



The Post-Arab Spring Leadership Deficit

Panel: Session 6 (Grand Ballroom III)

Date/Time: Wednesday, May 1, 2013 / 15:30-16:45

Speakers: Han Intaek, Jeju Peace Institute
Christian Berger, European External Action Service
Mohammad Elhalawani, Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Republic of Korea
Ellen Laipson, Stimson Center

Rapporteur: Brian Gleason, Yonsei University

Mohammad Elhalawani informed the audience that the term “Arab Spring” is not preferred in the Arab world because it can insinuate a hidden foreign agenda or imply that the Arab people didn’t have the self-confidence to achieve the social and political transformations on their own. The political and social transformations we have witnessed in North Africa and the Middle East were catalyzed by a variety of factors; the quest for freedom after long years of oppression, rising social discontent, dire economic problems and rising prices motivated frustrated Arab citizens to rise up in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. Elhalawani also attributes the development of civil society under Hosni Mubarak as a crucial condition that facilitated the popular uprisings in Egypt. After so many years of oppressive rule, the Egyptian people are still stunned by how fast the regime collapsed, and are now in a state of “disorientation.” Although some predicted the downfall of the regime due to pervasive corruption and systemic decay, nobody knows the right step forward at the moment, and reaching any sort of meaningful consensus is extremely difficult.

Ellen Laipson stated that ensuring competent, capable leadership is a global challenge and is not unique to the Arab world. The “Arab Spring” countries are not merely suffering from a leadership deficit, they are suffering from the increasing competition for leadership, as well as a “citizenship deficit,” meaning that many of the citizens do not have realistic expectations about the relationship between society and government. Furthermore, those who participated in the protests and who seek a new social pact need to organize themselves and channel their

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demands effectively so the political leadership can address the issues. Contentious issues like the status of women and the role of religion in public life might not be resolved by political institutions, and thus strategic patience is necessary while these societies work through the process of addressing the numerous challenges that create social cleavages and diverse societal demands. The people also need to be wary of “charismatic populism,” in which a charismatic individual telling the people what they want to hear may actually lead back down the road to authoritarian rule.

Christian Berger described the European Union’s role in the “Arab Spring” transitions as “trying to support the people as much as possible without being intrusive.” The EU has set up an array of support structures, established a special task force, provided expertise, allocated 1.6 billion euros for development cooperation, and worked with various institutions in the public and private sectors to facilitate stable transitions in North Africa and the Middle East. Yet numerous challenges remain. For example, although Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi wants to encourage European tourism and investment, Berger noted that it’s difficult to achieve these goals if Europeans are seeing images of Egyptian violence and social upheaval on TV. Nevertheless, Egypt has played a strong and positive leadership role on several regional issues, so we should not assess the “leadership deficit” merely in domestic terms, but in regional and international terms as well. Overall, the road to democracy will take a considerable amount of time, as it did for many European countries, and the EU hopes to help facilitate a stable transition process.

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