

Managing Contested Democratic Transitions
LSE Conference, 'Responding to the Crisis in International Development
Francine Pickup, UNDP, 10 September

Under this intimidating title that I was given, I want to focus on what the international community and United Nations can do to support democratic transitions taking place in the Middle East.

What brought people out to the streets in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere? Was it democracy or better living standards? It was both. They were demanding jobs, better services, stamping out of corruption and human rights.

Regarding the call for democracy, these countries are going through a homegrown process of institution-building. The international community can support the development of a stronger media, academia, civil society and democratic institutions of government. But this development work takes time, particularly in countries where there has been a totalitarian regime, and it has to be locally-driven for the change to take hold.

With regard to the demand for better living conditions, the international community can support new authorities in addressing the grievances that brought people out to the streets – decent work, human rights and better services.

The challenge to development work in the transition countries in the Middle East is not to undermine state sovereignty in the process. In this regard, the task is not to deliver services *per se* but to help the state to deliver those services better. The bulk of the UN experience is in far less developed countries or countries with humanitarian crises. While the regimes in the Middle East were authoritarian, they nevertheless had plenty of resources and functioning systems to deliver services.

The problem in many of these countries is that the emphasis has been on state security and regime survival rather than human security. By contrast, in democratic countries, regime survival depends more on economic growth and improved human security. In this way, the agendas of the state and society coincide.

This complementarity between state and societal agendas may be what is missing in some of these Middle Eastern countries undergoing democratic transitions. Written by a team of independent academics, policy analysts and practitioners from the region, the Arab Human Development Report 2009 forewarned that regional governments tend to “focus more on the security of the state than on the security of the people. While this adherence to a traditional conception of security has in many cases ensured the continuity of the state, it has also ... left the bond between state and citizen less strong than it might otherwise be... [I]n the long run, the government that pursues state security without investing in human security is the government that achieves neither”.

The social contract between the people and the state is weak. Take the example of Iraq. The government does not need taxes from the people because it gets huge revenues from oil. Accountability and transparency would be greater if a bigger proportion of revenues were collected from the population. Consequently, Iraqis have more confidence in tribal and religious leaders to get things done than they do in their government. In this situation, other forms of identity can become more important than national identity.

We can learn from the experience of Iraq. And indeed, it is likely that the international community's experience in Iraq will be relied upon when developing strategies to support these other Middle Eastern countries in transition.

I want to highlight three fields where the international community can support new governments in their efforts to establish stronger democracy and human development.

The first is the promotion of inclusiveness. It is important that the new authorities respond to citizen demands for broader economic and political inclusion. There is a need to strengthen state, private sector and civil society institutions but this is difficult when there are no independent sources of power. How can governance model be changed from one where power and wealth is concentrated in the hands of a select few to one that is more inclusive and tackles socio-economic disparities? This is a particular challenge in largely tribal societies or societies where ethnic disparities are suppressed.

The second is in addressing inequality. In some of these countries there is impressive economic growth but high poverty. Often, these disparities fall along ethnic, tribal and religious divisions. Take the example of Iraq, where revenues from oil doubled between 2009 and 2011 and yet poverty and unemployment remained constant and services saw little improvement. Efforts to address these issues have been hampered by corruption, lack of voice to the poor and overly-centralised authority for service provision.

A third area is to ensure that women and youth participate in their country's development. Young people and women have been at the forefront of the protests. Under 25s make up more than 50% of the populations in the region (63% in Iraq). How do we ensure that this 'youth bulge' is a benefit rather than a threat to economic growth, peace and stability in the region? Across the region, young people and women have been worst hit by the inability of the labour market to provide enough jobs due to the weakness of the private sector and education system. Even those who do find work are not guaranteed a decent standard of living. Youth and women are low on the social hierarchy in Arab countries – how can it be ensured that their voice is heard and acted upon?

The transitions in the Middle East are still in the making and we don't know where they will end. Our support can play a modest but still important role if we recognize the specific challenges and needs in these countries, which are often resource-rich but with poor human development.