



**Program on Arab Reform and Democracy
From Political Activism to Democratic Change in the Arab World
May 12-13, 2011**

ABSTRACTS

Christopher Alexander

Title: *Toward a Second Republic in Tunisia*

Abstract: Tunisia was the very unlikely point of origin for the wave of popular protest that has toppled two governments and threatened others across the Arab world since last December. Today, Tunisia offers the region's best chance for a relatively smooth transition to democratic governance. The country enjoys economic, cultural, and historical assets that many suggest should make it fertile ground for democracy.

This paper agrees that Tunisia may provide the region's first democratic transition. If that comes to pass, however, it will not be because of the oft-cited factors. Instead, the paper argues that Tunisia's progress owes much to the presence of a coalition of civil society organizations that have taken control of the reform agenda, sustained the reform process' momentum, and protected it from subversion. The paper traces the development of this collection of organizations in the broader context of political opposition in Tunisia. The paper then discusses the politics behind the reforms to date and lays out the challenges that lie ahead

Maryam Alkhawaja

Title: *Activism in Bahrain and the Struggle for Reform*

Abstract: The move to reform has been an ongoing struggle for many years now; it is not something new to Bahrain. The job of an activist is to bring people together. As they try to unite the people, the government plays the sectarian card trying to separate society. This talk will mainly focus on the last decade of the Bahraini struggle, not just what it means to be a Bahraini activist today but what it meant to be a Bahraini activist when Bahrain claimed to be the beacon for democratic reform in the Middle East. This talk will mention the many ways the government targets these activists; from harassment to beatings; from arrests to defamation campaigns. I will mention the status of a few prominent activists in Bahrain and how what they are subjected to today as a result for their activism.

Amer Bani Amer

Title: *Assessing Current Public Perceptions of Political Activism Development in Jordan*

Abstract: The current achievements of political activism and reform in Jordan remain few in number due to the relatively early stage of activism development within Jordan overall. This presentation provides a current overview of public perceptions of political activism development in Jordan based upon qualitative methods and analyses.

Public perception of political activism is often described as lagging and thus achievement is generally seen as still developing and minor overall. Some of the key challenges include the resistance of the “system to change”, such as the “old guard” phenomenon, the existence and behavior of the Muslim Brotherhood as the main opposition group, and “citizen” and “citizenship” as disputed terminology related to Jordanians of Palestinian roots participating in policymaking processes. However, the revision of the public meeting law, public freedom increases for media, increase of women engaged in political and public life, and changes in the elections process are frequently indicated as “achievements” accredited to activists’ efforts within the data. Mobilizing youth and providing training on effective activism are additionally mentioned as ways to implement future successful reforms.

Political activism in Jordan is still largely undefined and faces serious challenges and barriers despite some key achievements due to the deeply rooted nature of political and traditional norms within policymaking procedures.

Ahmed Benchemsi

Title: *Morocco: Revival Activism vs. Autocratic Resilience*

Abstract: The Arab wind of change started to Blow on Morocco on February 20, 2011. That day, an average estimation of 200,000 protesters hit the streets of more than 50 cities, claiming democratic change. Since then, every sunday has been protest day nationwide, with record turnout estimations of 500,000 in more than 100 cities.

Leftist secularists and conservative Islamists, monarchy-reformists and republicans revolutionaries... all agreed to put their differences aside and to rally behind the unifying banner of the Facebook-initiated, youth-led “Feb20 movement”. It was not long before the royal palace felt the heat. On March 9, King Mohammed VI announced dramatic constitutional change in a landmark, televised speech.

Who are the Feb20 leaders? How is their movement organized? Do they have a strategy to move forward? How is the Makhzen (autocratic monarchic system) reacting in return? Is the royally appointed constitutional reform committee to be trusted for democratic change? How are Morocco’s political parties and civil society playing their part in this revolutionary chess game?

Nathan J. Brown

Title: *Pretending Palestine is Normal*

Abstract: Palestinian political activists have a long history on which to draw—older Palestinians currently like to claim that the methods of the recent Arab uprisings are ones that were learned from Palestinians—but an unusually difficult and complicated set of obstacles. They face not only semiauthoritarianism (in the form of two rival governments headquartered in Gaza and Ramallah) but also occupation, and it has never been clear how to integrate demands for internal change with the struggle for national independence. And there are some more subtle political difficulties as well: while the Arab world’s most successful uprisings have taken place in states with strong institutions (Egypt and Tunisia), Palestine’s semiauthoritarian regimes are weak; in contrast with many other Arab societies, the political field is already crowded with parties, movements, and factions. Rather than seeking to overcome these obstacles, Palestine’s most promising activists seek, in a sense, to ignore them; their situation is so difficult that they seek not so much to build on their own past experiences but to import other peoples’ by drawing on the simplicity, focused, cross-ideological, imaginative, and grass-roots nature of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

Nabiha Jerad

Title: *Political Activism of Everyday Life: Lessons from the Tunisian revolution.*

Abstract: The Tunisian revolution surprised everyone inside and outside the country . It took place without a leader , outside the parties or other organizations. It had no ideology. Yet in 23 days it succeeded in putting an end to a brutal dictatorship in place for over 23 years. Though largely non violent, this was a true revolution, not an intifadaha or uprising. Still, it was not the soft revolt that the title of “ Jasmin revolution” suggests . This revolution was like an earthquake that immediately resonated throughout the region under the name « thawrat ashaâb » , (revolution of the people) « thawrat al- horrya wal karama » (revolution for liberty and dignity). It was an event that opened a new era, shaking political and social ties.

The Tunisian revolution is a new phenomena that needs to be thought in new ways. It introduced an epistemological rupture in the paradigms used by those who analyze the Arab-Muslim region both socially and politically. The view of these societies that suggested that Islam is incompatible with democracy and that which suggested that living under authoritarian regimes cultivated a fear that paralyzed any action dominated the literature in political sociology.

Tunisia was studied as a model of what E. Hiboux calls the « force of obedience » (*La force de l' obeissance.* 2005) . The political landscape was either dictatorship or political islam. Many articles and books have stressed the signs of islamization in Tunisia and other Muslim societies. Some almost justified the repression that weakened the role of opposition and civil society controlled by the Ben ali's regime because of the fear of Islamization. We were made to think that Tunisians and Arabs destiny was to live under autocratic regimes and that change could only be a kind of reform within the system through opposition and the pressure of civil society .

It seems that this view is reflected in many theories in political science that we will be discussing during this conference which must now be questioned because we are facing absolutely new questions . The current framework does not allow us to understand the demand for democracy with the traditional concepts in the discipline : « elites » and « opposition » . We must ask how can we explain the politization of Tunisian society through other means than political activism in its traditional forms : partis and NGOs actions ? The notion of opposition and civil society as theorized in political science were not the forces of political change in Tunisia.

Stéphane Lacroix

Title: *Saudi Arabia: The Impossible Revolution?*

Abstract: While most Arab authoritarian states have since December 2010 experienced some form of prolonged popular unrest - leading in some cases to the fall of the government -, Saudi Arabia has until now remained fairly quiet. In this paper however, I will argue that, despite the exceptional resources of the state, a strong potential for change does exist in Saudi Arabia.

Laurence Louër

Title: *The 2011 Uprising in Bahrain and its Consequences on the Participative Institutions*

Abstract: Among the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Bahrain distinguishes itself by the existence of an endemic political instability manifested, among other things, in the regular occurrence of popular uprisings. In this context, the 2011 uprising did not come as a surprise. The Arab revolutions only hastened something that had been expected for several years now. Indeed, the political reforms of the early 2000, and in particular the new constitution of 2002, opened a new episode of crisis after a brief lull in 2001. The opposition has since demanded the reinstatement of the 1973 constitution which granted the elected parliament much more powers than the current one. After having adopted boycott as a strategy of pressure, the main opposition party, al-Wifaq (the Concord) decided to participate to the parliamentary elections in 2006 and 2010, progressively becoming an institutionalized opposition accepting to play in the limited participative framework imposed by the Al-Khalifa ruling dynasty. The uprising did put an end to this process. The brutality of the repression indeed made al-Wifaq's position unbearable, forcing its deputies to resign from the parliament. The uprising has hence resulted in damaging the instable participative institutions in Bahrain as well as the general political climate. The question now is whether the limited political participation will survive in a way or another. The current tendency seems to be the return to a classical form of authoritarianism.

Ellen Lust

Title: *Activism in the Middle East: A Framework*

Abstract: The dramatic unrest unfolding across the Middle East in 2011 is altering our view of activism in the Middle East. Observers both within and outside the region are reconsidering assumptions about the stability of authoritarianism and obstacles to activism. Most explanations behind the unrest fail to answer old questions while raising many new ones: What were the key challenges facing activists, and how have they been overcome? How has activism developed over time, and what were the catalysts for such changes? How have the events of 2011 altered the challenges facing activists, their capacity to respond to these challenges, and the strategies at hand? And what are the most important steps activists can take in leading countries toward positive development, including democratization, social equality and economic growth?

This paper addresses some of these questions, turning our attention as well to some of the related academic literature in sociology and political science. In doing so, the aim is not to provide answers to the questions raised, but rather to provide a foundation for discussion. This allows us to determine the extent to which individual experiences match broader trends and findings in the literature, and to find the boundaries/unanswered questions that these experiences raise (particularly after 2011).

Ziad Majed

Title: *Activism and the Orphan Reform in Lebanon*

No Abstract

Munir Mawari

Title: *Challenges to Realistic Political Reforms in Yemen*

Abstract: Political activism in Yemen has been mostly taken the shape of militant and confrontational actions since 2004, when the Huthi insurgency started in northern Yemen. The relative success of the Huthi insurgency encouraged activists in South Yemen to form a secessionist movement aiming to solve their problem with Salih regime by reestablishing their independent state of South Arabia. This movement has rejected taking an active part in political events under Salih regime and focused on taking direct resistant actions against the union. The traditional political parties who have been taking peaceful parts in political events failed to achieve any change until 2011 when they form a strong alliance with the Huthis, the Southern Movement and the armed defectors from Salih regime. The unrest that we are witnessing across the Middle East in 2011 is not new in Yemen. In fact, it was widely expected that Yemen will face a popular uprising before Tunisia and Egypt. In normal time most Yemenis are politically active. The social gatherings of chewing are widely viewed as political forum that allow activist to disseminate their messages. The young generation, however, is the most active and anti regime among all Yemenis. They were inspired by Tunisian and Egyptian youth and started in mid-February 2011 to protest. They have not change the regime yet but they have already forced Salih to promise not to grant power to his son or any one of his family member, not to re-set the meter for his term and not to run in any coming election.

These achievements were not enough for the young protesters to go home, they are stick to their demand of an immediate regime change but they are facing multiple internal challenges in forming coalitions and facing the government co-optation and maintaining unity. The GCC position in supporting Salih regime and the passive action by the international community in regard of human right violation in Yemen are the most external challenges. The panelist will explain the most critical challenges and turning points ahead and steps should be taken to achieve positive change in Yemen.

Marwan Muasher

Title: *A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System*

Abstract: Although King Abdullah II attempted to launch a number of political reform initiatives in Jordan since coming to the throne in 1999, all efforts to open up the political system were thwarted by a resilient class of political elites and bureaucrats who feared that such efforts would move the country away from a decades-old rentier system to a merit-based one. This class accurately predicted that reform would chip away, even if gradually, at privileges it had acquired over a long period of time in return for its blind loyalty to the system. It thus stood firm not just against the reform efforts themselves, but also in opposition of the King's own policies.

One example of such a gradual and serious reform effort by the King was the Jordanian National Agenda, a blueprint for political, economic, and social reform. The document was developed in 2005 by an inclusive committee of personalities from political parties, parliament, media, civil society, the private sector, and the government who represented a wide spectrum of political, economic, and social ideologies. It did not rely on rhetorical statements, but suggested specific programs with timelines, performance indicators, and links to the budget.

In the political reform field, it proposed new laws to open up elections, prevent discrimination against women, encourage freedom of the press, and address other issues, with the goal of gradually building a system of checks and balances in the country and moving from a rentier system to a merit-based one. It is precisely because of this goal that the effort was shot down by

an entrenched political and bureaucratic establishment.

The paper will detail the proposed initiatives and their role in developing a gradual and serious reform process to put the country on a solid track towards a political system of checks and balances and an economy characterized by sustained and internally generated growth. It will also analyze the structural reasons why reform efforts continue to falter: In order to protect itself, the regime created a loyal political and bureaucratic group. But this group is now entrenched and ossified, and has no qualms turning against its creator when its interests, as opposed to those of the country, are threatened. This phenomenon is not unique to Jordan, but can be found throughout most of the Arab world.

The reform process in Jordan has largely stalled since the National Agenda was first proposed. Successive governments have paid lip service to it, but dropping all references to its recommendations on political reform. The old election law, structurally flawed to thwart the development of a strong parliament and a system of checks and balances, has been largely left intact. The lack of a serious reform process has resulted in successive weak parliaments, a rise in corruption, and an erosion of public trust in state institutions that has manifested itself in unprecedented social tensions in the country.

Ahmed Salah

Title: *Factors Leading to the Egyptian Revolution Where are We Now?*

Abstract: This presentation maps out political activism within the last decade, from support for the Palestinian Intifada to going against the American invasion of Iraq 2003 to reaching a state of maturity and realizing that the regime is the enemy, which catalyzed the formation of The Egyptian Movement for Change in 2004, Youth For Change in 2005, April 6 Youth in 2008, the appearance of several small movements and independent groups in 2010, and culminating in the popular forces that made and defend the Egyptian Revolution. Within this context, the presentation addresses the challenges activists faced whether with the security, delivering the message to the people, organizing, or funding, and the steps taken to deal with those challenges. It will focus on the unconventional plan for the 25th, its reasons and strategy; the continuous and not very successful attempts to create support for democracy within the American government, and how activists kept the balance; and the current situation in Egypt, with the military, fractured opposition, and what activists are doing about it. Where have activists advanced? What are the achievements obtained? What more are activists struggling for, and what are the mechanisms for doing this?

Radwan Ziadeh

Title: *Syria from Political Activism to Popular Uprising: A Roadmap to Democracy*

Abstract: For more than ten years the Syrian political opposition parties tried to push for more political openness; the answer was more repression and wave of arrest. The last one was last year when the government arrested lawyers who had worked for years to defend political prisoners. At the same time the opposition parties succeeded to be united in one front called the Damascus Declaration for Democratic change, but after the successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, things changed dramatically in Syria. A massive demonstration started in Daraa then spread to other cities like Damascus, Latakia, and Homs. Those demonstrations put an end to “Syrian exceptionalism”, and exactly as in Tunisia and Egypt, these protests are about domestic issues.

It is matter of time until the demonstrations reach a massive stage in Damascus and Aleppo, but still the question remains as to how the Syrian people will deal with the biggest challenge any

country faces during a democratic transition, and that is the legacy of the totalitarian regime. The Syrian regime since the third republic when the Ba'th Party took the power in 1963 was not very different from other totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Therefore, the process of disassembling or breaking down the regime should benefit from the lessons of other cases in order to secure a safe and peaceful transition to democracy.