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Seismic Shift:

Understanding Change in the Middle East

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Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)

Mona Yacoubian

Explanatory Note

The non-governmental organizations (NGO) sectoral report comprises nine organizations, focusing particularly on their work in Tunisia and Egypt during the 2005-2010 timeframe.¹ Organizations included in this section fall into two broad categories: democracy promotion NGOs, and human rights groups. Beyond these two types of organizations, two groups included in the study are considered “hybrid” organizations, melding characteristics of democracy promotion NGOs and more traditional think tanks. The study concentrates on democracy promotion NGOs and human rights groups since their work focuses specifically on the prospects for democratic change, and identifying strategic entry points in Arab societies. As such, these organizations, rather than more traditional development-oriented NGOs, are best placed to gauge the potential for significant, bottom-up change. Since Tunisia and Egypt were the launching points for more widespread popular unrest in the Arab world, the study centered largely on the organizations’ activities, planning, and strategy in these two countries. Given the significant regime repression in Tunisia and correspondingly low levels of NGO involvement there, this report primarily reflects NGO work in Egypt.

In many ways, this sector is an anomaly in the broader study. As such, an “apples and oranges” issue must be addressed. Unlike think-tanks, media, or other groups, these NGOs do not produce analytic products or forecasting. In interviews, organization representatives often emphasized that their mission was not analytic or forecast oriented. Most organizations did not employ specific methodologies for obtaining and analyzing information. Instead, their work aims to promote democratic change by working with local partners or to document human rights abuses for broader advocacy purposes.

While these groups produce some publications, ranging from press releases to longer reports, the work is not necessarily analytic in nature. Lengthier human rights reports

¹ For a complete list of organizations and their mission statements, see Appendix III.

constitute an important exception, albeit one focused largely on documentation of human rights abuses rather than on prospects for change. More broadly, in both public and private documents, these organizations documented in detail the deterioration of basic freedoms, civil liberties, and socioeconomic conditions fueling popular revolts across the region.

Nonetheless, the NGOs' strategic planning and resource allocation decisions implicitly, if not explicitly, reflected their analysis of the prospects for democratic change. They necessarily made analytic judgments on the timeframe, key change agents, and broader environment for democratic reform. Moreover, the nature of their projects – whether working with tech-savvy youth, human rights dissidents, or independent labor groups – provided an often unique vantage point from which to view change taking form at the grassroots.

Given the limited utility of written products, this chapter extensively relied on personal interviews conducted with representatives of the various organizations studied. Specifically, the author interviewed 14 representatives from both democracy promotion NGOs and human rights groups.² In some instances, internal planning and strategy documents were made available to help understand how the organization viewed the prospects for change. In the absence of analytic products assessing prospects for change, an organization's funding and resource decisions were an important proxy for its assessment of where and how democratic change might occur. Indeed, for any sector, resource allocation decisions are perhaps the best possible indicator of how an organization viewed the prospects for change – literally by investing scarce funds in people and organizations considered to be genuine “change agents.”

Some additional caveats bear mention. In some instances, organizations might be captive to a structural bias that favors seeking funding for projects in response to programmatic priorities defined by US government initiatives. However, in most instances, projects and ideas were internally generated by groups as they sought to work around mounting government repression in pursuit of their objectives. Organizations often “ran up against walls” when working in the field, which forced them to try new ideas in order to circumvent the numerous obstacles on the strategy. These difficulties led organizations to “fall-back” options, which paradoxically opened venues to interesting new actors promoting democratic change.

A bent toward advocacy by some of the groups in this study constitutes an additional bias. In at least one instance, an organization appeared to have exaggerated prospects for instability to bolster their advocacy efforts. As one human rights organization representative noted, “We may have issued warnings about potential unrest [in Tunisia or Egypt], but this was more to get the attention of policy makers, rather than believing it from the heart. The warnings were instrumental, and used as part of an advocacy strategy. They were not reflective of long-range analysis that forecast the possibility of unrest.”³ Others acknowledged communicating these warnings to governments in the region as a means of pushing them to implement reforms, but also felt that the warnings were realistic.

² For a complete list of representatives interviewed, see Appendix II.

³ Anonymous interview. April 6, 2011.

Summary of Key Points

- While none of the NGO sector actors predicted the timing, pace, or breadth of Arab world turmoil, many expressed a sense that the status quo was untenable, particularly in Egypt. They described in detail a confluence of mounting regime repression and growing popular agitation over a variety of political and socioeconomic issues. While the “dots were not connected” to suggest a social explosion was imminent, numerous references highlighted the developing “explosive mix.”
- In an increasingly repressive environment, organizations identified the nexus of youth and emerging social media as a potentially successful arena for promoting change. Numerous groups emphasized that the Internet, particularly the blogosphere and Facebook, served as an important “free space.” However, they underscored that mobilization – translating online activism into offline actions – remained a key challenge. Many shifted their programming to fill this perceived void by offering training to youth activists in using social media for political mobilization.
- An inverse relationship appears to exist between the extent of contact with formal structures – both government and opposition – and the degree of understanding of societal dynamics and the potential for change. Only by moving away from work within the traditional establishment, either by default or design, were NGOs able to gain a sense of germinating grassroots change. Organizations that worked on the periphery of society, for example in the informal sector or with young, unaffiliated cyber-activists, had a keener sense of the level of popular disaffection, and the possibility for change emanating from the grassroots. Similarly, those groups that operated outside Cairo or Tunis appeared to have greater insight into the popular mood in the country, and the extent of popular frustration.
- The cultivation of a longstanding network of trusted contacts served as a critical source of information to better gauge dynamics on the ground and prospects for change. Nearly every organization deemed some level of Arabic language proficiency, if not by US then by local staff, as an essential component. Moreover, building deep relationships of trust over time, and having staff that understood the local environment and culture was also considered a critical element to gain insight.
- NGOs interviewed for this study often identified three important “turning points” that they connected to greater prospects for change in Egypt: mounting labor unrest in 2007-2010; the online campaign in remembrance of torture victim Khaled Said; and fraudulent legislative elections in November 2010.
 - Labor strikes began occurring with regularity in 2004 and gained momentum over the following years, growing both in frequency and size, and spanning numerous sectors. Many NGOs identified this shift as unprecedented and indicative of the potential for greater popular mobilization.
 - The Facebook campaign mounted in remembrance of torture victim Khaled Said marked another milestone in the ability to translate online activism to

“offline” mobilization, with the NGOs noting that the campaign attracted “regular, everyday” Egyptians to the street with greater frequency.

- The 2010 legislative elections – notable for widespread fraud and manipulation – were deemed “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Democracy promotion organizations in particular noted that popular expectations for the elections were high, with significant “Get Out the Vote” (GOTV) campaigns. The fraudulent election elicited a palpable sense of disappointment and frustration.

Background on Operating Environment of NGO Sector

The human rights groups and democracy promotion NGOs reviewed for this section operated in a variety of ways in Tunisia and Egypt, as they did across the Arab region, reflecting the differing contexts obtained in individual countries. Some nations, such as Bahrain, actually offered considerably more hospitable operating environments for democracy promotion and human rights groups than did the countries considered here. Few NGOs, if any, had an extensive field presence in Tunisia, where the environment was extremely repressive. Neither of the political party institutes, for example, operated field offices in Tunisia because of government restrictions. Other groups operated quietly “under the radar,” undertaking periodic trips to Tunisia, or maintaining an extremely low-key presence in country.

Work in Egypt also proved extremely difficult, and the period 2005-2010 was marked by increasing government repression. Democracy promotion NGOs, for example, uniformly noted an increase in repressive regime tactics, including harassment of their staff and withholding of their operating licenses. As one democracy promoter noted, “I had just arrived in Cairo having worked in our Ukraine office five years prior, and Egyptian officials, referring to the ‘color revolutions,’ told me, ‘We know what happened in Ukraine, and it won’t happen here.’”⁴

These difficulties had the double-edged effect of curtailing their ability to undertake programming, while impelling them to make connections with less established opposition groups. Paradoxically, these new contacts exposed democracy promotion and human rights NGOs to many of the unaffiliated elements, who ended up forming the leading edge of the uprising.

Democracy promotion NGOs employed a variety of strategies to deal with increased government repression. The International Republican Institute (IRI) opted to maintain a low-level presence in Egypt, but conduct all of its training of Egyptian activists outside the country to deflect government pressure. In this manner, they managed to train 1,200 Egyptians via programs in the region or in the United States. Similarly, Freedom House, citing the difficulties that other organizations encountered, operated from a regional office

⁴ Interview with Tom Garrett. International Republican Institute. April 15, 2011.

in Jordan, while maintaining a “presence” in Egypt. As a result, “The Egyptian regime couldn’t really go after us because we didn’t have a formal presence on the ground.”⁵

Not all organizations maintained a field presence in Egypt. Some, such as the Solidarity Center, made an explicit decision *not* to operate a field office in order to preempt attempts at cooptation and to avoid Egyptian government harassment, underscoring that an in-country presence can be distracting and bring unwanted government scrutiny. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) does not maintain field offices, and noted that as a result it had greater degrees of maneuver. Those organizations without a field presence in Egypt make regular visits several times a year and maintain regular contact with partner organizations.

Broad Assessments on the Prospects for Change

None of the NGOs studied predicted the specifics of the Tunisian or Egyptian uprisings. However, nearly all of the groups noted growing popular frustrations and few outlets for expression. The NGOs documented and often experienced firsthand sharpening regime repression. They also noted that the government crackdown coincided with increasing popular frustrations over a variety of issues including widespread corruption, the systematic use of torture, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, and lessening political freedoms. Taken together, this confluence was deemed an untenable “explosive mix” by some groups.

In a piece for the Arab Reform Initiative, a hybrid democracy promotion think tank, Egyptian researcher Dina Shehata noted, “while marginalized as a social group, they [youth] continue to entertain high expectations due to urban exposure and education, and are, therefore, amongst the most politically mobilized groups in Egypt.”⁶ She continues to document the qualities that came to characterize those propelling the Arab uprisings: non-ideological, inclusive, internally diverse, and operating outside traditional party structures. She concludes the paper on a prophetic note, “The challenge during the coming period for both the ruling party and opposition parties and movements is to make room for the emergence of new groups that are better able to represent youth and articulate their needs. Absent such a development, youth in Egypt, as in much of the Arab world, will remain a ticking time bomb.”⁷

Another organization framed the issue in terms of the fraying social contract governing relations between ruling regimes and their populations. “It was clear that the social contract between regimes and the people was not tenable. Either they needed to reform or there would be an explosion. Something had to give.”⁸

Specifically, in a February 2008 report called *Middle East and North Africa Reform: Rooted in Economic and Political Ground*, the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) stated, “An intensifying demographic transition in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) calls for creating as many as 100-million new jobs in the next decade in order to

⁵ Interview with Daniel Calingaert. Freedom House. April 13, 2011.

⁶ Dina Shehata. “Youth Activism in Egypt” *Arab Reform Brief* 23. (October 2008). p. 1.

⁷ Ibid. p. 8.

⁸ Interview with Abdulwahab Alkebsi. Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). April 8, 2011.

accommodate the increasing number of entrants into the labor force. The shortcomings of past economic reforms foreshadow a massive labor crisis and potential social instability as the rising wave of youth unemployment sweeps through the region.”⁹ The paper notes that the MENA governments “can no longer ensure sufficient public sector employment levels to manage social expectations.”¹⁰ It continues, “If the urgent employment challenge is not met, dark scenarios of intensified social conflict or even internal violence may follow.”¹¹ Terming the situation an “explosive mix,” the paper concludes, “MENA is currently facing a threat of the deepest socioeconomic crisis in its history.”¹²

Referencing their on-the-ground experiences, other democracy promotion NGOs also emphasized the untenable nature of growing popular frustrations. As noted by one democracy promotion activist, “In Egypt, there was a huge build-up that took place over 10-15 years. It was a slow incremental movement of groups organizing themselves and reaching out. It was obvious that frustration was on the rise. Everybody was telling us the country is going to explode. But there was also the sense that little could be done to stop it. Instead the thought was let it explode and then pick up the pieces.”¹³ His concerns were echoed by another democracy promotion activist describing her feelings after the fraudulent 2010 legislative elections, “I remember feeling very concerned about Egypt. I had a sense of a deteriorating country, and I felt this country is going to explode. I just didn’t think it would be so soon because of popular apathy.”¹⁴

While most organizations underscored the potential for change in Egypt, many did not foresee the possibility of significant change in Tunisia. “A number of Tunisians used the language of revolt and uprising, and I didn’t really believe them. We were told by our Tunisian contacts that ‘we are at a breaking point,’ but the analysis seemed rigid and self-serving. We didn’t see it coming. The best proof of this is that on January 6-7, in the midst of the Tunisian uprising, we all met in Washington to finalize our plan for the year. We had no inkling that anything significant was going to happen. A key project for the year was going to be on Moroccan child labor abuse. We were already two to three weeks into the Tunisian uprising and didn’t see it coming.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, a researcher for Human Rights Watch visiting Tunisia in May 2010 noted, “Despite Ben Ali’s best efforts to conceal his government’s dishonest methods to silence and quash dissent, the carefully crafted façade of ‘modern, democratic, and moderate’ Tunisia is coming apart at the seams.”¹⁶

⁹ Center for International Private Enterprise. *Middle East and North Africa Reform: Rooted in Economic and Political Ground*. Economic Reform Issue Paper No. 0804. (February 2008). p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 6.

¹² Ibid. p.13.

¹³ Interview with Laith Kubba. National Endowment for Democracy. March 24, 2011.

¹⁴ Interview with Lila Jaafar. National Democratic Institute. March 24, 2011.

¹⁵ Interview with Eric Goldstein. Human Rights Watch. April 6, 2011.

¹⁶ Rasha Moumneh. “The Myth of Moderate Tunisia” *Foreign Policy*. May 6, 2010.

Assessing Strategic Entry Points for Change

Social Media and Youth –The Power of Facebook

As repression mounted following a brief opening in 2005, human rights organizations extensively documented autocratic regime tactics, in particular the systematic use of torture, suppression of popular protests, press censorship, and harassment of opposition figures. Numerous press releases and reports by Human Rights Watch and Freedom House detail widespread abuses by the Tunisian and Egyptian governments. At the same time, these groups identified new media as an important “free space.”

In a 2005 report, Human Rights Watch documents Egyptian government efforts to expand computer and Internet access across the country in the hopes that it would spur investment and present Egypt as a modern, forward-looking nation. Instead, local human rights groups exploited this new opening to both document abuses and mobilize support. “Egyptian human rights activists have argued that the spread of ICTs (information, communication, technology) appreciably has strengthened the human rights movement in Egypt.” The report quoted an activist terming the Internet “a paradise” for activism, explaining that “human rights organizations can send out calls for help” and “launch online campaigns.”¹⁷ The report continues by describing numerous examples of online activism and subsequent mobilization, but also details regime efforts to censor and block access to the Internet.

In its 2007 *Freedom of the Press*, Freedom House noted the growing significance of new media. A press release underscored that “newer media forms – such as satellite television and Internet-based newspapers, blogs, and social-networking sites – had emerged as an important force for openness in restricted media environments, as well as a key area of contestation.”¹⁸ This point was underscored in a recent interview. “Five years ago, it started to become apparent that the Internet space was more open. If you wanted to support cutting-edge activists, that’s where they were.”¹⁹

With the profusion of social networking sites, many NGOs singled out Facebook as a powerful tool for mobilization. A number of groups cited the success of the April 6, 2008 strikes in solidarity with the labor movement as an important turning point, marking the use of social media for mobilization.

Freedom House emphasized the use of Facebook in “mobilizing 80,000 supporters to protest rising food prices” and “playing a crucial role in broadening support and turnout for the April 6 textile workers’ strike.” The group underscored the significance of the “Facebook movement,” noting that it “challenges the perception that there is no prospect for independent, secular opposition in the country” and “offers a safe political space” where “every member in the 100,000-strong online community could be, at any given moment, a leader of the movement.”²⁰ National Democratic Institute (NDI) came to a similar conclusion, also citing the April 6 movement while highlighting the fact that “the government had its eye primarily

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch. *False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa*. Vol. 17, No. 10 (November 2005). p. 21.

¹⁸ Freedom House. *Press Freedom in New Media, 2007*. www.freedomhouse.org.

¹⁹ Interview with Daniel Calingaert. Freedom House. April 13, 2011.

²⁰ Sherif Mansour. “Egypt’s Facebook Showdown” June 2, 2008. www.freedomhouse.org.

on bloggers, not on Facebook users.” By its nature, Facebook was more difficult to monitor when there are millions of Facebook pages. Facebook also had a multiplier effect by allowing “friends” to view links and other items on each other’s pages.²¹

During this period, democracy promotion NGOs regrouped, re-assessing their strategies and revising their understanding of the most propitious areas for promoting democratic change. As one democracy promoter noted, “by 2007, we were in a funk and we asked ourselves whether we should be re-orienting our activities because we felt we had reached a dead end with our traditional work.”²²

A number of democracy promotion NGOs identified the convergence of online activism with an increasingly politicized youth sector as a critical catalyst for promoting democratic change, and began to allocate funding and design programming focused on “seeking to transition from online activism to offline capabilities. Beginning in 2005-06, we realized there was great potential for online activism.”²³ In pursuit of this objective, NDI developed “Aswat” a virtual space accessible by membership that allows for online collaboration, sharing of best practices, etc. The organization invested \$1 million in the project, which connects online activists to one another and develops their capacity to mobilize.

In 2009, NDI developed a program to strengthen youth political participation by engaging them with social media. As an NDI staffer noted, “Capacity on the ground was no match for what was happening online.” NDI also partnered with organizations such as Google to hold three new media conferences that brought together activists across the region to help them learn how to leverage new media tools for mobilization. The conferences elicited important insights into key focal points for change. For example, informal notes from the September 2010 new media conference remarked that “Facebook is quickly supplanting forums as a communications platform,” while also highlighting the increased use of “multiplatform techniques” [for example combining video, photos, and links] as a more effective tool for mobilization.²⁴ The group also brought Obama campaign experts to Egypt in response to a surge of interest in Egypt on how to use social media for political mobilization.

By the same token, Freedom House launched a New Generation program in 2007 that aimed to “inject new blood and dynamism into programming by working closely with ‘up and coming’ activists, training them in the region and Europe, and bringing them on advocacy tours to the US.”²⁵ Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas was one of the first fellows, and his work underscored the potential for new media to document human rights abuses and mobilize for action. The organization worked closely with activists who were mobilizing around the Khaled Said issue, including Wael Ghonim, who played a critical role in organizing the Egyptian uprising.

Similarly, the NED – urged by a board member to find new ways to bring about change in Egypt – developed a new strategic plan for Egypt in 2009. The plan emerged following a fact-finding trip to Egypt in which NED staff met with 50 Egyptians across numerous sectors, connecting with a number of youth activists in particular. “The trip was a key

²¹ Interview with Lila Jaafar. National Democratic Institute. March 24, 2011.

²² Interview with Les Campbell. National Democratic Institute. March 21, 2011.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Notes from MENA Africa Bloggers Network Meeting.” Budapest, Hungary. September 23, 2010.

²⁵ Interview with Daniel Calingaert. Freedom House. April 13, 2011.

instance in which NED sought out and met with digital activists who were playing an increasingly important role. The April 6, 2008 strike was a key example of the power of digital activism.”²⁶ The meetings, conducted solely in Arabic, informed NED’s new strategy, which focused on empowering civil society, particularly human rights and labor organizations. The plan cited digital media as promising, noting 160,000 bloggers and 40 million cell phone users in Egypt. “Such space is yet to be fully utilized to its full potential.”²⁷ The plan also pinpointed youth empowerment by “civic engagement through the use of new technologies” as another potential source for promoting change.

Informal Sector – Unaffiliated Cyber-Activists, Laborers, and Entrepreneurs as Key Change Agents

NGOs identified the informal political and economic sector as another key strategic entry point for promoting democratic change. In some cases, the groups “backed” into this sector as other, more established sectors were not penetrable due to government cooption or repression. “Meeting with young, unaffiliated activists in Egypt became a strategy available to us by default. We ended up talking to human rights and youth activists because we couldn’t penetrate more conventional political circles.”²⁸ Similarly, IRI noted a shift in their policies, “reaching beyond political parties into civil society. It had become clear that there was no real opportunity for reform within political parties or formal structures. As a result, we reached out to youth groups and NGOs.”²⁹

Freedom House also pursued a similar strategy: “The decision to focus on [unaffiliated] individuals was demanded by the nature of the operating environment. Working with individuals was an access point to avoid oppressive governments in the region who control registration and operation of organizations. We also fostered networks of activists, rather than formal organizations, because networks were less vulnerable to crackdown by the regime and reflected the flexibility that today’s activists prefer.”³⁰ Moreover, they focused on finding creative and innovative activists whom they identified as “up and coming.”

For its part, NED – based on its strategy planning trip to Egypt – opted to steer its funding towards a younger generation. “They were small, scattered, undeterred, and committed to their cause.”³¹ By exploring these contacts, NED expanded its grants from 17 to 42 organizations with a particular focus on vibrant, young organizations – a majority of which were located outside Cairo.

Focusing on the informal economic sector, CIPE staff noted the “tremendous gap in reality between statistics on paper and what goes on in the street. Many economic indicators only reflect what’s happening in the formal sector, but their accuracy is diminished since 60 to 70 percent of Egypt exists in the informal sector. Remember, the Tunisian fruit seller is the perfect example of an informal sector actor and entrepreneur.”³²

²⁶ Interview with Amira Maty. National Endowment for Democracy. March 28, 2011.

²⁷ “The National Endowment for Democracy’s Strategic Plan for Egypt.” July 2009.

²⁸ Interview with Les Campbell. National Democratic Institute. March 21, 2011.

²⁹ Interview with Tom Garrett. International Republican Institute. April 15, 2011.

³⁰ E-mail correspondence with Sherif Mansour. Freedom House. April 18, 2011.

³¹ Interview with Laith Kubba. National Endowment for Democracy. March 24, 2011.

³² Interview with Abdulwahab Alkebsi. Center for International Private Enterprise. April 8, 2011.

Likewise, the Solidarity Center noted its emphasis on working in the informal sector. “We didn’t work with professional syndicates, but focused on workers. We cultivated contacts with people on the fringes of society who lived in the ‘gray’ areas. As a result of these contacts, we learned that there was a tremendous amount of discontent. The degree to which basic needs were not being met was significant, as we learned by getting inside many small-scale and large-scale factories through our Egyptian partners.”³³ The organization also maintained contact with large, “decrepit” public-sector enterprises where government privatization efforts were exerting a significant toll on workers’ living conditions.

Cultivating Trusted Networks – A Key Source of Information

Coalition building is an essential element of democracy promotion work. As such, the NGOs surveyed uniformly emphasized the critical role played by building trusted networks of contacts on the ground over an extended period of time. These local contacts served as crucial sources of information both in terms of understanding societal dynamics and identifying where the best prospects for democratic change resided. The groups stressed the importance of talking to “real people across the country, not just government or party officials.”³⁴ Others emphasized the importance of engaging with a broad spectrum of society: lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, and others.

Many cited their local partners as important “windows” on society. “Our partners reside in different strata of Egyptian society, from very small business owners that live on the fringe of the formal sector, to larger, family-owned businesses based in Cairo or Alexandria.”³⁵ Often, leveraging contacts with local NGOs facilitated an organization’s ability to reach literally thousands of people or small organizations who are their members, providing even deeper inroads into society. Democracy promotion organizations often used focus groups, roundtables, and polling (when able) to gain insight into popular sentiment on a variety of issues.

Building trust was cited as an essential ingredient for relationships to be effective. “We developed a good relationship of trust with our partners who open up a lot to us.”³⁶ Some organizations noted that by being subjected to the same type of government harassment as their local partners, “it gave us a sense of ‘street cred’ with our contacts.”³⁷

Most groups suggested that Arabic language skills – either by US or local staff – are essential for forging these new contacts. As one democracy promoter explained, “It’s necessary to be able to sit down and break bread together. This is crucial for cultivating relationships.”³⁸ Other groups added that along with Arabic language skills, employing staff with a deep cultural understanding, ideally from the country, was equally important. While language and regional expertise were deemed significant factors for interpreting dynamics on the ground, one organization also raised the need to include staff with cross-regional experience. It was noted that at times country experts fall back on pre-conceived notions, lack fresh perspective, and view change as linear. By contrast, a non-regional

³³ Interview with Heba el-Shazli. The Solidarity Center. March 30, 2011.

³⁴ Interview with Lorne Craner. International Republican Institute. April 15, 2011.

³⁵ Interview with Abdulwahab AlKebsi. Center for International Private Enterprise. April 8, 2011.

³⁶ Interview with Lila Jaafar. National Democratic Institute. March 24, 2011.

³⁷ Interview with Tom Garrett. International Republican Institute. April 15, 2011.

³⁸ Ibid.

expert with experience in diverse regions can “see possibilities for change where others may not. They are able to see commonalities across regions. It is important to have a combination of both types on staff.”³⁹

Moreover, organizations routinely cited the need to get out of Cairo and travel to the governorates as a means of understanding country dynamics. Several noted decisions to take “road trips” to various provinces in order to delve deeper into Egyptian society and gain greater insights into popular sentiments.

Additional sources of information included local newspapers and satellite television channels, as well as Facebook pages. One contact underscored the importance of Facebook, noting that she is “friends” with hundreds of Egyptian activists, and able to learn more about key issues by reading the numerous articles, videos, and other links posted on various Facebook pages. Another organization noted the importance, in particular, of local satellite stations, such as Dream TV, which featured call-in shows where people aired their grievances about corruption or deteriorating living conditions.

Three Key Turning Points: Labor Unrest, Khaled Said, and Fraudulent Elections

Throughout the course of numerous interviews, three key events emerged as important turning points in the thinking of NGOs surveyed regarding prospects for change. Mounting labor unrest in 2006-2010 emerged as a critical benchmark for popular mobilization. The Solidarity Center noted, “The current wave of protests is erupting from the largest social movement Egypt has witnessed in more than half a century.”⁴⁰ The report documented the spread of labor strikes across numerous sectors, and economic classes broadening to include white-collar workers and civil servants. Referencing a 2007 strike of real estate tax collectors, the report noted that the strike “involved the largest number of workers in the entire wave of protests since 2004, and was the first coordinated mobilization of civil servants across Egypt.”⁴¹ The Mahalla al-Kubra textile factory strike was also noted as key event, with 26,000 people mobilized on strike for one week. The April 6 solidarity movement was established in solidarity with the Mahalla strikers and denoted an important instance of civil society coordinating with the labor sector. Moreover, “throughout 2007, ‘08, and ‘09, we saw mounting strikes, sit-ins, and work stoppages taking place on a weekly, if not daily, basis.”⁴²

This observation was echoed by other organizations. “The labor unrest grew into something much broader. People began coming together when they realized they had no other options.”⁴³

“In particular, labor strikes caught my attention. They were increasing in frequency and in the numbers of people being mobilized. They were able to bring out tens of thousands of people. The strikes weren’t suppressed by the government, so they inspired others to come

³⁹ Interview with Lorne Craner. International Republican Institute. April 14, 2011.

⁴⁰ The Solidarity Center. *Justice for All: The Struggle for Workers’ Rights in Egypt*. February 2010. p. 14.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 31.

⁴² Interview with Heba el-Shazli. Solidarity Center. March 30, 2011.

⁴³ Interview with Scott Mastic. International Republican Institute. April 15, 2011.

out. There was a sense that the country was starting to fall apart. The government was aware that economic grievances signaled a deeper deterioration. They knew if they cracked down on massive labor protests, it would cause an uproar. It was a mass movement.”⁴⁴

As with Egypt, labor unrest served as a precursor to broad, popular uprising in Tunisia, whose trade union movement has a 78-year history. While President Ben Ali fully controlled the political parties, he did not have full control over the local branches of the labor unions. Before the uprising, labor unrest took place sporadically outside the capital, driven by the more independent local affiliates. When political unrest began in Tunisia, these local labor activists broke away from their Tunis-based leadership and joined the protestors.

Mobilization around the torture and killing Khaled Said in Alexandria in June 2010 marked another turning point. NGOs noted that the Facebook page established in his memory attracted hundreds of thousands of “friends.” For the first time, “non-political Egyptians demonstrated in the streets against torture and government brutality. It wasn’t just activists in the street, but regular people – mothers, fathers, children. Everyone watching the scene was struck by it.”⁴⁵ Others underscored that “after Khaled Said, people really got organized. We saw a number of very well-organized protests in Cairo, Alex, and elsewhere.”⁴⁶ Still others emphasized that the tactics employed in the Khaled Said protests were precursors to the uprising. “The Friday of Rage on January 28 was not the first one. The *first* Friday of Rage took place on October 29, just before the elections, in honor of Khaled Said. There were also continuing episodes of ‘silent mobs’ spontaneously gathering at random to protest the death of Khaled Said. They were organized by Facebook and happening all over Egypt.”⁴⁷

Finally, many of the NGOs studied indicated that the fraudulent legislative elections in November 2010 were also a significant factor, suggesting that popular frustrations had reached critical mass. “We saw increasing frustrations particularly after the November 2010 elections, which were blatantly fraudulent. The elections galvanized a sense of anger in the people. While the international community did not pay as close attention to the elections, the vote was front and center for Egyptians. It was clear that frustration levels reached a tipping point. Rather than giving up, people just got more angry.”⁴⁸

Others made similar observations. “The elections were blatantly stolen. This pushed people over the edge. There may have been some sense of lethargy and depression, then Tunisia happened.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Interview with Lila Jaafar. National Democratic Institute. March 24, 2011.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with Amira Maty. National Endowment for Democracy. March 28, 2011.

⁴⁷ Interview with Sherif Mansour. Freedom House. April 13, 2011.

⁴⁸ Interview with Scott Mastic. International Republican Institute. April 15, 2011.

⁴⁹ Interview with Amira Maty. National Endowment for Democracy. March 28, 2011.

