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Emerging Channels of Public Participation after the Arab Uprisings

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Emerging Channels of Participation after the Arab Uprisings

Governments and civil societies play vital and interconnected roles in facilitating the participation of citizens and their productive engagement in post-uprising political environments. This Policy Brief explores the transformation of civic engagement and participation leading up to and following the Arab uprisings. Experiences across the region reveal the challenges and potential of new channels of engagement developing in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

Defining Civic Engagement and Participatory Development

Participatory development refers to a process that encourages all members of a community or organization to take part in formulating their future. This implies that public programmes focus on the community's self-defined needs. Participatory development projects include community members in every stage of the process, from problem identification to project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This inclusion helps ensure that people in developing communities are empowered to actively engage in economic, social and political life, and that resources are effectively distributed. To facilitate inclusive participation, government and civil

society actors must ensure transparency and the free exchange of information and opinions. Encouraging broad participation allows citizens to take ownership of national development, giving individuals a sense of responsibility and motivation to contribute. In addition, the 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development states that participatory development is a basic human right, because people are entitled to define, implement and enforce the development programmes that shape their lives.

Conceptual definitions and measurements of participatory development have been covered at length in various publications of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The focus of this Policy Brief is an analysis of the new participatory forms that Arab citizens have developed in the wake of the uprisings. This analysis aims to highlight the successes and challenges of emerging channels of public participation and suggest ways in which Governments and civil society can better engage with one another in the service of citizens and the promotion of social justice. It reaffirms that civic participation and participatory development are vital to ensuring social justice, because they guarantee that the voices of all people and the issues that are most important to their lives are reflected in policy.

When the Arab uprisings began in late 2010, many regimes in the region were

caught off-guard by the overwhelming public participation in protests and newly-founded initiatives. Prior to the uprisings, many Arab regimes espoused an implicit social contract, promising citizens security and social welfare in exchange for legitimacy and disengagement from public affairs. Under this system, regimes did not feel obligated to engage in political reform nor listen to citizens' voices. However, the fall of ruling regimes in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia opened the floodgates of political participation. Parties proliferated as people seized the opportunity to coordinate political action and make their voices heard in new democratic processes. During this time, the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region increased exponentially. These political communities, many of which initially emerged during the uprisings to put pressure on autocratic regimes to step down, evolved during and after the revolutionary period to address long-neglected political and socioeconomic issues. In addition to the expansion of traditional methods of political participation, such as political parties, labour movements and electoral participation, Arab citizens also carved out new ways of engaging in politics through youth movements, women's rights initiatives, social media platforms, street protests and public art.

These new—or revived—political spaces have contributed to debates about the future of post-uprising States and allowed a broader sector of the population to engage in national dialogues and transitional processes. However, large segments of society remain marginalized and distanced from the decision-making process by transitional Governments. In Egypt, for example, according to Human Rights Watch, over 1,000 protesters have been killed and 16,000 people have been jailed – primarily Muslim Brotherhood supporters and liberal activists – since the military removed former President Mohamed Morsi from power on 3 July 2013. Many of these deaths and detentions seem to have resulted from protesters' "peaceful exercise

of rights to free expression, association, and peaceful assembly". This exclusion, coupled with economic challenges arising from transitional instability, has further marginalized the poor and disadvantaged, increased inefficiency in public service delivery and lowered the chance of broad-based democracy. Across the region, popular protest spaces such as Tahrir Square and Change Square have been carefully controlled, opposition parties have been constrained and economic policies have continued to ignore the most impoverished. These practices have alienated large sectors of society from the emerging post-revolution politics, and left new Governments vulnerable to the frustrations of excluded and extremist groups.

Challenges to participation in the Arab region

Across the Arab countries, a number of common challenges to popular participation and civic engagement have arisen in the wake of the uprisings. Though they were present prior to the uprisings, the mass mobilizations in 2011 brought the weaknesses of the political and social apparatuses into the spotlight. In the cases of Egypt, Yemen and Libya, successive transitional Governments have struggled to effectively engage with this new level of civic participation and create broadly inclusive political environments. In Tunisia, a three-year-long national dialogue process eventually resulted in a coalition Government and a Constitution widely-praised by constituents across the political spectrum. The experiences of these States, with the diverse civil society and government actors that have emerged in recent years, provide lessons for developing more inclusive and efficient practice.

Civil Society Organizations in Changing Environments

Civil society groups have been important in transitional politics following the Arab uprisings. Across all spheres, civil society plays a role in generating ideas, encouraging dialogue

Tunisia stands out in its efforts to institutionalize diverse and inclusive participatory practices into the transitional political process after the fall of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime. Engaged CSOs and strong political parties helped to maintain a vibrant national dialogue process that culminated in the ratification of a widely-praised new Constitution on 26 January 2014, revealing Tunisia's capacity to contain its diverse population in political channels and institutions.

and holding the Government accountable in the reform process. For example, the popular Egyptian movements April 6 and Kullna Khaled Said [We Are All Khaled Said] began as Facebook pages prior to the revolution, and developed into dynamic, long-term spaces for public discourse and coordinating civil action. Kullna Khaled Said evolved from a niche Facebook page responding to a single atrocity – the torture of a young man by police officers – to a significant player in national grassroots political mobilization and ongoing civil reform initiatives. During and after the uprisings, successful civil society organizations (CSOs) expanded and transformed to better address changing political environments.

Publicity and Broad-Based Participation

A number of constraints persist in facilitating broad-based participation. They include:

- Fear of retribution for participation;
- Limited resources;
- Lack of information about active CSOs, political parties and government programmes;
- Misinformation about institutionalized channels of participation;
- Disillusionment of systems that have previously been unjust;
- Public policy spaces that are inhospitable to women.

A large-scale qualitative study by Gabriella Borovsky and Asma Ben Yahia after the uprising in Tunisia reveals, for example, that “despite an interest in politics, most participants, particularly young women, demonstrated low levels of political awareness. They may have heard of various political institutions or individuals, but could not provide details about what they knew... They lack familiarity with laws and official entities”. In addition, most female participants did not see any value in contacting political representatives to resolve community issues or participating in public political debate. No participants could name the female representatives in their region, and few could cite the name of any Tunisian women’s organizations. Young women, according to Borovsky and Ben Yahia, especially in interior regions of the country, “seek avenues to participate but are not aware of any new avenues that exist outside of contacting the Government; they do not expect the Government to provide adequate redress”. As these responses suggest, the development of CSOs and democratic processes does not in itself ensure access to or engagement with these new channels of participation. In order to provide equitable access, citizens should be informed of the diverse CSOs, political parties and government agencies working in their areas; local and national laws and political processes; and the platforms of elected officials. They should also be offered opportunities to participate in and respond to government and CSO programmes that affect them.

Creating Spaces for Democratic Participation

One of the greatest challenges to public engagement is the continued restriction of public dissent by Governments. Freedom of speech and association are not only basic rights outlined in the Declaration of Human Rights, but also vital components of a democratic society. When regimes criminalize non-state organizations and critical dialogue, they cut off citizens’ ability to participate in the decisions that shape their lives and drive dissent

underground, making it vulnerable to becoming radical and violent. For example, recent laws banning protests and cracking down on political expression in Egypt have driven some groups to shift from slogans proclaiming “our peacefulness is stronger than bullets” to slogans that claim “our peacefulness would be stronger with bullets”. The legal environment, for both local and foreign CSOs in Egypt, is vague and inhospitable, and groups must confront radically shifting political atmospheres that come with changing regimes. CSO operations can be restricted for a broad swath of reasons, including threatening national sovereignty, engaging in political party activities, or acting “against public order and public attitudes”. Such an environment limits the freedom, diversity and efficiency of non-state actors to engage in public discourse, provide critical social services and facilitate dialogue between citizens and the Government.

Engaging Marginalized Constituencies

Youth and women’s initiatives span the full spectrum of political orientations and social issue niches, and they have faced many of the same setbacks as other CSOs and political parties. Across the region, women’s and youth-led organizations played a defining role in the uprisings. Though their demands differed within and across countries, their increased participation in civic and political life helped to topple long-standing regimes and shape the emerging environment in the wake of the revolutions. Youth and women’s movements have also been a driving force behind recent civil society developments, electoral politics and public debates. While youth were involved in politics before the uprisings, an unprecedented level of youth participation and engagement developed in their wake. Leading up to, during and after the Egyptian revolution, for example, predominantly youth-driven groups such as the April 6 Movement, Kullna Khaled Said, Kefaya, the Popular Movement for Democratic Change, Tamarod and Tahrir Bodyguards, shaped public discourse and created avenues for new kinds of civic engagement. This has made them

an important constituency that post-uprising regimes must not underestimate. Recently, to express their disapproval of the unlawful detention of young activists, many youth movements have refused to meet with current President and former Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has acknowledged that reaching out to youth may be “the most daunting of the tasks that he will face as he transitions from army chief to Head of State” (Ezzat).

Toward Expanding Participation and Civic Engagement in the Arab Region

There is no universal template for CSO and Government success. Each country reveals a distinct political climate and social structure, and appropriate development processes shift with these unique environments. However, a number of practices have proven beneficial in previous initiatives to expand participation and empower citizens to engage in public policy and social development. The following is a brief summary of such beneficial practices.

Governments

Prior to and in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, institutional mechanisms for effective public participation were absent in most Arab States. Following the proliferation of channels of participation during the uprisings, Governments risk alienating many sectors of the population if they do not adapt to the emerging political climate. When Governments adopt legislation that encourages free and vibrant political discourse, and support the development of political parties and effective channels of popular representation and expression, this counteracts corruption and promotes fairness in electoral processes. When institutionalized avenues of political expression are closed or inaccessible and street politics are criminalized, citizens are liable to turn to violence to make their voices heard by their Government. Governments can respond to

While it is commendable when Governments reach out to active youth groups, women's rights initiatives, and labour movements in any format, surface-level engagement is not enough.

this threat of social exclusion by expanding and diversifying the space of policy discourse and encouraging engagement with civil society. Such participatory programmes encourage greater trust in the social contract between citizens and the state, and help to alleviate inter-communal conflict and inequalities.

In addition to developing institutionalized channels of participation, collaboration with CSOs allows Governments to better understand and address the needs of all citizens. Meaningfully engaging youth groups, women's rights initiatives and labour movements is particularly important, because they represent large sectors of society and are vulnerable to being marginalized in public discourse. While it is commendable when Governments reach out to active youth groups, women's rights initiatives, and labour movements in any format, surface-level engagement is not enough. These organizations want not only a seat at the political table, but also real change in the issues that affect them. Their voices should no longer be alienated or ignored.

Political Parties

Political parties are an important medium for channeling opinions and agendas into public discourse and ensuring representation of diverse viewpoints. In order to strengthen the role they can play in productively engaging the public, parties should:

- Develop explicit and detailed programmes defining the group's platform;
- Design this platform in conversation with constituents;
- Address society's pressing economic and social needs;

- Abandon ideologically-driven missions;
- Focus on "creating jobs, ensuring economic mobility, establishing equality before the law; fighting corruption, and guaranteeing fairer and wider political representation" (Muasher);
- Reduce the focus on individual leadership personalities;
- Develop grassroots networks;
- Explore ways to diversify funding sources.

In the first post-uprising elections in Egypt, there were more than 60 parties, in Tunisia there were more than 100, and in Libya there were 142. The majority of these parties existed only in government registries; they failed to build a constituent base and lacked the funds to generate public awareness or be significant contributors to political discourse. The legacy of citizens excluded from the policymaking process creates additional challenges as parties attempt to develop policy proposals.

Once in power, party maturity is also important. When ruling parties reach out to opposition groups to form coalitions and create a productive governing environment that includes voices from across the political spectrum, they are able to generate broad-based support after elections. The Ennahda Party in Tunisia is often seen as exemplary in this regard, because it allowed a neutral caretaker Government to step in until the next elections when political deadlock had paralyzed the Ennahda-led Government. The party's voluntary exit from power reflected a significant compromise and allowed the party to go into elections with the added legitimacy of having put the country's stability over their party interests. Globally, the Indian National Congress

The proliferation of political parties, however, is not in and of itself an indication that meaningful political representation is being developed.

International Experiences in Combating Corruption

Transparency International has worked in countries around the world to develop innovative programmes that tackle corruption without creating divisions in society through the rhetoric of blame. These programmes include anti-corruption radio programmes in Brazil to raise public awareness, a National Corruption Observatory in Morocco to improve management and public access to information about corruption, and anti-corruption television sketches in Niger to educate citizens about the components and consequences of corruption. These tools to combat corruption reflect creative and accessible responses to a deep-seated and engrained problem for many countries in the region.

Party is also often cited as a useful model, because it has focused on forming coalitions that transcend traditional political blocs by combining support from local networks, smaller parties and diverse constituent groups, enabling the party to more directly address the needs of the people.

Civil Society Actors

Civil society engagement should seek to address the issues most important to citizens and relay them to Governments. The authoritarian nature of Arab regimes prior to the uprisings stifled the growth of a healthy civil society environment in the region. As a result, many States have developed expansive civil society networks without a historical basis to build on. In this environment, it is particularly important that civil society groups allow citizens to shape the content and structure of CSOs from the bottom up, because this increases the likelihood that participants will become invested in their community and active in other spheres of public life. This approach combines capacity-building and empowerment with social development, which enables citizens to take ownership of national programmes because they are represented.

In addition, CSOs in the region should ensure that democratic practices are reflected internally at all levels of the organization. Fighting corruption within CSOs will facilitate wider participation and set an example for Governments and other partners for productive collaboration. To

facilitate participation, civil society groups should reach out to diverse constituents, especially in underserved areas, to raise awareness about what affects people's lives and provide tangible opportunities for people to engage in public discourse or social action. Borovsky and Ben Yahia's 2012 study in rural Tunisia, for example, found that limited knowledge about CSOs generated suspicion about their activities and was the primary deterrent to the participation of their interlocutors in public life. Many of these interlocutors suggested that if civil society groups were "more accessible, had more resources, or recruited more actively", they would be interested in participating. In order to respond to these demands, CSOs should actively seek to broaden their network of participants. They can do this by making use of new technologies to increase awareness and accessibility, and collaborating with other civil society groups to more efficiently address the needs of communities.

While many citizens vehemently opposed old regimes, their visions for their countries after the fall of these regimes differed widely. Channeling these diverse visions into a unified and representative national Government cannot develop without conscious and consistent efforts to engage all sectors of society in the democratic process. This will require new national Governments to convince all parties of the common advantages of investing in the new political order.

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