



# Dignity Revolutions and Western Donors: Redefining Relevance

Kawa Hassan

# Introduction

'It is the unthinkable that people now think, say and do. It is not the elite artists or intellectuals who form the avant-garde, but the ordinary people. I consider myself an expert on Syria, but suddenly places are springing up out of nowhere and we're hearing dialects that we never knew about. Now it's the simple people in the country, whom everyone considered illiterates, who are giving us an education'.

*(Syrian writer Hassan Abbas, Syria's Creative Resistance)*

The dignity revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are 'political Big Bangs' that have shocked and awed almost everyone in the world, including the revolutionaries themselves. The Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia (CSWA) is certainly no exception. Until the fall of the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, conventional wisdom – both in the region and beyond – held that Arab autocrats were 'here to stay' and that the region was doomed to governance by authoritarian regimes. Against this background, this Hivos CSWA Briefing Note argues that there is a strategic and urgent need for two paradigm shifts and paying attention to six strategic principles when considering the role of Western donors in supporting social changes in MENA. Despite the daunting challenges and possible setbacks ahead, Hivos believes the dignity revolutions are the start of the reconfiguration of state-society relations in favour of empowered citizens and actors who are determined to fight for and negotiate new social contracts aimed at achieving accountable, inclusive and responsive political and economic systems. Western donors cannot fail to grasp the historicity and strategic momentum of this grassroots movement towards democracy and accordingly accompany tough transitions initiated, led and ultimately determined by the people of the region.

## This is not a Spring, this is a revolution

Terminologies form the foundation of policies and projects aimed at supporting democratic reforms in MENA. What started as peaceful demonstrations in Tunisia in December 2010 and continues to send

# Highlights

- Western donors cannot fail to grasp the historicity and strategic momentum of this grassroots movement towards democracy and accordingly accompany tough transitions initiated, led and ultimately determined by the people of the region.
- In order to comprehend the complex context in which transitions take place donors must partner with think tanks, researchers and experts in the region who can provide dynamic demand driven context analysis to annual/strategic planning and prior to the start of projects.
- The lesson from these creative revolutions is to be prepared and willing to learn from local actors and critically reflect on assumptions about social change and activism in general and in particular in authoritarian, revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts.

shock waves across and beyond the region, is not a Spring, but rather a revolution in every sense of the word. The notion of a Spring is superficial, a passive phenomenon. It is a misleading concept that refers to a brief or limited transitional moment that soon gives way to the next season. It does not reflect the true essence of democratic struggle by empowered citizens and groups that confront and bring down entrenched authoritarian regimes<sup>1</sup>. Hivos believes what is unfolding in MENA is nothing less than the rewriting of history. This assessment does not minimise the hurdles to democratisation, nor does it romanticise the resilient societies that confront authoritarian regimes. Rather, it is based on extensive engagement with experts and activists in the region who understand the depth of social transformations and are able to take the pulse of their societies.

## Upgrading authoritarianism

Prior to the dignity revolutions, it was difficult to envisage civic action leading to democratisation in MENA. The attention of external actors promoting democracy was focused on (mostly secular) formal civil society, such as NGOs in the areas of human rights, women's rights, trade unions, etc. There was a lack of deep knowledge on both the context in which these actors operated and, more importantly, how complex social change occurs in authoritarian contexts. Such knowledge is only acquired by doing away with a formal (liberal) civil society concept, particularly formal NGOs and the expectations that external actors have of them. The CWSA programme zoomed in on the authoritarian characteristics of the context that civil society actors operate in, dissecting its core components as well as its impacts on civic activism. CWSA research revealed that both 'hard' authoritarian regimes, such as Syria, and their 'soft' pendants, like the Moroccan state, have reconfigured their relations with societies. Such regimes successfully appropriated democracy discourse and co-opted important segments of civil and political society in a strategy that can be called 'upgrading authoritarianism'. Take Syria: prior to the outburst of popular protest in March 2011, empirical research revealed that: 'the borderline between civil society and the state turns out to be less clear-cut than assumed in theoretical discussions. Most actors have a rather ambivalent relationship to the state.

Organizations can only survive if tolerated by the state, and risk becoming instrumentalised by state authorities who can use them as a kind of fig leaf to demonstrate a façade of pluralism. The alternative is not to organise into established groups, but to cooperate in loose networks' (Junne, Gerd. CWSA Newsletter, October 2009, Issue 1)<sup>2</sup>. Social media enabled other forms of civic action, created a virtual space that confronts the culture of fear and enhanced trust among activists privileged with the access to new media. But by themselves, these

instruments offer no magic bullet and can even be a double-edged sword. The Syrian regime also used these media to infiltrate digital activism. Broadening the focus to other actors, specifically those outside formal human rights and democracy NGOs, offered more insight into the interaction of social forces and the state. In the case of Morocco, Farid Boussaid eloquently analyses the rise and fall of a nascent independent private sector. This 'unusual suspect' could have been a genuine agent of democratisation, but it also had to operate in the same ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere as the 'usual suspects' did. The monarch managed to break the increasing independency of the umbrella group of business associations (CGEM) by gradually replacing the independent leadership with pro- government ones and co-opting sections of the new business class<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the apparent successes of the regimes, prior to 2011, to limit attempts towards democratisation, upgrading authoritarianism was not a proactive strategy. Rather, it was a reactive response to internal and external pressures to democratise the political system and provide more space for civil society. The outcome was that both traditional civil society and relatively 'new' social actors such as social media activists and the private sector operated in an ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere. Such ambiguity does not render activists puppets of regimes; rather, it demonstrates that the liberal notion of civil society as the engine of democratisation does not reflect the reality. In this ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere civic actors walk a tightrope between co-optation and confrontation, between commissioned criticism and active citizenship.

## Why did we not see it coming?

While regimes were engaged in upgrading processes and sharing 'authoritarian best practices', international donors stuck to project-by-project outcome assessments that say little about contribution to qualitative change on the ground<sup>4</sup>. The result was

---

<sup>1</sup> Khouri, Rami, *Arab Spring or Revolutions*, ([www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/opinion/arab-spring-or-revolution/article2132994/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/opinion/arab-spring-or-revolution/article2132994/). Accessed 1 May 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Shaery-Eisenlohr, Rosschanack, *Newsletter Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, October 2009, Issue 1*, University of Amsterdam/Hivos.

<sup>3</sup> Boussaid, Farid, *State Business Relations in Morocco*, Working paper 6, Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, June 2010, University of Amsterdam/Hivos.

<sup>4</sup> Heydemann, Steven, *The Uncertain Future of Democracy Promotion*, Working paper 12, Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, November 2010, University of Amsterdam/Hivos.

donor disconnect between project outcomes and process impacts. It was against this backdrop that popular revolutions erupted in the region. Why did we not see it coming? There are three reasons: we over-stated the state and its capacity to reconfigure state-society dynamics in its favour; we under-stated society and its capacity to confront the culture of fear; and we overlooked the irreversible impacts of the invisible triple revolution of education, gender and political awareness the region has witnessed over the past 50 years. The mass participation of youth, particularly girls, in higher education and the failure of the state to meet the high expectations of this generation increased political awareness among highly educated, unemployed and underemployed young people (though this did not always translate into overt political activities). In other words we didn't see beneath and beyond upgrading authoritarianism. This knowledge is not new; these indicators were known to researchers, governmental and non-governmental actors. According to Volker Perthes: 'Actors in politics and business who predicted the revolts and revolutions in the Arab world were few and far between, even though the causal political and socio-economic factors were known and enough has been written about them. There were no "unknown unknowns" or "black swans", but rather a whole flock of very well-known white swans about whose behavior too little was known. As so often in crises that turn out to be systemic, the phenomena were known but early detection was hampered by a lack of understanding as to how they would interact'.<sup>5</sup> The failure to comprehend the potential for change within the region was also a result of prevailing analytical and orientalist veils in the West that have prevented the majority of policymakers, Middle East experts and democracy promoters from seeing the transformative impacts of this invisible triple revolution. This was the basis for two dominant stereotypes about the region: 'Arab Exceptionalism' and the 'passive Arab subject'. Hivos firmly believes in the need for strategic rethinking that culminates in two qualitative paradigm shifts and the adoption of six strategic principles. This can form the

foundations of contributions to meaningful long term social changes in MENA.

## Two paradigm shifts

The two paradigm shifts are: 1) from democracy promotion by Western donors to accompanying transformative changes initiated, led and ultimately determined by the people of the region; and 2) from 'Arab Exceptionalism' and 'passive Arab subjects' to a 'Tahrir Square Republic'. This 'Republic' symbolizes Arab citizen's determination to bring down dictators, unity between Muslims and Christians, women's empowerment – despite setbacks to women's rights in some countries in the immediate aftermath of the revolutions –and participation, by secular and Islamic actors alike, in square politics and deep democracy. Hivos believes that despite daunting challenges and possible setbacks ahead, donors must realise that revolutions are, by nature, contagious. They should not underestimate the determination of empowered citizens to fight for and negotiate new social contracts aimed at achieving accountable, inclusive and responsive political and economic systems<sup>6</sup>.

## Redefining relevance: Marginal yet meaningful donors

In light of this strategic rethinking, Hivos believes that Western donors must accept that their impact on these transitions are limited and their contributions therefore will be modest. In this new revolutionary MENA, Western donors must strategically reassess their role and 'revolutionise' their thinking about- and contribution to meaningful long term social changes.

## Six strategic principles

In practice, this means Western donors should pay attention to six strategic principles:

**Whose Knowledge Counts:** Most of the work on democracy and human rights is still informed by academic and evidence-based research and knowledge produced in the North about the global South. The Egyptian sociologist Mona Abaza remarks:

---

<sup>5</sup> Perthes, Volker, *Beyond North Africa and the Middle East, The Impact on International Politics, in Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World: Actors, Challenges, Implications and Policy Options*, Asseburg, Muriel (ed.), SWP Research Paper, February 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Hassan, Kawa, *Regional Perspectives on the 'Dignity Revolutions': How Middle Eastern Activists Perceive Popular Protest*, Policy Paper 3, Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, November 2011, University of Amsterdam/Hivos.

'it is no coincidence that many belonging to our scientific community have recently felt somehow "misused" through being overwhelmed by Western tourist-revolutionary academics in search of "authentic" Tahrir revolutionaries, needing "service providers" for research assistants, for translating, and newspaper summaries, for first hand testimonies, and time and again as providers of experts and young representatives for forthcoming abounding conferences on the Arab Spring in the West. "Cherchez", the authentic revolutionary in each corner of the city, is the fashionable mood of these times. In theory, there is nothing wrong with providing services, had the relationship been equal, which was unfortunately never the case' (Academic tourists sight-seeing the Arab Spring, [english.ahram.org.eg/News/22373](http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/22373). Accessed 1 May 2012). The dignity revolutions must lead to a 'revolutionary' rethinking of the eschewed knowledge relation in favour of knowledge produced in the region about the region in genuine and equal partnership with Western experts and actors.

**Dynamic Demand Driven Context Analysis:** In order to comprehend the complex context in which transitions take place donors must partner with think tanks, researchers and experts in the region who can provide dynamic demand driven context analysis to annual/strategic planning and prior to the start of projects. The aim should not only be to understand the status of formal/informal civil society and how donors can support likeminded actors but, more importantly, to understand what constitutes social change, how it evolves and how socio-economic and political factors interact. In addition they should examine the role of emerging actors in transition processes, and how non-organized groups like slum populations, day labourers, rural unemployed, and unemployed university graduates (to name a few), mobilise and contribute to change. For example, female peasants contributed to ousting Mubarak in 2011 by travelling to Cairo to prevent the army from moving against young demonstrators<sup>7</sup>.

**Strategic Patience in a Rapidly Changing Context:**

Revolutionary transitions are long term processes with progress and setbacks. The road to democracy is bumpy and at times bloody. A recent study by FRIDE shows that transitions can be expected to last at least ten to fifteen years<sup>8</sup>. And success is far from guaranteed. This conflicts with the short termism of most donors who need to demonstrate quick progress and 'impact' to their constituencies back home. There are no magic bullets to address this structural clash between project and process. Transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya show that the struggle for the future form of the state, setting up new constitutions, etc is in full swing. The speed with which these processes have proceeded has surprised even seasoned analysts and actors in the region itself. Therefore donors need to balance between the need to act quickly and the need to possess strategic patience.

**Learning from Local Actors:** The revolutions and mobilisation of social groups have led to a revolution of ideas and creative citizen activism. Abdel Basset Ben Hassen, President of the Arab Institute for Human Rights (Tunisia) remarks: 'The Tunisian revolution is alive and kicking. Those who want to sense and see this must move from capital to countryside to see for themselves a myriad of community and citizen based initiatives that aim at improving human rights and strengthening social services and local governance'<sup>9</sup>. Syria provides us with another example of a revolution of creativity, as citizens and activists innovatively and successfully employ slogans, sarcasm, satire, dance and theatre to confront and ridicule Assad's brutal regime and the limp response of the international community. The Syrian writer Hassan Abbas-considered country's walking encyclopedia- aptly asserts: 'It is the unthinkable that people now think, say and do. It is not the elite artists or intellectuals who form the avant-garde, but the ordinary people. I consider myself an expert on Syria, but suddenly places are springing up out of nowhere and we're hearing dialects that we never knew about. Now it's the

---

<sup>7</sup> El Difraoui, Asiem, "No Facebook Revolution"- But an Egyptian Youth We Know Little About, in *Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World: Actors, Challenges, Implications and Policy Options*, Asseburg, Muriel (ed.), SWP Research Paper, February 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Echagüe, Ana, *The role of external actors in the Arab transitions*, FRIDE Policy Brief Number 122-April 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Remarks made at the seminar Funder Learning Visit of International Human Rights Funders Group and ARIADNE, Tunis, May 2012.

simple people in the country, whom everyone considered illiterates, who are giving us an education. Look at Kfar Nibl. Kfar Nibl, a village in northern Syria near Idlib, was entirely unknown until sarcasm and wit put it on the map. Kfar Nibl has become a trademark for the best and funniest slogans, shared and disseminated by activists and fans. When the Arab League monitors arrived in Damascus and took up residence at the Sheraton Hotel, a picture was passed around showing a group of villagers holding a banner that read: The people of Kfar Nibl demand the building of 5-star hotels, so that we can attract the Arab monitors to visit us'<sup>10</sup>. The lesson from these creative revolutions is to be prepared and willing to learn from local actors and critically reflect on assumptions about social change and activism in general and in particular in authoritarian, revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts.

#### ***End of Embedded Islamists Theory and Engagement with Them:***

Islamic actors are an important part of the political and social fabric of their societies; Western donors urgently need to engage with them. This engagement should not be based on the false thesis that Islamists are embedded in their societies and seculars, who are deemed elitist and out of touch, are not. Rather, it should be founded on the basis of the principle that 'the process itself is more important than the participants'<sup>11</sup>. Prior to the dignity revolutions, one dominant thinking in democracy promotion circles stressed engagement and cooperation with Islamic actors based on this 'embedded thesis'. The aforementioned paradigm shifts and the dignity revolutions mark the end of this thesis. The revolutions were, for the most part, initiated by informally organised secular youth with loose links, and in some cases without links, to formal NGOs. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood joined the revolution only when it sensed that Mubarak's regime would definitely fall.

In Tunisia, it was mainly secular human rights activists, lawyers and trade unionists who brought down Ben Ali. Granted, Islamists have won elections

in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, and may fare well in elections in post-Assad Syria. Yet the root causes of these electoral gains are to be found in the historical oppression of Islamists and their subsequent 'martyr and scapegoat' status, their financial and organisational capacities and charitable networks and the current weakness of their secular competitors. It is these factors and not 'embeddedness' that explain their victories at the polls. It is essential that Western donors do not panic every time Islamists win elections. Islamic parties must be allowed to govern and make tough policy decisions. At the same time, Western donors should not underestimate the increased ability of electorates to hold those who come to power accountable and vote them out when they fail to deliver. The provincial elections in Iraq in 2009 are a case in point; when Islamist parties failed to deliver, they were voted out. In addition, the diversity of Islamist actors and generational transformations within Islamic movements must be taken into account. Liberal minded young Islamist activists broke away from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2011 and formed the progressive Al-Tayar Al-Masry party. These social shifts will continue in the short-, medium- and long term. Hence, Western donors need to partner with emerging progressive Islamic actors and support coalitions for change across the Islamic-secular divide. This will lead to a better understanding of these societies and ensuring partnerships with actors that enjoy legitimacy with their populations. It will also help Western donors determine their relevance, role and possible contributions to complex social changes. With this in mind, Hivos believes dignity revolutions are both post-Islamist and post-Huntington revolutions: they mark the end of the embedded Islamists thesis and at the same time they demonstrate, once again, the bankruptcy of Huntington's thesis on the incompatibility of Islam and democracy as most of the millions who poured onto the streets were of Islamic faith<sup>12</sup>.

#### ***Foreign Funding: Genuine Suspicions and Political Instrumentalisation:***

The issue of foreign funding to local civil and political society, and the political

---

<sup>10</sup> Al-Zubaidi, Layla, *Syria's Creative Resistance*, [www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5920/syrias-creative-resistance](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5920/syrias-creative-resistance). Accessed 14 June 2012).

<sup>11</sup> EUISS Report Number 9, *The Arab democratic wave, How the EU can seize the moment*, March 2011.

<sup>12</sup> de Vasconcelos, Álvaro, *The Post-Huntington Revolutions*, ISSues, the quarterly newsletter of ISS, Issue 35, May 2011.

agendas often associated with it, remain a highly sensitive issue in MENA. The fall of authoritarian regimes provides real windows of opportunities for donors to support politically sensitive democracy and human rights projects. Yet old habits die hard. It has become clear, for example, that the ousting of ageing dictators has by no means abolished either their regimes or their practices. Branding civil society activists and organisations who receive foreign funding as agents of the West aiming at regime change is a common tactic that contributes to perceptions of a 'conspiracy' behind foreign funding. A Gallup survey on foreign funding for civil society organisations in Egypt conducted in February 2012 shows that 85% of Egyptians opposed direct US funding for civil society organisations<sup>13</sup>. Despite differences between countries, the lesson from Egypt is that Western donors need to be aware of this delicate dilemma. They must understand and address genuine suspicions and (mis) perceptions among Arab general publics and distinguish them from the political instrumentalisation of such public sentiments by regimes who want to cut external funding to civil and political societies by regimes and international human rights and democracy organisations they do not approve of (project proposal Foreign Funding in the Arab World: Myth and Reality of a Political Tool, Hivos/FRIDE/AFA, unpublished).

### Hivos and Dignity Revolutions: Delivering insider knowledge

In an attempt to address the six strategic principles, Hivos CSWA has initiated partnerships with regional, Diaspora, and Western think tanks with links to and roots in the region. Our aim is to gain demand driven context analysis and informed insights on transition challenges rooted in regional realities. To this end, Hivos will:

- co-produce with Arab Forum for Alternatives (Egypt) a bulletin on dignity revolutions from the perspectives of researchers in the region;
- co-produce policy briefs with AFA and FRIDE (Spain) on foreign funding dilemma in post-revolutionary contexts;
- co-produce policy papers and policy analysis

articles on transition challenges in Syria with the Syrian think tank Strategic Research and Communication Centre (UK), USIP (US) and German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in the fields of transitional justice, rule of law, political development and civic education;

- co-produce with the Dutch-Iranian expert Shervin Nekuee a special bulletin on the role of Iranian Shia Clergy in democratisation processes written by Iranian clergies;
- co-produce with University of Amsterdam books and working papers on state-society relations in Syria and Iran.

Hivos wants to be a bridge-builder between regional thinktanks, experts and activists on the one hand and Western think tanks, NGOs and policymakers on the other. This will facilitate our aim to be a knowledge intermediary that addresses the knowledge gap between both regions of the world. In addition, Hivos has embarked on an engagement process with Islamic actors in Syria.

### From research to policy analysis and advice

One of the aims of this programme is the translation of research results into policy recommendations for development practitioners and policymakers. To this end, Hivos CSWA provided policy advice to the Netherlands Council on International Affairs (AIV) in 2011 on how the Netherlands government can best support democratic reforms in the region. In addition, we provided in-depth analysis to BBC MEDIA ACTION on how international actors can support media freedom in Syria. These informed insights will be published in a forthcoming case study by the BBC MEDIA ACTION on Syria.

### Further information

To find out more about the Hivos Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia and our recent publications see the following website: [www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net).

Kawa Hassan is knowledge officer at Hivos.

---

<sup>13</sup> *Egyptian Opposition to US and Other Foreign Aid Increases, Majority now also opposes aid from international organizations*, ([www.gallup.com/poll/153512/egyptian-opposition-foreign-aid-increases.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/153512/egyptian-opposition-foreign-aid-increases.aspx). Accessed 11 June 2012).

## **Hivos**

P.O. Box 85565, NL-2508 CG

The Hague, The Netherlands

T +31 70 376 55 00

F +31 70 362 46 00

[info@hivos.net](mailto:info@hivos.net)

[www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net)