

The Revolution Continues – Interrupted

The assumption is this – that Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, and others in the Arab world, *decided* one day, after waking up from their beds, to go out and revolt. The assumption is that they had a choice in the matter – and many, indeed, wonder now – did they make the right choice? After unrest, death, and repression – after seeing these revolutions – our revolutions – become at least interrupted, in many ways – was it the right choice?

I want to problematise that assumption – because I do not believe that this was a choice in the slightest. Not, at least, on the part of those who revolted and rebelled three years ago. I think there were three people who *did* have the choice in North Africa three years ago whether there would be a revolt, or not. Their names were Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Muammar al-Qaddafi. As for those who went to the streets – this was not a choice – not unless you assume that the person whose ship is headed towards a cliff at the hands of an awful captain, has any choice but to demand he steer it in the right direction. The choice was not whether or not to revolt – that was the choice of those dictators and autocrats – but what was the choice of those who went to the street was how they would fight their battle.

I shan't speak for the experience of being in Tunis when the uprising began, before it turned into a revolution – because I wasn't here – nor will I speak of the experience of being in Benghazi, when Libyan patriots demanded a better future. I can only pay tribute to their sacrifices. I can, however, speak of Egypt – because that was where I was – and I can speak of *Midan el-Tahrir* - the Square of Liberation – and what I saw there during those 18 days almost three years ago.

When the previous speaker spoke of the 'Revolutionary Promise', my mind goes back to the promise of those 18 days. It's a promise I have often reflected upon over the past 3 years – because the word 'revolution' has now become so instrumentalised in North Africa for a variety of political and partisan purposes. For me, the word revolution related to that promise exhibited in Tahrir during those 18 days in 2011. It's since become quite fashionable, it seems, to describe those days as something of a utopia – a place that did not really exist, except in the figments of our imaginations, and manipulated through cameras and hopeful reporters. That's not true – and we do a disservice to ourselves who lived those days – and to those who died during those days – when we flounder in despair, and deny what we saw. That Square was real – in all of its respect for diversity, pluralism, freedom and respect. *bread, freedom, social justice, human dignity.*

The road was never going to be short – it was always going to be long. In the past three years, I think we've all lived, whether in Tunisia, Libya or Egypt, through events that usually take decades to unfold. The pace of change is tremendous – and the difficulties are as well – but the core demands remain. And they do, it must be said and recognised, remain interrupted. In all of the themes that the Hammamet conference asks us to consider, progress remains interrupted. I am sure the

challenges are different in every country – for the sake of discussion I will focus mine on Egypt, and wait for others to introduce their own thoughts on other cases.

When we ask, for example, about ‘trust’ and ‘accountability’, I cannot imagine that we’ve gained much in that regard at all. At the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, the Egyptian people put their trust into Mubarak’s own supreme council of the armed forces, hoping that as the armed forces did not fire on Tahrir Square, they would take Egypt onto a path leading to a pluralistic democracy, backed by the rule of law, and protecting fundamental rights. In the end, Egyptians received a catastrophic plan that meant that Egyptians were eventually led to a situation where they were forced to choose between a representative of the former regime, and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood – not quite what anyone seemed to have had in mind. Neither of these camps were revolutionary in their desires for change. The Muslim Brotherhood won, with the backing of pro-revolution forces – but that victory was quickly squandered, as the Brotherhood failed to even begin on the road of economic reform, let alone security reform. Accountability of those in power, whether those who were elected, or those who remained in the system from Mubarak’s former order, was certainly not on the table. In the end, the loss of popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, the deterioration of the country, and a confluence of interests between varying political structures in Egypt (including, but not only, remnants of the former regime), meant that a military overthrow of Egypt’s first democratically elected president was extremely easy to accomplish – and with great popular support.

Egypt – and I’d argue other states as well – finds itself now in the midst of an interruption – the revolution has been interrupted – the democratic process has been interrupted – accountability, with a non-elected government in place, has been interrupted – and trust? Trust is at an all time low – and that links in to what I think is another important theme in our conference – that of diversity and inclusion. Because, clearly, you can’t trust those that you reject even including in the first place – and those who are not included will not trust those who exclude them.

Here, I wonder if Egypt is uniquely placed to gain the price for the worst example in North Africa at present, based on the past three years. Under the first military government from 2011-2012, Christian Egyptian communities, faced with a far more free and permissive attitude in the public sphere, were subjected to tremendous pressures, particularly from radical religious groups such as more extreme Salafis, as well as some senior offices within the Muslim Brotherhood. Claims that, for example, 60% of the protesters at the presidential palace were Christian (stated by the now imprisoned Mohamed Al-Beltagy of the Muslim Brotherhood); the inflammatory rhetoric expressed on the Rabaa stage before the violent crackdown, which laid the groundwork for extremely vicious actions against Christian communities later on; and the use of sectarian slogans in marches (Egypt is “Islamic”, for example), that find themselves spray painted on churches in the midst of pro-Morsi marches. The rhetoric, with the acceptance of even the presidency, against Shi’i Egyptians led to several of them being lynched. On the

political level, the marginalisation and exclusion of non-Islamist political forces (including violent clashes with other, non-Islamist Muslims) was also clear.

All of that kind of exclusionary rhetoric from the Islamist camp is clear – and one has to keep that in mind. However, as distasteful as that sort of discourse is, it is not the only type of exclusion that is currently being passed through the Egyptian public sphere. On the contrary – there is a rhetoric and discourse vis-à-vis Islamists that now pervades the highest levels of the public arena, which is a deeply pressing issue, considering the loss of life that has taken place in Egypt over the last four months. That kind of discourse is reserved for those Islamists who reject the current political framework: primarily the Muslim Brotherhood, who insist on “legitimacy” and so forth.

The discourse goes further, and it has costs. The discourse describes these types of Islamists as “non-Egyptian”, as they have supra-national considerations due to their commitment to the Islamist project – strangely enough, the same sort of judgment is rarely, if ever, applied to Nasserite Egyptians, who obviously have supra-national, Arab nationalist dreams. Again, all of this serves to dehumanise this portion of Egyptian society – and it does have costs. It is precisely this sort of discourse that has made it possible for Egypt to witness the most violent state crackdown against Egyptian citizens in modern history – with few voices expressing their objections. Discourse can, indeed, lead to death.

There is a final type of exclusion that ought to be recognised in today’s Egypt – and that is the exclusion of those who even raise the idea of inclusion in the first place. The current Egypt Deputy Prime Minister, for example, Ziad Bahaa Eldin, is loyal to the new political arrangement – but he is demonised and attacked in the media for daring to even consider the idea of national reconciliation. For his trouble, he’s described as a member of a ‘5th column’, working against Egypt’s interests. He is not the only one – the likes of Amr Hamzawy, Belal Fadl, and the scores of human rights activists that caution against the discourse of exclusion and dehumanisation, are also subjected to another kind of exclusion and dehumanisation themselves. It is not enough, it seems, for some to dehumanise a group – they must also dehumanise those who oppose the dehumanisation process itself. None of that serves to instil trust, let alone respect for inclusion and diversity.

So, one has to ask – what have North African Arabs gained in this process over the past three years? It’s a worthwhile question – and I think that the answer lies in addressing one of the other themes in this conference: the concept of ‘active citizenship’. One cannot yet speak of the ‘Arab citizen’ – because, frankly, to do so would be to declare a victory. The basis of citizenship is entitlement – entitlement to certain rights vis-à-vis the state in which you live. That, to me, is the difference between an Arab national, and an Arab citizen – the Arab national has the right to a passport, and one that will actually let him travel. The Arab citizen, however, is entitled to certain fundamental rights – and they must be real, without Arab states denying them the basis of citizenship: their rights.

Now, one can argue that this is true in many places, and not just the Arab world – and one would be right. I do not mean to suggest otherwise. My point in this regard, however, is to point out that these uprisings turned into revolutions precisely because Arab nationals wanted to become Arab citizens – and that process has been interrupted. What is different now, however, as compared to three years, is that more and more people actually *want* to be citizens. They *want* those rights – and they're willing to go after them. That, to my mind, is something of an accomplishment – an awareness that actually, human beings are imbued with fundamental rights that the state is *not* allowed to override. That no longer can the state simply invoke itself as the ultimate arbiter, without finding a large number, if not a sufficient number, of people to resist. One can complain about the phenomenon of the protest which has been probably abused somewhat in recent years – but what we've seen clearly in a place like Egypt and elsewhere is that while 3 years ago, few were willing to protest for something they believed in, now, everyone feels an ownership over that. It's certainly not the best form of political expression – it's chaotic and difficult to measure – but it exists, and it is powerful. That is not a small thing to consider – and I say that as much as a note of optimism to civil society in this room, as I say it as a note of warning to politicians and would be politicians.

We've gained the ability to recognise that we *can* do better. Tahrir in the 18 days was not a fluke – nor were the examples of true citizenship that were exhibited in all these countries. It was real. It was a choice. If I had to sum up what role I think Hammamet participants can play in re-building a trusting and trustworthy society, I think it would be purely that: to remind us all that building a better society is a real and viable choice. We ought not to take that for granted. I know that everyone here does think we can make that choice – and I look forward to seeing us all over the coming sessions figure out how we can help others make the same.

Many people have died for these causes – we must now ensure that we live for ours. Despite those who frequently hit the pause button, and cause interruptions: the revolution continues.