Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"Freedom is still flowering in the Arab Spring"

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“Some are already writing the obituary of the Arab awakening. They point to bloodshed in Syria, clashes in Egypt and attacks on religious minorities as evidence that the revolutions have lost their way.

Electoral success by parties rooted in Islam has led some to fear that change may be for the worse. But to say that Arab Spring has turned into cold winter is wrong. Such pessimism misses the extraordinary opportunities that popular demand for freedom and dignity bring, and could lead us to disengage at a time when we need to redouble our diplomatic and long-term support to the region.

The Arab Spring was always going to be a long process, not an instant fix. It was bound to take different forms in each country. The staging of genuine elections in countries that have been denied them for decades is significant. But it is what happens after elections that will determine success or failure.

The new governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya face enormous challenges as well as sky-high expectations from their people. Having paid a high price for their revolutions, they expect tangible improvements in daily life. As Eastern Europe after 1989 showed, this takes time.

One year on, we must steel ourselves for setbacks and crises, such as we see in Syria today, but there will also be great progress in other parts of the region. This is the new reality.

But being realistic does not mean losing faith. Far from it: greater freedom and democracy in the Middle East is an idea whose time has come. It holds the greatest prospect for the enlargement of human freedom and dignity since the end of the Cold War.

On the positive side, Tunisia has its first democratically elected parliament since the 1950s, with 24 per cent of the seats held by women. Morocco has held free elections under a new constitution that, for the first time in its history, means a prime minister from the party that won most votes, rather than one picked by the King. Turnout in the first phase of Egypt’s elections was above 60 per cent, compared with 23 per cent in the 2005 elections under the Mubarak regime. Libya has a new government after more than 40 years of dictatorship. Positive reform is under way in Jordan, and Yemen has agreed a political transition negotiated by the increasingly influential Gulf Co-operation Council. Bahrain has begun to

take steps to implement the conclusions of its commission of inquiry into the violence last year, although the need for full implementation remains.

We are seeing governments required to be more responsive to the demands of their people. Principles that underpin democracy are beginning to take greater hold, such as the need for popular consent, the right to seek redress, to be protected against arbitrary punishment and to have space for freedom of expression. We have also seen a groundbreaking shift in the willingness of members of the Arab League to show leadership in confronting crises in their midst.

These are trends that must be supported. It is in our national interest to see stable and open societies emerge across the Middle East over time.

It is true that parties drawing their inspiration from Islam have done better at the polls than secular parties and there are legitimate concerns about what this will mean. Their success is partly a legacy of the refusal of governments to allow the development of meaningful opposition parties in the past. It may also be part of a tendency to vote for groups believed to have done the most to oppose dictatorship and corruption and to offer basic welfare.

Either way, we must respect these choices while upholding our own principles of human rights and freedom and urging the highest standards. Trying to pick winners would fatally undermine faith in our intentions and our support for democracy. In standing up for the right of peoples to choose their own representatives at the ballot box, we have to accept their choices and work with the governments they elect.

Again it will not be easy. But these parties will be under pressure to stick by their pledges to share power and chart a moderate course. The scale of the economic problems they face is monumental. They will have to seek coalition partners and to reassure international investors if they are to meet the expectations of their people. We cannot guarantee that they will take this path, but if they do not they risk angering people who can easily turn to the streets. The true test of these governments will be how they act in office and, ultimately, whether they are prepared to surrender power if rejected at the ballot box and will make a commitment to non-violence. This makes our engagement with them all the more important.

Our most immediate challenge is in Syria, where the killing of more than 5,000 people, combined with horrific accounts of torture and oppression, risk plunging that country into civil war. All our efforts are devoted to strengthening the hand of the Arab League as it attempts to broker an end to the violence, maintaining economic and diplomatic pressure on the regime, supporting the emerging opposition, and pressing for a UN Security Council response as well as the departure of President Assad.

A more stable and free Middle East will be the work of generations. We cannot dictate choices and each country has a right to find its own way. We respect the concern for stability,

but will always argue that no change – or change at a snail's pace – can no longer ensure it. We will also be adamant that the erosion of women's rights would be fundamentally wrong and that attacks on Christian communities are unacceptable.

We will work with all governments in the region committed to reform and will invest time and resources in strengthening civil society: we are already supporting 47 projects in nine countries in the region that support the building blocks of democracy including media freedom, voter education and transparency. We will deepen our Arab Partnership Initiative and our Gulf Dialogue, as well as working for bold support from the EU, World Bank and IMF. We will continue to try with our allies to push forward the stalled peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. And we will resist the efforts of those such as elements of the Iranian regime that back bloodshed and repression in Syria and beyond.

Now is not the time to lose faith in the Arab awakening – but to show the same boldness in our thinking as the people of the region have shown in their actions."

This piece first appeared in The Times newspaper.

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