

Schools of Political Studies
Thematic meetings during the World Forum of Democracy (3-7 November)

Thematic Group Meeting
“Pluralistic political dialogue in the Maghreb: Can it prevail?”
5 November 2014
Synopsis¹

The thematic Group Meeting on the Maghreb region gathered mostly representatives of Northern African countries, in particular from Morocco and Tunisia. It was attended also by participants from sub-Saharan African countries, in particular Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, Senegal and Togo. In his introduction, the moderator, Mr **Salvatore SAGUÈS** (OIF), underlined the changes observed in the region since the Arab Spring three years ago. He pointed out in particular the social dialogue that has been put in place with Islamic groups.

For the invited expert, Ms **Khadija MOHSEN-FINAN**, there are substantial differences in the ways that both Morocco and Tunisia undertook to reform their political systems.

In **Morocco**, the reforms have been initiated by the authorities with the support of King Mohammed VI who plays an important role in balancing different groups. The **situation is evolving incrementally**. The institutional reforms protect the monarchy, but also aim to modernise it. The pluralism put in place is still largely controlled by the King; he defines the rules and plays the role of arbiter between different groups. The opening up of the system has allowed Islamic parties to enter the Parliament. They are, however, excluded from the Government. Institutional reforms are still weak and there are still problems regarding freedom of the press. The Moroccan transition has many common points with reforms in Latin America or Eastern Europe.

Ms MOHSEN-FINAN underlined that **Tunisia** undertook the reforms through a rupture with the previous regime. The revolution allowed the country to remove previous rulers and to proceed with reform of the political system. It has now adopted a new Constitution and recently conducted successful parliamentary elections. One of the main issues is the **question of the Islamic parties and their place in Tunisian society and politics**. The radical Salafists are also very active. There are two opposing points of view: Islamist and modernist.

The speaker underlined the **positive role of civil society, trade unions and employee organisations** such as the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Bar Association. They have all contributed to reach a historic compromise which allowed for the sharing of power and the move towards a policy of dialogue and rapprochement.

During the discussion participants focused mainly on the principal ideas developed by Ms MOHSEN-FINAN and commented on current developments in both countries. While their evaluation of some historical developments may differ, they all expressed **the wish that the Arab Spring continues**. The positive role of the army has been underlined, in particular in Tunisia. Others underlined the important role played by the opposition in shaping the civil society and the emergence of the main player – the citizen.

Even if the political reforms in Morocco and Tunisia have been progressing rather successfully, the participants noted **dangers to the future of democracy and political stability**. The strong role of Islamic movements still dominates public discussion. Some participants pointed out that there is regression regarding women's rights. The recent elections in Tunisia showed that Islamic parties were present in all regions and used their

¹ Notes taken by Piotr Walczak, DPP

political weight to their advantage and which it is feared could endanger democracy and political pluralism.

In Morocco, reconciliation remains un-resolved. Some critical comments were expressed about the existing Commission on Equity and Reconciliation, which it was suggested is not seeking the truth or justice and is limited only to compensation. The example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was mentioned as a source of inspiration.

Speaking about the situation in the region, the participants wondered why the **Arab Spring and democratisation** has not succeeded in, for example, Egypt, Libya and Algeria. It was suggested that in Libya there is a regime, but not a State. Despite the common challenges of democratisation, it was underlined that each country has to work out its own way of transition. Much depends on the democratic dynamic and the population's support for change, in particular for strengthening the civil society. The need to educate young people was also emphasised.

Ms MOHSEN-FINAN observed that both Togo and Senegal are exceptions in the Arab world. She sees substantial progress in both countries, in particular as regards the **social dialogue and the management of the existing diversity**.