

New political generations emerge in the Middle East and Denmark must support them

Social and economic rights must be at the heart of the struggle for liberal democracy.

A few days ago, the United Nations celebrated the International Day of Social Justice. For most of us, this is yet another obscure international UN day of action, and the event has gone relatively unnoticed.

But in many parts of the world, it is precisely social justice, and more specifically economic and social rights, that millions of people are increasingly putting on the political agenda these years.

The Middle East and North Africa, where my organisation has been working to promote human rights for two decades, is no exception. Over the last few years, social and economic dynamics have increasingly influenced engagement with politics and society.

Take Egypt, the region's most populous country, as an example. When millions of Egyptians took to the streets in the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, they were calling for then President Hosni Mubarak to step down. This demand encapsulated calls for specific changes to the political system and its practices: the dissolution of the ruling political party, the NDP, the roll back of the state of emergency law, the reinstatement of the freedom of assembly, and the renewal of the political elite. .

There were of course also social and economic frustrations due to widespread poverty and the unfair distribution of the country's resources involved in the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and 2012. But, in my view, the aim of the uprising was mainly to change Egypt's autocratic political system.

Eight years later, the picture has changed significantly. Not only because the military capped the political developments in 2013, but also because the political forces seem to have changed.

When tens of thousands of protesters defied the brutal police repression that President Al-Sisi reinstated, and took to the streets last September, the protesters did once again call for the president to step down. But this time, the causes and demands were rooted in social and economic injustices.

While the 2011 protests were sparked by an episode of gruesome police violence, the 2019 protests were triggered by accusations of corruption in the president's inner circle. The allegations had been shared by the former supporter of the regime, Mohammed Ali, now turned into a self-exiled whistle-blower from Spain. In a series of powerful videos, Mohammed Ali presented a number of indications of large-scale economic fraud in the top circles of political decision-making. In response, tens of thousands of Egyptians demanded more economic and social justice. In many ways, it resembles the birth of a new political generation in Egypt. A generation that, eight years after the 2011 uprising, has found its own credo in the claim of social justice.

There are several reasons why this new political generation is growing right now. On the one hand, the regime, through unprecedented severe repression, has tormented the political generation behind the uprising in 2011. On the other hand, the government's fiscal and economic policies have significantly exacerbated social and economic injustice.

Over the past few years, Al-Sisi's regime has sought to counteract a downward economic spiral through international loans, most importantly from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Such loan packages have been conditioned on far-reaching structural adjustment programmes, which require, amongst other measures, reducing state subsidies and corporate taxes.

These policies have had the – rather predictable – effect of eroding and undermining the capacity of the Egyptian state to provide basic social and economic services. As far too often in history, this has mainly affected the many millions of Egyptians who were already living in poverty and at the margins of society. But

Egypt is not the only country in the region where social and economic grievances are rising to the top of protesters' demands.

From the Moroccan Hirak protest movement to the ongoing demonstrations in Lebanon, Algeria and Iran, economic and social factors are either at the forefront or lurking just below the surface. Although largely driven by the specific local circumstances, the protests bear striking resemblances: the revolt against degrading economic and social living conditions, the lack of access to public services, corruption and rising inequality.

The latest UN report on social and economic development estimates that 1 in 4 Arab youths aged 15 to 24 are unemployed. In the Gaza Strip, whose population continues to suffer enormously under the Israeli blockade, according to the latest figures reported by Deutsche Welle, it is now three out of four.

These alarming statistics are first and foremost a consequence of the Arab and Middle Eastern regimes' excessive focus on security rather than development. It is also a result of deeply entrenched corruption. According to the Arab Barometer, corruption today has systematically encroached upon the region's state institutions. This can only be tackled by fundamental systemic changes, which can only be initiated and carried out by the Middle East's own political and economic decision-makers.

In my organisation, we are working to advance social and economic rights and place them on the political agendas of the – unfortunately too few – countries in the region where governments are willing to act. But this is ultimately the task of the governments and leaders of the concerned countries.

However, international institutions such as the EU also bear a responsibility. Just like in Egypt, the IMF, the World Bank and other international players have for decades provided incentives for Middle Eastern and North African governments through the conditions imposed as part of structural adjustment programmes to erode the social and economic safety net to support the most disadvantaged in society.

What's more, the international community's fixation on the fight against terrorism and undocumented migration from the region has supported the tendency of Middle Eastern regimes to strengthen security institutions such as the police and the military rather than social investments like education and health.

Of course, as a small country, Denmark is not in a position to dictate policies of the IMF, the World Bank or the EU. But Denmark should push for social and economic rights to be guiding principles in the decision-making of international institutions we support and of which we are a member.

The EU is an obvious place to start. Denmark could play a role by pushing for the Union to take its existing international human rights obligations seriously in its foreign policy towards neighbouring countries south of the Mediterranean.

An increased emphasis on social and economic rights in Denmark and the EU's foreign policy goes far beyond the symbolism of an international action day. It is about promoting and strengthening the social and economic foundations of our democratic societies.

As we are facing increasing pressure on this very foundation in our own European backyard, we have an even greater long-term interest in promoting social and economic rights in neighbouring regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, where political developments continue to have a profound influence on our European reality.

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