



Report of the Forum 'New Political Cultures in North Africa and Middle East'

(Cairo, October 8-10 2011)

Introduction

The Forum on New Political Cultures in North Africa and Middle East was held in Cairo on October 8-10, organized by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva in partnership with MADA for Media and the Arab Forum for Alternatives. It convened some 60 activists, researchers, bloggers and actors of mobilizations from several North Africa and Middle East (MENA) countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrein. The objective of this event was to develop together a better understanding of the new political cultures and the values they illustrate (equality, freedom, justice, dignity, inclusiveness, non-violence, non ideological and participatory approach, etc.), It also aimed to explore the similarities and differences in the expressions of political change between countries and to look into the waning of the rhythm of change. The forum offered a unique opportunity to share concrete experiences, to develop shared analyses of the recent changes, and to plan initiatives in the field of conflict resolution and peaceful change. Through discussions at the academic and practical levels, it enabled participants to move towards a focus on shared experiences: What rules of collective political action are we promoting? How can we defend the respect of our shared principles on the ground?

Participants to the forum had diverse and very rich experience backgrounds, often combining profiles of activist, blogger, political actor and/or researcher. They configured a very inclusive spectrum of ideological and political background (ranging from secular to Islamists, revolutionary to reformist and more conservative), gender and age (youth and more senior profiles). The selection of participants had been made possible thanks to Cordoba Now's Network of experts, whose members had reached out throughout the region to achieve a fairly representative segment of the region's diverse civil society (albeit without the ambition of achieving a formal representativity). This balanced participation enabled constructive discussions where participants explored ways to prevent/mitigate violent crises and support peaceful and inclusive dynamics in the current processes of change.

Executive summary

The Forum on New Political Cultures in North Africa and Middle East gathered an inclusive political and ideological spectrum of actors of mobilizations from six countries concerned by the so-called "Arab Spring". Participants shared experiences about the recent changes in the region and assessed the commonalities in values. They discussed and planned transversal cooperation initiatives to defend the respect of shared principles on the ground, to prevent or mitigate backlashes and to promote rules of collective political action. This summary highlights some of the main points raised by the participants.

- The dynamics of political change in the MENA region cannot be taken for granted and their outcomes are not fully predictable. Despite this, the recent protest mobilizations do give evidence of a **deep change in political cultures**, with new forms of engagement in collective

and political action, a profound questioning of the relationship to power, and new articulations between individual and collective identities through the emergence of 'individual citizenship'.

- The popular dynamics manifest a set of "universal humanist values": political freedom, citizenship, national/popular determination, inclusiveness, dignity, equality, justice, along with transition-born aspirations such as security and stability.
- These political cultures have materialized **new forms of political engagement** from actors that were previously less visible in the political scene (e.g. youth, women, periphery area groups, salafi leaders). It is a challenge to integrate the mobilization activists in the formal political sphere (including youth that challenged their parties' internal organization or are not keen on political participation within the scope of political parties), because many tend towards mistrust and disengagement vis-à-vis the traditional political sphere. This risks reproducing former models of central elite governance.
- **Non-violence** has not so much been an absolute principle than conditioned by the specific structure of political opportunities of each mobilization. Nevertheless, its moral and ethical value remains essential, and violent action should never be ensconced as a mode of political action.
- The protest mobilizations have created opportunities to build **new political solidarities**, focusing on consensual claims and enabling to fend off sectarian policies of contested regimes. The 'insurrectional moments' have thus served as learning processes on consensual and citizen governance of pluralism, where political actors have shown to be more willing to adjust their discourse than in victorious occurrences.
- Mobilizations have witnessed a renewed strength of regional solidarity with no identity tensions against the "Western world". Nevertheless, Western governments are challenged on their own coherence vis-à-vis the principles they promote for the region and on double standards. **External interference**, both Western and regional (Arab-led), is not rejected outright and can be acknowledged as a factor that has rescued from blocked bloodshed situations.
- A crucial present stake is to provide the supporting structure to institutionalize the values of the mobilizations. **Evolving from insurrectional mobilizations to political competition** is a hazardous step, when solidarities built in the street must be preserved in the transition, and consensus must be nurtured in a political pragmatic approach. In phases of transition and reconstruction, finding a 'negative consensus', i.e. "what we agree to reject" can be more feasible than agreeing on a definition of "what we want".
- It is imperative for societies to **build bulwarks against authoritarianism**. This implies to create instruments to establish an authentic balance of political powers, most probably outside of the usual institutionalized political field. The civil society has a fundamental role in consolidating the emergence of the new political generation, in helping institutionalize the rules of political and collective action, and act as whistle blowers in cases of infringement to this 'code of conduct'. The planned Observatory project in Egypt could possibly implemented with a regional dimension
- There are real concerns about the growing **forces of inertia and backtrack** that threaten the dynamics of change. These 'counter-revolution' dynamics are often carried by the permanence of the "deep state" and the trail of the contested regimes, as is seen with the symptomatic convergence between some new political elites and deep state. The recourse to identity polemics and the affirmation of competing particularisms also reactivate the same old divisive practices, as for instance in unsubstantial debates on the relation between religion and state or in reactivation of regional, tribal and/or ethnic tensions.
- Pursuing exchanges and repeating the experience of the forum can be useful to go more in depth into specific issues and work together to bring practical responses to present challenges. Many projects for **transversal cooperation** have been explored to further develop the forum's potential outcomes, starting with a platform for regular exchange and

sharing ideas. Beyond that, participants agreed that cooperation will help to address shortcomings of traditional and new media and raise awareness about “under-covered” mobilizations to other Arab countries and to the “international community”. Horizontal synergies between Arab countries can also be very beneficial to assess opportunities and risks of integration of political and civil society actors with the international community, and to build informed strategies for meaningful international partnerships. Several principles in engaging with foreign support can help to distinguish between real and perceived hazards of manipulation and undermining sovereignty, such as independence vis-à-vis governments and rejection of selective political support.

- Other **practical suggestions** were made, among which: developing the concept of citizenship initiatives to address strategies of discord and fragmentation; monitoring of forces of inertia, backtrack and ‘counter-revolution’; research on "youth politics and on South-South and South-North relations between civil society; pilot experiments on transversal cooperation; networks of revolutionary women; and strategic plans for raising awareness and influence.

Annotated agenda:

Emergence (day one)

New Actors: The recent mobilisations yielded new actors and/or new forms of involvement and activism. But are these really new or is it rather media attention the new factor? How was the "empowerment" of these actors (youth, religious actors, salafis, women) made possible? Is it a lasting trend? Beyond the positive aspect of widespread participation, what challenges does it pose in terms of relations between new and older actors, of political legitimacy and of political participation versus pressure groups?

Non-violence: Non-violence in the uprisings was a main feature both in Egypt and Tunisia. It was not the case in Libya, and the scenario is mixed in Yemen and Syria. The issue of is explored in pragmatic terms and through a comparative approach, discussing the influence of factors such as cultural heritage and political repression on the nature of mobilizations and looking into the efficiency and the limits of non violence.

New Solidarities: The mobilisations have been, to a certain extent, a space to overcome the traditional fragmentation that was frequently the reason for the status quo in the previous regimes and to experiment new kind of solidarities. How can this spirit be sustained in transition phases?

New Media: New media have proven to be more than simple media: they were as well a political actor (Facebook youth) and a political culture based on transparency, equality, anti-authoritarianism, etc. They were able to build extended networks that enabled the rise of a new street politics. What role do they play in the construction of new values, and what challenges new media pose to traditional actors? What is the future of these cyber-activists in a post-revolutionary situation?

Backlashes (day two)

Social setbacks and identity politics: In many MENA countries in transition, the enthusiasm of the very beginning is waning, and there are new fears, various setbacks both at the level of the society and of the State. Identity politics tend to become a political issue at various levels: confessionalization and polarization on the relation between religion and State, fears of tribalism, new regionalisms. How can these issues be addressed?

Authoritarian Restoration: In this second phase of the mobilizations, new fears on authoritarian restoration and on “counter-revolution” appear. In Egypt, actors from the previous regime are the ones designing the roadmap of change, in Tunisia figures from the former regime are appearing on the front again, as well as in the executive office of the NTC in Libya.

Change Engineering (day three)

In many transition contexts, the challenge is to go beyond street politics and re-institutionalise the political process, even while transitional elites lack popular and constitutional legitimacy. How can the institutional engineering of change follow the path of the new political cultures?

Institutional questions: constitution, electoral and parties laws: The formal bases for the future are set in transitions, with new constitutions, laws and parties formed, reconstructing power sharing. Actors of mobilization and uprisings tend to shift their attention away from this and concentrate their efforts on capacity building. How can mobilization actors sustain their important role in the transition phase?

Civil society as a space of political participation: Institutional building cannot be thought of without addressing the issue of balance of power and the rise of counter powers. The issue is to promote an approach favouring pluralism in order to avoid the confiscation of the benefits of the change by a new hegemonic actor.

What cooperation and what role of external actors? External actors have a soft power in supporting and influencing the change. International actors have rapidly made contact with local actors to offer support. In the cooperation between "inside" and "outside" actors, how can the advantage be given to authentic support to new experiences in the region, and ready-made recipes for democracy be avoided? "Horizontal cooperation" between Arab nations can be helpful to be able to face these changes and make the best of the different present scenarios.

Transversal cooperation (building tangible outcomes)

The present descriptive analytical report highlights the main points discussed during the forum. It is not a verbatim report, and follows only partly the structure of the program, as certain findings needed to be regrouped in a more adapted structure. The bracketed quotes are comments made by participants themselves. This paper does not necessarily represent a consensus among all participants and does not *per se* represent the opinion of the organizers.

Mass mobilizations inspired by a spirit of “universal humanism”

The popular dynamics of mobilization, protests and revolutions in North Africa and Middle East in the past year share a common set of slogan values that have been qualified as "universal humanist values": political freedom, citizenship, national/popular determination, rejection of exclusions, dignity, equality, justice. The demands for change are "neither ideological revolutions, nor social protests, nor religious uprisings. They are a movement of promotion of shared values that has enabled to overcome fear." As noted by one participant, there is also a feeling that "Islam has the capacity to translate these values and to root them into reality".

As values interact with the social context and the political conjuncture, some transition phase or "post-revolution" values have emerged in addition to the above-mentioned, such as security and stability.

The forum started with discussions on the nature of the ongoing changes and its corresponding terminology. Participants agreed that the current processes were not linear and their outcomes not fully predictable. The term 'revolution' is defined in its academic understanding by the fast rhythm of change and by the end result, and its popular use in Egypt has more to do with the expectations of activists than an concluded reality. Nevertheless, the protest mobilizations throughout the Arab countries do prove that a 'revolution of political cultures' is taking place – independently of the future outcome in each country. The term 'thaoura', used for instance in the Egyptian context, can be translated as uprising, revolt or revolution, and this may add some complexity. In any case, participants insist that the recent processes of political change and protest mobilizations do represent a deep change in political cultures in the region. They also agree on the fact that 'counter-revolution' dynamics – an equally vaguely defined term – are a real concern, with forces of inertia and conservatism curbing the dynamics of change inspired by humanist values.

Change of political cultures

The mass mobilizations must not be restricted to calls for change of regimes and elite in power. On the contrary, it is important to give credit to the importance of changes in terms of culture and political governance. Even in countries where governments have not fallen, the values promoted by protest movements have had a strong effect on the relationship to power. In Morocco for instance, slogans of the February 20 movement have deeply questioned the royal sanctity, replacing the reference to the king by that to the people and implicitly suggesting a new principle of legitimacy of power. The strategy was "a campaign to change political representations, if for lack of immediately changing the power"

As for "new actors", participants agreed to say that the reality was new forms of engagement in collective and political action, and not "new" actors *stricto sensu*. The role of these actors as a new political generation was instrumental in voices for change and must remain so for transition phases. Participants discussed examples from the young generation of political parties in Morocco and Egypt, from Yemeni women, from the new Salafi political party and from the Syrian diaspora were discussed, including the tensions with the "older actors". Facilitating alternative modes of engagement, the new media played a unique role in crystallizing and accumulating information and awareness, and in helping to build local and international networks. The limitations of the virtual tools of new media must however be kept in mind as well as the still predominant role of "traditional" media in raising international awareness. Strong interconnections and cross-feeding between old and new media are therefore an important factor.

The 'external' dimension of the mobilizations in North Africa and Middle East

The principle of justice: dissonance with Western politics in the MENA region

Participants agree that the values of the wave of political change in the region relate more to "universal humanist values" than they have to do with any identity tension between the "Muslim world" and the "Western world". While the "West" is not seen as the enemy, the MENA mobilizations have mainly centred on national political expectations, despite the renewed strength of regional solidarity (as the Tunisian slogan calling for "free Tunisia and Jerusalem as its capital"). Participants noted that in the sense of a national scope with regional inspiration, "the new political cultures embodied by the mobilizations and revolutions do not mean a rupture with the past." For instance, one person noted that "sensitivity to the Palestinian cause remains more present than ever, albeit without the former instrumentalization of governments".

Beyond the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the mobilizations challenge Western governments on their own coherence *vis-à-vis* the principles they promote for the region. As such, it was noted that the "Arab Spring" further revealed enduring double standards of the Western politics, where the international community manifested itself for Libya but not in the Bahraini or Yemeni contexts. Participants highlighted the challenge of raising awareness about their own countries' mobilizations to other Arab countries and to the "international community". The Moroccan, Syrian and Bahreini were mentioned as examples of "under-covered" events, and participants exchanged on ways to address this shortcoming of traditional and new media attention.

Participants were nevertheless clear about not rejecting outright all Western interference in the region: in countries where the repression also mobilizes the army and makes non-violent strategies possibly inefficient, Western-led foreign interference is envisaged as a factor to save blocked situations and rescue from further bloodshed. In Libya, the military intervention was seen as a non-dilemma in the Eastern part of the country: "it was either interference or genocide". The intervention was moreover made acceptable due to a form of international consensus, with UN backing and Arab support. In Syria, participants called for some intervention but on a minor scale: demilitarized zones, stronger diplomatic pressure, possible Turkish intervention.

Beyond the common understanding of external as "Western" interference, it was noted that "foreign" has to be understood in its broader sense to include the regional dimension. For instance, the external interference in Bahrain and Yemen was not western but Arab-led.

Participants had a nuanced and pragmatic view of "foreign intervention": while it is feared in some countries (Egypt, Tunisia); it is urgently called for in others (Syria, Libya), and the "silence of the international community" is criticized in many other contexts of repression.

New values and new political cultures in action:

Non-Violence: a value conditioned by political opportunities

If most uprisings in North Africa and Middle East have been characterized by their non-violent mode of action, this principle is not so much absolute as rather conditioned by the specific structure of political opportunities of each mobilization. Participants note that while this can be a winning strategy in contexts with conditions fulfilled such as neutrality of the Army (Tunisia, Egypt), it has limits in other contexts. In Libya, the army's involvement in repression, added to a "historical liability" of massacres by the regime and to practical opportunities of access to weapons, had all contributed to militarising the anti-regime forces. The Syrian context shows that despite violent repression with the participation of the army, there is until today only a marginal process of militarisation of protests, as is also the case in Yemen. In these two countries, the rejection of violence is politically even more than ethically motivated, while the regimes push for a radicalization of the insurgences, arming parts of the population against others (Syria) or distributing weapons to then discredit protests as "radical" (Bahrain). In Morocco, where participants describe the governments' reactions to protests as strategies of deception, the pacifist approach is undisputed.

In other terms, despite its ethical advantage, non-violence is not an absolute principle in North Africa and Middle East mobilizations. To various degrees, all uprisings have had their share of violent incidents, including in Tunisia and Egypt. Furthermore, violence in the resistance to oppression has been described as legitimate as a mode of self-defence and even of pressure against repressive regimes. The question is thus not so much a binary issue of violence vs. non-violence, but rather that of the outcomes and consequences of possible violent action. In any case, participants of the forum insist that violence must not be ensconced as a mode of political action, and that any use of violence must be directed by political economy and moral concern.

Transitions, Revolutions and Reconstruction: beyond the unmaking of regimes

The mobilizations embodied much more than calls for change of regimes. Their supporting values questioned social order, challenging for some the "patriarchal system" (as attested by the predominant role of women in demonstrations in Yemen and in Homs, Syria) and for others, calling for a "cognitive liberation" as seen with young activists in Egypt and Morocco which have overcome the hierarchy of political organizations and the culture of obedience to political leaders.

The 'moment of liberation' is also described by some participants as a pedagogical step in itself. It was mentioned that the relative long length of the protests movement in Syria and Yemen can have a positive effect, by consolidating the national consensus and leaving time to overcome political and social fault lines that were instrumentalized by the old regimes. Participants ventured the hypothesis that political actors may be more willing to adjust their position and discourse during uncertain dynamics of change than in the victorious moments of change of power.

On the other hand, precisely because these mobilizations are characterized by incertitude (evanescence of leaderships, plurality of ideological references), the important stake of the transitions is to provide the 'framing'. The idea is not so much to put the change or the revolutions under one unique leadership, but rather to provide the supporting structure to institutionalise the values of the mobilizations. Participants discussed the multiple means to achieve this: observatories to better define the values and the rules of conduct they imply, monitoring and rapid response, setting up local networks to defend the 'rules of collective and political action', mobilization of international networks, special initiatives, etc. It also includes establishing corresponding principles of governance: establish in the constitution the principles of equality, of individual and public liberties, the policies of social justice, the political accountability, the respect of social, economic and cultural rights.

This set of values is set in the context of new articulations between individual and collective identities. Societies in the region seem to lean towards more individual citizenship (as seen with the immolations that sparked off the mobilizations), or rather towards a definition of the individual

that is the multiplication of competing collective identities (professional, religious, local, political, ideological).

From consensus in mobilizations to consensus in transition and reconstruction: New Solidarities challenged by "politics as usual"

New political solidarities have been established in Egypt to overcome "divide and conquer" politics. This invalidated the regime's tendency to set itself as a bulwark against Islamic radicalism. In Morocco, the coordination of protests throughout more than 70 cities insists on consensual claims: fundamental rights (work, health, housing), nature of the State (parliamentary monarchy), leaving aside specific political programs for debate later on. Political Islam and leftist trends all refrain from an ideologization of slogans (religion, women's issues, secularism). This consensual dimension also enables to fend off the sectarian policies of contested or "fallen" regimes. The coordination and cooperation during mobilizations has brought together various political and intellectual trends that had never before been in contact.

These must be understood as the first steps of a learning process on consensual and citizen governance of pluralism, which must remain imperative in the transition and reconstruction phases (as the mobilizations' consensus is not a sufficient heritage to naturally evolve to consensus in transition and reconstruction). Forum participants point out that the consensus of mobilizations movements (context-related practices) must be perpetuated by reinforcing strong political cultures of respect.

Evolving from mobilizations to politics as usual implies to "replace intellectual discussions on identity by specifically political debates". This passage to *politics as usual* should however not be restricted to a conversion to the logics of majority, as some Islamist currents seem to advocate in Egypt with a systematic recourse to the street. Some participants highlight that it may be problematic to endorse new constitutions on a pure logic of majority, and that it might be necessary to base the constitution-building on "universal humanist values".

Aspects of the mobilizations' heritage must also be kept into account in the transition to political competition. One example of this is the Egyptian left-wing which engaged alongside of the Islamists, waging that should the latter access power, they would still be better than Mubarak's regime. They are now expecting Islamic groups to show accountability for this commitment.

Finally, the imperative of consensus must be built in a political pragmatic approach. This can be achieved by a "negative consensus": in the first phases of transition and reconstruction, "what we agree to reject" can unite better than trying to define "what we want". This implies a process of, agreeing on a set of rejected elements (a form of "code of conduct") and establishing the means to confront these risks.

Backlashes: Forces of inertia and of backtrack, social setbacks and "counter-revolution"

Both in post-revolution countries and in those in the process of mobilizations, the rhythm of change is decelerating and the enthusiasm of the very beginning has waned. In the meanwhile, dynamics of resistance to change have been developing. Participants shared concerns about what was called the "counter-revolution dynamic", or rather the forces of inertia and of backtrack. This multifaceted concept covers various aspects: for one, the clearly identifiable actors of the trail of the old regimes (al-fulûl), also described as the "deep State", which operate against any process of change seen as attacking the foundation of their power. On another level, forces of inertia and "counter-revolutionary" dynamics act through more diffuse processes, as the recourse to identity politics and the affirmation of competing particularisms. These dynamics also contribute to curb the efforts for change and, as such, confirm the strategies of the "deep State" actors.

The trail of old regimes and the "deep State": actors of inertia, backtracking and "counter-revolution"

Presidents stepping down and new power arrangements are not enough to dismantle the governing apparatus of regimes. Although weakened by protests and uprisings, regimes remain and return in various way, either in elections with the comeback of "old actors" from the trail (al fulûl) that have found their way into new lists, either in the restructuring of administrative and security devices. This expression of the deep State did not fool Tunisian protesters who chanted: "the dictator is now in Saudi Arabia but the clan is still in place" (al-diktator fi al-sa'udiyya, wa al-'asâba hiyya hiyya). As one participant put it, "the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences show that the return of authoritarianism is a very credible fear". Many elements back the reality of this perceived risk, among which the permanence of torture in Egypt; in Tunisia, the repression of the second sit-in of the Kasbah, the return of the political police and the absence of reform of the judiciary; the continued presence of regime figures in transition governments and in elections, instrumentation of fears with the stability discourse; persistence of old mechanisms in the media (confessional provocation in Egypt, mobilization of the "Islamic threat" in Tunisia). These facts and many other confirm that "if the revolutions have provoked real pressure on the authoritarian systems, these have managed to fragment themselves, sacrifice a few figures and recompose".

In Egypt, the management of the political transition by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) is a salient example of the permanence of the deep State. The SCAF has talked to most actors of the revolution, but without engaging in a real dialogue: "the SCAF started of with fear and arrogance, and then developed some listening skills, but never really negotiated and their only concessions were achieved thanks to the power of mobilization of Tahrir Square - the only way to make the military change their minds." The SCAF remains in control of the executive power due to the vague time-frame of the transition road-map. Meanwhile, the SCAF attempts to reinforce its power by the proposed supra-constitutional principles that are under the jurisdiction of no specific authority. Finally, the new electoral law opens doors for deep State-related elites to adjust their alliances between bureaucracy and economic interests. In the Egyptian context, loss of time and vagueness are the main tools in the hands of the deep State and retrogression.

Similarly, participants noted the same will of the trail to keep things in hand throughout all transition dynamics: in Tunisia, the constituent elections have mainly been organized around two elite groups: the new political leaders and the deep State leaders, with no real discussion on the nature of the State. Debates around identity politics have been used to dissimulate the convergence of the two elite groups, while the constituent elections actually served as parliamentary election, to define roles in the political stage. This is symptomatic of a convergence between new political elites and deep State, as in Egypt.

Identity politics: social setbacks without an intentional plan

Aside from the deliberate strategies of deep State actors, "counter-revolution" dynamics and resistance to change also operate in more subtle processes, such as the focus on identity politics. Although they are seemingly not responding to a concerted strategy, identity polemics reactivate the same old discourses (e.g. the Islamist threat) and use the same old political techniques (e.g screening the potential sensitive movie Persepolis in Tunisia to scare electors about a possible Iran scenario in case of Ennahda victory). The same divisive dynamics are observed in Morocco, where the committee for the constitutional revision choses to open the debate with the specific political issues that will oppose secular and religious forces, or with the results of referendum on reform misleadingly presented as a call to stop the protests. In Egypt, managing confessional issues remains in the hands of the security apparatus, while the national Commission for Justice struggles to promote a soft-power citizen approach to the issue.

Debates on the relation between religion and state are central in the present identity politics, despite the fact that it is for the most a false debate: in Egypt, article 2 of the constitution which affirms Islamic Law as a main source is not controversial for most Egyptians, as the Libyan consensus on Islam as a founding principle of their society. This sadly does not curb the growing polarization between Islamists and non-Islamists in Libya, nor does it prevent Egyptian Islamists and the left-wing to turn to the army for back-up as a side effect of this polarization in Egypt.

The affirmation of competing particularism is also extended to the reactivation of tribal tensions (Libya, Tunisia), to regional rivalry (around Tunis in Tunisia, around eastern Libya vs western regions), to ethnic / cultural claims (the Amazigh issue in Libya and Morocco) and to confessional antagonism (Sunni vs Alawi and Christians in Syria, Christians vs Muslims in Egypt).

In other terms, whenever there are tools of "politics of tension" (*siasa ta'zîm*), "identity politics and the affirmation of competing particularisms operate for the counter-revolution and contribute consciously or not to deterring dynamics of change".

Integrating actors of mobilizations in the political sphere

One of the big challenges faced by "post-revolution" countries and by current "mobilization countries" is the integration of their activists in the national political sphere, in particular newly engaged actors such as youth, women, and representatives from marginal regions. It is crucial to maintain the political engagement that emerged during mobilizations and revolutions, and to sustain it in the long term as a citizen guarantee against later political retrogression. These groups however tend towards mistrust and disengagement vis-à-vis the traditional political sphere, and this could lead to reproducing former models of governance of a central elite left alone to define public policies and the country's future. In the case of Libya for instance, the reintegration of fighters and revolutionaries in the national army or in the civilian political life is an urgent priority to avoid a militarization of the political sphere.

Creating new instruments as a bulwark against the return of authoritarianism

In the present transition phases, the priority is not only to defend positive values that emerged in the mobilizations but by this to resist strategies of inertia, backtrack and counter-revolution. "Protecting societies against the return of dictatorship" implies to "create an authentic balance of political powers which can only be built up outside of the usual institutionalized political field". And this is where the fundamental role of civil society is important, as in Libya, where the civil society acts as a watchdog of the intermediary power which is halfheartedly acknowledged as a lesser evil. Syrian participants mentioned the same perspective for their country, with the concern however of a society that has been "desertified" by years of repression, which eradicates all social organization apart from that controlled by the regime. This advocates for an early effort of reconstruction of civil society, even while the outcome of ongoing mobilizations are still uncertain.

It is important to further consolidate the emergence of a new political generation, as can be seen in Egypt with the recent creation of a forum of the youth of political parties, which is now a new space of consensus, not on the values of the revolution, but on the dangers of the counter-revolution. These positive efforts could be institutionalized in the framework of the Observatory project, built up by Egyptian youth with Cordoba Now Network, and which was presented to all participants. On the basis of a mobilization/revolution legitimacy, the project of the Observatory aims to defend the gains of the mobilizations and curb the forces of retrogression, by institutionalizing the values of the new political cultures and helping to establish rules of political and collective action. It aims first to draw a synthesis of consensual values shared by the majority of actors (a form of political compass), and on this basis to achieve a "consensus in negative" on what is rejected (drafting a form of code of conduct of political action). This "code of conduct" will then be submitted to a broad set of politicians, social leaders and media actors for consultation and endorsement. A structure is created to support the process and to organize the monitoring of the transitions: they will act as whistle blowers in cases of infringement to the code of conduct principles, and propose possible measure to enforce the principles. The project also aspires to be a venue for citizen engagement (non partisan), mobilizing for instance a space for youth politics (*siasa shababiyya*), which core could be the above-mentioned forum of the youth of political parties. The observatory could also develop ad hoc research on specific topics that would require a better understanding, and will lead to citizen initiatives to react to specific problems identified in the monitoring work. The project is conceived as a pilot experiment, with potential regional dimension. As such it could be replicated in other countries with the necessary adjustments. Both

the CNN network and the New Political Cultures forum members could be mobilized for this purpose.

Participants agreed that efforts in this direction were an utmost priority, and that expanding the Observatory project in a contextualized form to other countries in the region could be useful. "Identifying clearly what we do not want is the way to avoid counter-revolution dynamics"

Participants also agreed that well planned transitional justice was also an important instrument to prevent the reproduction of the deep State, and that developing a better understanding of the dynamics of "counter-revolution" is important to preserve the gains of the mobilizations.

Managing the new soft power of a global civil society

The contexts of mobilizations, revolutions and even more the transition context have seen the emergence of a massive new soft power: that of a globalized civil society with the new foundations that have played a funding and/or structuring role in the different phases of change. This civil society is not "value-free" as had been said, and not necessarily neutral politically.

In the meanwhile, there are urgent needs for support at various levels, which implies an interaction with the global international civil society. As one participant put it, "foundations in the West offer support, and we need support. But how do we know the real value of what they are offering?". Policies must be created on how to interact with the global civil society, and on "changing the modes of conceiving political change: it cannot be made without interaction with the international community". In any case, there is a "real need for better exchange of information, if we want to be able to distinguish between real hazards and perceived hazards of foreign support in undermining sovereignty."

Participants agreed that the interaction must follow a certain number of principles:

1. Independence vis-à-vis governments
2. Rejection of selective political support that would reinforce certain trends (e.g. seculars) and disadvantage and exclude others (e.g. Islamists)
3. Refuse the control of National Foreign Affairs on the international financial support granted to local civil society

Horizontal synergies between Arab countries is also important to maximize the comparative advantages and expertise of each country, for instance with the Yemeni experience in promoting Human Rights, with Lebanon's know-how in terms of think tanks, or Egypt's well developed media expertise.

Practical outcomes of the forum

Participants' Evaluation and 'Subjective impressions' from Cordoba organizers:

The forum ended by a workshop on practical outcomes of the event, and a round of evaluation comments from participants, which concentrated on two main aspects:

- **The forum as a great opportunity to learn, exchange, and build capacity:** It was mentioned that "impressive discussions, exchange and dynamics of the forum were made possible" due to having "the right people on board" and "the harmony among them", which enabled "learning many things that you cannot learn from media". Many participants commended the "very good opportunity to meet and exchange with youth and other actors", and expressed the "wish to further pursue the exchange with each other". They stressed that the "very serious discussions" and "in-depth exchange" enabled "very

good capacity building”, and that the workshop was one of the rare ones that avoided hackneyed discussions. In general, participants affirmed that they would like to pursue similar meetings in order to further develop their exposure to other’s political experience and deepen the analysis on new political cultures in the region.

- **Transversal cooperation** was a central learning from the forum, and most participants stated that “transversal cooperation like it was practiced here should go on”, as a “very good capacity building” approach. It was stated that many ideas for cooperation have been launched and that the Cordoba Foundation could help vitalize them. In that sense, participants felt that the Forum had achieved its main goal.
- Some mentioned that **the thematic focus** was excessively set on sectarianism, and others agreed that the forum had highlighted a shared concern about forces of inertia and backtracking. Some regretted the under-representation of youth participants, and the “overloaded agenda” which did not leave enough space for young actors.

From the point of view of the **organizers**, the forum was as a successful experience. They note the very positive dynamics among participants, a good level of trust and a shared will to focus on elements of cohesion rather than divisive ones (without censuring the differences however). Three main points can be pointed out: **first**, it is indeed confirmed that the format of the event has enabled everyone to develop an increased awareness to the new political cultures, and to reflect together on the realities of the protest mobilizations and future challenges. **Second**, the strong interest to pursue exchanges and repeat the experience of the forum is a sign that there is still much to do in the field. It seems that the first edition of the forum has highlighted commonalities and similar issues in the different countries political change processes and that it has revealed a joint concern to address challenges of the present phases. A further step would enable to go more in depth into specific issues, and possibly work together to bring practical responses to the current threats.

The chapters below try to summarize the ideas for further action and possible initiatives.

Develop transversal cooperation

The suggestion to develop more transversal exchanges and cooperation between North Africa and Middle East countries convinced many participants. Various aspects for this cooperation were stressed:

- In the new contexts, the integration of political and civil society actors in the **international sphere** is central, as it carries hope but also fears of losing sovereignty. There is a need to build up the framework for the integration, and use transversal exchange of experience and cooperation to engage with the international community in an informed and strategic approach. This exposure to other countries’ experiences can help to overcome prejudice and mistrust, and to develop meaningful international partnerships without fearing manipulation and loss of control.
- Participants expressed special interest for the question of “counter-revolution”, or rather the forces of inertia and backtrack. This included the fear for the newly engaged actors to be excluded of the public space, which goes parallel to their difficulty in finding an influential place in the formal political sphere. Discussions on this issue showed that there is a widespread interest to develop the project regionally and adapt it to other countries than Egypt.
- There was also a general consensus about the difficulty to attract media attention and to “get the word out” to other countries in the region and to the international community. Transversal cooperation could be a useful tool in this field, as participants noted that they “want to show that our mobilizations are shared ones”.

Set up New Political Cultures network(s) A first step to pursue exchanges is to set up a platform that will enable regular exchange. This means keeping active the group of participants of this forum to enable further work together (see below). But participants also suggest that an “open” New Political Cultures network can be created, that would welcome new members to increase the exchanges and share them with a more important number of people. It was also mentioned that a

specific youth network could be established, although others participants suggested that inclusiveness enabled richer exchange between the younger and the older.

Distribute a report of the forum In order to keep track of the rich content of the forum's discussions, it was decided that the organizers would draft a report. It was suggested that two different papers could be written, a narrative report and another with more analytical content. The present paper however combines the two. Participants are invited to give feedback on this report. The organizers then suggest that it could be made public – as the content are of high value and that it seems that no confidential information is divulged.

Setting up a Facebook group and page is an easy step to facilitate further exchange among participants. The Cordoba Foundation has done this shortly after the forum, with a private forum group that has already become quite active. All participants are invited to contribute, and to suggest any ideas to develop the page, or even to open a public page if relevant.

Practical suggestions for shared initiatives and other further action:

1. Develop the concept of citizenship to counter the social fragmentation by authoritarian regimes and root the concept deeper in the everyday life of societies - beyond the political sphere which for the most has integrated it already (including Islamists).
2. Create initiatives to address strategies of discord and fragmentation in transition and post-revolution contexts.
3. Expand the scope of research on the transitions and revolutions, and the forces that oppose them, Develop comparative approaches with similar scenarios.
4. Develop modes of everyday monitoring of forces of inertia, backtrack and "counter-revolution". Integrate this aspect in the Observatory project.
5. Promote research on relations between civil society from the South and from the North, to explore how mutual fears and reluctance are overcome and extract criteria for cooperation.
6. Generalize pilot experiments on transversal cooperation to develop and share skills and experience.
7. Consider a regionalization of the Observatory project (at least in a later step) to the Arab world
8. Replicate the experience of the New Political Cultures forum and open it to become a space of dialogue between youth, and possibly a venue to train future leaders. Nota: the organizers are currently looking into this possibility, and consider a possible 2nd forum in spring or summer 2013. It could include work on the progress of the Egyptian observatory project, on results of the Arab World in Transition research papers, or explore further the modes of "counter-revolution" and initiatives to address them.
9. Create a network of revolutionary women.
10. Launch a research project on "youth politics"
11. Follow, exchange on and document a number of particular experiences:
 - Syria: the proposal "Tomorrow's Syria"
 - Tunisia: "New generation" initiative
 - Egypt: forum of the youth of political parties
12. Set up strategic plans for awareness and influence: open up the Cordoba Now network, mobilize existing channels of information (Nyon Process, think tanks, ...)