Why the Transitions in the Arab Region Matter for the Rest of the World: Challenges and Opportunities for South-South Cooperation -

Friends, fellow delegates and speakers, ladies and gentlemen: we come together thanks to the UNDP’s continuous commitment to shared futures and shared spaces where human development, good governance, poverty alleviation, and today, south-south co-learning to reaffirm the common aspiration that peoples, cultures, experiences, civil societies, international organisations and governments could come together to add common value to one another and advance the idea of freedom and dignity, the famous slogans of many a public square across boundaries of geography, language, culture and politics, including the Arab Spring, as a common vision. The narratives and practices of moral protest on such a wide canvass animate such aspirations, displaying the verve and passion for returning people to rule and rule to the people.

In exploring why Arab transitions matter for the rest of the world and the attendant opportunities and challenges, I propose 5 frames of thought – vistas for reflecting on a topical subject that warrants this distinguished gathering and the UNDP’s judicious choice of theme.

Before proceeding with the frames, I begin with a summary with what I consider to be a relevant set of ideas that capture the essence of why Arab transitions matter for the rest of the world.

What is striking about the current historical moment is primarily the ‘death of the hegemon’. The usual dichotomies that have for so long perturbed the Arab psyche may be finally coming unstuck – namely the colonizer-colonized power relations that have structured Arab-Western geo-strategy for so long.

I mean by this that to use the totalizing terms popularized by Orientalism, the ‘East’ – a generalizing term to refer here specifically to
the Arab Middle East – is no longer a ‘workshop’ or a ‘laboratory’ where experimentation with the ideas and theories invented in, and by, the ‘West’ takes place.

The polarities that litter the ‘narration’ of democracy’s global travel should not be framed in either Orientalist or Occidentalist terms. I see a new journey that calls for synergy, partnership, and co-learning.

The democratic moment North African revolutions have heralded has necessitated cross-pollination: the ethos of pluralism, good government, and democratic identity defy being ‘boxed’ into a single location, paradigm of knowledge, ethnicity, region, religion or civilization. I think we can all bid the ‘clash of civilizations’ farewell.

Today, this region pulsates with the ethics and values of democratizing becomings. Democracy itself continues to be contested, making room for temporal, spatial and cultural difference and specificity as well as for shared spaces and commonality. Indeed, these newly emerging spaces spell ‘in-between-ness’, negating democratic mentoring from the ‘West’ to the rest, singular and top-down democratic knowing and ‘civilizing’ from without. At the core of moral protest is the revendication of the right to embark on journeys devoid of local and global hegemons – ‘Isnat al-nidam’ – top-down, singular, hegemonic order.

As Homi Bhabha maintains, ‘liminality’ empowers. [call it wasatiyya if you will – the fourth way …appellations do not matter here]. It enables a capacity for resistance. It is this resistance, as a capacity to speak and write back which calls for the re-narration of democracy and of democratic knowledge, by inscribing on both democratic ‘stories’ of unconventional struggles from below in the age of the Arab Spring.

You all no doubt recall that ‘democracy’ is intrinsically pluralist: it negates surrender to a single temple of wisdom, singular thinking, or single authors. It is a parchment for all on which to inscribe their ways of mapping out democratic routes, reifying democratic identities and of building democratic institutions.

The liminal moment – this historical moment – as far as the Arab Spring is concerned, may be labelled ‘the moment of agency’. We all recall the iconic cries of the Arab public squares: ‘Al-sha’b yureed’ [The people will]. Thus agency is repositioned in public consciousness as not simply the mantra of the still unfurling Arab Spring – with all its fluidity, bright and dark spots – but also as an ethos. This underpins the normative dimension which comes to the fore, hinting at the democratic futures and communities being re-imagined across the vast Arab geography.
The gist of the ideas above is that through the Arab Spring, bridges are being built to reach to the West but this time on Arab terms: seeking democratic futures is no longer the figment of remote policy-making communities detached from unfolding events, struggles, and communities. The deluge of agency in the context of the Arab Spring has yielded democratic voluntarism. Arabs willingly seek democratic futures – discarding the need for systematic ‘class-room’-type induction such as through the now defunct ‘Greater Middle East Initiative’, itself the by-product of power relations engineered after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In other words, the time has never been more opportune for partnering voluntarily with the rest of the world on the basis of mutuality, reciprocity and equality. This matters not only to the youths of the Arab Spring, but also to the youthful leaderships emerging in the Arab region.

Today an arch of possibilities is emerging within the democratic ‘stories’ and struggles that accompany agency. Democracy's indeterminacy contains the thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectics, dialogism and resistance. No longer is it tenable to suggest a binary governing the power relations – in relation to democracy learning – between the Arab world and the rest of the world. Democracy exists in a fluid sense requiring constant 'renewals' and, more importantly, in the Arab context reference to the Arab youths whose inventiveness and cries for freedom and dignity have opened up such an arch of possibilities in the first place.

Therefore, south-south democratic co-learning cannot ignore the demography of the Arab Spring and primary citizenry – which, in this regards differs from transitions in the 1990s in Eastern Europe, for instance. Plus, we all know that transition in Eastern Europe was from one ideology to another. The Arab Spring was not catalysed by the quest for unhinging hegemonic ideologies -- but more appropriately dynastic republics in whose hands conflated the means and resources of political, economic, informational, and coercive prowess.

Now I turn to my frames, to tease out some ideas about south-south exchange in relation to good government.

1- Democratic knowledge and democratic co-learning:
   ‘Democracy does not land from the moon’

The Arab Middle East (AME) has historically featured as a contributor to Euro-Med cultures and civilizations. Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Phoenicia all at one point in time or another mediated processes of infusion, inclusion and diffusion of ‘learning’. The flow was not one-
way. The ‘travel’ of ideas left lasting inscriptions on AME’s cultural map. As the AME enters its ‘democratic’ and ‘revolutionary’ moment, it is apposite to address the question of democratic knowledge and trans-democratic exchange. This question is noted by glaring omission in most accounts of AME since the eruption of the 2011 uprisings. This moment registers continuity as much as rupture. It is a moment opportune for a break, encouraging the unshackling of the region from postcolonial histories of tutelage from without. Yet, at the same time, it renews the ethos of exchange, concomitantly unmaking North Africa as a space of ‘exile’, ‘exception’ and ‘otherness’ and remaking it as a shared space of democratizing ferment, democratic exchange, and diffusion of democratic knowledge.

The ‘democratic moment’ is additionally confused by the ontological and epistemological postulates, assumptions and theories of Western transitology. The clamour for closure, the obsession with consolidation and the temporal and spatial specificity of the Western experience, all defy the realities of the Arab Middle East. The air of superiority evidenced by many Orientalist writings on the AME continues to prejudice the terms of how ‘West’ meets ‘East’ in relation to democratization. When ‘West’ meets ‘East’, contrast and difference reign supreme. The ‘West’ is privileged as the sole source of all knowledge of good government whilst the ‘East’ or ‘Orient’ is paired with ‘West’ only for the convenience of constructing mirror images. ‘Orient’ is invented to highlight and celebrate, by way of contrast, what the ‘West’ is and is not. In such mirror images, the ‘non-West’ is marginal to rationality, peripheral to theory and on the side-lines of knowledge-making.

Many accounts of polity and society of the Arab Middle East generally expose the survival of this line of thinking. Western transitology displays the prejudicial position of the ‘Occident’ as the ‘knower’ of democracy. There are two reasons: alternative possibilities for locating instances of democratic learning or apprenticeship, democratic struggles, and democratic discourses are largely omitted or ignored as serious contenders for systematic study.

Yet we have examples of bright spots of inspiration, learning and dialogue by the founders of Tunisia’s constitution who have exercised ‘modularity’ very widely, picking the brain of democrats everywhere. From Portugal for instance, the semi-presidential system; from France rule of law, from the US civil and political liberties, from the UK the robustness of parliamentary institutions. And the Transitional Justice
Law created in December was, amongst other countries, inspired by the South African model.

2- The Arab Middle East is not ‘an empty space’: Arab-Arab Learning

For most of the region’s recorded history, both tyrants and empires have occluded the region from the dynamic of local learning. The idea that south-south exchange could bring together in interactive and dialogical circles interlocutors, students and teachers, from both sides, to share learning, experiences, stories, struggles and even triumphs of democracy must not preclude the possibility of Arabs learning from each other. The idea here is that those who cannot learn from within will not be able to learn from without. These didactic processes must work in tandem.

There are always highs and lows on any learning journey. However, it is the people and the epistemic communities we encounter through co-learning, dialogues, discussions, class-rooms, which create the greatest memories – and hopefully intellectual sparks.

Examples attesting to a local repertoire of potentially useful democratic learning:

- Kuwait: parliament
- Tunisia: trade unions and women role in polity and society
- Lebanon: pluralism
- Qatar: Al-Jazeera model – Shaykh Hamad’s abdication and his constitution-making
- Yemen: the civility of the Yemenis who possessed 70 million pieces of light weapons and yet remained peaceful protesters
- Egypt: youth movements
- Morocco: trade unions and inclusiveness of Islamists in government
- Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco: National Dialogue
- All Arab Spring States: youth movements’ interactions and exchange of ideas as was the case in the heyday of the Arab Spring amongst youth movements from Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.
- Jordan: charity and local development experiences

There remains a real thirst for dynamic sustainable development experiments that are badly needed as supportive processes for political development. There is no escape from distributive justice and the search for outside ‘models’ may not be sufficient for creating local alternatives.
This is needed for levelling the playing field with and between Arab communities, regions, religions, sects, ethnicities and youth groups drawn so much to ‘Lampedusa’. Potentially, ‘exilic’ movement from the Southern shores of the Med to Europe can rob transitional states of badly needed human-power, causing brain-drain.

3- Religious Spirituality & Politics

Three Latin-American experiences that represent an indigenous effort to contribute to democratic practices: the movement Buen vivir/Good Life - an anti-neoliberal movement in the Andean region that tries to include social and ecological demands into a broader political movement, the Mexican Zapatista movement that worked for the inclusiveness of formerly marginal groups (e.g. the Maya) into mainstream society; and liberation theology as practical ‘philosophy’, aiming to reconcile social demands with a religious outlook. These practices have potentiality in terms of application to fields such as: (i) community participation and bottom-up strategies such as direct democracy (ii) the primacy of socio-economic and ecological dimension in mapping out human rights vision and strategy (as opposite the traditional liberal outlook of focusing exclusively on civil and political human rights); and (iii) the inclusiveness of religious spirituality in politics. The main hypothesis is that these Latin American experiences may serve as good practices, worthy of study in the quest for indigenous democratic learning from global and “Southern” spaces, including the MENA region.

4- Youth-to-youth learning: tactical innovation and civic activism: April 6 & Otpor

Egypt’s period April 6 members was impressed by nonviolent tactics of Serbian and Ukrainian youth movements. In 2009, April 6 activist, Mohammed Adel, visited Serbia to learn more about non-violent protest strategies at the hand of youths who overthrew Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s.

In Serbia, the nature of civic activism influenced the so-called ‘tactical innovation’ of the well-known youth movement Otpor (Resistance). This was evident in leadership structures shaped democratically and inclusively. For instance, a small group of young leaders were made official spokespersons and briefed the media during student protests of 1996-97. When Otpor was created in 1998, it matured by responding to state oppression and, for instance, rotated the spokespeople, thus creating a horizontal political structure not easy to break through draconian measures.

Arab youth movements all sought learning from the so-called tactical innovation invented by protest strategies of youth movements in Serbia,
Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Azerbaijan. Cross-movement similarities yield many lessons: successful youth movements were organized around election time, and all had clear political agendas demanding: free and fair elections, free speech, and de-politicized universities and education.

Primarily, Serbia's Otpor was impressive by initiating a type of non-violent and thus effective protest youth movement against authoritarianism.

**Conclusions**

Last but not least, I finish with a few caveats:

1. One must underscore the importance of contingent and contextual variables in accounting for divergent trajectories of three prominent cases of transition triggered by the Arab Spring. This is why when framing south-south democratic co-learning, specificity (understood in positive terms not as an autarchic device) must still be accounted for – as one means of knowing where to ‘locate’ good practices that transcend locality.

2. The tradition of disputation ‘munazarah’, which once facilitated the travel of Hellenic democracy into Arabo-Islamic research and curricula attests to the ability of the forebears of Europe and the Arab Middle East to engage one another through dialogism, co-learning, and dialectical engagement, as versus synthesis. The search for syntheses is futile because it hints at the death of dialogue or search for some kind of stable ‘truth’, not fitting with the exciting times this region and its peoples are experiencing.

3. Very uniquely, the new approach to learning democracy through moral protest and revolution presents the Arab region with a facility for democratic reconfiguration of power and civic consolidation: democratization should not ‘kill’ the revolutionary ethos, and the attendant space it opens up for the marginal to acquire civic know-how and potentially ‘social capital’. This is where turning to South-East Asian experiences may be useful in learning about revolution – such as in the Philippines and Indonesia – worked in tandem with formalizing democratization and institution-building, creating a ‘sustainable culture of democratic learning’ and proactive citizenry. Simply, democracy cannot be built solely by institutions, constitutions and elections. A society that parleys, questions, organizes, works, contests, dissents and safeguards the resources of autonomy is as vital as institution-building. Spain today illustrates the point. There is a return to civic activism to re-energize citizens’ sovereignty and say in the distribution of both power and material resources.

4. The Arab Spring states and peoples’ engagement must address the civic, the economic, the legal, the institutional and the attitudinal (e.g.
compromise, dialogue, acceptance of defeat, free inquiry, etc.). This must be realized through the creation of shared spaces and interlocking ‘publics’ for the dissemination of democratic know-how: state-to-to state; elite-to-elite; and people-to-people. This presents the region’s peoples with opportunities and challenges for bouncing ideas with other regions – dialogically and interactively. Democratic learning cannot be concentrated and elite-led or based.

5. Finally, perhaps the hands-on approach and exchange that we all expect from south-south learning may be needed to revitalize academia -- as thus far theory of transitions seems to be turning in empty circles through teleological, elite, and institutional obsession. These prospective dialogues favour reference to experience but this will not be at the expense of theory - should those ready to heed the new lessons of the ‘travel’ of democracy re-think the ‘search for democracy’ in the Arab region.

It is with humility that I have addressed this forum – am honoured for being included in the panel opening what promises to be thought-provoking deliberations and discussions. I am grateful to the UNDP for this opportunity. Thank you all for your indulgence.