

Civil Society and Arab Transitions: A New Beginning?

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Summary

The current social and political situation in several countries of the Arab region presents challenges as well as opportunities for re-defining the role of civil society in supporting the locally owned transition to democratic institutions. Despite the many challenges, there are also indicators that the motivation and capacity for an inter-regional effort are now present. The key question is how to identify, connect and utilize regional capacities that can address local challenges to maintain the momentum of the popular call for democracy. This will require more transparent civil society–state actor partnerships, exchanges between national civil societies facilitated through improved communication, and an accessible forum to foster these interactions. It will also require taking into consideration a series of factors specific to culture and context of the Arab region.

Introduction

Since the start of the Arab Spring in late 2010, several transitions have been observed in the region: participatory citizenship has moved, partly at least, from principle to practice; large-scale demonstrations have taken to the streets, demanding political change; grassroots movements have managed to topple political elites by mobilizing public opinion; and the legitimacy of autocratic regimes has been directly challenged by large-scale protest.

Academically, there is recognition of the prominent role that civil society is expected to play in the transition to democracy.¹ However, events have also revealed shortcomings: inability to connect with popular sentiment; a failure to increase credibility in public opinion; and lagging behind quickly mobilized popular protest movements. This has been the case before the Arab Spring, as well as in the transitional stage currently experienced by many Arab countries. As Benoît Chaball has noted, the changes sweeping the region signify a new phase in the expression of political force by civil society.² The trajectory of events since the first Arab uprisings in the region is not a linear one.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were largely absent from the initial uprisings, which were mobilized on the grassroots level.³ CSOs found themselves basically

1 Blair, Harry. "Doing Democracy in the Third World: Developing An Applied Theory of Civil Society," paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC, 2–5 September, 1993.

2 Benoît Challand, "Citizenship against the Grain: Locating the Spirit of the Arab Uprisings in Times of Counterrevolution," *Constellations*, 20 (2), 2013.

3 While there are many conceptions of "civil society", in the Arab context the term is used to refer to all non-state organizations. However, the terms CSOs and NGOs are often used interchangeably.

disconnected from both the street and the state, lacking effective coordination mechanisms for engaging with the public and government institutions. The inability of CSOs to coordinate their activities minimized the influence of civil society as a whole, and compromised the role it could have played in giving impetus to causes important to the population, at a time when political parties are still constructing themselves and adapting to the new realities of competitive elections. Also, although street-level protests proved effective in instigating change, the lack of organization across various social actors has meant that momentum is easily lost. There is a fundamental need for capacity building among CSOs, particularly in a region that requires internal reform, changed management practices, financial viability and other assistance related to institution-building.

The momentum brought by the revolution of civilian grassroots movements has created an opportunity for Arab governments to forge new relationships with civil society actors, and for CSOs to exchange experiences in their respective areas of expertise. Prior to the Arab uprising, relations between CSOs and the state had been tense. Newly established governments have often promised to address this issue and forge a new relationship between the state and CSOs after the toppling of previous regimes. The current context in the Arab region provides an opportunity for CSOs to institutionalize their role in relation to the state, as well as for further coordination and cooperation among themselves by exchanging experiences and sharing expertise. At a recent workshop at the League of Arab States headquarters,⁴ participant input held to a series of recommendations that were agreed upon by stakeholders. These included:

- Engaging in objective and transparent partnerships where each partner (state as well as civil society) should be accountable;
- Organizing workshops and conferences to strengthen relationships between states and CSOs, and to indicate gaps and needs;
- Translating CAPMATCH as well as civil society reports into Arabic;⁵
- Establishing inclusive processes that are necessary to secure stable relationships between states and civil society, and stability within societies;
- Fostering increased communication through dialogues and partnerships;

- Creating a secure, neutral forum for Arabic civil society organizations to engage with the League of Arab States (LAS), supported by a fund managed by the LAS.

International experience, peaceful transitions, and the Arab region

Strong and accountable national institutions are widely recognized as one of the main indicators for a successful peaceful transition to democracy. They have been a positive factor in preventing conflict (re-) escalation while benefitting post-conflict reconstruction efforts.⁶ Furthermore, national ownership is a crucial condition for such institutions to succeed. Partnership between government and civil society may serve to facilitate this process. In particular, five areas are strong success indicators for the overall creation of strong state institutions: *inclusive political processes; safety and security; access to justice; public administration and economic revitalization*. If all these areas are to be developed simultaneously, civil society can be the bridge that enables success. However, there is no universally applicable model for the creation and reinforcement of institutions for all contexts, and each society will need to define its own path towards this goal.

Specificities of the Arab region

Although the specificities noted in this section concern the member-countries of the LAS, it should be borne in mind that each society has its own traits that differ from other Arab countries.

Many of the Arab countries have been in a state of flux since 2011: indeed, the same applies to the Arab CSOs, which are affected by the national changes as much as they could be affecting the transition process. However, these changes do not always follow a linear direction: while many CSOs were, in one way or another, sharing a bigger common space before the transition, a wide range of disparities appeared once the regimes were toppled, with each trend adopting a different perspective. Indeed, in some cases, CSOs have come into direct competition with one another in regard to their current operational vision and perspectives on building a “new” state. As such, CSOs in their current operational state might be seen as hindering rather than enabling the process of transition.


The evolution of Arab CSOs in the next few years will be central to the implementation of these recommendations, especially as regards the strategic directions or the legislative framework in which they operate – as shown by the challenging discussions in some Arab countries over proposed legislation on NGOs.

Equally, transitions in the Arab region have resulted in a considerable social polarization. The CSOs are not immune to this; prior to the Arab Spring, some politi-

4 On June 13–14, 2013, a workshop on “Civilian Capacity Development in the Arab Region: The Role of NGOs and Civil Society” was held at the headquarters of the League of Arab States (LAS), organized by the Civilian Capacities Network in close collaboration with LAS and UN CIVCAP.

5 The UN has developed CAPMATCH, an online platform that enables providers to offer civilian capacities, while hosts can request specific capacities that are not available from local providers. The CAPMATCH platform can be accessed at: <https://capmatch.dfs.un.org/Capmatch/>

6 *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict*: Independent report of the Senior Advisory Group, 22 February 2011 (A/65/747-S/2011/85)



cal forces had used civil society to influence the political arena. The lack of a robust political party structure pressed people to express their political views within informal entities, which could sometimes be more influential than the established system – as witnessed recently. Thus, in their envisioned role as capacity-builders in the development process, CSOs should not serve as a tool for aggravating the polarization.

CSOs of the region have the additional difficulty of shifting public perceptions. They have often been viewed negatively, for numerous historical and cultural reasons. Cooperation between Arab CSOs and foreign entities is important in terms of experience sharing – but the widespread existence of notions of “conspiracies” related to external actors should also be recognized. Countering this will require a strong commitment to local ownership in setting agendas, as well as transparency and respect of laws, so that regional CSOs can benefit from external expertise without suffering setbacks.

Despite the sizeable challenges, the current situation in the Arab world offers a unique opportunity to forge a new social contract between the state and the people, institutionalized by a strong and transparent relationship between governments and CSOs. Supporting locally driven cooperation between civil society and state institutions could serve as an appropriate gateway for achieving a new equilibrium between the state and the citizenry. This is of particular importance given that State institutions are at their weakest during transition processes. This weakness, coupled with the negative perceptions of CSOs noted above, could seriously damage and delay the prospects for peaceful transitions.

Background

Civilian capacities are a fundamental part of effective peacebuilding efforts and a necessary component in addressing region-wide challenges. This is recognized by the League of Arab States, the United Nations and the Civilian Capacities Network, and constitutes one of the reasons underlying the desire to develop closer cooperation with NGOs and civil society in the Arab region.⁷

In this context, the League of Arab States hosted an expert-level workshop at its headquarters in Cairo on 13 June 2013, to explore the opportunities for closer cooperation between member-state governments and regional civil society actors, and to discuss the role of civilian capacity in responding to regional challenges.

Workshop participants consisted of LAS representatives, NGOs working in the Arab region, members of the UN Civilian Capacities team, academics, and subject matter experts. The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness for the need to identify civilian capacities in order to ensure appropriate responses to national challenges, as well as to highlight the need for greater regional cooperation and coordination.

Addressing Challenges as a Joint Effort

In the regional context of the Arabic-speaking countries, further obstacles remain. The political situation is still in a state of flux, with no clear indication of an end-state in the near future. As many countries in the region lack the institutional framework and representation to guide interaction between CSOs and governmental institutions, the point of departure should be the needs and grievances of the people. Poverty, illiteracy and access to education remain developmental obstacles that require immediate attention. Furthermore, structural challenges persist beyond the scope of civil society – including environmental issues such as the energy crisis, water scarcity, and climate change.

Tackling these issues will require local ownership and national leadership, but can benefit greatly from regional collaboration and international assistance. It is essential to avoid the traditional system whereby outside donors select specific CSOs, relying solely on them to represent civil society. Capacities should be enhanced within a set of CSOs that are representative of all segments of society, whether they operate in urban centers or the rural periphery, and not only the ones that receive the greatest media exposure. Inclusivity is a key factor: with more stakeholders included in the process, the greater will be the likelihood of a comprehensive system for addressing citizens’ grievances. And here we should note that women and youth constitute two large untapped pools of potential to build upon.

Most countries in the Arab region have civil societies that already possess the human resources required for addressing public grievances. However, they are unable to dedicate and deploy the appropriate resources effectively, as a result of a supply-based rather than a needs-based approach. On the regional level, new opportunities are available for sharing expertise and experiences between CSOs. With a common language and a regional platform, the League of Arab States could serve as a forum for exchanging knowledge and creating a framework for fostering partnerships between CSOs in their member-states. In addition, the UN has developed CAPMATCH as “a self-service online platform whose purpose is to better match the demand and supply of specialized civilian capacities for countries emerging from conflict.”⁸ If an Arabic-language version of CAPMATCH were developed, regional capacity providers

7 The Civilian Capacities Network is a research partnership involving the Igarapé Institute (Brazil), the International Institute for Strategic Studies (China), the Cairo Regional Centre for Training on Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping in Africa (Egypt), the United Services Institution (India), the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta (Indonesia), the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Norway), the Institute of Contemporary International Studies (Russia), African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (South Africa), and the Istanbul Policy Center (Turkey) (<http://bit.ly/1ck6Gwb>).

8 About CAPMATCH, see: <https://capmatch.dfs.un.org/CapMatch/Home/About>

could indicate their expertise, and local requesting parties would then identify the capacities most appropriate to their needs. Networks for activating these civilian capacities are not always in place; today there is a lack of overview as to exactly where these capacities exist. Further, if civilian capacities are identified, difficulties may arise when attempting to engage these. As noted by Cairo workshop participants, this is often due to inadequate long-term funding and support – a gap that needs to be addressed.

The need for socio-economic transition is an overarching narrative in which CSOs can play a key role. The first step in this process must entail renegotiating the relationships between governments and civil society in a clear departure from past decades of large-scale discrimination, suppression, and execution of civil society actors. There is widespread recognition in today's Arab societies of the need for a new social contract between the citizen and the state, based on human rights but also including the responsibilities of citizenship. Strengthening the capabilities of CSOs can prove useful in establishing such a social contract.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With the Arab region still in a state of transition, there remain many uncertainties and challenges for the emergence and evolution of civil society. It is also clear that the current social and political situation in several countries of the region presents unique opportunities for re-defining the role that civil society can play in supporting a locally-owned transition to democracy. Though many challenges remain for this recent development to maintain momentum, there are also indicators that the motivation and capacity for an inter-regional effort are present. The key question today is how

to identify, connect and utilize regional capacities that can address local challenges. This will require more transparent partnerships between civil societies and state actors, exchanges between national civil societies facilitated through improved communication, and an accessible forum to foster these interactions, physically and online. It will also require sensitivity to a series of cultural factors specific to the Arab region, and how these influence the potential for international engagement.

Based on an exchange of perspectives and experiences between Arab CSOs, government officials, LAS representatives, the UN CIVCAP team, and relevant experts, this policy brief recommends:

- A strengthening of capacity building for civil society in the region;
- Objective and transparent partnerships in which each partner is accountable;
- Workshops and conferences to strengthen relationships, and to indicate gaps and needs;
- The development of an Arab-language version of CAPMATCH, and translation of civil society reports;
- Inclusive processes to secure stable relationships between states and civil society, and stability within societies;
- Increased communication between states, LAS, and civil society, to foster dialogues and partnerships;
- A secure, neutral forum for Arab-region civil society organizations to engage with the League of Arab States, supported by a fund managed by LAS;
- Greater awareness of the specificities of the Arab region at every stage.

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