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GENERATION GAPS AND MASS UPRISINGS IN THE ARAB WORLD

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The social revolts that began erupting early this year in Tunisia seem to be extending throughout the Arab world, threatening to impel radical changes in the hitherto most entrenched, unequal and unjust forms of political, social and economic organisation in the region. While the main reason for this agglomeration of the heterogeneous groups from civil society that are leading the protests is the existence of a common enemy embodied in authoritarian personalistic regimes, they all share another common element: the youth of the population in these societies.

It is presently estimated that the age of some 60% of the region's population is under thirty, while the average is about twenty-five. The vast majority of the young people in the vanguard of the protest mobilisations today are progeny of the demographic boom that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa in the latter half of the 1980s. At the time this generation was born, many analysts viewed the high fertility rates as a "blessing", an opportunity for the future, since this boost to the workforce would constitute a demographically-based assurance of bringing down levels of dependence and expediting economic take-off. If this was to happen, it was necessary to train this future "army" of workers and entrepreneurs by equipping them with good education and skills. In general terms and, as different indicators for the region reflect, this turned out to be the case. While the illiteracy rate among young people aged between 15 and 24 in 1980 was 42.5%, it is just over 10% at present. Again, the percentage of children and young people in schools has shown an extraordinary increase over the past twenty years. Thus, for example, university enrolments in Egypt and Tunisia have now risen to 30% and 34% respectively in comparison with 8% and 14% in 1990.

Nevertheless, many optimists failed to stress the fact that, in order for these predictions to come true, it was also necessary to make available and encourage new professional opportunities in which all this potential garnered in schools and universities might flourish. The reality today, almost three decades on from the birth of these young people, has turned out to be unyielding and the scarcity of jobs and economic opportunities is rife everywhere in the region. In spite of the economic growth of the last twenty years, with an average for the zone exceeding 4%, it has been insufficient to absorb the vast numbers of young

people entering the job market year after year. Unemployment in the region among people aged between 15 and 24 is estimated at more than 25%, with the Egyptian and Tunisian cases heading the list (both over 31%). The great majority of the unemployed are aged between 20 and 29 and, in some countries such as Egypt and Morocco, they account for over 70% of the total.

This absence of job opportunities for young people is the outcome of economies headed and directed by gerontocratic oligarchies keeping a firm grip on a regulatory framework that hampers access to and opening up of new businesses in many sectors of activity. If one is to prosper in these societies, political connections are much more important than any merit system or the worth of skills accumulated through education and professional training. The high levels of corruption characterising these regimes have only heightened perceptions of injustice and feelings of disgust adduced by many of the young people as reasons for the need to change their hard-to-bear reality. Estimates of levels of economic inequality calculated on the basis of the Gini Coefficient have registered scant change in spite of the economic growth. In some countries of the region they have even risen.

However, lack of opportunities is not the only element that seems to have brought the young people into confrontation with the authoritarian regimes and the gerontocracy that underpins them. These generations have appeared and come to adulthood in tandem with the new information and communication technologies. The emergence of Internet and the new forms of socialisation have played an essential role in widening the generation gap. The very fact of their decentralised nature has made it extremely difficult for the powers-that-be to control information and it has therefore been possible to break down the walls that once prevented millions of young people from dreaming and imagining new realities and different forms of social organisation. The possibility of moving beyond one's own frontiers and sharing concerns with young people in other countries throughout the region (as demonstrated by the highly consequential connections among bloggers in Tunisia and Egypt) has had its effect in giving greater legitimacy and momentum to the mobilisations.

It is still too early to venture into speculation about what the future might hold and the consequences of the revolts now occurring in the Arab world. It is difficult to image what forms might be taken by any new models of social, political and economic organisation resulting from these mobilisations. What does seem sure, however, is that within the idiosyncrasy of each society, these new generations will have a major part to play in writing the new rules of the game and, without a doubt, this will entail rupture with a past notable for oligarchies that will be incapable of understanding them.