

# Egypt: The crucial role of civil society in transition

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The countries which experienced the Arab Spring have now found themselves in a transitional period, and Egypt is no exception. Ayman Okeil shares the experience of the Egyptian Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, with its particular focus on contributing to social development through promoting dialogue and protecting cultural diversity. This will provide a basis, the author argues, for a renewed intercultural dialogue among civil societies to the South and North of the Mediterranean, touching upon equality and democratic rights.

To understand the context of the current situation in the Arab countries today we need to refer to the changes brought about by the popular mobilisations and revolutions provoked by the absence of public freedoms and social justice, and the high rates of poverty and marginalisation, along with violations of human rights and human dignity. Despite the fact that almost three years have passed since the eruption of the first revolution in Tunisia with the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the Egyptian Revolution of 25th January 2011, and the revolutions in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain, stability and the popular revolutions objectives have not been achieved yet.

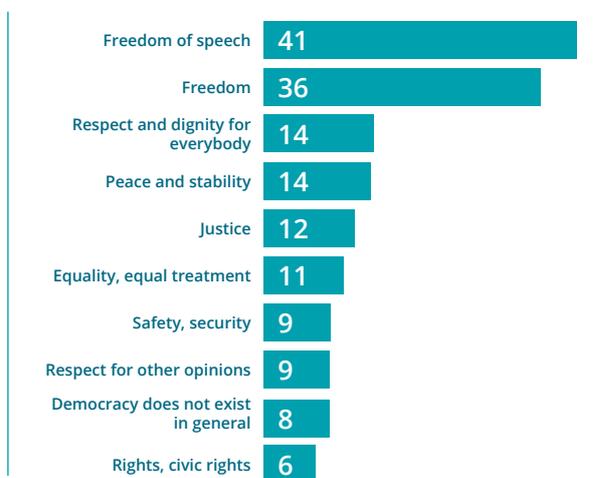
In Egypt, immediately after the stepping down of former President Hosni Mubarak, the country entered a transitional period characterised by parliamentary and presidential elections, the rehabilitated right to establish political parties and organisations, but also extreme

political polarisation. The one-year rule of President Mohammed Morsi ended with his overthrow on 30th June 2013 on the back of a 'popular revolution' according to many people, and a 'military coup' according to others. For many, the recent events increased polarisations and the social tension in the Egyptian streets, taking the country back to square one and prolonging the transitional period with people calling for the same demands voiced since 2011: bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity (Chart 19.1).

## The evolution of the Anna Lindh Network

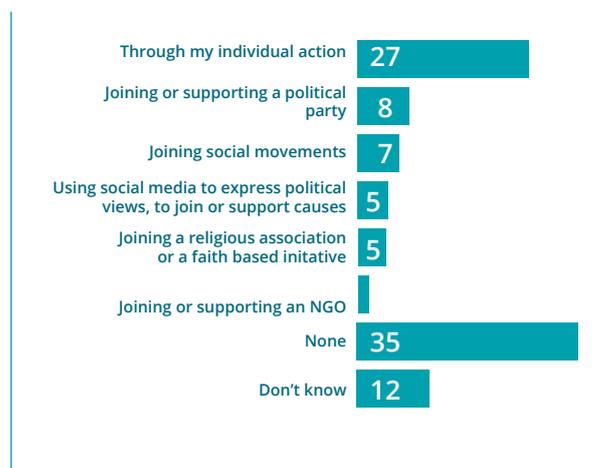
The situation in Egypt during the past three years has demanded an active role of civil society organizations (CSOs), which in Egypt are registered as volunteer, not-for-profit, and non-partisan entities, with regard to their internal and international action. The first pertaining to the capacity of CSOs to directly contribute

**Chart 19.1**  
Words that come to mind when thinking about democracy in Egypt



**Survey Question:** When somebody is using the word democracy, what are the words that come to your mind? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

**Chart 19.2**  
Most efficient ways of solving problems in Egypt



**Survey Question:** How do you think you could most efficiently contribute to solving the problems in your country? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

### Chart 19.3

#### Views about political, cultural and religious diversity in Egypt



**Survey Question:** Could you please tell me, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

to the achievement of the popular revolution demands, to advance the democratic transition process, and promote social cohesion by spreading the values of dialogue and acceptance of the other. The second dimension relates to those CSOs that have established cooperation schemes with neighboring Euro-Mediterranean countries and are able to exchange experiences and tools to promote social, economic, and political mobilisation in Egypt. At this historic juncture, it is particularly important to benefit from the acquired adequate CSOs knowledge of the cultural background of other Arab and European countries to establish fruitful exchanges and collaborations (Chart 19.2).

Within this context, and the work of the Anna Lindh Foundation's region-wide civil society Network, the role of the Egyptian National Network stands out with its 152 CSO affiliates, and growing membership. Since its beginning, under the initial coordination of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the Network has been working to achieve the Foundation's objectives for the promotion of understanding and dialogue between the people of the Euro-Mediterranean region in fields related to social and human dialogue, committed to the Foundation's governing values, represented by the acceptance of pluralism, cultural diversity, mutual respect between societies, religions, and beliefs, the acknowledgment of the rule of law and basic freedoms. This continues today with the support of Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights that was elected to become the Head of Network in Egypt in June 2013.

Based on deep discussions and several meetings with the Egyptian members and an understanding of the current country's reality, Maat has developed a clear vision to what could be offered to the Network during its coordination and the role that could be played by members to serve the transition towards a more democratic community that respects the values of dialogue and acceptance of the other (Chart 3).

Since its establishment, the Network has been facing key challenges, ranging from the low level of community awareness about the importance of this agenda, to the negative impact of media and opinion-leadership on international cooperation. This included the growing sensitivity to foreign funding of Egyptian CSOs, with some accused of having established headquarters and practiced activities illegally in the country, an issue fuelled by media coverage and political handling which led to a question of public opinion on the existence of CSOs in general.

#### Social dialogue and the Euro-Mediterranean dimension

The Network shall continue to focus on being an active partner and positive contributor to the democratic transition process through its focus on the required social dialogue among the Egyptian population, protecting the political and cultural diversity in the country (Chart 19.3). The current network setup, the capabilities of its member organisations, its geographical spread, and accumulated experiences allow it to play this role on a basis of neutrality and objectiveness without taking sides or getting involved in politics.

The Network will also make sure that the Euro-Mediterranean dimension is strongly present in the intended reform process at the national level to strengthen the basis for mutual collaboration and cultural, economic, social, and equal partnership to further social integration without compromising the principles of independence, and cultural and religious identity. The Survey results shall guide the efforts to achieve those goals, especially when the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll provides valuable information on issues strictly related to our goals and that refers to the best ways for citizens to contribute actively to the solution of their countries issues, and their perspectives on the traditional role of CSOs, as well as the benefits of cooperation with the other Euro-Mediterranean countries.

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