent provocateur was a young merchant who immolated himself in protest against the indignity and injustice meted out by local officials. In Egypt, it was a group of secular 20-30 year old internet-savvy Egyptians fed-up with the status quo in which Egyptians were treated as though they were servants to the pharaoh. They wanted to reclaim their role as citizens - that is, as owners of the land and of the public space. The slogan "Islam is the solution" was not the rallying cry in Tahrir Square. Rather, it was: "the people want to bring down the regime."

There is no doubt that the Islamists will have their place at the table in any future democratic Tunisia or Egypt. But they will be one stakeholder among many others including liberals, leftists, nationalists, and a host of other civic organizations. Upon his return to Tunisia after more than 20 years in exile in the UK, Rashed Al Ghanoushi, a Tunisian Islamist leader announced that there is no place for Shariah in Tunisia. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has already announced that it will neither field candidates in the next presidential elections nor seek to garner a majority of seats in the next parliament. It is quite telling that when Iranian leader Khamenei called on the Egyptian protesters to establish an Islamic regime, Mohamad Al-Katatni, the former leader of the Muslim Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc, replied: "We are not responsible for the statements and declarations made by external forces."

These developments in both Tunisia and Egypt clearly show that the Islamist movement in the Arab world is not the scarecrow that Arab authoritarian regimes have long claimed it to be. It is a movement that has undergone a long gestation period of internal deliberation and self-reflection, and by now has come to respect and espouse the democratic rules of the game.

It's about governance, stupid!

Both revolutionary movements have shown that the uprisings were spurred by corruption, unemployment, and poverty. Arab governments have long used the Arab-Palestinian conflict as an excuse to avoid reform and would often argue that political, economic and social reforms must be postponed until after the Palestinian issue has been solved. The protesters in the streets of Tunisia and in Tahrir Square were not mired in foreign policy debates. Rather, their demands centered around good governance defined by gaining a voice in the decision-making process, rule of law, respect for human rights, and transparent and accountable institutions of government.
whose purpose should be to achieve the welfare of all members of society. At the heart of good
governance is human freedom. As economist Amartya Sen has long argued, "Expansion of
freedom is viewed both as the primary end and as the principal means of development."

The wall of fear has been broken. The public space has been reclaimed. The citizens of Tunisia
and Egypt now face the hard work of nation-building. It is in the West's interest to help make
these two stories end well. Otherwise, the longest war will be with us for generations to come.

*Randa Slim, a Lebanese-American political analyst, is a practitioner of dialogue and peace-
building processes in the Middle East and Central Asia.*