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Shades of Grey: Poland's Example for a Middle East in Transition

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It is not at all clear if or how a country's experience in systemic transition—from authoritarian to democratic rule—can serve as a lesson to another country in transition. Positivists would claim the 20th century provides a plethora of examples about how to conduct a transition. Sceptics would point at differences in each and every case: in the character and condition of the economy, a lack of adequate political structures or different cultural and historic backgrounds. Tunisia and Egypt, however, are at this extremely precarious point where they will understandably want to make decisions on their own but will be at the same time looking carefully at the experience and competence of others because the democratization process inevitably requires many practical solutions.

The following study will show that there are certain specifics that make the Polish transition experience in 1989 relevant to the changes unfolding in Egypt and Tunisia, especially in the public sphere. It is not comprehensive,¹ rather it tends to show good practices that were successfully, albeit turbulently, implemented in Poland in domains that need urgent reform in North Africa (constitution and economy) but, equally important, it will point out the deficiencies of the Polish choices that eventually led to both positively and negatively viewed outcomes.

Similar backgrounds

Economic hardship and a constant lack of means, disparities between the authorities and the people, censorship—these all were characteristics of Poland in the late 1980s and in the Arab world of the 21st century. In Poland, workers' unions supported by intellectuals started the change. The intelligentsia voiced discontent on behalf of the underprivileged. Likewise, in Tunisia and Egypt, the youth and the poor spoke in unison. One of the biggest social-media-inspired movements in Egypt (rallying under the banner of "April 6") sprung out of the Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra strike in 2008. In Tunisia, the General Labour Union instigated, to an extent, the revolution in Tunisia. The local branches of the union helped people mobilize thanks to its organized structure.

The dramatic state of the economy in Poland in the '80s drove the change. Ancien regime's reforms could not cope with the scale of the problems. Reforms also were insufficient in Egypt despite privatization programmes, subsidies, etc. The Tunisian economy was growing, but unemployment, especially among young people, hit hard.

At the beginning of 1988, the rising prices of bread in Poland caused protesters to chant "we want bread." Similarly, in Egypt and Tunisia the demonstrators took to the streets in a quest for dignity. Hatred for Ben Ali and Mubarak, who had become the faces of the regime, paralleled the Polish abhorrence of "komuna," the communist rule. Interestingly, religion empowered the anti-regime sentiment in Poland, Egypt and Tunisia alike. The Catholic Church played an eminent role in bringing down communism and giving the revolution a moral character. In Tunisia and Egypt, religiously inspired parties had long been in the opposition or illegal. Apart from the opposition, the people

* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

¹ For example, the most successful reforms in Poland—decentralization, regional development etc.—that did not cause the most heated debates in the transitional period have been omitted.

themselves had been growing more and more religious. The combination of all these factors led to a peaceful regime change in all three cases.

The Polish transition experience can still be relevant for Egypt and Tunisia despite one particular difference: the regional and international settings in 1989 and 2011. Indeed, the slow decomposition of the Soviet system allowed changes to take place in Poland and elsewhere. The international system played an even more important role in encouraging reforms. According to professor Aleksander Smolar, who was a political advisor to Poland's first prime minister after 1989, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, while Poland's pro-Western orientation set a clear goal for reform, Arab countries are anything but Western-oriented. They have entered what can be called the last stage of decolonization in which the nationalist-secular state falls. Nevertheless, there also are similarities between Poland in 1989 and Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 that range from the symbolic to the very specific.

Political forces

New political forces come to power unprepared and tend to see the world in binary as a zero-sum game and think that the only conflict they had to withstand was strife with a tyrant. Conflict, though, is a natural social process and part of political and social life. The revolution is only the starting point of a new time when numerous conflicts need to be mitigated in a non-authoritative and democratic manner.² In Poland, Lech Wałęsa, the face of the Polish revolution, became the first democratically elected president. It then came as a surprise that he encountered opponents from within his own camp and in society who had initially supported him. The previously united opposition soon formed a plethora of tiny parties, Solidarity split and regular pluralist politics began. Even if one cannot assess to what extent this experience is transferable, it needs to be pondered as the most important precondition of a new democracy.

The transitional period is by definition a combination of the old and new. In Poland the ruling communist party was dissolved but some of its former officials and activists formed the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). The National Democratic Party in Egypt was dissolved and the Constitutional Democratic Rally in Tunisia was suspended, but depending on the direction of the transformational changes, these people who number in the millions can re-emerge and participate at a later time. This process should not be viewed as negative, rather as a natural consequence of an inclusive democratic process. A much more complex dilemma, however, will be the “de-Mubarakization” or “de-Ben-ali-zation” goal to purge public posts of officials who in one way or another had ties to the former regimes. **The process of “decommunization” and later “lustration” in Poland brought about a fiery debate in the society, which split over how to treat thousands of people working in the pre-1989 structures, especially those blamed for oppression.**

These dilemmas will show how important symbols are for new systems to grow in unison. According to Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, the second prime minister of a newly free Poland (in 1991), the weight of these symbols should not be underestimated. What Poland can do for Tunisia and Egypt is to explain what major mistakes it made in dealing with the past during its transitional period. There are, however, conflicting opinions on what went well and what went wrong.

Constitutional reforms

These reforms took a long time in Poland but were cautious and gradual. In April 1989, the parliament amended the 1952 constitution according to the Round Table agreements. Seats in the lower chamber (Sejm) were divided, with 65% given to the ruling party and its allies and 35% distributed through a free electoral process but at the same time, it was agreed that the upper chamber (Senat, or Senate) would be set up. Elections to the Senate were to be free and democratic. The elections took place on 4 June 1989 with Solidarity members taking all 35% of the seats they were allowed to compete for in the Sejm and 99 out of 100 seats in the Senate. It was a sweeping victory that surprised even the opposition. The ruling party was unable to form a government so in August 1989 Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who was a member of Solidarity, was sworn in as the first freely elected prime minister in the new Poland. Later that year the so-called “December amendment”

² See Schopflin, G., *Post-Communism: Constructing New Democracies in Central Europe*, International Affairs, vol. 67, no. 2, April 1991, p. 236.

scrapped the ideological preamble and allowed political pluralism in Poland.³ In January 1990, the Communist Party was dissolved. In April 1992, the Sejm accepted the constitutional bill that regulated the process of drafting a new constitution. But works on it were slow and the system so opaque that a provisional constitution called the “Small Constitution” had to be approved in October 1992. It regulated the relation between the legislative and executive branches and also local governments. It wasn't until April 1997 that the new constitution of Poland was approved to fully replace the 1952 Constitution.

Both Egyptians and Tunisians want a new constitution for their countries. In Egypt on 19 March eight amendments were introduced in a referendum but a fortnight later the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) scrapped the 1971 constitution altogether, replacing it with a constitutional declaration in a nontransparent and authoritative process.⁴ **In Poland, despite a multitude of difficulties, the debate about constitutional reforms was inclusive and deliberate.** Hence, it eventually resulted in a document that reflected the compromise between different political groups and views. The new constitution was introduced after two subsequent free parliamentary elections had already taken place. In a reverse of logic, Tunisia will first elect the Constituent Assembly and draft a new constitution before free parliamentary elections take place. It seems that Egypt will take on both processes simultaneously, similarly to how it happened in Poland.

Economy

The transitional economic systems of Poland and the respective Arab countries are different. Poland was a centrally planned economy (with some elements of a market economy) that faced the challenge of a far-reaching transition to a market economy. Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other Arab countries have partial market economy but they all generate similar problems and are marked by the unsustainability of the status quo.

In Poland, the transition to a market economy began in 1990 under extremely difficult circumstances: hyperinflation, a high rate of hidden unemployment, external public debt, black market foreign exchange premiums and obsolete state enterprise sectors. The Ministry of Finance led by Leszek Balcerowicz prepared and implemented the economic reform during the first two years—the so-called shock therapy method, a comprehensive programme of transformation that combined measures directed at tackling inflation and institutional reforms. While these reforms allowed small enterprises to flourish, at the same time they did not regulate the new market enough and subsequently produced a deeper recession in the short term (GDP fell by about 15% in the first two years after the transformation). It also had a grave social cost in the form of increased unemployment and poverty. In the long run, however, the economy grew steadily from 1992 and inflation dropped over a decade to 1.9% in 2002.

A couple of economically helpful factors existed in 1989, such as free judiciary or entrepreneurial spirit among the people—the latter is surely shared by Tunisians and Egyptians. Nevertheless these new harsh conditions of living brought about strong dissatisfaction, which in social and political terms translated into a sharp split in the society (those supporting and opposing the reforms), political blame games, the emergence of populist parties and a longing for the “good old times.” **The democratic paradox is that the more open the political process (a requirement of democratization) the more responsive (populist) it is to the demands of those who are losing economically and politically.**

Unemployment and dissatisfaction. In the first two years of the transition, unemployment grew rapidly. Poland went from nominally zero unemployment (there was hidden unemployment) to 14%. The unemployment was structural and related to the changing needs of the state and flourishing enterprises on the one hand and the irrelevancy of the skills of parts of the population on the other. Simultaneous with unemployment throughout the 1990s was an increase in the number of impoverished people. In 2002, people living below the national poverty level reached 15% of the total population, but the number of people living below \$2 a day was 8.5% in 1993 and 11.3% in 1996

³ M. Bankowicz, *Transformacje konstytucyjnych systemów władzy w Europie Środkowej*, Kraków 2010, p. 140.

⁴ Nathan J. Brown, Kristen Stilt, *A Haphazard Constitutional Compromise*, Commentary, CEIP, 11 April 2011, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=43533>.

(World Bank data). That is quite significant since in 2005 the number of Egyptians and Tunisians in poverty accounted for 18.5% and 7.4% of the respective populations.

Finally, the economic reforms did converge (at a later post-1995 stage) but there was one additional incentive for their eventual effectiveness—the prospect of joining the European Union and the requirements it entailed. From 1990 onwards, however, popular discontent eventually toppled the government of the party responsible for the reforms (Democratic Union) in the 1993 elections, giving way to the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance.

Social relations

In 1991, only 22.4% of Poles described their lives as “successful.” In 2005, this number grew to 33.5% and in 2011, more than 80% of Poles were satisfied with their lives. In 2007, though, half of all Poles were unable to answer the question whether the post-1989 reforms worked well in Poland. These parameters offer a symbolic explanation as to how the post-1989 period has shaped the Polish people. On the one hand it has undoubtedly brought genuine qualitative change—there is plenitude in the stores, a gradual and slow improvement in conditions of living, freedom of speech, pluralism and respect for public property—while on the other hand the social cost of the Polish transformation process causes and will continue to cause mixed feelings. A more general conclusion can also be inferred here: **It takes time for a transitional society to live up to democracy or its most noteworthy emanation, the rule of law.** In a 2009 national survey of the functioning of democracy in Poland, only 25% of Poles felt they had any impact on the state while 72% claimed they had none.⁵

The social aspect of transformation deserves a closer look because of certain similarities between Poland, Tunisia and Egypt. The role of the Catholic Church in the Polish transition is a special case in point. It was instrumental to the pre-1989 opposition. For the most of the communist era after 1956 the Catholic Church, albeit in opposition to the regime, functioned fairly autonomously until it engaged in the political and social debate, mainly after 1978 when a Pole became pope. The Church joined the Round Table (as an observer) and supported the subsequent reforms. It also gave the revolution a moral flavour.

Similarly in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood—the most vocal and powerful representative of organized religious institutions—played an important role in the Mubarak era. Like the Catholic Church in Poland, the Muslim Brotherhood also epitomized the opposition. While illegal, it was tolerated and the relationship that existed between the regime and the Brotherhood could be described as a “cold peace.” After the fall of Mubarak, the popular expectation is that it will be political Islam (in the form of the MB or others) that will dominate the public sphere. There are further similarities: **95% of Poles declare themselves religious (and Catholic)⁶ compared to 98% of Egyptians.⁷ If we combine it then with the level of social dissatisfaction that may be exacerbated by harsh economic conditions, it may emerge that politicized religion can indeed thrive on the dispossessed.** Some in Egypt may even support the post-Mubarak NDP the same way many Poles clung to the post-communists, but some will choose the Muslim Brotherhood given the fluidity and pro-social character of its policies. In Poland, even the catholic “Christian National Union,” a marginal offshoot of Solidarity, won 8.7% of the votes in 1991.

The Catholic Church emerged as a visible and potent player in everyday Polish public life, often imposing its doctrine on formal solutions, either directly or indirectly. As a direct example, in 1990 the Catholic religion was introduced in public schools with two classes a week for the period of 12 years, and in 1993 abortion was made illegal. Also that year, the church in Poland signed with the Vatican a Concordat, a document that recognizes the Catholic Church as the authority over the church in a given region or country and which also made the Vatican the biggest recipient in terms of legal powers and financial profits. These were the immediate gains for the Church as a result of its political and social influence. This is important in Egypt and Tunisia in particular because the legal and educational systems will be at stake.⁸ These are, after all, the most divisive secularization-related issues.

⁵ *Opinie o funkcjonowaniu demokracji w Polsce BS/20/2009*, CBOS, February 2009, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2009/K_020_09.PDF.

⁶ *Polish Public Opinion*, Public Opinion Research Center, March 2009, http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2009/03_2009.pdf.

⁷ Dalia Mogahed, *Islam and Democracy*, Special Report: Muslim World, Gallup Poll, 2006, http://www.gallup.com/press/File/109693/islamdemocracy_Flyer_POLL_02.15.08.pdf.

⁸ According to 66% of Egyptians, *shari'a* must be the only source of state legislation. Ibidem.

As for the political spectrum, the Catholic Church influenced the right, which accentuated the roles and rights of the family and the nation, not the state or the individual. That characteristic is yet another analogy with what Islam prioritizes: the umma, the Muslim family/community as opposed to individualistic liberal thought. The right was, therefore, far from the post-communist left, which stressed individual social rights, or the centre-liberal discourse, which advocated individual liberties and property. The interplay of these voices lead “toward a permanent fluidity of alliances and conflicts.”⁹

Women. Women in Poland have been, and to some extent are, until now under-represented in the public sphere. It has been a continuous problem independent of the political system. Egypt shares this problem, although on a different cultural level, while Tunisia’s feminist movement seems much stronger than in Poland in 1989. The interim authorities have already introduced unprecedented gender-parity in electoral lists for the Constituent Assembly.

In Poland the process of a changing feminist identity was on the one hand empowered by new possibilities of self-realization and constrained by certain cultural and religious contexts on the other. The role of women in the transformation cannot be underestimated as they often took a back seat or silently played their parts, away from the splendour of the political elite, which until now has had a marginal representation of women. It also is true that as the roots of a civil society went deeper and deeper a multitude of women or feminist organizations mushroomed and raised awareness of the status of women in the changing Polish society. The disparity between the traditional role of a woman in the society and the opportunities that a democratic system offers will most likely be seen both in Egypt and Tunisia, making the Polish experience particularly valid.

Transformation drives innovation. In this volatile period, innovative people strive and thrive. This is true in the positive sense of the free market and the social context—enterprises of many sorts are being created and civil society organizes—but also in the negative sense when innovation leads to degenerative behaviour such as corruption or crime. The innovative character of the transitional period, however, makes educational reform in Egypt (a literacy rate at 66%) and Tunisia (literacy at 78%) one of the most urgent undertakings. In Poland, the educational reform was not a priority to the same extent since the literacy rate was close to 100%. The Education System Act was introduced already in 1991 but a full-fledged reform started in 1999. The Ministry of National Education oversees the education system but the administration is decentralized. From 1988 to 2002, the number of people with incomplete elementary or no education decreased threefold but significant inequalities appeared with regard to gender and place of residence (rural or Roma origin).

Conclusion

So far, the reaction of the Polish intelligentsia and people directly involved in the transition in the '90s to the idea of sharing the Polish experience with Egypt and Tunisia has been mixed. They can be divided into optimists (who see real potential in the idea) and sceptics (who point at the differences and the inapplicability of the Polish experience in Arab countries). Of these two groups, the first one can be further divided into those who emphasize the advice Poland can give in the most crucial and general transition issues such as dealing with officials from the former regime and those who favour Polish advice in specific sectors that have demonstrated concrete solutions. Each of the three groups mentioned has good arguments to support their points of view but none of them claims that trying to share the Polish experience in the Middle East will harm the transitional processes there or the Polish stance in the region.

It remains to be seen whether the Polish experience in the transition can be applied in either Tunisia or Egypt in any real terms. Any Polish experience can only be transferred if Tunisia and Egypt voice interest in cooperation on these issues. Poland was very cautious in its use of the help of foreign advisors¹⁰ and was later criticized here and there for not following the West’s pieces of advice.¹¹ It is only natural, however, that people who are both high up in the echelons of state decision-making and

⁹ Jeczek Kurczewski, “The Democratization of Europe,” In: Ryszard Stemplowski (ed.), *Europe and Latin America. Looking at Each Other?*, PISM, Warsaw 2010, p. 362.

¹⁰ In early 1990s there were groups of foreign advisors who arrived in Poland but hardly ever left their hotel rooms or learnt about the Polish reality, hence a pejorative term was coined: “the Marriott brigades.”

¹¹ Z. Blok, *Transformacja jako konwersja funkcji wewnętrznych na przykładzie Polski*, Poznań 2006, p. 133.

responsible for reforming narrowly defined domains would look at other countries' experiences in a search for clues. Undoubtedly that was also the case in Poland.

The price to pay for democratic changes is high. Rarely are people aware of the price at the time of the revolution. In the '90s there were nine different governments in Poland. In Tunisia, there already is a third government in office since January 2011. The fluidity of the political scene will most likely be a natural phenomenon in transitional Arab countries. **It goes without saying that the revolution is then only a starting point for a period of increased instability.** The recent Arab Youth Survey 2011 showed that as much as Arab youth want democracy they also expect stability.¹² Their possible disappointment with the transition will prove costly for subsequent governments attempting to reform the country. On the positive side, the majority of Tunisians and Egyptians are young people below the age of 30 who look optimistically to the future. They are the most valuable resource for their respective countries—a resource that needs to be taken good care of during the transition.

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¹² *Third Annual ASDA'A Burston-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2011*, March 2011, <http://burson-marsteller.eu/innovation-insights/arab-youth-survey>.