



Arab Social Democratic Forum

Social Democracy in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities

Conference Report

On Monday 23 March 2015, the Arab Social Democratic Forum (ASDF) was hosted by Ettakatol party in Tunis, Tunisia to discuss challenges and opportunities to developing a social democratic movement across the Arab World. There were four sessions in addition to the opening and concluding remarks when recommendations for the Forum were presented.

Present at the Forum were representatives of twelve Arab political parties, these are:

Algeria: FFS – Socialist Forces Front
Bahrain: Wa’ad movement
Egypt: ESDP – Egyptian Social Democratic Party
Iraq: PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
Jordan: JSDP – Jordan Social Democratic Party
Lebanon: Lebanese Progressive Party
Morocco: USFP – Socialist Union of Popular Forces
Palestine: Fatah Movement
Palestine: PNI – Palestinian National Initiative
Syria: Syrian Democratic People’s Party
Tunisia: Ettakatol Party
Yemen: Yemeni Socialist Party

The Forum was also attended by representatives from the Socialist International (SI), Party of European Socialists (PES), Solidar, and the Progressive Alliance (PA).

The dominating theme of the discussion was a general agreement that the Arab world and democratic forces are currently at a cross road in their efforts to push for and achieve democracy. The region is suffering from terrorism and violence that is being witnessed in several countries, most recently in Yemen and Tunisia, not to mention the ongoing terrorist attacks in Egypt. In the battle for freedoms and human rights, it is vital for the democratic voices to stand together to fight these forces of darkness that are instilling fear and are a threat to freedoms and human rights. On the other hand we are seeing the return of oppressive regimes or the continuation of them with an increasing stronghold leading to restriction of democratic spaces. This regression in the aims of the revolutions and uprisings

that have taken place over the last few years calls upon those present to unify their stance and take concrete and serious steps to be able to confront the tightening spaces for freedoms and democracy in the region.

The title of the Forum this year is a response to the challenges that the region and democratic forces today are witnessing. For this purpose, the Forum has an intellectual as well as a political dimension to ensure that the Forum is transformed into a coalition that can provide policy and joint action.

Welcoming Speeches were given by: Hussein Gohar, International Secretary of the ESDP and the Forum's coordinator; Mostafa Ben Jaafar, Secretary General of Ettakatol Party of Tunisia; Nabil Shaath, (Comissioner for International relations - Fatah); Louis Ayala , Secretary General of the Socialists International; and Konstantin Woinoff, Coordinator of the Progressive Alliance.

All speakers have confirmed the importance of the current moment, with **Hussein Gohar** putting emphasis on the opportunity to come together and work collectively to achieve our goals as social democrats. He also announced the formation of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in Egypt and the willingness to help all other parties to initiate their own BDS chapters in their own countries.

Mostafa Ben Jaafar emphasized the way to confront terrorism to bring an end to it across our region is by tackling its root causes and that fighting to achieve the goals and aspirations of the revolutions to fulfill freedom, dignity, and social justice.

Nabil Shaath emphasized on the importance of the non-violent struggle to end occupation and injustice. He talked about the importance of having an honest, deep, and self-critical discussion on how we should confront the challenges of today. He urged the Forum to be the space for a real movement to develop with a clear strategy and a program of action.

Louis Ayala confirmed the solidarity of the Socialist Internationals with the struggle that Forum is facing to achieve democracy and justice. He emphasized the important role of social democracy throughout history and how it was the solution for non-violent means to end oppression.

Konstantin Woinoff also expressed gratitude for his presence in the Forum and his invitation and confirmed the Progressive Alliance's support and solidarity for the Forum at the critical period.

The First Session: Present challenges in the Arab World: Impediments and political, economic, social, cultural and security issues

The first session posed important issues in dealing with the current challenges to democracy in the Arab world. The expert, Ommaya Seddik, warned the Forum from the trap of falling into old concepts that only consolidates oppression and injustice. He emphasized that the only way to fight terrorism and violence is through democracy and respect of human rights. He talked about the importance of increased participation of citizens in decision making process and how this is a step forward that would end a sense of exclusion and should be

the true meaning for sovereignty. In his word, he said that the antonym of sovereignty is "subjection" and the only way to resolve this is through growing participatory democracy. Seddik also warned from the danger of combating terrorism on the basis of a "war against terror", as the concept of war is a threat to freedoms and can be used to consolidate oppression. Better, he stressed, to deal with terrorism as an organized crime and thus according to law, thus protecting rights and freedoms.

On the other hand panelists spoke about their different experiences in their own country. There was a general agreement that it is the responsibility of the members of the Forum to show that people of the Arab world demand democracy and dignity. Also there was a clear demand for non-Arab actors to adopt a concept of solidarity that is based on shared values rather than exporting specific models that might not work with the different situations and contexts in the region. It also must be clear that for Europe to prosper; its neighbors also need to prosper. This is the only guarantee for the advancement of Europe.

Also there was mention of Chile and Turkey as examples of democratic transitions that we can learn from, while putting into consideration that the region is not necessarily homogenous and thus should not be looked at with a one solution fits all.

Second session: How to build up a new social democratic movement - Evaluation of the experience of social democratic parties in the Arab World since the onset of revolutions

This session provided space for examples on the ground of attempts to build social democratic movements. From Egypt, Heba El-Karar emphasized the importance of uniting our forces, spreading the thought of social democracy, fighting destructive thoughts. From Tunisia, Hela Aloulou emphasized that social democracy is the third option that would help us avoid the polarization of terrorism and oppression. To build a movement in her opinion, is to put mechanisms to build coalitions; create a space for serious discussion amongst social democratic parties in order for them to be empowered to go down to the field and spread their thoughts. She also emphasized the importance of strengthening the forum and opening it to civil society organizations. From Yemen, Abdel Rahman Omar spoke about the current situation in the country and the threat of war and increased violence and how terrorism is redrawing the socio-political map in Yemen. Finally from Palestine, Mostafa Al-Barghouthy spoke of the importance of Palestine and invited all the present to adopt the BDS campaign, as a peaceful struggle against Israel's occupation of Palestine and called upon the Socialist Internationals and the Progressive Alliance to adopt this position. As for the Forum, he said that the members have agreed on five dimensions for the forum has to focus on. These are:

1. The social dimension: it is no longer suitable to talk to the people with broad political discourse. There has to be social action and the parties that we consider to be our enemies have succeeded because they reach out to the people
2. The democratic dimension: it is impossible for a party to succeed to represent the people without being democratic internally and to support the issues of women and marginalized groups. Pro-democracy forces have to confront their realities and face their challenges.

3. Liberation Dimension: This is not only about Palestine. It is in solidarity with all liberation movements, including that of women. In this context, the Forum must focus on better integration of women and activate the women's wing of the ASDF.
4. To strengthen the forum
5. How to use non-violent means for political activities: we need a lot of training and experience sharing on the non-violent and peaceful movement

At the end of the session, the floor was opened for discussion. Overall, the dominating point was regarding the importance of activating the women's wing and generating a recommendation in this regard from the Forum. Also, the discussion focused on the active support for the role of youth and women in engaging in public affairs, and the importance of getting deeper into the society and supporting social movements.

Third session: The Tunisian experience of the transitional process: Success Factors and challenges

The expert, *Salaheddin Jourchi*, talked about how in Tunisia, the transition was a negotiated one between the old figures and the new beginning to avoid conflict or any severing of the past. He also talked about the importance of rising above small interests and looking for the general public and national interest which led all political forces involved in the transition process reach agreement. There were compromises on all sides but that was the way forward. He emphasized the importance of the constitution and how it was drafted and ratified on the basis of consensus.

Also the expert focused on the constitution – this has been a main issue and we are proud that we were the pioneers to establish for the new constitution and changing the constitution shaped the new era and transition process towards building a democratic state.

Despite the victories of Tunisia, its democratization process is still fragile as so far the political dimension has been dominating the scene. He warned that a social crisis could threaten the political efforts. He also mentioned how terrorism is posing itself as a real threat to the Tunisian experience. He said we should understand terrorism and deal with its root causes.

The fourth session: How can Social democratic movements contribute through participatory approaches to the establishment of a sound and stable social and democratic environment?

In this session the expert, Hala Al-Yousfy, talked about the importance of integrating civil society in the decision making process. She used Tunisia as an example and showed how the involvement of civil society in the national dialogue had allowed for the voices of the unheard to be heard. In this sense also and in line with all that has been said previous about the importance of looking into the social aspect of the changes taking place, the involvement of civil society allows for the consolidation of social mobility with political action. She also showed how the role of civil society had ensured the upholding human rights principles and represented the voices of marginalized sectors.

Closing statement:

A summary was presented by the Social Democratic Observatory that acted as a rapporteur and then Husam Zomlot from Palestine presented the suggested recommendations, which are for the Forum to develop policies around key issues that were discussed during the gathering in Tunis. These issues are:

1. The question of Democracy and democratic practices within political entities and parties
2. Economic and social policies
3. Women – Policies
4. Solidarity with Palestine
5. The nature of the forum and ways of expansion

In addition to the policy papers, that the different members of the ASDF will be working on, there were other recommendations:

- 1) The activation of the women's wing of the ASDF to ensure more active participation of women in the Forum
 - 2) The adoption of the BDS campaign
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This report was written by the Egyptian Observatory for Training and Consultation (Social Democratic Observatory –SDO). The observatory is an Egyptian organization established in 2014 with an aim to support democratic transformation in Egypt and the Arab World and building the capacity and skills of young leaderships engaging with the public sphere. The Observatory produces research and policy paper; supports initiatives; builds capacity and skills; and provides consultations in the fields of democracy and human rights.