

THE AUSTRIAN ANNA LINDH NETWORK ACTIVITY:

Democracy! But How?

Societal diversity and difference – Challenges for participation and representation?



SUMMARY

PUBLIC FORUM II

**“How to keep up the momentum:
Renegotiating democracy“**

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Zusammenfassung

Das zweite Public Forum mit dem Titel „How to keep up the momentum: Renegotiating democracy“ beschäftigte sich mit den unterschiedlichen Protestbewegungen in der MENA Region und Südeuropa. Dabei standen die Fragen, was aus den Protestbewegungen wurde, in welche Richtung eine Transformation stattfand und ob Fragmentierung und Diversität ein Hindernis für Solidarität darstellen, im Mittelpunkt der Debatte. Zu den geladenen DiskutantInnen zählten Mohamed ABLA, Künstler und Mitglied des Verfassungskomitees in Ägypten; Neila AKRIMI, Direktorin des Centre for Innovative Local Governance (CIG) in Tunesien; Vedran DZIHIC, Senior Fellow am Österreichischen Institut für Internationale Politik (oiip); Ivan MOLINA ALLENDE von der Universität Wien und Niccolò MILANESE, Vizepräsident von European Alternatives.

Abstract

The 2nd public forum entitled “How to keep up the momentum: Renegotiating democracy” dealt with the protest movements in the MENA region and Southern Europe. The forum centered on the questions what had become of the protest movements, what they had been transformed to and whether fragmentation and diversity hindered solidarity. Among the invited speakers were Mohamed ABLA, an artist and member of the constitutional committee in Egypt; Neila AKRIMI, who is the director of the Centre for Innovative Local Governance (CILG) in Tunisia; Vedran DZIHIC, a senior fellow at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) in Austria; Ivan MOLINA ALLENDE from the University of Vienna and Niccolò MILANESE, the co-president of European Alternatives.

Summary

Cengiz Günay, from the oiip, directed his first question towards Mohamed Abla and asked him to evaluate what had happened to the spirit of the revolution in Egypt, where and how the protests lived on and whether Abla saw any similarities to the spirit of the '68 movement. Abla in fact considered the revolution in Egypt as still on-going. Drawing on from his experience as a member in the constitution committee, Abla reiterated that having a constitution was not enough for a country and that Egypt found itself in a very critical moment. The American involvement of trying to educate the people about democracy was perceived rather critical as Abla believed that democracy was not only about knowing your rights as a citizen but, moreover, about demonstrating for them and going to the streets. Abla viewed Egypt to be different from other countries since there were a lot of different people involved in the political sphere, a lot of “(foreign) hands playing in the game”, according to Abla. Painting a rather pessimistic picture Abla thought that Egyptian people were not ready for democracy. Even though they talked about it, they were not ready to have it.



Günay suggested to see the movements from two angles: we could be enthusiastic about people going to the streets, protesting against the system but at the same time the will to protest seemed to be diminishing and decreasing recently. Therefore, he viewed the current situation to be a search for security and stability, which could in fact lead to a rise of new nationalism.

The question was raised whether Egypt's way could be a model for other African countries. Here, Abla indeed saw the Egyptian protests as a learning process concerning how a protest movement is managed well. Particularly important was the role of social media, which allowed Egyptians to connect with people from other countries and to ask them how they can organize such a movement. Thus, the spread to other countries via social media, via the young generation and their spirit, was apparent for Abla.

Even though it was acknowledged that the Egyptian people faced more and more restrictions recently, which made it difficult for the spirit to be carried on, Aba thought the revolution not to be over. The regime government has been criticized a lot via social media where heated discussions would take place, simply because the reasons for revolution continued to exist. Aba said there is no social justice. There are still people who have not enough bread to feed themselves or their families. As long as young people didn't have a hopeful future, Aba contested, the spirit for a revolution would be there. We shouldn't, however, expect to have millions of people in the streets again. Nevertheless, there were still things and reasons for a revolution, just as there still existed reasons to protest after '68. The Arab Spring dream was a story of the young generation from all over the world. Hence, Aba highlighted that a future resolution would come from all over the world, not only from Egypt alone, and that this resolution would take on another form as well.

Oya Günay raised the point of not putting all countries in the same basket, as there are different situations in different countries. She explained the change of political systems with a three-stage model designed for change within persons: first there is *knowing*, then there is *doing* and the final stage is *being*. In her example referring to the protest movement and the state of democracy in Turkey, she stated that Turkey might have past the *knowing* and the *doing* part, but it has not arrived at the *being* part. Even though there were a lot of set-backs, she believes that this was normal, marking a loose momentum. A country is in the *being* part, once democracy becomes part of societal life at different levels. With this comes the understanding, Günay explained, that there are other forms to protest than just going out into the streets.

Comparing different country examples, it was discussed whether the Spanish 15-M (Movement) showed any commonalities to other protest movements. Cengiz Günay posed the question who the driving forces behind the Spanish movement(s) were, what they achieved and what has happened to them so far. Molina Allende held that social and historic contexts were different from



country to country. Yet, he identified one common element in all the protest movements, which was

a revolt against neoliberalism. Molina Allende saw the movements as an uprising against the incapacity of the current economic model to satisfy the basic needs of people. In his opinion, different from the situation today, in 1968 the dominant bourgeois system had been able to integrate at least some of the demands of the movement. As the crisis of the economic system was more fundamental, this was not possible at the present-day.

The *indignados*, or 15-M as they are commonly referred to, experienced some changes in the logic of the movement. They now promote a new way of understanding democracy since they view the current concept of democracy to be antagonistic. According to Molina Allende people want to have an inclusive democracy, however, the current system is not able to give them this form of democracy. Thus, he sees a decline of the main political parties and a rise of new political parties and movements, which understand democracy as a dynamic, open and public practice.

The crisis of dominant mental structures prevailed for many years. The only thing left now were repression and managing democracy as a technical issue rather than as a political one, Molina Allende stated. It was true that the 15-M was not as powerful as it once had been, with occupying squares as in the start. But new initiatives emerged, such as e.g. the *Podemos* movement, with its main message “either we organize and govern ourselves or we will always be ruled”. *Podemos* is a new force with more than 400 local self-organized assemblies. At the moment it was in the process of being constituted as a political party, a process, which is open and dynamic, Molina Allende highlighted. Moreover, Molina Allende viewed it to be more than just a political party, but rather a political movement. The underlying logic was to have “one foot in the institutions and at the same time 1.000 feet in the streets” in order to spread the radical and rebellious grass-roots movement feeling. The goal was to stop the current system, which in Molina Allende’s opinion, ruled against the people.

Günay found it difficult to use the rather vague terms of “them vs us” and the “ruling political elites”. He stressed that it was easy to be critical of the system but that it was difficult to suggest alternatives to “the system”. Molina Allende agreed that the political elites and the decision takers were not homogenous, however, he saw Spain to be ruled by a corrupted elite at the moment. In his opinion, the social contract had been broken from above, by a conglomerate of the Spanish bourgeoisie and international financial institutions. Thus, those who surrendered the sovereignty of the country were, in his opinion, responsible for the current crisis in Spain.

Sarah Ponesch questioned how the connection between political decision making and the streets worked and how the Spanish movements tried to avoid being put into the system or being transformed into something else. In this context Molina Allende underlined the crucial role of mechanisms of control, e.g. every member of the *Podemos* movement had signed a contract, stating that it was not okay to earn more than 8,000€ as a politician. This way the activists tried to not conceive politics as a profession and to make sure that there are mechanisms for removing people who were not acting along the agreed lines. With one and a half years to go until the general elections in Spain and a ten to twelve percent approval rate of the *Podemos* movement, Molina Allende also saw room for evolution. Furthermore, he noted a trend towards the growing support of *Podemos*, which would be the 3rd force right now.

Coming back to the transnational aspect of protest movements, Niccolò Milanese stated that revolutions aren't positive per se, that there could be bad revolutions as well. Revolutions didn't just happen in one country. Particularly in a European context, the system cannot be changed in one country alone. Decisions are being taken on a supranational level (e.g. Brussels) or outside the political sphere altogether, with international companies and multinationals influencing decision making processes. Thus, Milanese suggested to work for change on a transnational European level as changes on the local level would not be enough to transform the system.

It was agreed that one has to be aware that revolutions can lead to different things: resurgent forms, nationalism or procedural reforms, which just follow the formal rule of democracy but do not represent real grassroots democracy. Therefore, Milanese thought it to be vital to build up alternative transnational institutions. In his point of view, the nation state was already dead or at least dying, as it was less adapted than ever to provide security to the people. Hence, Milanese suggested to either establish new institutions or to reform the old ones. A good place to start with such reforms would be the European Union, since it was not a national institution, contained transnational elements and was open to democracy to some extent. When looking at the outcome of the EU elections, Milanese recognized the biggest risk at the moment lying in an eventual return to fascism, which would not come from one side, either left or right, solely. Voting for far-right parties was, according to Milanese, a way to shake up the system and to seek change through a nationalistic way. Cengiz Günay agreed and suggested that (far-)right movements could also be considered to be protest movements. He saw a confusion of protest and social movements, which in fact used the

same slogans. Thus, it would be crucial to seek ways to overcome differences of protest movements and connect them on a transnational level.

The credibility of such alternatives still consisted a problem and a more mature way of dialogue between the movements would be needed, Milanese added. He recognized, however, that most of these movements were still in a process of political learning. Another essential thing was the recognition of the existing powers by the movements. Often, the problem was the reasoning of the people, to think that problems need to be resolved on a national level, rather than on a supranational level, Günay mentioned. This trend was also to be observed through the EU elections. It still remained problematic how voices, which were not present in the movement structure, could be included. Milanese thus argued for an organization of democracy not bound by territorial lines, which would be way more flexible to include minority groups or other actors' opinions.

Within a Balkan context, Vedran Dzihic stated that actually democracy, in the sense of how the term was used at the moment, seemed to be the problem: he saw a quest for democracy in many countries but what actually arrived (e.g. in the case of Egypt) was nothing but a new form of authoritarianism. Dzihic points to the fact that people who voted for far-right or similar parties, were disappointed with the notion of the post-1989 term of democracy. Therefore, the solution would lie in a multifold revolution. It would be a long quest for democracy, where conflicting notions of



democracy would appear: a liberal notion of democracy, which was value-based with people participating and deciding; and at the same time another form of democracy offered by far-right parties, which centered around social security, the provision of certain goods for only certain parts of the population and having a strong man/woman in the lead.

For Dzihic it was vital to ask how we could reenergize the notion of democracy that we needed and how it was possible to transform political movements into something else then just rhetorical movements. He gave the example of Bosnia, where movements sought to change the current system of parliamentary democracy by adding a new, third “chamber of commons (common people)” to the

already existing chambers of representatives and senate. This way there would be a constant flux of people who would exert some kind of control within the system and could overcome the danger of being institutionalized and drag into the prevailing power system.

Cengiz Günay returned to the three-stages model of evolution presented by Oya Günay and highlighted the impatience of people as a factor. In consequence of neoliberal policies people have been used to think in short-term perspectives. In an environment where everything is perceived as a project, it seems difficult to inspire people for long-term goals. Many people thought that toppling the dictator would almost naturally evolve into democracy. However, time has proven that democracy is a long and bumpy road that needs a lot of patience.

Neila Akrimi noted that before the revolutionary time in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the topic of local-level democracy was a taboo. Akrimi saw another problem to be based in the ownership: democracy was limited to the daily needs, e.g. young people who lacked jobs claimed that the revolution had failed to provide them with jobs. There has been a need to deal with the reasons for the uprisings. In the Arab Spring countries, these were mainly economic and to a lesser extent social or political reasons, Akrimi noted. From her point of view, the revolution's demanded jobs, dignity and a good life. These demands were still not resolved though and need to be addressed now.



Even though every country was different and needs to be looked at differently, the local dimension has become the most feasible in all countries. The service of basic needs to the people, by providing them with schooling, electricity or clean water on a local level would signal development and gives people hope. Also in a European context, the local level has remained a battlefield, Akrimi stated. She highlighted the importance of cities, which serve to connect different dots, to create a common ground, which could then expand into a transnational level.

It was, however, different for countries such as Egypt, where the local level had long been neglected and where no structures existed to build upon. Historically, everything had been decided on a central level in these regions, e.g. decisions had been taken in Tunis for the whole of Tunisia with the aim to

control the *hinterland*. However, the centralization would now be questioned. She stated that the over-centralised state institutions were weakened to that extent that local levels were left to deal with local issues on their own. In this context Akrimi saw the European Union's role as especially important: according to her, neighboring countries were looking up to Europe for support and to a possible involvement of Europe as a strategic partner. The EU should however revise its tools and its ways of cooperating with the Arab region.

In order to rebuild democratic structures it is also important to deal with the fact that countries are often deeply polarized and divided, e.g. Tunisia. Once more, Akrimi saw the possibility for common ground at a local level, where common interests of the people prevail. At a national level, Akrimi argued, polarization was strongly felt. At a local level, however, problems in regard to schools, clean streets and waste management could be resolved more easily, despite polarization as it affected people's lives directly. These issues, the daily needs, would bring people together. Therefore, civil society organisations should play a role in counterbalancing political divisions. Akrimi herself felt very optimistic about the future. She held that she believed in bottom-up solutions which start at the local level.

Ultimately, in order to transform common ground and solidarity from a local level into a transnational solidarity movement, the people will need to find their own way and their identity within themselves first. Akrimi called it the countries' "homework" to find their own model for economy and for democracy in order to be able to successfully connect with others and to create solidarity among the people on an international level.