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Corruption and the “Arab spring”

As one of the main elements leading to revolutions

Abstract

Corruption in the Arab world in general and in the “Arab spring” countries in particular is one of the most important hidden elements led to revolutions and uprisings. The accumulated different types of corruption made the Arab societies hopeless and pushed them to lose faith in the capabilities of their regimes/governments to achieve the economic and social justice, as those regimes and the small category benefiting from them are the main cause of corruption.

Therefore, fighting corruption requires the willingness of the state with clear structural systems and regulations in the states’ institutions. In addition, is needed a comprehensive plan at the short, medium and long term.

Keywords: *corruption, Arab spring, revolutions.*

Introduction

The “Arab spring” revolutions made its effects on the already regressive economic situation in the most of the Arab countries, which caused at once, a main element to fall back the economic performance, it was as well a consequence of an economic inheritance full of chronic structural imbalances at all the economical sections, debts accumulation, an excessive increase in the budget deficits and the spread of unemployment among youth. “Also in the case of the Arab Spring, scholars and analysts have attributed a primary role to these economic causes”.¹

What contributed to those difficult situations of the “Arab spring” countries in particular, the growing feeling of the people that there are small categories of rich persons, decision makers and owners of political influence, who took control on most of the economic estimators and development benefits, while the other poor and limited income categories did not get. A small percentage of these estimators and/or wealth, which does not enable them to achieve their goals of an appropriate living level, besides the bad distribution of this wealth among all categories fairly, the expected result of that was a growing feeling of social injustice, and the spread of financial and administrative corruption, there was only one way to eliminate this situation which is the change and reform with hope to achieve better future. After two years of the beginning of those evolutions, we can study now the economic motives, which were behind them, and what accompanied them of changes at the economic and social levels.

As a result of that, the motives have increased and lead to the outbreak of the “Arab spring” revolutions. Moreover, at this point, it is very important to stress that there is another important side of other reasons, which seem always in the same context and should not be oversight at the regional and

¹ M. Lagi, K. Z. Bertrand, Y. Bar-Yam, *Economics of Food Prices and Crises*, New England Complex Systems Institute, Cambridge 2012

international levels. It is the increasing gap of development among the Arab countries and the developed countries during the past years.

The aim of the essay:

Corruption as a subject became the main concern of everyone in the “Arab spring” countries, especially after the revolutions in these countries, talking about corruption is no longer limited to a class of intellectuals, journalists, and others interested in public affairs, but became the main subject under discussion for public and private sectors alike.

For the sake of the public debate to be more positive, we try in this paper to make apparent to those interested in the issue of corruption an analytical study of the causes of the phenomenon, which may help in the development of a comprehensive vision for the prevention and fight against corruption in all sectors and at all levels, on the basis that the solutions will come are based on a deep understanding of the causes of the phenomenon, and thus be effective in combat.

Why the “Arab spring” countries have arisen?

The change to the sake of freedom, the economic and social justice, and the partnership in the political life with the peoples, cannot be possible without popularity movements, uprisings and revolutions beyond the limits of possible and reasonable. This fact made the economic reform opportunities unavailable in the “Arab spring” countries, but the Arabic economic situations confirm that most of political elites in those countries, were unable to realize that at some point they will be forced to go to the social and economic reform, or to abandon the power and leave it to those who are able to achieve the goals of reform to those peoples, which had suffered a lot. “An aspect that can help us to understand the social causes of the popular riots is the composition of unemployment: youth unemployment, particularly female, was very high.

Juvenile dissatisfaction has been considered as one of the most relevant causes of the Arab Spring”.²

Therefore, the Arabic experiment is not different from the experiment in some of the European countries, which showed that there is no freedom without a dispute or conflict and there are no rights or social justice without a seek to achieve them. Here it became clear that the man if he wants his/her rights, s/he must snatch these rights with his heart, if he could not then with his tongue, if he could not then with his hands, as happened in the revolutions fields.

It is noticeable here that the economic part of life, is the prime motivation to all liberties' efforts. The basic principle in all conflicts among the rulers and the peoples goes over to the economic variables, which leads to this movement. These variables were serving one category without the other, and they achieved the benefits of the minority which is with money and power at the expense of the big majority of the poor peoples, and the result was an expansion in the gap among the peoples of the same country. It became those who owns everything and those who owns nothing. Poor peoples who become more poorness and rich peoples who become more richness and wealthy. At this point the economy became the axis of conflicts, because surviving in life is connected with the continues availability of the elements of a decent living to the citizen who is getting less amount of the wealth and income. If the man lost these elements, he has to seek his economic rights by all means. If there were not given to him in return to his efforts, and if he felt injustice, theoretically he has to prove and achieve to himself the right of liberty and justice with getting an appropriate share of the wealth, which he kept safe and secure at the state institutions, and might contribute to that if he could not find a job opportunity or if his income does not commensurate with the levels of common prices, or if

² N. Sika, *The political economy of Arab uprisings*, European Institute of the Mediterranean - IEMed, 2012, paper no. 10.

there was a common sense that economic corruption infringe on his social rights.

In such case, peoples sometimes hope that there are rulers do not control the economic elements of the state when they have the power. If the ruling elite was corrupted, then the reform demand would not be enough, and that why and when the peoples resort to escalate to reach to the political reform, which will be followed by social and economic reforms and aims to a total change which guarantee the social justice purposes and an equal distribution of wealth and income, without discrimination. This is of course lead to outbreak of the revolutions.

Here the peoples will not ask any more only for the bread, or neither to raise the wages or to solve the housing problem, to reduce the amount of the basic needs, or to find a job opportunity, because all those demands become later a small part of the bigger problem, as revolutions become at this point for liberty and to provide the total economic rights, as like education, health care and an appropriate and decent life. Especially if the man did not feel the benefits of the development and the economic growth, the thing which was approved when the benefits of the economic growth did not appear spontaneously, but when the peoples felt that those benefits were focused and stopped at higher levels without reaching to them. As well, it is the opposite of what most of the traditional economic theories have predicted, therefore, there was a huge deference within the society and the common feeling with injustice, which was the cause of the emotional explosion and the strong pursuit to change, with hope to reach and achieve their overall aspirations.

The main reasons of corruption in the “Arab spring” countries:

We can define six main reasons of corruption in the Arab world in general and in the “Arab spring” countries in particular as follows: reasons related to the rule of law and the punitive of deterrent, reasons related to the public administration, reasons related to public finance of the state, reasons

related to the institutional framework, reasons related to the structural relations among the authorities of the state and finally reasons related to the social culture. Each one of these reasons has its own character which is different from the others, thus it needs different solutions than the others.

1. Reasons related to the rule of law and the punitive of deterrent:

Looking back at the situation in the “Arab spring” countries, we can find that the law rules haven’t been respected largely, there were laws which have been issued to serve the benefits of specific category at the expense of the public interest. In addition, the implementation of law and the judicial decisions was controlled mostly by the political influence and the financial capability of the himself. The dominant feature of the length of the trial proceedings was weaker than the strength of the legal and judicial deterrence against corrupted people. As it happened many times when some corrupted people run away from the country to abroad before the trial, especially those who were close to the power and decision makers.

These practices have led to shake and then weak the rule of law among the peoples, and they became more encouraged to break it and/or trick it. They were looking to the law as it is a kind of potential threat and not as a tool to protect them, and that the law is a tool to protect the powerful people and nothing more.

2. Reasons related to the public administration

There are too many gaps in the system of the public administration in the “Arab spring” countries, which had a major role to spread the corruption widely before the revolutions, failure to determine the tasks and duties strictly in governmental agencies gave the opportunity to many people to evade the responsibility and dumping it on others. In addition, the governmental bureaucracy and the complexity of the procedures had led many to resort to bribery to facilitate their work, and gave some employees the opportunity to extort the citizens, add to that the weakness of self-censorship in governmental

agencies, which encouraged the corrupted officials to move forward to commit more serious corrupted acts with impunity.

The low salaries, wages and its poor distribution, and also not being tied to efficiency and integrity led some people to justify to themselves, unlawfully, getting bribes and profiting from their jobs until they get the appropriate income which provide them with a decent life. Unemployment and the mismatch between qualifications and 10 jobs offered are, undoubtedly, causes of dissatisfaction among young people.³

The centralization, individualism and lack of transparency in the management of public affairs, facilitated to some corrupted officials to make decisions and implement policies to serve their personal interests or the interests of the groups they belong to, in the absence of the consultation or even the involvement of the people affected by these decisions, or those policies.

3. Reasons related to public finance of the state

The public finance of the state was managed in a way contributed significantly to spread the phenomenon of corruption in the state, the difficulty of understanding the public budget had weakened the popular supervision of the public money and the resources and ways to spend it.

The numerous special funds outside the public budget had led to weakening the control over the money, which is public money; the same criticism can be directed to the budgets per item, also the government expenditures tainted by extravagance.

As for the system of public bids and tenders, although they are legally well structured, and the bids and tenders are posted on the e-government portal in a transparent manner, however, the real practice revealed a significant corruption in this sector. The “Arab spring” countries have suffered

³ T. Behr, *Talking about the revolution: Narratives on the origin and future of the Arab spring*, European Institute of the Mediterranean - IEMed, 2012, paper no. 9.

from the methods of granting loans in the public banks, which was predominately personal and led those close to the former regimes to get many of large loans without guarantees and escape outside the country. In addition, the management of public sector companies and privatization were marred most of the times by corruption, because of the politicization of its administration, the decisions of selling them, and the lack of the standards of transparency, participation, efficiency and effectiveness.

4. Reasons related to the social culture

The cultural and social environment in the “Arab spring” countries has an impact to spread the corruption, the social acceptance of the small corruption, and socially being seen as an acceptable way to get the rights, and calling corruption with other terms such as gratuities, tea, and transportation, entrenches the corruption in the governmental agencies and hamper the efforts to fight against it.

There was also an influence of the class and the factional politics on the public decisions. The public policy was not before the revolutions, in many cases, seeking the public interests as much as it was seeking to satisfy some persons belonging to a particular social denominations, or belong to the dominant party at the time. A striking example of the corruption founded on the social class and the political influence is the appointments in the judiciary, the police, the diplomatic corps, and the universities, as these jobs have become, in large part of them, limited to the lucky people (unqualified most of times) of certain families, or these who have favoritism or can afford to pay large bribes. In addition, a lot of deals were held by the ruling party with specific tribes or certain powers to guarantee their support in the multiple parliamentary elections. These denominations get in return some preferential advantages more than the rest of the citizens. “Improvements in living standards have, however, been unequally distributed among groups and

individuals: all Arab countries, including those of North Africa, remain characterized by profound social and economic inequalities”.⁴

5. Reasons related to the institutional framework

Although the “Arab spring” countries have a large arsenal of laws, the number reached to more than 250,000 legislation, but there are many gaps that did not make the legislative framework sufficiently active in the fight against corruption. The first of these gaps is the lack of an adequate protection for the witnesses and the informants in the corruption cases, which made a lot of people reluctant to report corruption crimes or to testify in fear of victimization. In addition, the lack of legal regulation allows access to information which gave the opportunity for the corrupted people to hide their crimes, and weakened the official and popular oversight them. Also the lack of a comprehensive legal framework to prevent conflicts of interest allowed a lot of officials to exploit their positions to earn and give the features that are not due to their companies to their families at the expense of the public good.

Although the “Arab spring” countries have very large number of regulatory authorities, but it did not perform its role effectively, for several reasons. First, there is a lack of awareness of approaching the relevant anti-corruption authorities, and secondly, how to resort authorities you do not know about them.

The lack of independence of these bodies and all of their subordination to the executive authority, and the weakness of its legal powers had an impact on its independence, the extension of its ability to investigate the corruption of senior officials, the overlap in the terms of reference of the regulatory authorities and the lack of coordination between them made more than one of a regulatory exercise the same control over the activity of the same kind in the same administrative units, which represents a waste of time and public money, and hinders the administrative bodies to perform their essential role and

⁴ D. Salehi-Isfahani , *Human Development in the Middle East and North Africa*. United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Research Paper , 2010, 26.

makes them devote themselves to the preparation of reports to regulatory agencies. Another reason the inadequacy of physical and human resources to some regulatory authorities, as the number of complaints made to these bodies are larger than their human capacity, also, some workers in the regulatory authorities fall into a simple procedural errors in the content, but it has a great impact on many people. "In the modernization theory education, jointly with other economic development-related variables, assumes a central role in the process of democratization".⁵

And eventually, the secrecy imposed on the reports regulatory bodies deprives the civil society of an important source of information and weaken the control of the people, and this secrecy give the impression to the public opinion that the government wants to cover up economic corruption in the governmental organizations. That it is not serious against this corruption, which further leads to the lack of trust between the citizen and the government and increases instability.

6. Reasons related to the structural relations among the authorities of the state

The principle of the separation of three powers is the guarantor that makes each one of the three powers of the state the legislature, the judiciary and the executive do its roles that assigned to it without any of those authorities taking over of another. This principle had led to the weakness of the parliamentary oversight and the local People's Councils in the accountability of the executive authority for many reasons. The most important one was the scandalous falsification of the elections, and bring some useless elected members, who are in fact recruited by the ruling party, the obey his command and do not exercise control over the government. There was also an interference of the executive authority in the affairs of the judiciary, by several

⁵ S. M. Lipset, *Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political legitimacy*, "American Political Science Review", 1959, 53, p. 69-105; G. Almond, S. Verba, *The Civic Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New York 1963.

means, including the intimidation of judges with judicial inspection of the Minister of Justice, and distribute certain cases to certain judges courts, and assign the judges to work in the governmental agencies, and the control of the executive authority in the greater part of the judges salaries, but these means succeeded in affecting a small number of judges. In addition, the government took control over the national media - described as the fourth estate - which made it lose its role in exposing corruption, and even make it contributes to mislead the public opinion.

Outline: fighting corruption

Based on the above analysis of the causes of corruption in the “Arab spring” countries, and bearing in mind the circumstances in the “Arab spring” countries in the recent time, we can distinguish between two types of interventions that must be done to prevent and fight corruption in these states:

1. At the short term:

There are a group of interventions which do not need new laws or major structural changes in the organizational structure of the state, as much as it can be done through the decisions of the Council of Ministers, or the cabinet, each one in its place, it will be aimed to achieving three main principles: 1. respect the transparency in every decision or policy taken by any party or government official at all levels, as corruption does not grow in the transparent environment, all officials, and government institutions at different levels and nature must, 2. involve community partners who are the civil society, the private sector and citizens in general, in any new policy, or any amendment to the current policies, as the participate is the important guarantees of a deviation from the public interest, and 3. taking into consideration the needs of all components of society, the marginalized in particular.

The accountability must be activated whoever is the corrupted person and it should be done quickly, because the slow and lazy justice is not

deterrent, and justice should be done in public in order to achieve general deterrence to the community.

2. At the medium and long term

Acting at the medium and long term needs, new laws and restructuring of some institutions and the integration of some of them, it may reach to the creation of new institutions. This type of policy needs the approval of the community around it. This debate takes quite long time, and it needs to be led by the public institutions, notably the parliament as a major institution able to pass laws that are reflective of the will of the people, with a condition that the composition of the board has been done in a real democracy, not in a formality.

On the other hand, there must be unpacking the dependency of the regulatory bodies to the executive power, so that it can play its role in the oversight of the executive authority neutrality, this can be achieved by making the dependency of some of these bodies to the legislative authority, and some of them to the judicial authority represented by the Supreme Judicial Council, each according to its competence, or create an autonomous situation to these bodies from all authorities.

The independence of these bodies can be also achieved by creating a new anti-corruption institution which includes under its umbrella all regulators, which achieves its independence from the executive authority, and can also achieve coordination between the works of these agencies.

A package of legislation and administrative regulations also must be issued in order to fill the legislative vacuum in several areas, most notably - access to information about conflicts of interest and provide protection to informants, witnesses and inform about corruption in the private sector, and improve the systems of appointment and promotion in the public service.

In addition to the need to reconsider, some of the existing laws and regulatory systems in the public administration and the public finances, so that

these systems are transparent and do not politicize and to activate the accountability to achieve its effectiveness and efficiency.

The curricula also must include the culture of rejection and anti-corruption, and the religious institution to play an active role in the development of the culture of integrity, as well as the national and the private media to adopt meaningful programs.

In all of these things mentioned, there is more than one way to achieve them by learning from the international successful experiences. We have to choose those most suited to the social, political and economic cultural environment of the “Arab spring” countries.

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