

## **The Tunis Imperative: Human Rights and Development in the Wake of the Arab Spring**

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There are moments in history when each of us is called upon to declare where we stand. I believe this is one of those moments.

Over the past year, in Tunis, Cairo, Madrid, New York and hundreds of other cities and towns across the globe, the voice of ordinary people has been raised, and their demands made clear. They want human beings at the centre of our economic and political systems, a chance for meaningful participation in public affairs, a dignified life and freedom from fear and want.

Remarkably, the spark that lit the fire of the Arab Spring, which would eventually spread to cities across the globe, was the desperate act of a single human being who, repeatedly denied the most basic elements of a life of dignity, set himself alight, and, in doing so, declared that a life without human rights, is not a life at all. But the dry kindling of repression, deprivation, exclusion, and abuse had been piling up for years, in Tunisia, across the region, and beyond.

The actions, omissions, excesses and abdications of the governments of the region were certainly at the centre. And the actions of powerful states outside the region in propping up authoritarian regimes, and pursuing destructive policies of self-interest that fostered repression, impunity, conflict, and economic exploitation also played a key role.

But, at the international level, the assessments provided by financial institutions and development agencies in the lead-up to the Arab Spring are also illuminating: Tunisia, it was said, showed “remarkable progress on equitable growth, fighting poverty, and achieving good social indicators.” It was “on track” to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. It was “far ahead in terms of governance, effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption and regulatory quality.” It was “one of the most equitable societies” and “a top reformer.” Overall, we were told, “the development model that Tunisia has pursued over the past two decades has served the country well.”

Yet, at the same time, UN and civil society human rights monitors were painting a picture of excluded and marginalized communities, imposed indignities, and a denial of economic and social rights. We heard of inequality, discrimination, lack of participation, absence of decent jobs, absence of labour rights, political repression, and denial of free assembly, association, and speech. We found censorship, torture, arbitrary detention, and the lack of an independent judiciary. In sum, we heard of fear and want. Yet, somehow, this side of the equation carried very little sway in our development analysis.

This is not to say that the development analysis was all wrong, or the data inaccurate. The

problem was that the analytical lens was often too narrow, and sometimes simply pointing the wrong way. Clearly, it was not fixed squarely on freedom from fear and want – at least not for the majority.

Instead, it was focused too narrowly on growth, markets, and private investment, with relatively little attention to equality, and virtually none to civil, political, economic and social rights. Even where attention was directed at the Millennium Development Goals, this provided only a very narrow set of economic and social indicators, none of them rights-based, all of them with low quantitative thresholds, none guaranteeing participatory processes, and none accompanied by legal accountability.

Essentially, the analysts did not get the answers wrong, they just never asked many of the most important questions.

And this policy myopia has been repeated in countries north and south, where political leaders seem to have forgotten that health care, education, housing, and the fair administration of justice are not commodities for sale to the few, but rather rights to which all are entitled without discrimination. Anything we do in the name of economic policy or development should be designed to advance these rights and, at the very least, should do nothing to undermine their realisation.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted on 10 December 1948, the framers warned that “it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.” The Declaration laid out the rights necessary for a life of dignity, free from fear and want— from health care, education, and housing, to political participation and the fair administration of justice. It said that these rights belong to all people, everywhere, and without discrimination.

Today, on the streets of our cities, people are demanding that governments and international institutions make good on this promise, with their demands streamed live via internet and social media. Ignoring these demands is no longer an option.

Rather, governments and international institutions should follow their lead by making a dramatic policy shift toward the robust integration of human rights in economic affairs and development cooperation, and by adopting human rights law as the basis for governance at home, and the source of policy coherence across the international system. This is our mandate for the new millennium. This is the Tunis imperative.

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