

# After the Arab Spring: The Road to Reform in the Middle East and North Africa

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Once the first protests erupted in Tunisia in December 2010, a wave of unrest quickly spread across the Middle East and North Africa as citizens expressed their discontent with the region's regimes. The Arab Spring was the result of mounting dissatisfaction with the status quo but also the result of blatant government corruption, brutal human rights violations, the economic downturn, low wages and rising unemployment rates. The socio-economic problems were truly the boiling point that pushed protesters, particularly youth, over the edge.

The rising urban youth population played an important role in sparking the demonstrations and continues to be a force for change. Young Arabs are now connected through various social media platforms and are acutely aware of what the world looks like in other places. A yearning for socio-economic change and freedom invigorated the youth movement and its anti-regime advocacy.

The question now is what lies ahead for the region as some countries take the long and convoluted path to reform while citizens in many other countries continue to take to the streets and struggle for their basic rights.

While Tunisia and Egypt have actually deposed their leaders, there has been movement toward opening up political space in most countries where protests have occurred, and the current governments of the region are under extreme pressure to deliver and address the concerns of their people.

These calls for a democratic regime change and a desire for a new order that respects citizens' rights must ultimately fulfill people's democratic aspirations and at the same time result in a political process that is credible. A fair vote is critical to establishing both domestic and international trust in the new governments.

Let us consider the case of the Soviet Union. Since its demise, it is fair to report that introduction of a credible election process is more than one event or election. In some former Soviet countries, a democratic culture or tradition has been successfully introduced over the past generation. In others, a credible election has really never occurred. As we mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attempted coup d'état in Russia, history shows that the next chapters of the Arab Spring will involve elections; however, political events alone will not fulfill the aspirations of the populations in the region.

## IFES in Tunisia and Egypt

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) supports citizens' rights to participate in fair elections. We have a track record of success as an independent global leader in election assistance and democracy promotion. Since our founding in 1987, we have worked in 133 countries—from developing to mature democracies.

Every IFES project is staffed by national and international personnel and developed and implemented in collaboration with local partners. This homegrown approach ensures that the expertise offered by IFES meets the needs of the country or environment.

IFES conducted a technical election needs assessment in Tunisia one month after protests erupted and is currently supporting preparations for the country's most immediate and crucial challenge: holding democratic, credible and timely National Constituent Assembly elections in October. The constituent assembly will be tasked with writing a new constitution in what many fear may become a polarized environment. While the population in Tunis and other metropolitan areas embody secular and progressive values, those in rural areas tend to favor conservative, religious and political values.

The challenges ahead of the electoral process in Tunisia abound. Voter registration resulted in only 55 percent of eligible voters registering despite numerous surveys showing that many more Tunisians expect to vote in the upcoming elections. The Tunisian authorities have not launched a comprehensive voter education campaign, and citizens have yet to receive adequate official information on processes such as registration or voting. In fact, many Tunisians still do not know what they will be voting for in October. According to a national survey conducted by IFES in May, fewer than half (43 percent) of surveyed adults correctly identified the upcoming election as a constituent assembly election. Among youth aged 18 to 24, only 38 percent correctly identified the upcoming election. At least eight out of ten Tunisians said they needed more information in each key area: voter registration, participating political parties, candidates and campaigns, where and when to vote, voting procedures and vote counting.

In Egypt, there are many public agencies responsible for the conduct of elections. In accord with Egyptian law and procedures, IFES—a registered NGO—continues to work closely with local stakeholders to provide advice and assistance in a variety of program areas related to elections, including training on the legal and organizational framework of elections for judges; producing a voter education toolkit; conducting a workshop on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the electoral process; facilitating discussions with civil society organizations; and developing methodologies for poll worker training to take place ahead of parliamentary elections.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) nominated new members to the Egyptian Higher Elections Commission by decree in July to implement the new election law unveiled by the SCAF over the summer. The new law determines that half of the parliamentary candidates will be elected individually, while the other half will be elected under a list system, in which parties obtain seats proportionate to the percentage of the vote

they received. Another SCAF decree has banned foreign observers from monitoring the upcoming elections.

The parliament, scheduled to be elected in November, will be charged with creating a commission to draft a new constitution. Presidential elections will follow the parliamentary elections and the military has vowed to step down after the electoral process is finalized.

By Western democratic standards, the transition process unfolding in Egypt and Tunisia has not been inclusive and comprehensive. There has been commentary, debate and drafting of proposals by multiple academic and government leaders but the entire process has been by invitation only. Most of the activist community—particularly the young people using social media and blogs—feel excluded from the process.

While women were central in protests across the region, their electoral role in both Tunisia and Egypt is far from certain. In many countries introducing democracy in cultures where women's rights have not been central, quotas to guarantee representation in political parties and parliaments have been routine. In Egypt, there had been a women's quota but it was the subject of political debate since the result had been to increase the parliamentary strength of former President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party. In the new law, the quota is not in place. More critical to the immediate future, the Committee of Wise Men, a formal structure charged with drafting the new constitution, lacks representation by women at this time. While the new people's assembly election law does have a requirement for women on candidate lists, it remains to be seen how this will translate to seats in parliament without a quota requirement for representation.

In Tunisia, women have parity for the October elections to the National Constituent Assembly which is responsible for drafting the new constitution. Their presence in the next parliament remains uncertain. Global and national women's rights advocates remain concerned that there will be a backward slide in this progress if women are caught in the middle of an ideological and religious tug-of-war over their rights.

Civil society forces in both countries and globally were originally optimistic that electoral authorities would engage in a consultative dialogue with the spectrum of advocates—particularly representatives of the young and disabled—in the political process. These hopes have diminished as election dates approach. Few consultations have actually taken place. The presence of domestic and international observers is one point of strong difference: Tunisia is open and Egypt remains closed.

In the countdown to Election Day in both Tunisia and Egypt, an adequate process must be put in place to ensure that the final results are accepted and embraced by all, especially the losers. Tunisian and Egyptian authorities have less than 30 days to implement an adequate process which must be credible to their voters. Each citizen must leave the polling station believing his or her vote will be counted fairly for the future of the country. IFES' 24 years of experience in the election field have taught us that an election can only be deemed successful when there is no second-guessing of the final vote count.

## Building New Democracies

As in many volatile environments where IFES operates, these new democracies also require a basic framework for the proper configuration of elections. This framework includes the development of new election laws, the formulation of election commissions or some form of an election management body and the dissemination of information to the public about elections. Public awareness campaigns are fundamental in countries that have little or a mixed history of holding democratic elections and where citizens are largely unfamiliar with casting a ballot and their rights and responsibilities as voters.

The postponement of elections in Egypt from September to November and in Tunisia from July 24 to October 23 was an acknowledgement that much remains to be done. Authorities have struggled with how to resolve differences of opinion over reform priorities, the relative legitimacy of various political actors and the details of implementation of reforms in what is still a very short time frame. While there is no question that the road ahead will be long and bumpy, the central challenge will be to maintain the trust of the people in the process and the hope for social/economic/political progress through choices made at the ballot box. Frustration with the pace of change is inevitable because the ambitions within both countries and the region are so high.

The international community has a relevant and delicate role to play as it continues to offer strategic assistance as appropriate; respect local ownership of the reform process; provide financial support to ensure the viability of progress; and help local stakeholders as they build new, and hopefully stable, democracies.

For now, the short-term goal of the reform process is to organize elections that are fair and credible. The long-term goal is to build democratic institutions in accord with culture and traditions to include an independent judiciary, representative local parties, civil society and a free press—all supported by the free expression of the right to vote.

Donors can encourage a smooth transition and the establishment of stable governments by strengthening civil society organizations and fostering the exchange of ideas. Dialogue and information sharing are vital to vibrant democracies.

IFES is uniquely qualified to support the reform process in Tunisia and Egypt. We promote democratic stability by providing technical assistance and applying field-based research to the electoral cycle in countries around the world to enhance citizen participation and strengthen civil societies, governance and transparency. Our work is non-partisan and includes projects that help citizens participate in their democracies, increase politicians' accountability to the electorate and strengthen government institutions.\*

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\* For more information about IFES' work in the Middle East and North Africa, visit [www.IFES.org](http://www.IFES.org).