Civil Society and Media
Case Study: Arab World

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If courageous media is absent, and if civil society organizations do not take media seriously, the society will not be able to protect the whole society.

In the last few years, a new term emerged in the Arab world, "civil society". It circulated among a great number of researchers with different meanings and various usages. Standpoints towards the term "civil society" diverged; there were those who got enthusiastic about it, while others were wary of it. Supporters of the term defend their stand by the following: the technological revolution, the downfall of totalitarian regimes in the Eastern Bloc, the retreat of the state and the increasing tendency towards democratization, synchronized with a sharp rise in globalization. They have driven the world towards the emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play a supplementary role to that of governments and help in propagating the values of collective initiatives and self- dependence.

Those who have reservations say the term emanated from institutions that provided finance to some research centers to promote the concept arguing that it is an ideological concept associated with its original Western context and is at odds with the Arab world and its unique cultural and social history.

Some were wrong in assuming that civil society is confined solely

to NGOs that came into being in the context of globalization and were actively pursuing, from the onset, a foreign agenda. Such agenda's topics are dictated by international capitalist finance institutions and civil organizations based in technologically advanced capitalist countries.

Civil society, in the Arab world, comprises several civil and public organizations, some founded at the end of the 19th century and in the 20th century which witnessed the emergence of worker and trade unions and Sufi groups, which might not be considered part of the civil society, but remain one of its most important components until the present day. The same thing goes for tribal members.

It seems that this fact is absent from the minds of those who have reservations. The degree of cooperation or tension between governments and civil organizations varies among Arab countries due to two factors: first, the difference between Arab countries themselves and the kind of activities practiced by these civil organizations. It goes without saying that the degree of cooperation increases between governments and civil organizations that support government policies and projects, while the degree of tension rises between governments and civil organizations when those organizations cross red lines that governments delineate. An obvious example is the barbed relationship between some Arab governments and human rights organizations.

The Arab governments used a number of mechanisms in order to secure total control over civil society institutions. One of the most flagrant mechanisms is the legislative mechanism that includes many restrictions on the establishment and practices of these civil organizations in a way that guarantees that governments enjoy absolute legal and administrative power.

This is not confined to harsh prerequisites for establishing these

institutions but goes beyond this to comprise the authority to oversee, supervise and disband, all of which governments are entitled to do when dealing with civil organizations.

The stand of Arab governments towards the institutions of civil society demonstrates that these governments still deal with societal interactions using a one-sided approach that does not tolerate democratic multiplicity and uses mechanisms of monopoly power. There is a question that arises here which is: Can a civil society be established under the current political, economic, social and cultural conditions prevalent in the Arab world?

Indications are that civil society in the Arab world passes through a very delicate, and intricate transitional stage, within which world change and the internal variables at the political, economic and social levels, accompanied by intellectual and cultural currents, are intertwined. Within this space organized civil society practice has widened to comprise 70,000 institutions in the 1980s, while it was 20,000 in the mid-1960s.

Despite this, all these institutions suffer from crippling restrictions as well as delays in the democratization process in the Arab world. Countries that permit restricted political and multi-party activities, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, Tunisia, and Algeria, also permit the increase in number of civil organizations. In conservative regimes in the Arabian Gulf, where it is noted that the number and kind of civil organizations are of meager proportion, human rights organizations are rare to find. Most civil organizations in this region focus on charity, which is religiously motivated in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. There are also countries that prohibit the establishment of civil organizations that do not reflect citizen's initiatives but instead establish people's committees that are extensions of governmental

policy, such as in Libya, or establish educational associations controlled by the government, such as in Iraq before the American invasion.

Civil society institutions, being the most salient political action tool, cannot be truly interactive in the process of democracy without a cultural frame that helps to implant the values and principles of democratic practice. In the Arab world, there are three kinds of cultures that are intertwined, pervading and cross-pollinating each other. The first culture is one of submission because of the patriarchal nature of Arab societies. This culture has permeated through educational, religious and political institutions where obedience prevails, while individual independence and critical and creative thought are disallowed. This culture is predominant in all parts of the Arab world without exception.

The second prevalent culture is that of vassalage dependency, which imposes an imitation of Western culture with its two-fold facets, Francophone and Anglo-American. This culture is quite common among political and cultural elites in the Arab world and much credit in this respect is attributed to Arab and foreign media for propagating this culture.

The third culture is based on participation, which is the backbone of civil action. Unfortunately, this culture is subject to noticeable retreat in the Arab world under authoritative political structures and the predominance of servile attitudes towards governments and the traditional value system.

Thus, the prevalent culture in most Arab societies is moving in a crippling direction for civil society institutions, even if they exist. Furthermore, the current situation is backed by the prevalent cultural structure, which is characterized by locality and submission towards governments and vassalage to foreign countries, both economically and socially. Economies of the Arab

world are based on two sectors that are not founded on institutions and do not encourage civil organizations, namely, the apiculture sector and the royalties sector. The first is typified with its own values, attitudes, relationships and ways of thought. The second depends solely on the royalties of oil and imported workers and immigrants, grants and loans, all of which lies in the hands of governments, reinforcing its influence as it also finances public projects and social services. Thus, it always has the upper hand in every field. Moreover, large sums of money are trafficked outside the Arab world. What remains inside is confined to small projects yielding quick profits.

We may reach a conclusion that the economic situation in general in the Arab world does not support structures and institutions that give its societies a modern civil character and make political democracy an imposed reality not only through civil struggles but also by means of increasing institutional pressure.

In some Arab societies, also, the withdrawal of the state led to the enlargement of the rate played by businessmen at the expense of other sectors in the society. Furthermore, a loosening of the grip of governments on civil society institutions such as associations, worker and trade unions, and civil organizations, did not accompany this withdrawal. For these reasons, civil society institutions will not grow and prosper, unless governments put an end to tight rule over these institutions. Governments should also allow them to perform their function in educating citizens through spreading civil culture based on affirmative values of voluntary action, collective work, accepting difference within a framework of respect, tolerance, co-operation, competition and pacifist struggle accompanied by a commitment to public accountability and transparency.

In this context, there are several criteria, which combined, measure the efficiency of civil society institutions;

media and communicational competence in propagating the values of participation and cultural development, and that activate and organize independent people's initiatives.

By communicational competence, I mean the ability to overstep traditional roles by drafting national priority agendas that reflect economic and cultural necessities and political and social challenges. Such institutions must be capable of facing Westernized cultural patterns and not be dragged into following Western agendas. My view is that this is the fundamental cultural message for civil society institutions to disseminate, accompanied with themes of change and motivation for people's participation through print and audio-visual media.

On the role of the media in shaping awareness of civil society issues, a number of problematics arise. By media, I mean both traditional and electronic media, namely newspapers, radio, TV,

satellite channels, internet, and media items issued by civil organizations. Despite important contributions in getting civil society issues on the public agenda during the last decades, international and local media shows that there are two patterns in tackling civil society issues in the northern and southern hemispheres. The first pattern is characterized by occasional coverage, mainly associated with formal events (inauguration parties, symposia, festivals or international or local conferences, etc). Most of the time, this kind of media coverage ends with the end of the event itself and doesn't follow up on activities, obstacles, consequences and the achievements of such events.

Advocates for this kind of coverage, which is still prevalent in the Arab world's media, argue that this is a locally and internationally appropriate response, which also meets the demands of ruling authorities. Moreover, civil society coverage is subject to competitive

mechanisms imposed by the media market. Such coverage is confined to news reporting mixed with advertisements and media items. Yet, this kind of coverage leans towards governmental and large investment projects, because it relies solely on official sources and often ignores the people's initiatives. In addition to this, it focuses on the issues presented by foreign agenda at the expense of focal issues, associated with exaggerated use of international mottoes and terms, which are enigmatic and propagated by foreign donors.

The second pattern of tackling civil society in the media relies on a more comprehensive point of view that may be summed up as follows:

This kind of coverage is characterized by the presentation of a critical eye to media disinformation put forward by advocates and practitioners of the first pattern. It demands a broadminded approach that is never too involved in theoretical labyrinths, and most importantly is based on no personal interest in the money circles of local and foreign investors that make others lose their true vision. Furthermore, this approach starts from the real ground of people's awareness of civil issues and their legitimate rights, trying to link media coverage with economic rights and interests and the cultural values of people as groups and individuals. Moreover, it focuses on the interactive relationship between public and civil organizations and actual feedback on their activities and the effects, whether positively or negatively felt, on the most needy segments in the society.

Civil society organizations in the Arab world are still revolving in the orbit of conventional media, confining their effort in this field on issuing newsletters and statements. Furthermore, in their communication, they focus on the stereotypical and redundant use of terms and ideas circulated in the official media and

by UN agencies without paying attention to formulating alternative forms that reflect the essence of the cultural role of civil society. This narrow technical outlook towards media, which is also prevalent among most civil society institutions, can be attributed to a lack of real strategic perception of the huge resources that the media could deploy in enabling the public to grasp a critical culture. This, if achieved, in turn, would enhance the capacity of civil action to formulate alternative policies instead of these adopted by governments and promoted by market forces. It can be achieved through refuting and criticizing what the official media promotes and by presenting political, social, cultural and economic alternatives that guarantee the rights of civil society institutions, on one hand, and influence state policies on the other hand, in addition to breaking free from subservience to international organizations.

Since the percentage of illiteracy is not less than 50 percent in the Arab world, it is clear that Arab civil institutions are in dire need for exerting exceptional and unconventional cultural and media efforts in order to play an effective communicational and media role, at least if we want to save these institutions from being entrapped in the discourse and terms of globalized markets and their predominant media channels, or superficiality otherwise imitating official media that is characterized by slyness and the promotion of governmental policies.

Some field studies asserted the absence of media and communicational awareness among a majority of civil organizations in the Arab world. One study, focusing on media treatment of the issues and challenges facing civil society, pointed to the inadequate outlook of the media relative to the role played by civil organizations in the face of state domination of society; legislatively,

administratively and in security. To be sure, civil action is often for example, understood as charity work. This attitude is reflected in media coverage of the activities of civil organizations and is characterized by narrow-mindedness and the fleeting nature of media itself. It can all be attributed to the lack of media cadres believing in the philosophy and role of civil action and the prevalence of an official imprint on media practices and the desire of Arab governments to retain a tight grip over means of mass communication. Readers and audience views are thus deprived of a media space that should be devoted to educating and raising their awareness. This is only compounded by the role advertising plays in corrupting several Arab media outlets, transforming them into mouthpieces for multinational corporations and international commercial agencies. Arab media also ignores the activities of civil organizations in rural areas while it sheds light on civil organizations

based in Arab capitals run by big investors, businessmen and government lackeys dependent on foreign financing. Explosive topics, for example relations between civil organizations and governments, are avoided, with the media concentrating on covering news items that have a festive character.

In sum, I believe that the effectiveness of media discourse concerning civil society issues, no matter how much it becomes objective, lucid, using proof and evidence and truly approaching the everyday preoccupations of the public, will inevitably be inadequate. It will not affect the public because citizens became at best followers, overwhelmed with information and news that do not satisfy their direct needs and do not lead to change towards a better life. Citizens after all do not live on media knowledge. It appears that those of bare skin, terrified souls and shivering hands do not belong to the homeland

that deprives them of security and dignity. Consequently, no one cares about their protection or advancement. After 25 January Revolution, we are in need for a new alternative strategy for both civil society and national media, which may be dealt with in detail via empirical research about communication and civil society field studies on audience.

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