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February Roundtable: The Arab Revolutions and Human Rights, Introduction

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Abstract

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The Arab Revolutions and Human Rights

Article under review: "The Failure of Governance in the Arab World" by Simon Tisdall. *The Guardian*. January 11 2011.

The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the people's rebellion in Egypt, and the subsequent popular uprisings that are taking place across the Arab world from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, remind us, scholars and policy makers alike, that order and stability must be based upon justice to be maintained. The current turmoil in the Arab world is the result of policies that have sought regional stability and regime security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the expense of society and human security.

Human dignity, human rights, and human security—not Islam, hatred of Israel, or resentment against the West—are what is driving the young Arab women and men to the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and other Arab states at the dawn of 2011. These young people are calling for a new social contract based on human rights rather than oppression; human security rather than fear; and human dignity rather than humiliation. As Christina Cerna remarks, "The humiliation of not being able to provide for themselves and their families and for not having basic human rights, gave way to anger and frustration."

While acknowledging the role of social media in helping activists to organize against the oppressive regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, Louis Esparza argues that the primary drivers of the Arab revolutions are the relevant political actors and their grievances and actions. The Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions are not "Twitter revolutions," as some define them, but revolutions of the people. "Explaining political grievances using phenomena that distract from the actual content of the grievances de-legitimizes political actors. Whether it is Twitter in Tunisia or the printing press at the Battle of Peterloo, what is important is the decision to engage in risk and social disruption in order to achieve a political end."

Robert Funk and Walter Lotze address the Arab revolutions from Latin American and African perspectives respectively. For Funk, one of the main lessons of US involvement in Latin America and the Arab world is that supporting foreign dictators threatens American national interest in the long term. As he says, "the supposed benefits of supporting anti-democratic strongmen…do not last a very long time, whereas the ill feeling amongst the population and the political fallout can last for many years."

Whereas most commentators compare the 2011 Arab states to 1989 Eastern European states, Lotze interestingly compares Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 to the Southern part of Africa two decades earlier. He argues that the Northern part of Africa is experiencing what the Southern part went through during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was Southern Africa that was the most unstable, autocratic, and conflict-prone region on the continent. "In a telling reversal of fortunes, it is now the Southern parts of the continent that are most stable and secure, and that display the highest commitment to democratic systems of governance, while the Northern regions of the continent are being shaken at their very foundations."

These are some of the main insights in our February Roundtable on the Arab revolutions, which highlight the interdependent relations between human rights and human dignity on the one hand, and order and security on the other.

Raslan Ibrahim
Managing Editor HRHW