

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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Report

Forum VI
Revolts of the youth: Challenges and perspectives

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Inputs:

Ramón Espinar, Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain)

Ahmed Naguib, The Egyptian Foundation for Finance and Development (Egypt)

Moderation

Rana Gaber, Egyptian Youth Federation (Egypt)

Introduction:

This parallel forum raised great expectation among the attendees, who were curious to learn more about the everyday details of the Egyptian Uprisings in Tahrir Square that took place during the month of January 2011, and the 15-M movement (Movimiento 15-M named after the 15th May 2011 when the protests started) in the Puerta del Sol of Madrid, in May of that same year. They had followed these events through news reports and social networks; however it was the more mundane details the ones they were hoping to find more about. The speakers were also excited to narrate their personal experiences, which they did with great enthusiasm, making the forum extremely interesting for all of us.

Rana Gaber, as the moderator of the forum session and member of the Egyptian Youth Federation stressed the devastating effects that the economic crisis is having on the young populations of all over the world. Although two years of public demonstrations reclaiming their rights show that the youth has a great potentiality for mobilization, they are also faced with a great challenge: how to transform their collective action into tangible results. To elucidate how this could be done was one of the main objectives that Rana Gaber established for the forum. The main questions then, revolved around mobilization and organization, the influence of social networks and Human Rights discourse, the differences between pre and post-democratic uprisings and the effect that both have had on political institutions.

First session:

The speaker Ahmed Naguib from the Egyptian Foundation for Finance and Development in Egypt came with more than ten years of experience in working with NGOs on a variety of programmes dealing with conflict resolution, youth cultural awareness, civil society, community development, empowerment and capacity building, and was especially interested in explaining the reasons behind the Egyptian uprisings. His main contribution on this matter was to stress that the uprisings did not simply 'spring', but had rather deeply rooted motivations. The youth's political disenchantment in Egypt, he stated, can be explained by the presence of a very weak civil society as well as a weak political opposition, both of which were too dependent on government economic subsidies. This, together with the brutality of a police state that had lived under emergency law for over 30 years, had left the youth with no opportunity to engage in politics. However, in the last ten years some sort of political participation was possible within the universities and these were the seeds of the mobilizations that took place in January 2011. The uprisings on the Tahrir Square were therefore not a shock. Egypt was a dysfunctional state in which only 4% of the population was benefiting from the economic boom, while more than 50% were poor and illiterate. Hence it was not a Facebook revolution. And the occupation of the square was an *ad hoc* strategy designed to avoid clashes with the police as much as possible.

Taking all of this into consideration, Ahmed Naguib argued that although it will take some time for profound institutional changes to take place, the uprisings could be considered a victory at many levels. Firstly, because it contributed immensely to the regaining of self-respect, respect for each other and for the Egyptian country. And secondly, because it helped nurture the civil society with the creation of over 70 new parties and over 200 youth coalitions. This fact gives rise to certain optimism even though they sometimes clashed with the reality of bureaucracies and the lack of funding. The question, therefore, is where to go from Tahrir and how to get there.

Second session:

The second speaker Ramón Espinar from the Autonomous University of Madrid in Spain began his presentation by highlighting the influences that the uprisings of Northern Africa had in the 15-M movement in Spain. He said that this movement was inspired by the events of the Tahrir Square, however as a form of expression, as the social bases of the protests were radically different. In Spain, as he argued, it was the context on unemployment, austerity and inequality that succeeded in mobilizing a generation that had hardly mobilized before, a generation, which finally realized that politics could affect your everyday life.

Because of this, the main issues that were present during the occupation of the Puerta del Sol of Madrid were, firstly, to break with the idea that there is only one way to deal with the economic crisis and that that way is austerity. Secondly, it was to reclaim, through the strategy of occupation, the access to the public spaces. Thirdly, an anti-elite discourse contained in the slogan "*abajo el régimen*" (down with the regime). And at last, it was the promotion of political engagement through the collective redefinition of 'democracy'. Ramón highlighted that democracy in the Spanish context is not only a manner of governing society, but also a very symbolic word due to its strong link in the collective imaginary of the Spaniards to the end of the Franco regime.

Democracy then, is a floating signifier; a very important word that, however, lacks a precise meaning. The 15-M movement set out to define it. "Because what we have now can no longer be considered a democracy, it must be redefined." And the 15-M movement had clear ideas about the elements that that redefinition should contain. Firstly, democracy must be something that belongs to the people, not to political or economic elites. Secondly, it is a

system that cannot be based on a neoliberal economy, because it is such an economy the one that has caused the economic crisis we are currently suffering. And lastly, it must imply the recovery of our sovereignty, one which is now not in our hands, but in those of markets and European institutions.

The emphasis that the 15-M movement put on democracy was visible not only in their discourse, that is, in their ends, but also in their means. It was a demand, but also a practice, as the movement operated in the form of deliberative assemblies that took place in public squares. A radical democratic practice that served everyone as a school of democracy and citizenship. So once again, like in the Tahrir square of Cairo, the outcome of the movement is, at least for now, more intangible than institutional, however it is crucial with respect to the democratization and the citizen education of the younger generations.

Several debates arose from these presentations, both between the speakers and between these and the audience. The first one was regarding the similarities and differences that can be found between both mobilizations. While Ramón Espinar stressed on the fact the social bases of the mobilizations in Madrid and in Cairo were radically different; and Benjamin R. Barber from the CUNY Graduate Centre New York in the USA supported him stating that the main difference should be found in the fact that the mobilizations in Cairo were pre-democratic while the ones in Madrid were post-democratic. Ahmed Naguib insisted that the uprisings should not be considered as detached phenomena.

The only difference lied in the fact that, with regard to democracy, Spain was more advanced than Egypt. However, the Egyptians wouldn't want politicians like the Spanish either. Consequently, both mobilizations aspire to redefine what democracy should mean. They were therefore not only similar in their means but also in their ends, being the common ground that of social justice.

The second debate concerned the possibility of teaching citizenship. While everybody agreed that both citizenship and political participation can and should be taught at schools, both speakers were firm in asserting that there is something which only the experience of political activism can promote: a critical and rebellious spirit. Ahmed Naguib argued that it is through the participation in the events of the Tahrir Square that the revolution has become embedded in popular culture, and this in turn will lead to a shift in paradigm. Hence he concluded that what should be done is to create spaces of expression both outside and inside of schools where both formal and informal education may take place.

Discussion:

Thirdly and lastly, the debate, which led to numerous comments and questions on behalf of the attendees, was regarding the future of the mobilizations. Specific questions were directed at Ramón Espinar from the Autonomous University Madrid with respect to the possible institutionalization of the 15-M movement in the form of a political party; to which he answered by pointing out the different paths that the movement is undertaking in different regions of Spain. Attempting to predict what could happen from now on, Ramón Espinar argued that there were two possibilities: either the political system assumes the demands of the 15-M movement, something which yet hasn't occurred, or it doesn't assume, in which case the result would be an increasingly polarized political sphere in the coming years.

Regarding this same issue, Ahmed Naguib from the Egyptian Foundation for Finance and Development was asked about the reactions from behalf of the activists of the Tahrir Square to the permanence of many members of the Mubarak government. In his answer, he highlighted the difficulty of overcoming old structures that are still present in all institutions,



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not only in the government, but also most importantly in the armed forces, and consequently, the difficulty of transforming the Arab uprisings into long term democratic practices. However, he said, the seeds have been planted.

