

Concept Note

17th New Faces Conference

“Pluralism in Egypt and Tunisia –

How the Political Opening is Changing Islamist Forces”

Cairo 4-7 October 2012

I. General Outline

Over the past year, Islamist movements have increasingly managed to translate their popular standing into sweeping election successes. With the demise of the authoritarian rulers in Egypt and Tunisia and the current attempted transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system, political forces in general including Islamists gained more freedom allowing them to widen their scope of operations and activities, and to institutionalize themselves by forming political parties to become official actors in the two countries’ political landscape. With their extremely successful performance in the recent elections, Islamists have clearly moved to the focal point of attention and without doubt they are forces that will have a great influence on politics and society in Egypt and Tunisia in the short and long-run.

This reality necessitates scrutinizing and understanding their beliefs, ultimate goals, program/agenda and actions. It is particularly important and interesting to analyze to what extent there are changes in their ideological stands and concretization of standpoints and principles as a result of the new pluralistic structures and of moving from the opposition to the force in power holding the responsibility to govern. Islamists have been subject to evolution over the past decades but this transformation has always occurred under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems. Hence, the current unprecedented opening lends their evolutionary path new dynamics. It has to be noted here, though, that certainty about the direction of Islamist movements and about their genuine espousal of liberal values and embracement of democratic principles can only be achieved the longer they are active in parliament and government and are engaged in policy-making. Hence findings of the conference can only be considered a snapshot of the current situation, with a very high probability of new changes as a result of the state of flux both countries are witnessing and which is expected to continue for some time.

The three-day conference aims to investigate Islamist movements in Egypt and Tunisia in an interdisciplinary setting, analyze how pluralism and political opening are affecting and changing them, and pinpoint (if possible) concrete policy measures and priorities they are offering their respective citizens. Implications of these developments for the democratic process and for stability in the two countries will equally be addressed.

II. Subjects

The conference will examine Islamist forces in Egypt and Tunisia by looking at several domains. The focus will be on mainstream Islamist organizations (movements and parties) that have renounced violence and are pursuing their goals by peacefully engaging in political life. The first domain that will be addressed is the one related to **1) changes in their internal dynamics, structure, and power distribution**. Questions that pose themselves here are for example: what is the influence and impact of contest, fragmentation, and intergenerational conflict over the proper course to be taken? What are implications of these differences on the strength and cohesion of the movement and party respectively? How does the thinking of younger members differ from the old guard? Are internal structures of the newly formed parties democratic and in line with their alleged support for democracy, or are religious, authoritarian, paternalistic structures prevailing particularly sidelining youth and women? Is there an attempt for a clearer separation between the political and religious wing of Islamist movements? Which conclusion can be drawn here concerning their sincerity of espousal of democratic principles in general?

In the context of agenda examination, several other key sensitive issues deserve special attention. Their viewpoints on **2) the nature of the state and civil and political rights** need to be thoroughly analyzed. Their constitutional priorities such as the role of Islamic law (*sharia*) need to be addressed as well as their stand regarding internal governance such as power distribution between the executive and the legislative and the decision-making process of legislation. For example, what do they think about pluralism and tolerance of other opposing views, especially in light of the religious framework (*the marji'yya*) that many pledge needs to be integrated in any decision-making? There is also major concern on the part of liberal non-Islamists that once in power, Islamists will severely curb civil and political rights of women, particularly those pertaining to the personal status law, and that the willingness of Islamists to make concessions in this domain will decrease. Doubts about equal citizenship and religious freedom including religious minorities like the Copts in Egypt are as strong and hence require closer examination. The same holds true for other individual rights such as the freedoms of speech and artistic expression.

One of the toughest challenges facing any force in power in Egypt or Tunisia is alleviating the socio-economic hardship of the majority of the population, and success or failure in this area will certainly determine the political fate of the new rulers. So what do the new actors have to offer in the domain of **3) social and economic policies**? How do they intend to fight corruption, eradicate poverty, create jobs, and offer decent social services? Is their economic and social agenda conducive to realizing social justice, a major demand of the uprisings in both countries? Is an economic system along purely Islamic lines a wish of the past and do they seek a rather mixed system with options and choices? Who do they turn to for assistance, the West or the Gulf countries and other Muslim majority countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey? The last

point is related to one of their blurriest, most unpredictable agenda parts, namely the one on their **4) foreign policy orientation**. What kind of foreign policy will they pursue? How will they deal with international agreements and conventions? Who will be their allies and what kind of policy will they adopt towards the Israelis and the Palestinians? Which implications does their foreign policy orientation have on domestic and regional politics? Finally, the conference will **5) draw on experiences of other Islamist forces in the region** and relevant findings as well as address **6) the EU's politics and policies towards these developments and actors** and whether there is need for an alteration or revision of these very ones or a simple recognition that an emancipation on the side of some North African countries is occurring that will bring with it a redefinition of relations and power dynamics, which the EU can hardly influence.

III. Objectives

The key objectives of the conference are to:

- Shed light on the agenda and development of the most powerful forces in Egypt and Tunisia
- bridge academic and non-academic discourses by bringing together researchers, policy makers, and other practitioners
- support the young generation of practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers to discuss their visions and findings with senior experts as well as peers
- establish a network between young professionals and promote mutual understanding by bringing together participants from North Africa, the EU, and Turkey.

IV. Methodology

The conference is composed of 1) three to four senior experts' inputs in the plenary and 2) various working group sessions. There will be 2-3 working groups. In each group, every YP presents a brief statement (around 2000 words) related to one or more of the six subject areas. These papers are commented by one expert assigned to each working group, who will also act as facilitator of the working groups' discussions. In each session, one YP will act as rapporteur of the results. Rapporteurs of each working group need to combine their material and the group should present findings in the final session. Whenever suitable, a plenary session will be called in with all participants to give an overview of the status and collective findings of the debate in each working group and to allow for a broader, more interactive exchange among everyone.

The tasks for each YP will hence include:

1. Preparation and presentation of a concise written input statement in the form of a commentary outlining one aspect of one or more of the six domains set (around 2000 words; the complete paper is due in August 2012)
2. Active participation during working groups and plenary sessions

3. Acting as rapporteur during working groups (there will be a rotation of this task among group members)
4. Preparation of a joint presentation in each of the two to three working groups that summarizes the results and major points of agreement and disagreement

V. Application Process

Kindly fill out the attached application form and send it back together with a one-page outline of your intended contribution to eumef1@dgap.org no later than **08 July 2012**.