



FORUM POUR UNE GOUVERNANCE
DÉMOCRATIQUE MONDIALE
FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC
GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

**Civil Society in the
Middle East and North Africa
Democratizing Governance:
From the Local to the Global**

Stockholm, Sweden
November 1-2, 2011

**Arab Civil Society Power Transactions
Locally and Multilaterally**

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Introduction

The term civil society (CS) has been used in a broad sense to describe a Third Sector existing alongside, and interacting with, the State and the Market. The concept includes a range of formal and informal organizations, namely non-governmental organization (NGO)'s, trade and labor unions, professional syndicates, social movements, citizens acting collectively, faith based groups, and others. Historically, civil society has played an important role in influencing governance at local and national levels. Civil society's role and influence has now transcended the national level to include the regional and global.

This paper discusses the role of civil society in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and its position in power transactions at local and national levels as well as within regional and global levels of governance. The paper will focus on the Egyptian context and will give special attention to gender issues. It focuses on NGO's as a sector of civil society and touches, where relevant, upon other groups within the wide concept of civil society.

NGOs in Egypt have been classified according to type, differing, in essence, between operational NGOs (i.e. those providing services and programs) and those who advocate and pressure for change, human rights NGOs, for instance. Each type has its own power, areas of influence, and specific targets.

Egyptian NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs) interact with, influence, and are influenced by, government through government policies and legislation. CSOs also influence, and are influenced by, the business sector, by regional bodies such as the League of Arab States, and by multilateral organizations including United Nation organs and the European Community.

The Evolution of Civil Society in Egypt

In the historical development of Egyptian civil society, one can distinguish four important stages: the inception stage, the 1952 revolution, the millennium, and the January 25, 2011 revolution. The circumstances of civil society and its power and ability to influence the state and market at different levels of governance during any of these stages depended, to a great extent, upon three interrelated factors: the degree of democracy and freedom that prevailed in the country at the time, the government's position toward the activities of civil society, and the nature of the global environment with respect to its support to the role of civil society. Following is a brief overview of these stages.

The Inception stage

Prior to 1952, Egypt had strong unions and syndicates. The number of NGOs increased consistently, extending their scope of work from charity activities to developmental, cultural, and political work. Groups and NGOs that were engaged in cultural activities were able to influence community attitudes towards women. These groups prepared the ground for the establishment of the feminist union. A democratic environment and a liberal civic law that regulated civil society work supported Egyptian

NGOs. The relationships between civil society and other sectors of society were complementary and power relations were not in question.

The 1952 Revolution

The 1952 revolution brought great restrictions to the work of civil society. New legislation was formulated changing the mandates of the unions and professional syndicates and disempowering them vis-a-vis the government and the nationalized business sector. New NGO legislation gave the government complete authority to define NGO work and to supervise it closely. NGO federations became, in reality, governmental organizations.

By the 1980s, a number of NGOs with human rights approaches and funding from outside the country took positions against the government on certain issues. As they became more organized they lobbied to change existing laws that restricted NGOs. The 1990s came with great changes to the circumstances of NGOs within Egypt's power structure. The international conferences of the 1990s¹ provided opportunities to become more organized, to submit shadow reports, and to attend conferences and forums in numbers.

Egyptian NGOs networked with Arab and other NGOs from outside the region, joining them in lobbying various governments to influence the conferences plans of action. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)² which was convened in Cairo was a major factor in giving the NGO sector a stronger position in the power transactions context. Eager to prove to the international community that Egypt can organize a global conference, the government gave full support to its NGOs. NGOs succeeded in influencing the conference document to become extremely gender sensitive.

The power gained by NGOs was reflected in the Fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing held the following year. Unprecedented numbers of Egyptian NGOs attended the conference and the parallel forum. Their shadow report pressured the government and the UN to address discriminatory practices against Egyptian women. They also succeeded in influencing the platform for action to represent a step forward from the ICPD document.

Two examples where Egyptian NGOs used their power to influence multilateral organizations are worth mentioning here. An important initiative was undertaken by the Egyptian General Union for the Environment, who criticized the World Bank for not being sensitive to environmental protection issues. The Bank reacted by recruiting its first environmental advisor and establishing the Office of Environmental Affairs. By 1993 the Bank had committed US\$ 2 billion to assist developing countries in environmental protection and improvement. A second example is the successful intervention of Egyptian CSOs who presented research on the effect of structural adjustment policies on children at the Third World Forum. The study was discussed with UNICEF who subsequently advocated "adjustment with a human face."

The New Millennium

The new millennium brought a number of events that increased the influence of CSOs at different levels. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Arab region human development report was produced in 2002. It stated three problems contributing to the backwardness of the region: lack of knowledge, lack of freedom, and discrimination against women. Linking the September 11 attacks with the problems of the region, the US and the G8 countries put pressure on MENA countries to enact overall reforms. A number of regional conferences to suggest directions and plans for reform were greatly influenced by CSOs who attended the conferences. The industrialized countries allocated budgets to implement the planned reforms. A special component of these budgets was directed to CSOs that focused on the empowerment of women. The availability of funds empowered the human

¹The 1990s witnessed one of the largest concentrations of UN-inspired global summits and high-level conferences giving expression, for the first time, to large numbers of NGOs.

²The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was held in 1994.

rights NGOs to establish coalitions at the local and regional levels. One coalition composed of 19 human rights NGOs appealed to the UN to refuse Egypt membership to the Human Rights Council on basis of the government's poor human rights record.

Another important event was the appointment of a commissioner general for civil society in the League of Arab States. Two departments were also established: the Department of Human Rights, concerned with developing an Arab human rights system and the Department of Civil Society Observatory and Vocational Unions. This second department was established to communicate with CSOs in the Arab region toward strengthening their role in the joint Arab action. Despite these arrangements, civil society to this day has no influence in decisions taken by the League. CSOs are permitted as observers in the work of the League. However, those allowed such status are associated with member state governments in some way.

During this period, Egyptian feminist NGOs influenced parliament to formulate a number of legislations to empower women. Changes to legislation included giving the Egyptian nationality to the children born to an Egyptian mother and a foreign father, giving women the right to divorce, and allowing women to receive a passport without the consent of their husbands. In addition, the appointment of the first woman judge to the Higher Constitutional Court represented a major change, opening the door to women judges in the family court. To achieve such changes NGOs used many tools including research, petitions, conferences, and the media.

To ease the restrictions of law no. 32/1964³ regulating CSO work, pressure to change the law was placed on the government. A new law was issued on October 2002⁴, providing more recognition of CSOs but still restricting their work.

Given the growth in the number of human rights NGOs, the increase in the availability of funding, and with more organized coalitions in place, the capacity of NGOs to influence multilateral organizations at different levels increased. The UNDP and the European Union (EU) organized national meetings with CSOs to discuss future policies. Increasing numbers of NGOs were able to participate in meetings of the UN Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia. They were also able to participate in the UN meetings in New York and other cities. Egyptian and Arab NGOs delivered a statement during the UN General Assembly in Beijing criticizing the UN for treating NGOs attending conferences as second-class citizens compared to government representatives. They also called on the UN to question Arab countries, including Egypt, on certain gender problems.

Important developments during this period included the increased number of human rights groups who registered themselves as civil "companies" able to operate outside of the restrictions of law 84/2002, and the growth of unregistered protest groups. Among such protest groups are *The Egyptian Movement for Change, Kefaya*⁵, *We Are All Khalid Saeid*⁶, *Youth for Change*, the groups against discrimination, *Writers for Change*, *the Egyptian Judges Club*, and *the March 9th Movement* by university professors. They used demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, public meetings, and the media to influence public opinion against government policies. A new powerful tool used by protest groups to communicate, to publicize ideas, and to organize was new information technologies, including mobile messages, Facebook, and Twitter. These tools reflected the participation of middle and upper-middle class youth in these movements.

The January 25th Revolution

Since the beginning of the millennium, CSOs in Egypt have evolved, extending their influence and power on all levels through their increasing size, improved organization and large amounts of funding from multilateral and bilateral organizations. On the other side, the government put more

³Law 32/1964 was issued by the government to provide extensive authority to the Ministry of Social Affairs to control the establishment, activities, funding and dissolution of NGOs. It was enacted in 1964.

⁴Law 84/2002.

⁵Kefaya, meaning "Enough" is an Egyptian activist group.

⁶"We Are All Khalid Saeid," is an opposition activist group named in honor of a young man that was killed by Egyptian police without trial because he recorded police officers torturing civilians.

restrictions on the limited space available for NGOs, for unions and syndicates, and for opposition parties and movements. As a response, activists groups like Kefaya, professionals, civil servants and others formed their own independent networks with well defined goals and demands. Never before had Egyptian streets witnessed the number of demonstrations that were organized by different groups, using new technologies for civic engagement including Facebook, Twitter, and online radio for community mobilization and advocacy campaigns. Kefaya organized its first major demonstration in 2004 entirely on line. In 2008, the April 6 Youth movement used Facebook and Youtube to organize a nationwide strike in support of textile laborers in Al Mahala.

The increased influence of CSOs on multilateral organizations was evident during discussions of the Egyptian report to CEDAW⁷ committee in Genève. Two groups of NGOs submitted shadow reports to the committee highlighting gender discrimination that was not included in the official government reports. The lobbying, which the NGOs carried with the committee members, influenced the discussions and the concluding remarks of the meeting.

The 2010 election for the parliament was monitored by a large group of NGOs who reported the outrageous intervention of the government to prevent any candidate from winning except those belonging to the National Independent Party. The flagrant abuse of power on the part of the government along with the severe oppression of the Mubarak regime and police brutality fueled an already boiling situation. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights documented 57 cases of torture and 167 deaths at the hands of police between 1993 and 2007. CSOs posted videos of police officers torturing civilians.

When the Tunisian revolution broke out, Egypt was quite prepared for its own. The first groups who marched to Tahrir and other squares on January 25th were organized by CSOs through mobiles, Twitter and Facebook. It was a day where civil society and information technology played a critical role. As the days went on, other groups from all social classes and from all age groups joined in the squares. On February 11th, the demonstrators reached millions in number and Mubarak had to step down. The Democracy Digest headline read: "Civil Society, a Force in Egypt's Democratization". The Digest introduced its April 29th issue stating: "Egypt's civil society overcame the Mubarak regime's stifling restrictions to play a critical role in mobilizing the forces behind the Jasmine Revolution".

Although Egypt has impressed the whole world with its peaceful revolution, the present situation is not satisfactory. The Military Council and the Cabinet are not formulating the policies or following the procedures that would ensure the realization of the goals of the revolution. Women in particular are extremely concerned about their exclusion from the decision makers' circles. The increasing influence of the religious-fundamental groups puts restrictions on women's role as partners in building a democratic Egypt. To counteract the situation, CSOs organized a massive national conference to ensure women's role in public decision making. One outcome of the conference is the establishment of an Egyptian Feminist Union to act as the watchdog for women's rights. Additionally, fifteen NGOs have formed a coalition calling for ending the state of emergency and stopping sending civilians to military tribunals.

Finally, it should be noted that the Egyptian revolution has influenced a number of uprisings within, and outside of, the Arab region. It has encouraged ongoing revolutions in Syria, Libya and in Yemen. The slogans raised by the *Occupy Wall Street* demonstrators include references to the Egyptian revolution.

The Future

The future presents both a set of opportunities on one hand, and a set of challenges on the other, that will affect the position of CSOs in power transactions at the local, regional, and global levels of governance. On the opportunity side, CSOs have gained greater space and more access to policy-makers and administrators. They have sharpened their advocacy skills, increasing their capacity to have an impact on shaping policy and on setting the agenda for political reform. There is now an opportunity to recruit more volunteers and constituencies. Members of activist groups are entering the new parliament elections as

⁷The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and came into force as a treaty in 1981. Work related to CEDAW is now based out of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva.

candidates and some have formed new political parties which will give them direct influence on the legislative branch. The newly born Egyptian Feminist Union can play an important role in coordinating the work of feminist NGOs and upgrading their capacity to address public issues and not only women's concerns.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned opportunities, Egyptian CSOs face various challenges that must be addressed if they are to strengthen their influence. There is a need for more coordination between NGOs, syndicates, unions, political parties, and the younger generation activists. Further, CSOs, particularly human rights NGOs, depend almost completely upon foreign funding. In order to ensure their sustainability they need to find ways to raise resources from their local communities. Also, the numerous training workshops attended by NGOs have not been seriously evaluated to assess the impact on their performance. There is a need for new, more effective, training methodologies and content to increase CSO capacities. On the global level, more coordination is needed between the different CS coalitions who attend UN meetings in order to maximize their impacts. Finally, there has been some concern on part of the Egyptian government about the increasing influence of CSOs and a growing rumor about a new NGOs law that would impose more restrictions. CSOs need to band together to ensure that any changes in existing laws give more freedoms to NGOs to participate in their own governance.

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