

Revolts and transitions in the Arab world: towards a new urban agenda?

International colloquium

French Center for Research in Cairo (CEDEJ). November 7-8-9, 2012

The 2011 popular uprisings in the Arab world widely affected large and medium cities of the regions, at same time as they deeply involved urban societies. About the following elections in some countries (notably Tunisia and Egypt), they could have a decisive impact on the ways of governing urban areas.

The 2011 year put into question urban action from the past, as it was led by collapsed or disrupted regimes, and of the future. At the beginning of a necessarily long process, we still do not know what result this “Revolution” will have. Nonetheless, it is already possible to assert that a new urban development model will present many challenges.

This international colloquium aims to discuss the urban dimension of the great changes in the Arab world, from the origins of the 2011 revolutionary episodes to the present experiences of democratisation, along with phases of political transition and socio-economic crisis in which states are still entangled. Our objective is to (re)consider processes of urbanisation and urban practices, by the yardstick of the political, economic and social issues relevant in the region since the beginning of the decade. Researchers in social sciences and experts on Maghreb, Middle-East and Arabian Peninsula will compare their different points of view. Thus, this colloquium aims to contribute to the revitalization of urban studies in the Arab world, as aligned to economic and political analysis.

Five topics structure this call for contributions:

1. The urban dimensions of revolts

2011 is a major and unseen break year for many Arab states. The extent and intensity of mobilizations expressed a desire of radical political change. Most of these protest movements start from medium and outlying cities (Tunisia, Libya, Syria). Beyond the coercive politics led by regimes, some of them having collapsed when the others are still in place, these movements seem to reveal the unequal development of territories, *between* as well as *in* the different cities.

Do these revolts reflect the exhaustion of development models mostly based on a ground rent and its capture by businessmen close to the political leaders?

Are they revealing the frustration of populations disappointed by the official strategies of development (economic, social, “human”, etc)? These strategies had indeed mixed results on the daily life. In the Egyptian case particularly, privatizing part of the urban services and public goods has been clearly harmful.

This axis will be composed of contributions studying the urban dimensions of Arab revolutions. Thus, going back over the “pre-revolutionary” mobilizations, concerning issues such as housing and basic urban services access, notably in “informal” areas, seems to be essential.

2. Living in cities in revolt and transition

Revolts themselves have been territorialized. They highlighted several cities that were very discrete before, on the political maps of the Arab world and in the scientific literature about the region: Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, Benghazi in Libya, Dera and Homs in Syria, Taz in Yemen, Sohar in Oman, etc. Central squares and emblematic places from the local urbanity will be bearing the stigma of these revolts for a long time: Tahrir square in Cairo, which remains the active heart of the unfinished Egyptian revolution; Change square (Taghir) in Sana'a, so-called by the protesters, few kilometers away from the Liberation square (Tahrir), occupied by Saleh's men before the great demonstrations of February 2011; or Pearl square in Manama, destroyed by the Bahrain army to prevent demonstrators from making it the hot-spot of resistance activities. These places and territories hit the headlines. Strategies to bypass, control and take over them are worth studying.

The aim is also to present *in situ* analysis of cities in revolt and/or in transition. Contributions based on ethnographic surveys about ways of living, working and travelling in such situations would be essential. Specific explanations are expected about the major changes within the framework of decreasing political control, weakened state, undermining police authority, etc. For instance, revolts had direct and obvious consequences on urban morphologies, even in places where no riot occurred.

In some towns, property speculation has never been so dynamic. On average, three floors have been added to buildings in some outlying districts of Cairo. Investors took advantage of the fall of Mubarak regime to get round the town-planning regulations. They made no secret of it.

3. Legacies of the past: details and questions about urban action of the « former regimes »

Many questions can be tackled here.

The great urban and tourist projects involving the former powers: did the "Arab spring" stop (temporarily or permanently?) some of the urban projects negotiated between the former authoritarian powers and multinational firms, for instance the *Cairo 2050 Master Plan*, or the tourist and commercial projects funded by Emirates companies in Syria, which the execution is now very uncertain ?

Urban and territorial governance before: are the administrative division and political responsibilities put into question? If change is actually demanded, by what means (what are the new kinds of discourses and how centralization is now criticized?)?

In the field of housing, are the shortcomings of urban policies highlighted?

How could we assess public action in that matter (new towns, informal districts, regulations)?

A desire to break with the past can be seen. How is it expressed today?

4. Elections and new political powers: the urban agenda in question

Contributions on the urban dimension of political programmes or electoral discourses, formulated by the different parties during the 2011 elections, will be appreciated. Islamist

breakthrough in Tunisia and Egypt could be partly explained by their long presence and action in popular districts neglected by former regimes. Will the Islamists be able to develop punctual actions, such as new specific services, in line with a global town planning? Who will be their interlocutors in that matter? What role will play the other political forces?

Will the new governments and parliamentary chambers have to follow a new urban agenda? What are the new scopes to place on this agenda?

Discontentment from the informal districts cannot be ignored anymore by disrupted regimes or transitional powers. Is there any tangible sign of change?

Are we moving towards new administrative divisions and devolution to local authorities, especially to major regional cities? Indeed hyper-centralism is characteristic of authoritarian governments. This resulted in considerable confusion between governorates and municipalities. However new authorities have just been nationally elected and established. Will it lead to new methods of local governance, promoting proximity and limiting spatial fragmentation?

5. Rethinking sustainable urban development: proposals from civil society and silent partners

In 2011, there was also an evolution of the strategies developed by operators in charge of foreign aid to Arab nations. How do the multilateral and bilateral partners change their development and financing strategy, while a new political geography is taking shape in the region?

Can we really talk about a wider range of possibilities for the civil society? After the outbreak of revolts, what were the structured or most visible groups? What are the new issues in debate and projects under discussion? Who is bringing them?

Are the associations and NGOs establishing new priorities?

Submission procedure:

This multidisciplinary colloquium is willing to collect communications highlighting recent fieldworks, or experts' reports and critical analyzes. Case studies or comparative analyzes will be welcome, from young researchers, (post)doctoral students and experienced researchers. We strongly encourage proposals (eg feedbacks) from NGOs, associations, national and international experts, etc.

Proposals for papers (5000 signs), and a brief biography or CV, can be sent in French or English.

Organisation:

Organized by the Pole "City and Sustainable Development" of the CEDEJ (<http://www.cedej-eg.org/>), this colloquium is also part of two ongoing research programs:

- Sustainable City in the South Mediterranean (MeRsi project), co-funded by the *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie* (Academic Agency of French-speaking countries)- Middle East Office and the CEDEJ;
- SYSREMO: Global Geographies : Towards a regional system in the Middle East, funded by the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (National Agency for Research), France (ESO-Rennes).

Organizers :

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Deadline for submission: May 15, 2012

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