

International Executive Master in Development Studies

**Award Ceremony
April 7, 2011**

Keynote Lecture

**“Political and Social Transformation
in the Middle East and North Africa:
Assessments and Prospects”**

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Dear Mrs. Graduate Institute Deputy Director,

Dear Mr. IMAS Director,

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be among you today for the 2010/2011 award ceremony recognizing the work of the students of the International Executive Master in Development Studies (IMAS). And, to begin with, I would like to extend my wholehearted congratulations to the graduating students wishing them much success in the next phase of their professional life. I hope that the training acquired at the Graduate Institute with my fellow colleagues and the overall experience in Geneva will carry on to form a solid base for the respective fields of study and work of this year's class.

As all of you know, since its launch IMAS has successfully come to represent an eminently international program whose core objective is knowledge-enhancement and skill-acquisition within a high-quality education environment, and whose aims are to promote sustainable human development that is equitable and respectful of cultural and social diversity.

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And so, it would seem that there is no better time to celebrate the graduation of this group, than at a time where a region of the world long struck by the absence of a key component of development – namely democracy and political liberalization – has dramatically emerged from such lethargy with popular revolutions aimed at granting its citizenry empowerment and control over its future.

Is then the Middle East and North Africa, this core region of the Arab and Islamic world, at long last witnessing a democratic wave? How widespread and lasting is this freedom surge? And what of the actual nature of the changes that this breakthrough is ushering? The fall of Tunisian President Zein Al Abidine Ben Ali at the hands of a nationwide popular revolt in January and, within weeks, the end of President Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt in February and the *de facto* delegitimization of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in March in a repeat of the same scenario have raised these questions with insistence and urgency.

Hence, we must, above all else, stress the historical significance of the events. Because, for all the second-guessing in the media about the uncertainty of what we can expect, it is important to indicate unambiguously how important these revolutions are in and of themselves. And that they are more than uprisings or revolts or indeed *Intafadas*, they are revolutions.

What precisely has been missing in the Arab World for such a long time (close to a century since the fall of the Ottoman Empire) is a *bona fide* revolution. The region has not fully experienced a single one. Last December 17, a countryside destitute Tunisian street vendor sets himself on fire in a gesture of absolute resignation in the face of injustice and resignation of hope, and less than 3 months later the region is ablaze with two of its most entrenched authoritarian regimes having fallen, one on its way, and several others seriously threatened.

Secondly, we must register the simple yet powerful fact that, for all the conceptualizing by experts and media alike, in the present case, it is merely injustice, inequality, and unemployment that drove these revolutions. More specifically, the continuing frustration of viable channels of expression, human rights abuses in a context of authoritarianism, and centralization of power.

It is a plea for dignity that we witnessed, which was furthered by increased social cooperation.

Still, given the well-known nature of the deadlocks, what is really surprising is that it took so long for the revolutions to materialize. In the presence of gradual mass delegitimization of the Tunisian and Egyptian states, why has there not be

mobilization leading to revolution earlier? Truth be told, there had been uprisings before in all of these countries; regularly (food riots, bread riots, unemployment riots, post-electoral riots). And there also had been democratization attempts, notably in the 1990s. But the 1990s democratization was institutional, its outcome cosmetic, and fundamentally it did not respond to people's aspirations.

Subsequently, the security and stability mantra, plus the post-9/11 anti-terrorism atmosphere allowed for a type of neo-authoritarianism to emerge whereby the ubiquity and sacralization of the War on Terror was an open invitation to putting anything democratizing on the back burner and turning a blind eye on repression (think of the practice of 'rendition' as a paradigm).

In essence, the longevity of the regimes and their ability to weather previous storms had led to the weakening of the middle class in both countries. The systemic and systematic rise of the corruption led to a feeling of unending arbitrariness. Citizens had to suffer the ills of corruption not to obtain favors, but in effect to secure basic services.

A second factor of weakening of the system (which we read about in Khaldounian analysis of earlier Arab dynasties) was the increased internal infighting amongst elites, notably the new businessman classes that emerged (often in partnership with foreign partners) in several of these countries (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in particular). The rise of social cleavages became intolerable.

Finally, the crystallization of popular hatred on a presidential family, spouse and son, symbols of a corrupt elite. This most visible dimension was also eating away at the very heart of the system. Notions of Leila Ben Ali, the spouse of Tunisian President Ben Ali, eyeing the presidency for herself were symptomatic of such dynastic drift.

The sequence leading to the revolution had been slowly building. In Tunisia since at least 2008, and in Egypt also since the April 6, 2008 movement. In both places, electoral appointments for the next year in which the President's candidacy or his heir (son or son-in-law) were intolerable. Transition scenarios had been planned for and they were not far of what transpired early on.

The sequence was then accelerated by key events. In Tunisia, the December 17 immolation of the street vendor, and in Egypt, the December 31 riots after the attack on a Church. Both allowed for a coming together of the country, sort of rehearsal for the coming unity that drove the revolutions.

Other Intifadas were always external; Gulf War in the 1990s, Iraq in 2000s, and Palestine throughout. They were not enough to generate permanent anti-regime mobilization. They were merely moments of anger in which the livelihood of the citizens was not questioned, or at least not directly as this remained a matter of external solidarity, not domestic societal becoming.

The steady rise and widening of the contestatory discourse – at a point, every Tunisian or Egyptian not benefiting from the system came to have a personal reason to resent the system – also took place in a context of weakening of the regime, the basis of the regime was no longer solid and it had become probe to elite division. Here, the ageing leaders had become paradoxically weaker than ever while thinking their power was absolute; Ben Ali since 1987 (24 years) and Mubarak since 1981 (30 years), Kaddafi since 1969 (42 years). A whole generation, for the majority of the youth in both countries, grew up only knowing one leader; a leader who also had never acquired full legitimacy because of a military past.

Finally, we should make mention of the role of the military which behaved as a republican army, the regional media which beamed powerful scenes of historical change, and, of course, the social digital media that defined these e-revolutions and the youth (including many female leaders) who drove them to success. All three factors functioned as mutually-reinforcing energies.

What can we expect next? Before anything, the Libyan scenario has made things more complicated and its swift resolution must be reached in a manner that hands back the revolution to its domestic actors, lest we generate an infantilisation of this revolution and create a precedent of successful regime resistance. Overall, the reconfiguration can arguably only move towards popular expectations, as the populations will continue to demand reform.

But, historically, transitions are more difficult than revolutions. They last longer, are more complex, and can fail. Democratization is a process of political liberalization towards an end result, namely democracy, which by nature is fleeting and requires strong institutions.

In the case at hand, both the Islamists and the military must continue, as both have so far, to play by the rules. What is their game plan is another matter. As long as it remains democratic, it is fine. A republican army and democracy respecting religiously-oriented political actors are concomitant with democracy. What is in fact more challenging is the weakness of political parties that have been emasculated by years of co-optation by the ruling regimes. Overall, revolutions take a life of their own, and in each country the story will be written differently.

In conclusion, we can say that these revolutions are but the latest phase in the incomplete history of the postcolonial story of the Middle Eastern and North African phases.

A savvy youth has ushered a momentum to demonstrate that there is more to democratic reform than hastily convened cosmetic elections.

The revolutions highlight the universal relationship between deprivation and aspiration. They illustrate the fact that skill acquisition leads invariably to demand formulation.

They demonstrate the tactical limits of authoritarianism once it is faced with its own insurmountable contradictions, unable to take the initiative beyond cabinet reshuffle, vague promises of better days, and struggling to keep pace with precisely the pace of changes.

In the final analysis, it is the cumulative weight of unending injustice, ever more arbitrary ruling systems and aloof rulers, and a distorted social fabric which have spelled doom for the regimes more so than the economies edged towards disaster

Revolutions are but a moment of freedom. Transitions are a different issue altogether. As noted, the transitions will be difficult but the revolutions have succeeded and that is a historical event to be saluted by men and women of good will all over the world.

We are lucky to be living such historical changes and your class even more so as its own start in the word coincides with the opening of an inspiring new page.

May we see more such democracy, and may you contribute to generate more of it.

Thank you for your attention.