

Sweeping Reforms Cannot Happen Overnight, Arab Leaders Say

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- Arab uprisings brought unforeseeable change, but sweeping reforms will take time
- Libya has complete control over its territory, its prime minister said, and Al-Qaeda elements are few
- Unemployment is the key economic challenge, and leaders must manage expectations
- The theme of the 43rd World Economic Forum Annual Meeting is Resilient Dynamism. For more information, visit <http://wef.ch/Davos>

Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, 25 January 2013 – The Arab uprisings have brought sweeping leadership changes, but progress on women ' s rights, corruption and freedom of the press cannot happen overnight, Arab heads of government said in a televised debate at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting today.

Asked by Fareed Zakaria, Anchor - GPS, CNN, USA, whether reports are true that Arab women have become worse off since the uprisings broke out, the leaders of Egypt, Morocco and Libya denied that they are suffering more than under the previous dictatorships.

“ It ' s clear that there are voices that want to limit the freedom of women, but the name of the game is that people can air their thoughts now, ” said Hesham Mohamed Qandil, Prime Minister of Egypt.

Abdelilah Benkirane, Chief of Government of Morocco, said Western countries should not seek to impose their idea of women ' s rights.

Reforms must start from within the Arab world, said Ali M. Z. Ben Zedan, Prime Minister of Libya. “ We need to create an environment conducive to development and education. ” Developing rural areas and institution building is the other.

In a sometimes heated question-and-answer session, member of the audience Kenneth Roth, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch, USA, said both Egypt and Morocco had used criminal defamation laws to limit freedom of speech and silence journalists, including a case in the latter country in the past few days. He asked the leaders to commit to banning the practise.

Qandil responded by saying that he himself had been “ pounded by unfair lies ” in the media, while Benkirane said he did not know the details. “ But I think this shows things are much improved in Morocco, if only one year after the elections there has been just one trial, ” he said. “ Do you want us to turn into Switzerland overnight? ”

Another audience member pointed out that corruption is among the main causes behind the wave of popular discontent, and charged that little has changed. Morocco is committed to respecting the law, Benkirane said. “ Some people have enjoyed immunity so far, but if these people continue, then one day they will have to face justice, ” he said.

Libya ' s Ben Zedan said: “ One of our goals is to change the mentalities and certain practises, but we can ' t change things overnight. ”

Asked whether the Libyan government has control over the whole of its territory despite reports to the contrary, Ben Zedan said, “ Yes, we do. ” Libya has managed to close borders that were long open to foreign fighters, and all but

Tunisian, Turkish and Jordanian citizens now need a visa to enter the country.

“ People have normal lives, there is relative stability, ” Ben Zedan said. Asked whether Al-Qaeda or its affiliates are operating in the country, he said: “ There are some Islamists whose beliefs are close to those of Al-Qaeda. ” But his information suggested they are few. Libya is still investigating the September killing of the US ambassador to the country in Benghazi, he said, so it is too soon to say whether Al-Qaeda affiliates were behind it.

Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, said managing expectations stirred up by the “ Arab Spring ” is a serious challenge for the new political leaders. But he warned against saying “ wait on us, things will be better ” . “ That is what they heard from the old regimes as well, he said.

Panellists agreed that employment is a major challenge in the region and another driver of the revolutions. Fayyad said that shows the importance of institution building and having functional governments.

Overall, the picture is upbeat, said Qandil. “ The Egyptian people will not have another dictator. They know how to topple a tyrant and they will do it again, so that ’ s the guarantee, ” he said.

Syria recurred in the debate, and Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati reiterated Lebanon ’ s policy of political “ disassociation ” from the conflict because the two countries are historically intertwined. “ If we took a position, we would be boosting the divisions in Lebanese society, ” he said. But humanitarian relief for the tens of thousands of refugees in Lebanon is another matter, and assistance for them is “ without limit ” .

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