



Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World, the dynamics of activism

A neutral definition of civil society debunks the idea that Arab societies do not have an active civil society. However, the level of activism that is present in the Arab world does not correlate with democratization. The dynamics generated by the authoritarian political systems have different effects than the ones occurring in established democracies. The volume examines in detail such dynamics in five Arab countries.

For a long time a popular view in political sciences and policy making has been that civil society activism plays an important role in processes of democratization. Building on Jamal's work (2007), the study by Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World* illustrates how this assumption is for many reasons not valid for Arab countries. The authoritarian and sectarian wider political context of countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen and Lebanon, the countries discussed in the book, have specific effects that tend to move away from the conventional wisdom that civil society activism generates democratizing trends. More significantly, civil society activism in authoritarian and sectarian settings strengthens the authoritarian regimes.

In the book the authors plead for a neutral notion of the concept civil society instead of linking it exclusively to liberal connotations and therefore to democratization. The authors study civil society as it is which means without a pre-conceived normative notion. If the normative traits are shed, then the independent and autonomous action constituted by civil society does not have a specific nature, but becomes the realm where all sorts of groups and movements operate. Their assumption is that civil society is uniquely shaped by the authoritarian structures in place.

The examples of obstacles civil society needs to deal with in authoritarian contexts are ample. There is a large gap between the written legislation and reality on the ground, laws are vaguely formulated or overruled by emergency laws used as an excuse to block initiatives threatening for the establishment. Other obstacles are: administrative limitations, open interference by security forces, limited or no access to policy-makers, patronage and divide and rule tactics.

However, constraints also come from the ideological divisions and competition that exist within civil society. There is competition for finance from the government or what the authors call the bicycle's spoke (i.e. all these civil society organization as spokes in a wheel with the government in the center) and divisions between secular and religious organizations. Foreign funding also shapes these organizations. Most external donors have an ideological bias and have specific ideas about democracy. This, coupled with strategic interests, prevents donors from interacting with organizations they seemingly cannot relate to (e.g. Islamists).

That the wider political context of the countries discussed in the book has its particular effects on the dynamics of civil society activism is well illustrated by analysis of the situation in different Arab countries. In Jordan some liberalizing policies have been implemented for the sake of international legitimacy. However, civil society is controlled by the regime. A circumstance particular to Jordan is the

large population of Palestinians residing in the country. Since it is such a large percentage of the country's population, the regime pays extra attention to this group and prevents them to organize into civil society organizations. In Morocco the monarchy is at first sight - since the accession of Muhammad VI - a driving force of civil society promotion. However, because the alpha and omega of this promotion of civil society or reforms is the monarchy itself, reforms need sanctioning from the Monarch reinforcing his central position in the political system.

Algeria has presented the world a façade pluralism since 1992. In reality intelligence security officers and generals rule the country. Competition between seculars and religious groups is strong. Seculars and the regime sided together since in 1992 - when the Islamist party was on the verge of winning the elections, with secular elements demanding that the Algerian Army end the electoral process. In Yemen political power is in the hands of the president and the tribal alliances he has managed to form. The obstructions are formed by restrictive legislation, tribalism, socio-economic underdevelopment and social conservatism.

In the case of Jordan opposition to the government hardly occurs in the realm of civil society because of several constraints. Seculars fear working together with Islamists even though they share a similar outlook on the problems that Jordan faces because the latter might use democracy to implement their religious laws. Existing organizations tend to work on the same issues and compete over the same resources. In Lebanon civil society legislation is much more open. However, it is ineffective because the political system is divided along sectarian lines. Furthermore, Lebanon has dealt with a lot of external intervention: Syria, Iran and Israel have all interfered in the politics of the country. Both the sectarian divisions and external interfering are obstacles for the emergence of a shared Lebanese citizenship and a stronger less divided civil society.

In the last part of the book the authors suggest to policy makers to rethink their strategies because most of them still seem to equate promotion of civil society with democratization. Instead of investing in civil society activism in order to foster democratization and regime change a better policy-making strategy would be to focus on defending and promoting individual human rights cases. This can be done in cooperation with the particular governments and through the legal system. Also Islamist groups would in many instances support this.

Another advice is to spend civil society funding primarily on activities that have bridge-building effects between secular/religious groups and between sects to lessen the divide and rule. Moreover, the focus on the bulk of funding initiatives should be on projects that have clear socio-economic implications to engage people, including Islamists.

For now the picture painted is that authoritarian regimes are letting civil society breathe without losing control (or in order not to lose control). However, on a positive note civil society activism is very lively in the Arab World. This can constitute a point of radical departure in the engagement with civil society activists in the region, provided that externally generated notions about democratization are abandoned.

This is a summary of the book “*Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World*” by Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac published 30th September 2010, Routledge.

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