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Overcoming centralism

Conference paper by Dr. Martin Pabst

With the exception of Lebanon, no real democracies existed in the Arab world, when the "Arab spring" started in 2011. The rule was authoritarian monarchies, one-party states, military regimes, and „facade democracies" without checks and balances and without real empowerment of civil society.

All states were characterized by centralization, which reinforced the undemocratic nature of the systems: Administrative elites in the capital determined the fate of the entire country and considered regional differences inadequately. Neither regions nor municipalities were granted political space. This led to dissatisfaction on the periphery, which felt politically and economically marginalized. In fact, government resources and services were often concentrated in the centre. Sometimes they were also used to buy loyalty. In return, dissident regions and municipalities were specifically disadvantaged. Such a procedure, however, is a long-term recipe for the destabilization of the state and the society.

Furthermore, the strong, historically grown group identities must be taken into consideration. Ethnic, religious and tribal affiliations have political relevance in Arab countries. In the current political systems, they are either ignored or played out against each other in the interest of maintaining power. Since the systems are organized centrally, as a rule, the monopoly of power is often used to concentrate resources to the advantage of a certain privileged group. This leads to the gradual distancing of disadvantaged groups from the state. The examples of Syria and Iraq demonstrate that insufficient recognition of group identities may even lead to civil war and state failure. Therefore, political solutions must be found, which may not be restricted to regional decentralization.

Finally, a shortcoming of Arab states is the lack of involvement of civil society. The citizen is not a citizen, but a subject. Civic commitment is viewed with suspicion by the state; it is restrained or even banned. At best, state-controlled mass organizations are offered, but they enjoy insufficient recognition and do not permit real opportunities for participation.

A long-term and sustainable democratization of the Arab states can only take place if
1. The prevailing centralism is overcome in favour of appropriate decentralized models,
2. Historically grown group identities are politically respected and recognized in the constitution in an appropriate way,
3. The role of civil society at all levels (national, regional, local) is encouraged, promoted and protected by law.

Each Arab country has its own history and its own specific conditions. Therefore, tailor-made solutions must be found instead of a "model for all". External actors such as the G8 states can render important assistance with their political experience and their expertise. Not only national governments, but also regional governments, municipalities, universities, associations, and NGOs may become valuable partners in the reform process.