

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

21 - 24 November 2012
Córdoba, Spain

Welcome

by Bernardino León

EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean Region (Belgium)

- The spoken word takes precedence -

Thank you. Good afternoon, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you to the ProDemos and to the Friends from the Fundación Ortega, from Casa Árabe. It's really a very challenging seminar. I have devoted a lot of time when working with The Three Cultures Foundation and from the privilege of working closely for a long time with Edward Said.

The complex relations between the East and West and North and South are changing also very quickly. We all have a lot to learn from each other. The challenge in this dynamic scenario is that things are moving very quickly and we must take a moment to reflect on our strategies. The first thing we politicians have to do is to find opportunities to talk and listen to the civil society.

The revolutions in the Southern Mediterranean are about inclusiveness; political and economic and, of course, with the civil society. Allow me to make some remarks. Firstly, the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are coming from the societies inside the country, which makes them stronger. Secondly, these societies are very determined to go on with the democratic transitions. These countries, after decades of dictatorships with social and political stagnation, are going through a huge wave of change. Instead of the rules that were accepted for decades, for centuries, there are now new rules and we have seen many new political actors come in to the political stage. But we still don't know whether this is going to be a successful transition for democracy. We hope so, and we are working to contribute as much as possible to successful transitions. There is still a lot to remain to be done and we also know that there is the debate about legitimacy about presentation in all these societies and this is not new, this legitimacy has been an old debate and today that we are, this week that we are talking so much about Gaza and what is going on there is maybe interesting to remember how dictatorships in the past were trying to use this Middle East conflict, the Palestinian/Israeli and Arab/Israeli conflict to try to bolster legitimacy in a way you've seen public opinion to reinforce themselves in and to try to project a sense that they were representing the societies. It happened not only internally in the societies, it happens also in the intra-Muslim or intra-Arab connections and we see how all this is also changing very quickly. It was not difficult to see in some cities in the Arab world in the past in some cafés pictures of Ahmadinejad, as a leader. Today, it is more and more difficult to see photos of Ahmadinejad but easier to see these photos of Erdogan. It is very interesting. It also shows how a country like Iran that tried to build an international legitimacy role of leadership in the Muslim world using the conflict with Israel or with the United States is now finding very difficult to re-define its role. Whereas Turkey, which is a truly democratic country, now has a

very strong role. However, it is very difficult to generalise. I refuse, this is one of the lessons that Edward Said used to insist and insist; we cannot generalise. The civil societies in the countries in the region play different roles. For example, in Tunisia, the vibrant civil society has been fighting for education, universal values, human rights, and women's rights for many decades. In Jordan, the civil society has been less active. There is like a culture in Jordan where being politically engaged has been seen as something negative, for example at the universities. So we cannot generalise but what I can say from my experience as a Special Rep is that we have to be very careful not to confuse political parties in the Arab countries, as they're playing a very important role after the so-called Arab Spring, with political parties in the West.

Political parties and Islamist parties in the Southern Mediterranean countries are developing a sense of identity. Their supporters are voting for them mainly on the basis of identity. They represent the huge part of the society that was excluded during the dictatorships and they represent religion better than other political parties. However, their success is based on the fact that societies without a strong political culture feel that these parties are representing their own identity. You will tell me that some analysts will say that these Islamic parties have a strong support from abroad or that they have very strong electoral machineries, it's true. It's true and this is part also of their success, but the main element is that they have been able to identify themselves with very wide sectors of their societies, which is completely different to what is going on in the West. Importantly, we are now facing a dilemma of representation: the people who made the revolution – representing the active and vibrant civil society organisations – were in many cases not part of the Islamist parties that are now in the Government in countries like Tunisia or Egypt. The civil society organisations that were in Tahrir, that were in the streets of Tunis are not well represented in the new parliaments or in the constituent assemblies. However we do see democratic representatives, we have members of parliament, we have political parties like the Salafists that are representative, the Salafists have more than 20 per cent of the votes in Egypt but most of them are not democratic. When I say that they are not democratic, I mean that they are placing themselves outside of our perception of democracy. They are saying that their interest is to go back to an original society. So, representative but not democratic, democratic but not representative and here is one of, to my opinion, of the most important tasks for the civil society organisations, which is reconcile democracy and representativeness, is very, very important. The second role I think is very important for the civil society in these countries is to work on political cultures. We have societies where political culture is very low. Many of the civil society organisations belong to an elite, had the opportunity to go to university, to be in contact with organisations like this fantastic network, but they have to work even harder to become more representative of the overall society.

We have to work for a better political culture, and the civil society has a key responsibility in this context. But it takes me to a third and also equally important role for the civil society, which is education. We talked before about education. It's critically important. We know how – for decades and decades – how deep and important have been the education debates in these countries, but not only in these countries. I think that now we are in Cordoba and it's worth remembering how three protagonists of the story of this city and the history of the world, Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes, the rationalist Arab thinker and philosopher, Maimonides, the Jewish thinker, also from Cordoba, both of them have been forbidden in many religious schools for many centuries. Still today, in many Muslim schools Ibn Rushd, Averroes, is excluded but also in many Hebraic and Jewish schools with radical views. We can remember also how some enlightened people in Cordoba, Christians like King Alfonso X, also were criticised for many centuries and excluded for many centuries and many Christian schools. Even in the twentieth century in Spain we have seen this ongoing debate and in Europe, so no one can teach lessons, but I know that I'm talking too much.

So, let me leave a final message, which is that from the European Union. The EU has a special responsibility. I said before that we have to listen. We have to be ready, to be humble, to understand what we did wrong and what we did right in the past but to try to understand that this is a new opportunity to treat our partners and our friends in the South as really equal partners and it means dialogue but it means also respect, understanding. But Europe has a special responsibility because without teaching lessons, without trying to teach anyone what to do, what not to do, it is has a model of social cohesion, it has a model of universal education, which can be useful in these new societies. Not only, it's not, or it shouldn't be said as a European tradition, there is also a tradition in many Arab countries and still we have to remember, for instance the Tunisians that in the 20s and the 30s of the twentieth century were promoting these universal education values. People like Tahar Haddad and many others. Tunisia has a fantastic example with the Sadiqi School, which is a great example.

So, let's work together and let's use all this we can share as equals and full respect to try to reinforce democracy because. From the perspective of the civil society, from this perspective of people who believe that it is still the best system, it is worth fighting for democracy and fighting for the role of the civil society. Thank you very much.

Moderator: Thank you very much, Bernardino León, I would like to benefit from the fact that you are with us and thank you for your terrific speech and thoughts. You are, as I said, a local person and you talked about East and West meeting and how you've been following and observing that and how, what kind of shapes that might take and now we are in Cordoba. I have never been. I only spent about an hour here. I'm already impressed from what I see. You know the city well, so if you were to advise us to go to a place that maybe you won't even find in the guidebooks that we might have bought before we came here, that is a great place to see East and West meet and that was maybe shaped recently or was maybe shaped hundreds of years ago, which one would it be?

Bernardino León: Well I think the, what is fantastic in this city is how the three cultures co-existed and, I wouldn't say a single place, I would take a walk around these mosques, of course, the mosque is a must. It's only a mosque, so I think it's probably the nicest and most impressive mosque in the world and it's interesting that it is in a part of the world that is not Muslim, but it's also very interesting because the other great Ummayyad Mosque, which is in Damascus, the great mosque of Damascus is very Western. So you have ... normally you have mosques in Damascus with mosaics with a strong Western influence and you have very Eastern mosque here in Cordoba and I recommend to start there and then to go around the Jewish neighbourhood. So many Arab remains and, of course, the city has also a very interesting Roman part. I am sure you have seen also part of this very close to here, but try to understand how in the twelfth century, when in Ibn Rushd and Maimonides were writing in this city, three cultures were co-existing in a European world that was obsessed about Jerusalem, about sending out of Jerusalem the Muslims and this, for hundred years, the three cultures had the possibility to enrich each other, to learn from each other and this is what you can feel in this city very well. Unfortunately, after the thirteenth century this mainstream European, with the strength of the Popes promoting fighting the Muslims, fighting the Arabs and the Crusades, this spirit also came here and we lost part of this enlightenment we had in the twelfth and early thirteenth century.