Introduction to the Special Journal Issue:
Spaces for Change? Decentralization, Participation and Local Governance in the Middle East/North Africa Region

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One of the critical factors that positively influence democratic transition in developing countries is the phenomena of decentralized governance. This is the capacity of institutions and political leaders to share power and responsibilities in accordance with the principles of participation, transparency and accountability, among others. There is a broad consensus in the related literature that the goal of local governance is to identify and promote those institutional arrangements that advance legislation and policies linked to effective human development and active citizenship. The latter can be affected through formal mechanisms such as elections or informal mechanisms, such as civil society involvement in the decision making processes affecting the lives of the people. The participatory approach is regarded as key to the empowerment of marginalized local communities which in turn is crucial to attaining democratic control over the policy process and hopefully over their own destiny. Community participation is not a panacea or a magical fix to defeat authoritarianism and promote decentralized governance, but if infused successfully with other democratic principles and practices it has the potential to influence the political game and the policy process at the local level through local government planning, budgeting, and development.

This framework and style of democratic governance is particularly important since the international donors (Western countries, multinational corporations, UN agencies, NGOs) are increasingly conditioning both their multilateral and bilateral aid on what they consider to be "good governance"

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criteria. Most political leaders in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region however are increasingly disturbed by American and European democracy promotion programs; thus heading for what we may call a "moment of truth". After years of backing authoritarian regimes, especially during the Cold War, there is a growing recognition today that the real interests of Western countries and their authoritarian allies are diverging sharply. This new trend is altering the old language of politics in the MENA region, and authoritarian regimes can no longer go about their business as usual. But, at the same time, those regimes are gradually adapting themselves to such external pressure without necessarily changing the structure of their power.

Indeed, regimes in the region are increasingly under pressure both from Western governments and international organizations (through aid conditionality and democracy promotion programs), as well as their own societies to grant more political and civil rights to their citizens. As a response, regimes are engaging in "authoritarian upgrading" (Heydemann, 2007). This entails opening up limited space for civil societies, permitting opposition parties to operate more freely, broadening press freedoms, and acknowledging the legitimacy of human rights. These processes have given rise to new (official) discourses of rights, social justice, and citizenship. Nevertheless, Arab regimes continue to regulate and police the boundaries of acceptable political practice.

While past and current research analyzes these trends through the perspectives of "Good Governance" and theories on democratic transition at the national level, less attention has been given to processes of "authoritarian upgrading" at the local level, and their implications for local governance. For example, recent decentralization reforms (e.g. in Morocco) have devolved more resources and power to local governments. Similarly, a host of "participatory" development programs promoted by various donors have contributed to the exponential growth of "civil society organizations" (CSOs). Finally, donors and NGOs have experimented with innovative local governance arrangements (such as consultative forums under the UN's Agenda 21 program). All these interventions have created a profusion of spaces in which citizens' participation has the potential to enhance accountability and state responsiveness.

The basic problem though is that local governance in the MENA region is becoming a dual edged sword: while it is true that formal and informal participation is stimulating the growth of a vibrant civil society in

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the region, authoritarianism is also strengthening itself for example through
the creation of state-controlled NGOs or the harassment of autonomous and
Human Rights NGOs. Local governance principles and techniques, in other
words, are not necessarily helping to defeat authoritarianism. They may even
be making it dangerously seductive and attractive.

The overarching questions this special issue aims to address are
therefore: First, to what extent have new spaces for citizens' participation led
to an increased sense of entitlement to participate, shifts in political agency,
and finally, incremental changes in power structures? Second, have
decentralization reforms, participatory programs, and local governance
innovations resulted in more efficient policy formulation and
implementation, hence leading to more effective basic service delivery to the
people at the grassroots? In short, given that most of these new spaces for
participation have been created "from above" (as part of "authoritarian
upgrading") or by external donors, what is the potential for genuine
participation "from below" to bring about improved service-delivery and/or
changes in local power structures that could challenge authoritarian
governance strategies?

Two remarks are in order before briefly introducing the individual
papers. First, we would like to stress that although they each tackle multiple
aspects of these overarching questions, they cannot provide comprehensive
and definite answers to them, given the multi-faceted and dynamic nature of
decentralized governance. Instead each paper serves as a starting point for
the study of the region's complexity and lack of uniformity. We hope that
the references cited in the papers will assist readers wishing to explore local
governance issues in the MENA region more fully.

Second, we would like to include a word about the genesis of this
special issue. It consists of selected papers that were presented at Workshop
Number 10, entitled "Spaces for Change? Decentralization, participation,
and local governance innovations in the MENA Region", held at the 10th
Mediterranean Research Meeting in Montecatini Terme, during 25-28 March
2009. The Mediterranean Research Meetings are organized by the
Mediterranean Programme at the European University Institute - Robert
Schumann Centre for Advanced Studies.

The workshop was co-directed by us, and brought together a group
of 14 researchers from Europe and the MENA region. We are very pleased

that as a result of this workshop, this collection of selected workshop papers is published in this special issue. Special thanks go to the Mediterranean Programme at the European University Institute for accepting our workshop proposal and awarding travel and subsistence grants, and to Prof. Ömer Çaha, Professor of Political Science at Fatih University, Istanbul, who facilitated the contact with the Journal of Economic and Social Research. We of course also express our sincere thanks to the co-editors of the JESR, Prof. Ali S. Hadi and Prof. Ahmet Kara and their assistants for publishing this issue.

Mostafa Jari's paper entitled 'Local governance in the MENA: Spaces for (incremental and controlled) change? Yes, Promoting decentralized governance? Tough question' sets the scene by elaborating on the overall themes of the workshop and the papers by drawing on a multidisciplinary approach (political science, world politics, and sociology) to explain the current political dynamics of the MENA region, especially the Arab countries. It uses democracy and local governance as a central thematic approach that integrates Arab countries' experiences into a whole with particular emphasis on the Moroccan experience. It gives the reader a comprehensive overview not only on the progress made towards democratic governance in the Arab world, but also an insight into the challenges facing both political scientists and decision-makers involved in democracy promotion and local governance programs in the MENA.

Malika Bouziane's paper discussing 'The State from Below: Local Governance Practices in Jordan' is an excellent example of the kind of research needed to further our understanding of local governance dynamics in the region. Although focusing on two case studies in Jordan, its theoretical and methodological approaches are relevant for most if not all settings. The paper explores how the local level – as a space – is contested, and how processes of struggle between different forces that interact and intersect at the local level affect the transformation of the state from below. Based on the assumption that state power does not simply emerge fully formed due to its statist formation, the paper aims to overcome the conventionally assumed dichotomy between state and society. An in-depth analysis of practices of various agents and agencies in Jordan illustrates the dynamics of state-society relations. By elaborating on how their strategies and practices overlap, reinforce or cancel each other out, the paper elaborates on how the context of local governance is (re)constructed and (re)shaped.

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Aude-Annabelle Canesse's paper on 'Rural "participation" and its framework in Tunisia' takes a similar approach by mapping local actors involved in promoting a certain state-led vision of rural 'participation' in the context of reducing subsidies, promoting trade liberalization, and privatizing public enterprises. The rural sector has been affected notably by the establishment of Agricultural Development Groups (ADGs) in the field of natural resources management. Whereas ADGs activities are diversified and include international "technical" considerations (e.g. natural resource conservation, international cooperation) and development catchwords (local development, governance, participation), this paper reveals the continuity in Tunisian public action and shows the need to analyze participation and governance in relation to the state and its institutions. The paper argues that international and national stakes are interlinked, and that there is significant continuity in public action in that ADGs represent the state's redeployment on its territory, the roots of which can be found in the French Protectorate. Indeed, even if new actors appear and the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources has lost some competencies, ADGs remain a "rural framework technique" still based on coercive instruments.

The next paper, by Yasmine Berriane, also focuses on participation, but this time on women-led urban NGOs in the context of the recent Moroccan National Human Development Initiative (known under its French acronym INDH). Entitled 'The Complexities of Inclusive Participatory Governance: the case of Moroccan associational life in the context of the INDH', the article examines the liberalization and reform processes that have been championed by the Moroccan monarchy since 1999. After the coronation of Mohammed VI, special attention has in fact been given by the state to terms such as "participation", "good governance" and "gender equality" and several reform programs have since been launched. The article concentrates on the local level in which these reforms and official discourses are put into practice and are (re)adapted. Using mainly an oral history approach based on carefully selected key informants, Berriane paints a fascinating picture of the process of (selective) inclusion (or even co-optation?) of new social actors, namely female NGO leaders, into the participatory sphere in the context of the INDH. The article brings out very effectively the many different and seemingly contradictory facets of "inclusive participation" and the role of "political society".

In a similar vein, Sylvia Bergh's paper ('Assessing local governance innovations in Morocco in light of the Participatory Budgeting experience in

Brazil: The case of "civil society" federations (Espaces Associatifs) in Al Haouz province') critically examines local governance innovations in Morocco as to their potential to bring about participatory governance. It does this in light of the Participatory Budgeting experience in Brazil. Based on empirical fieldwork (in the case of Morocco), and an extensive literature review (in the case of Brazil), the paper reviews the practical conditions in which attempts at co-governance take place. Co-governance arrangements refer to institutional mechanisms that grant local civil society and citizens' representatives a voice in local government, be it in the form of simple observer status or as a full partner in Participatory Budgeting exercises as is the case in Porto Alegre. The findings from Morocco are based on projects by the American NGO Catholic Relief Services in two rural communes in Al Haouz province. These projects encouraged the creation of federations of local village associations that were given voice in local government, and paved the way for the creation of such federations in the entire province and at various levels of government. It is argued that these federations (so-called 'Espaces Associatifs') mainly constitute arenas for state control and politicisation of local civil society rather than viable partners for co-governance with local government. However, the paper also acknowledges the important governance reforms underway in Morocco that could benefit from insights from the Porto Alegre experience, and that constitute interesting areas for future research.

Nidal Rashid Sabri's paper brings us back to issues around local governments in an urban setting in his paper entitled 'Assessing mayors' and council members' perceptions on improving community involvement and municipal performance: The case of Palestinian local governments'. Based on questionnaire responses, this article aims to further our understanding of local politicians' perceptions on how community participation in and the performance and efficiency of local governments could be enhanced. The study finds that the council members prefer to limit their involvement to participating in municipality committees, rather than extending their responsibilities or to have permanent offices in the municipality headquarters. Both council members and mayors of Palestinian local governments favour indirect communications with citizens, as they consider the idea of enhancing community participation in municipality affairs as potentially reducing their authority. Although they disagree in their preferences with regards to some other practices, both groups show a reluctance to adopt IT innovations to enhance the efficiency and transparency of local government activities. This paper thus contributes

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insights based on a very different, mainly quantitative, methodology to the questions addressed in this issue.

The final paper by Ömer Çaha on 'Women and Local Democracy in Turkey' echoes some of the issues discussed in Berriane's paper. It focuses on the role of women's civil society organizations engaged in the participation of women in political activities at the local level in Turkey. Based upon an empirical study conducted on ten women's organizations in Istanbul, it tries to answer the twin questions of, 'to what extent are women's organizations influencing the political agenda at the local level, and how active are they in the area of social responsibility?'The article finds that, due to the existence of barriers between civil society and local governments and the unwillingness of local governments to have close relations with civil society organizations, women's civil society organizations are not active enough to dominate the agenda of local politics. However, they seem to indicate a considerable success in involving themselves in the area of social responsibility.

Reference cited

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