

Shifting Urban Policies in Northern Africa after the ‘Arab Spring’ – Urgent Reactions or Real Changes?

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There might be two impressions that have stuck to people’s mind since the Arab uprisings have started in the late months of 2010: First, pictures of masses of protesting citizen occupying Tahrir Square in Cairo, Pearl Roundabout in Manama or Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis. Second, the image of a poor street vendor from one of the most deprived urban neighbourhoods in Tunisia’s neglected hinterland burning himself after being humiliated by a municipal employee. Both pictures show the significance of the spatial dimension: the city as “the environment that creates the structural conditions for dissent to emerge and be expressed” (Allegra et al. 2013, p. 1676). Accordingly, we should rethink whether the city in the Arab uprisings might not only be “the site of the struggle, but also ... the focus of the struggle” (Stadnicki et al. 2014, p. 8).

Social injustice, corruption, an authoritarian rule of law, and the growing contrasts between the rich and the poor have become particularly evident in the Arab countries’ largest metropolitan areas. Mirroring the contrast between global aspirations and local challenges, these “cities of extremes” (Bayat & Biekaart 2009) have seen the emergence of gated communities and urban flagship projects in the direct neighbourhood of precarious informal settlements. Far too often, the region’s urban planning is not demand-led, but rather driven by a centrally controlled real-estate market that feeds a hardly transparent, rentier-based economic model. Consequently, top-down planning has often prioritised ambitious large-scale projects instead of decentralised and differentiated planning solutions (cf. Elsheshtawy 2004, Zaki 2011). This underlines the importance of urban ‘worlding’ ambitions (cf. Roy & Ong 2011) within the North African context; not only as way to attract tourists and investors, but also in order to project countries’ power and global significance. Moreover, North African urban planning has been remarkably characterised by what Rachik (2002) called *urbanisme de l’urgence* (urbanism of urgency) – the strong interplay of protest and counteraction – especially in informal settlements and popular quarters.

Thus, for at least two main reasons it is likely to assume that urban development has become a priority of post-2011 public policy: First, the increasing need of state authorities to participate in international competition has put cities in the centre of countries’ marketing strategies orientated towards external stakeholders like tourists and investors. However, from the perspective of the governments, the Arab uprisings have endangered the marketability of cities. This is likely to provoke *urgent* counteraction aiming to restore investment- and tourism-friendly pre-‘Spring’ stability. Second, the crucial mobilisation of marginalised classes disclosed the deficiencies of neoliberal urban development. Informal settlement dwellers were among the main protesting groups in the Arab uprisings. Marginalised groups in the neglected Tunisian hinterland have triggered the Tunisian revolution. In this sense, the political reconfigurations

after the Arab uprisings may present an opportunity to rethink previous modes of urban development and to push for more *sustainable* planning solutions.

Because of that, I argue that the country-specific roles of public space and spatial disparities for the rise and (non-)success of the Arab uprisings have remarkably influenced post-2011 planning practice and planning institutions. However, the question is whether planning authorities have opted for more sustainable solutions or rather have stuck to urgent planning reactions. In order to approach this question, the paper is designed as a comparative analysis focusing on urban policy in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia from 2011 to 2015. In which way planning authorities respond to the role of the city during the rise of the 'Arab Spring'? What are the motivations behind the changes and continuations of urban policy? The paper is based on own empirical data (mainly problem-centred qualitative interviews) collected during field research in the early months of 2015.

The paper shows that the Arab Spring has had a significant impact on countries' urban policy. In all countries considered, authorities showed urgent willingness to restore and re-project stability mainly because of economic motivations. However, there are remarkable differences in the extent to which repression or reform have been used within post-2011 urban policy. In Egypt, intra-urban disparities have been a remarkable aspect of the uprisings. Thus, authorities have invested in the reestablishment of control in informal settlements – through means of repression and appeasement. Besides, they restricted access to public space and pushed for new urban megaprojects. In contrast, Tunisia's urban policy is rather long-term orientated. Pivotal political attention is given to decentralisation and the strengthening of local governance capacities as a mean of diminishing inter-urban disparities within the country. However, urban mega-projects and the *projection* of stability remain important aspects. In Morocco, the urban dimension of the Arab Spring has not been as remarkable as in the other considered countries. However, authorities have increased control mechanisms in popular quarters in order to prevent the participation of marginalised classes in the February 20 Movement.

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