The Internal and External Obstacles and their Impact on Pluralism

Edwerd Channer
London

Abstract

In the context of the Arab Spring and the transition from autocratic regime to democracy and social equality, it is helpful to think of pluralism within this state of flux; where nations are attempting to achieve, and subsequently maintain, political pluralism. Wissenburg's definition of 'pluralization' is useful in this instance, where pluralization is categorised as 'the emergence of "polities" other than the state, where polity stands for any form of social organization within which (among other things) politics takes place'.[1] Pluralism, therefore, involves such polities (sections of society, religious or ethnic minorities etc.) practicing and engaging in politics themselves and, by implication, having a representative political stake in society which

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1- Marcel L. J. Wissenburg, Political Pluralism and the State: Beyond Sovereignty (Routledge: Abingdon, 2009), p. 13.

may bear influence on the state.

In less abstract and more practical terms, as will be the tone of this paper, pluralism is therefore about the political stake of these polities determining their very recognition, where government accepts their presence and acknowledges and protects their right to be different. In post-revolutionary society, this translates to the long-term disenfranchised now becoming enfranchised as legitimate and equal members of the populace complete with a political voice.

In this paper on 'The Internal and External Obstacles and their Impact on Pluralism', I will be scrutinising some of the challenges to pluralism, or the process of pluralization, brought to light in the wake of the Arab Spring. I will attempt to provide a comprehensive perspective by exploring a range of obstacles impacting on pluralism (or, again, the achievement of pluralism) imposed by either national or international factors or, more likely, a combination of the two.

This assessment is in the light of work undertaken by Forward Thinking and the Nyon Process. Conclusions have been reached, therefore, following regular liaison and engagement with key reli-

gious and political actors, parties and movements within the region. It must be remembered that challenges discussed here are by no means exhaustive and complete. Rather, this paper serves to simply elucidate and discuss many of the common issues we as an organisation have encountered as a result of our position and associations within the region.

The dawn of the Arab Spring has initiated a drastic and ever-changing shift of context in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Its importance, not only to political changes, but also to social and cultural adaptations, cannot be underestimated. It is within this layering of change that the significance of pluralism, and striving to achieve pluralism, lies.

Since the stark changes in the MENA region were first initiated, there has been a profound emphasis upon the notion of pluralism. The reason for this is, of course, manifold and complex, yet the relevance of this notion of pluralism to the defining principles of the Arab Spring must be foremost considered. The very social and cultural composition of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, for example, combined with the model bottom-up approach that constitutes them – connecting people

of various religio-ethnic backgrounds in the face of a common cause – demands by its very nature the need for pluralism to run through its core. All must make a stand so all may benefit.

Pluralism being a vital component of the Arab Spring has inevitably led to revolutionary groups realising its significance in achieving fair democracy. As we have found through our ongoing dialogues, both the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt and Ennahdha in Tunisia have repeatedly stressed their striving to achieve a pluralist government to represent the populations of their respective nations. There are, of course, obstacles to this progress: numerous, complex and invariably inter-related.

The role of ideology is critical in exploring such barriers and serves as an example of this complexity. As a mindset that may be shaped by faith, be non-faith-based or a combination of the two, ideology connected to faith (as is the focus here) is not necessarily a barrier impacting upon pluralism. Indeed, rather than any ideological dogma precluding pluralism from government in an attempt to ensure a form of religious or social purity, the most significant impact this form of ideology has on plural-

ism is caused by the way in which the relationship between ideology and politics has developed in recent history.

To take the Egyptian model as an example: through the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood under Mubarak, and the traditional Egyptian Salafist belief of their role being exclusive to politics, ideology of Islamist groups has existed completely independent of the political system. Consequently, the lack of ideological and political amalgamation means that ideological groups, in this context, have never had to lend their perspectives to national ruling structures.

As can be seen now through the efforts of the Freedom and Justice Party and, even, through the growing political experience of the Salafists in Egypt, ideological viewpoint has largely had to give way to the practical precedents involved in governance. As we have heard the FJP often state, therefore, the demands of guiding a nation in the best interests for all have emphasized the importance of pragmatism over ideology. This movement can only occur with exposure to political practice. Without it, ideology naturally assumes priority over the pragmatism fundamental to leading a modern democracy.

The obstacles to pluralism, therefore, lie in how ideology is united with pragmatic needs and how this effective compromise is explained to the ideological constituent base. Inevitably, external obstacles are created as western players, unappreciative of the sensitivity of this latter point, look for unrealistic, tangible guarantees of pluralism. The issue is thereby one of inter-related political, cultural, interior and exterior barriers.

Similarly, the difference in organisational strength of various political groups may impinge upon pluralism, as certain movements more able to motivate their grassroots in times of elections capitalise more fully on their traditional support. There is an ever-present danger that this occurs as other, less-mobilised voices become unwittingly excluded from political representation. Once again, external barriers arise here when foreign benefactors focus support on one political group, again mobilising them at the expense of others with inferior resources.

The factors addressed above serve to illustrate the inter-relation of internal, external, political and socio-cultural obstacles impacting on pluralism in transitioning states. To gain a wider perspective of

these challenges, I intend to explore these issues at greater length whilst also paying significant attention to the importance of national democratic inexperience (the context of a nation state emerging from autocracy), the role of social and cultural mechanisms built around exclusion (such as the perspective of women in society) and the pressure and mistrust of foreign governments. Furthermore, I will also discuss the importance of establishing institutions which work to guarantee pluralism in the long-term, after the current rhetoric concerning fair representation has inevitably quietened. These points are all paramount in understanding the role of pluralism in the MENA region and the barriers that impact upon it.