

Democracy Activity Brief  
FRIDE Conference  
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FRIDE

FUNDACIÓN  
PARA LAS RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES  
Y EL DIÁLOGO EXTERIOR

## Democratic Transitions in Europe and Latin America: What Relevance for the Arab World?

### About FRIDE

FRIDE is an independent think-tank based in Madrid, focused on issues related to democracy and human rights; peace and security; and humanitarian action and development. FRIDE attempts to influence policy-making and inform public opinion, through its research in these areas.

### About ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative is a network of independent Arab research and policy institutes, with partners from the United States and Europe. Its goal is to mobilise the Arab research capacity to advance knowledge and develop a programme for democratic reform in the Arab World which is realistic and home grown. The Initiative also aims to produce policy recommendations that can help promote reform in the region.

### About Club of Madrid

The Club of Madrid is an independent organisation dedicated to strengthening democracy around the world by drawing on the unique experience and resources of its members - democratic former heads of state and government. The Club of Madrid is supported institutionally by FRIDE and the Gorbachev Foundation of North America, and its President is Ricardo Lagos, former President of Chile.

*On 24-25 March, 2006, FRIDE organised a conference together with the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) and the Club of Madrid exploring the question of what relevance democratic transitions in other regions might have for the Middle East. This was the first large-scale event organised under the rubric of and supported by the Arab Reform Initiative, a network of mainly Arab research institutes devoted to generating analysis on issues related to political reform in the Middle East. The conference assembled nearly 60 experts from the Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Latin America with the aim of sharing experiences in political reform processes.*

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Some of the most salient points to emerge from the two days of discussion were as follows:

- It was agreed that the holding of discussions on comparative models of transition should not be taken to mean that any one path to democratisation was replicable in wholesale fashion to the Middle East. This assertion was taken as understood, and as a basis for the conference's subsequent debates. Notwithstanding this caveat, participants acknowledged that there was utility in looking at the specific sectors of transition processes in different states and regions, and comparing dynamics at this level with the Middle East.
- In a first session on 'Lessons from the Spanish Transition', it was pointed out that democratic transition in Spain had brought concrete benefits: Spain's GDP per capita was \$4,000 in 1975 at the time of Franco's death and is now \$25,000; life expectancy has risen; the average years of schooling has risen from 8 to 16; the number of university students has grown from 200,000 to 1.5 million; in one generation the average height of Spaniards grew 20 cm. *Felipe González* gave an account of the lessons he had taken from his crucial role in piloting the Spanish transition. Democracy cannot be imposed nor exported. Democracy is not an ideology, but rather a mechanism that allows for peaceful coexistence and structures citizens' duties and obligations. It is not in itself a guarantee for good government; it only guarantees that when the government doesn't do a good job, it can be replaced by a new one. The success of Spain's transition was not certain, and was not – contrary to common views – guaranteed by the country's relationship to the European Union. What the Spanish experience suggested was that the importance of consensus should not be under-valued. Mutually-beneficial

compromise and a culture of accepting defeat were the key variables that allowed the Spanish transition. The role of Spain's King Juan Carlos has been much debated: the most crucial lesson from his role was that he renounced absolute powers as a strategy of self-preservation.

- Invited speakers and participants in the open debate on this session argued that a number of key differences existed between pre-transition Spain and the current juncture in the Middle East:

In Spain democratic change came on the back of a sustained period of economic reform, still not present in the Middle East;

Civil society had already developed a democratic culture; civil society debate is significantly more limited in the Middle East than it was in Spain in the 1970s, and still, according to one expert from the region, organised on 'pre-modern' lines rather than through structures that could serve as the basis for a modern democratic state;

The socio-economic and international contexts were favourable in Spain, with political actors' agency not being sufficient in itself as a motor of transition; in the Middle East the central difference today is that democrats are tarnished rather than assisted by the democracy promotion agenda of external actors, it was argued;

Reformers were already ascendant within the regime when Franco died, to a greater extent than is the case in Middle Eastern countries;

Key to Spain's 'transition by transaction' was the fact that reformers and non-reformers were

relatively balanced in their respective influence, which gave both parties the incentive to agree pacts; in this sense, the conditions of Spain's transition were relatively particular, points of such balance not frequently occurring in pre-transition states;

Even 'reformist' Arab monarchies are still some way short of resembling the Spanish monarchy of 1975. They are, one participant suggested, still 'efficiency rather than democracy-driven.' As one participant pointed out: King Juan Carlos did not have to be persuaded forcefully to cede absolute power, whereas in other countries autocrats need to be 'faced down' and 'compelled' to leave office;

State control over the media is also tighter in the Middle East, while Spaniards had begun to be exposed to different views in the years preceding Franco's death.

- Cutting across discussion in a number of the conference's sessions, some of the central 'lessons' emerged of Latin America's democratic transitions. Experts raised a number of issues that they argued could usefully be borne in mind by those studying the prospects for change in the Middle East. These included:

'Pacts' were not as important as less formal 'political agreements;'

Where 'pacts' did occur it was generally in the aftermath of civil war, rather than fashioned consciously as part of a pre-transition strategy;

Compromises may often be an essential part of strategy: compared to what might be an ideal-type process of change; Chile underwent the worst

transition in Latin America, but is today the region's most successful and stable democracy;

All Latin American transitions engendered instability; transition is unlikely without an initial phase in which the autocratic regime is vigorously contested; Latin America does not, it was argued, suggest a correlation between 'pressing too hard' and violent instability (often a fear evoked);

The right balance is difficult to strike: such contestation might be firm but not so strong that coalition-building becomes impossible;

NGOs in some cases played crucial roles, but especially where these organisations were based around the political party system, rather than attempting to serve as a substitute for the latter;

In the case of dominant party regimes, such as Mexico, the central issue was not 'how to kick out the power holder', but rather how to transform the political party in power to open the way gradually to a democratic regime;

Coalitions are important, but one lesson to take on board is the need to avoid 'false consensus'; pacts based on convenience but that do not address fundamentally different understandings of democracy have been a complicating post-transition factor in Latin America;

One area where compromise is essential is in regard to the post-transition role of politicians associated with the autocratic regime: Latin American experience suggests that it is impossible to insist that they will not continue to occupy positions of influence. In Brazil's first parliament after the

military dictatorship, the politicians who supported the previous military regime were a majority; in Mexico, the PRI is still a dominant actor;

Another area of compromise, for some (although not all) participants, might lie in the granting of amnesties for human rights abuses committed under autocratic regimes;

In addition to formal institutional changes, a change in mentality is required: all sides have to accept the 'uncertainty' that governs democracy, that elections can be lost;

Democrats need to tolerate considerable ambiguity during the process of transition and, crucially, the establishment of institutional structures that govern the period immediately after transition;

In a number of Latin American countries (and East European states, some participants pointed out) it proved difficult to establish full civilian control over the military for some years after formal transition; this was arguably an overlooked element of democratisation that could usefully be borne in mind in the Middle East;

- A session on Ukraine, one of the most emblematic of recent democratic transitions, focused attention on a number of factors that, it was argued, should be seen as useful 'lessons' for reformists in the Arab world:

Contrary to some perceptions of the Orange Revolution, democratic change did not come out of the blue in Ukraine; civic mobilisation started immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and generated a gradual accumulation of authentic, home-made civic activism.

There were identifiable milestones along the road to full democratisation, such as the 2002 parliamentary elections, around which civil society could organise and which slowly opened a space for the political opposition – and which ultimately made the Orange Revolution possible.

Information Technology played a key role in providing a political space, virtual but free of the authorities' effective control. It could be said that this was the first 'web-based revolution.' The web helped recreate fractured communities, after Communism. The audience of one reformist website in Ukraine rose to 2 million in 2004. IT links were of practical importance in orchestrating the protests in the autumn of 2004; without the technology it is possible that these protests would not have grown to sufficient magnitude to persuade the Russian-backed regime to relent.

- In relation to the Middle East it was argued that some of the lessons suggested from other regions found resonance in Arab participants' own experiences; that some were not at all useful; and that some revealed profound comparative differences. Salient points raised in these regards included:

Pacts have been struck in some countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco), that opened the way for a degree of political liberalisation, only for differences and problems to occur in fashioning agreement on 'second order' issues: stagnation in the reform process has then resulted.

Something of the spirit of pragmatic political agreement prevailed in Palestine after Yasir Arafat's

passing, in this case between Fatah and Hamas; according to one expert, the key difference with other regions such as Latin America and Eastern Europe is that here the international community did not support a coalition government, but rather dissuaded Fatah from joining the Hamas government after the January 2006 elections.

Indeed, more generally, participants from the region mostly and in familiar terms referred to the failure of the peace process, and the nature of Western policy towards Israel, as the main factor differentiating the Middle East from other parts of the world: the Arab-Israeli conflict in this sense is a key factor militating against the success of pacts and political agreements on reform.

The element of fear over the consequences of far-reaching reform is present in the Middle East; here, there could be lessons to be learned of how political agreements and pacts in other regions provided reassurance and guarantees to religious and political minorities. Probably more than in other regions, in the Middle East there is need for explicit and robust guarantees that democratic principles will not be reversed by anti-democratic forces once the elections are over: the absence of such guarantees so far remains an important factor holding back reform.

Governmental strategies have become more subtle in the Middle East, according to some of the participants, with regimes arguably having themselves learned from other regions and seeking thus to deflect pressure for full democratisation: governments have allowed civil society to expand over the past 10 years by favouring NGOs in the area of service delivery, but not advocacy; this has been part of a strategy of depoliticising civil society.

Perhaps the most obvious point of difference, it was suggested, is the extent to which civil society in the Middle East is religiously based, thus making the whole definition of civil society more problematic and contested than in other regions. But, it was argued, this difference should not be overstated, with the church having, for example, played a role in Latin America.

Comparing, for example, the Kifaya experience in Egypt with that of the Orange Revolution, leads one to question whether the broad populace is, in the words of one participant, 'ready yet.' Kifaya has been on the street for two years, first in front of government buildings and then in poorer districts; they received polite applause but people did not actively join them, it was observed by one expert. The Egyptian opinion of the Ukrainian experience is that it was completely U.S. inspired, one participant claimed.

The potential value of Turkey's example was widely recognised, although it was also suggested that the Turkish case also demonstrates the difficulties in the Middle East in constructing coalitions: despite the progress made in Turkey, the Erdogan government has still been unable to form broad coalitions on a number of issues, including relations with the army, the head-scarf issue, the Kurdish conflict, Cyprus and relations with the EU. It was argued that there is still an underlying lack of trust between Islamists and secular groups, and that consequently many in Turkey still express concerns over the long-term prospects for democracy.

The issue of civilian control over the military was felt to be particularly pertinent for the Arab world, although here again it was argued that the Middle

East appeared to face additional challenges to those experienced in Latin America and Eastern Europe. These included the high number of competing security agencies; the way that powerful interior ministries have developed in a way linked to the specificities of the regional context; paramilitary forces also taking root due to regional conflicts; the fact that in some states the military continues to enjoy high levels of public support, often flowing from the role played by armed forces in the process of nation-building; and the existence of what one participant referred to as 'praetorian armies' that directly protect the regime as opposed to serving the state. (One expert argued that the East European experience with Communist secret services was more proximate to the Middle East than Latin American examples).

For one Arab expert the clearest lesson from other regions was that democratic reform requires both 'demand and supply': demand of the masses and organised groups for a democratic society; the supply of a leadership that takes that demand and uses tactical wisdom to translate it into a concrete reform

strategy. Amidst current debates in the Middle East, it was argued that observers of the Arab reform process should remember this lesson from Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans: demand on its own is not enough for democratic transformation.

Another lesson referred to by Arab participants was that in other regions, prior to transition, something approximating a national consensus existed that democracy was a desirable objective; it was felt by some from the region that the Middle East had still not reached that point; many people are wedded either to a theocratic outlook or are part of an omnipresent state bureaucracy that gives them the motive to defend the regime.

A recurrent theme was that the international context is less favourable for democratisation in the Middle East than it was in Latin America and Eastern Europe; international pressure, argued one participant, might have been seen as 'friendly' reinforcement in Spain, Portugal, Hungary, etc., but in the Middle East was judged to be 'enemy fire'.

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