

Local Governance in the MENA Region: Space for (Incremental and Controlled) Change? Yes, Promoting Decentralized Governance? Tough Question

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Abstract. My paper draws on a multidisciplinary approach (political science, world politics, and sociology) to explain the current political dynamics of the MENA region, focusing on 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. My purpose is to not only provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of the progress made towards democratic governance in the Arab world, but also to illustrate the critical issues hindering decentralization and local governance in this region. The findings of our research do not obviously cover all the aspects nor provide all the answers, but it gives the reader an insight into the challenges facing both political scientists and decision-makers involved in democracy promotion and local governance programs in the MENA region.

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1. Why Democracy and Local Governance in the MENA Region?

The MENA region¹, while old in origins and civilizations, came to dominate the agenda of international politics during the second half of the 20th century. Seemingly, this trend has been confirmed during the first decade of the 21st century. While the Arab-Israeli conflict has been, and still remains², the main issue in the MENA region, the collapse of the bipolar world system and the military interventions led by the United States of America in Iraq and Afghanistan have worsened the instability of this region. Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks against the USA have opened the floodgates to the “international war on terror” and the subsequent military-driven attempts to change political regimes both in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, “democracy promotion,” brought by soldiers and tanks is only one dramatic factor of the global strategies implemented by key international actors (states, intergovernmental institutions and global NGOs) since the end of the cold war. In the nineties, through conditionality, democracy promotion initiatives become part of the political economy of international public aid. As most Arab countries, especially non-oil countries, are heavily dependent on foreign aid, they were instructed by donors to review not only their economic policies but also their political institutions in ways that were not previously possible.

The Arab world is attracting the world’s attention not only because of geopolitical and geo-economic reasons but also due to its poor democratic performance. There is an increasing number of international reports that are heatedly debating the root causes and consequences of this issue. For example, the Economist Democracy index (the world in 2007: 7) informs us that “Most of the world’s authoritarian regimes are to be found in the Middle East and Africa.” In the same spirit of this comment, the Arab Human

¹ The term “MENA” which sums up the two sub-regions “Middle East” and “North Africa” is an acronym often used in academic, business and journalistic writing. Broadly defined, this region extends from Afghanistan on the east to Morocco on the west, Turkey on the north and Yemen on the south. In this paper, the term MENA will generally cover the Arab Middle East as well as North Africa countries, but not Turkey, Iran or Israel.

² The dramatic events of the Gaza strip in January 2009 are a reminder of this serious geopolitical conflict. Israeli airstrikes have killed more than 1300 Palestinians, most of them civilians, and wounded more than 5000.

Development Report (2002: 2) observed that out of seven³ world regions, the Arab countries had the lowest freedom score in the late 1990s: “There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory governance. The wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s and Eastern Europe and much of Central Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s has barely reached the Arab States. This freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development. While de jure acceptance of democracy and human rights is enshrined in constitutions, legal codes and government pronouncements, de facto implementation is often neglected and, in some cases, deliberately disregarded.”

More recently, Freedom House (2009: 8) noted that “After several years of modest gains for freedom in the early part of the decade, the MENA region has experienced a period of stagnation. The trend continued in 2008, with little significant movement arising from a part of the world that has proven most resistant to democratic change”. The State of Reform in the Arab World (2008: 78), which is a qualitative assessment made by some Arab researchers, stated that the “democratic transition process appears to have failed as far as the people’s trust in the performance of public institutions is concerned, since there is near total consensus regarding the widespread use of *wasta* (favouritism and nepotism) in public sector appointments, and widespread corruption in public institutions. Failure is also apparent in the mistreatment of the opposition, ill-treatment of detainees, arbitrary detentions, the use of military tribunals or state security courts, and exaggerated public spending on security at the expense of health and education.”

2. International Assistance to Democracy Promotion in the MENA Region

This section addresses the following questions: why do global politics and international conditionality adopt local governance as a strategy to influence domestic politics in the MENA region? To what extent should the transfer of powers, authorities, responsibilities, accountabilities in the MENA political

³ Those regions are North America, Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, South and East Asia, Sub Saharan Africa (The Arab Human development report 2002: 7)

regimes be a matter of foreign affairs rather than domestic public policies? What are the opportunities for a constructive partnership between both levels?

The democratic governance paradigm has become the cognitive framework through which most critical issues of the MENA countries are perceived. “Good governance”, “local governance”, “gender governance”, “E-governance”, are all concepts randomly and abusively employed by the international community as umbrellas to promote democracy, economic growth and human development. Despite all the vagueness surrounding those concepts though, they succeeded to capture the attention of several MENA governments’ official agendas, showing a willingness to change the way businesses, civil societies and governments work. This shift covers, on one hand, many real economic, administrative, political and socio-cultural challenges that are facing both well established and emerging democracies. For example, globalization is transforming – if not to say destabilizing – states, civil societies and other institutions in unprecedented ways, and this is where the government’s search for new forms of legitimacy is most evident, yet most problematic. The democratic governance in this new context means that traditional models and old practices in politics and business management should adapt very quickly in order to be able to fully capture the opportunities offered by globalization.

But, on the other hand, the governance rhetoric fails to hide the heavy dependence of many developing countries on foreign aid and its implications for their national decision-making processes. The public policy process is de facto integrated into international politics and global markets’ agendas which are not the most appropriate environments to deliberate on good governance strategies at national levels (Offe Claus, 2000: 71-94). Global markets – made of powerful states, intergovernmental economic institutions and trans-national corporations are designed to create, accumulate, often through speculation, and concentrate wealth in the hands of the market-dominant minority; whereas democratic governance strives to increase the political power of the impoverished and marginalized majority. In other words, democracy and global markets are heading in completely different directions; one is concerned with enlarging the possibilities of the “have-nots”, the other with utilizing those same possibilities to extend the wealth of the “haves”. The projected impact (trickle-down effect) of global trade on democratization is considerable as many billions of dollars came

from the deregulation and privatization⁴ business. It is unclear however, in what way this will affect the millions who are facing serious and immediate problems of poverty (Ray Bush, 2007), food insecurity, and unemployment. As Amy Chua (2004: 13) observed, “markets and democracy may well offer the best long-run economic and political hope for developing and post communist countries. In the short run, they are part of the problem.”

We believe that “endogenous demand” rather than the “exogenous offer” of governance will probably bring democracy and economic development for Arab people and societies in quest of “freedom as development”⁵. If democratization succeeds in the Arab countries, it will not be due to the blind adoption of imported market democracy but to the citizens’ ability of those countries to build broad-based political consensus to gradually defeat authoritarian rule. However the debate on whether or not international assistance promoting democracy should continue is not the appropriate question to be asked. Rather, the debate should focus on how efforts to promote democracy could be structured so as to preserve the efficiency of external pressure to foster genuine reforms. While foreign pressure alone has produced very limited added value to the process of democratization, it still may be helpful for part of it. For example, the European Union (EU) has forced the East European countries seeking admission to the EU to demonstrate their commitment to the values of political liberalism and pluralistic democracy. Needless to say that the reward of being a future EU member was a positive incentive on the process of political reforms, but it is hard to think that EU pressure alone will make

⁴ Evidently, the privatization of public enterprises and the transfer of property is not on trial in itself. Carefully planned and appropriately managed they can lead to new inflows of capital, efficient allocation of resources and a new mode of management. But the modalities, beneficiaries and the impact of privatizations on the economy are likely to be negatively influenced by the domestic and international politics contexts, especially in the case of weak and corrupted regimes, which capture illicit rents and consolidate its authoritarian rule.

⁵ Amartya Sen (1999: 3) have forcefully articulated the freedom conception of well being in a major proposition that development “can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Development requires the removal of major sources of ‘unfreedom’: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states. According to Sen’s pioneering approach, the wellbeing of a person should be judged with respect to one’s “capability” to achieve and enjoy a healthy and active life.

the European post-communist countries more democratic (Stephen White and al. 2007) (John S. Dryzek and Leslie Holmes, 2002). The foreign pressure and incentives of the EU should be accompanied with the willingness of those countries to freely and gradually engage into a long-term, complex, contingent and open-ended experience.

When international assistance to democracy promotion collides with realpolitik, as happened in the Bush's "Greater Middle East initiative" and related programs, democracy does not always prevail; instead of a backlash against local authoritarian regimes, there is a backlash against democracy. As Zbigniew Brzezinski (2004), the former US National Security Adviser, observes "even a good idea can be spoiled by clumsy execution. Worse still, the idea can backfire, particularly if people come to suspect that ulterior motives are at work." Democracy promotion in Arab countries seems today to be a vital issue for the western world, with global implications that range from energy policy (securing oil production and supply) to security concerns, such as the US-Israel strategic alliance. Moreover, nowadays western countries are backing the democratic movement in the Arab world because authoritarianism, and its related human rights abuses, is generating negative externalities affecting not only western countries but more widely the stability of the international system. With global terrorism and the flow of illegal immigrants, western countries are negatively affected by their (more or less distant) neighbors' failure to install and sustain democracy. Therefore, improvement priorities and focus areas are set and designed according to key international players' agenda to support their local initiatives and interests in the MENA region. Our purpose of considering those geopolitical facts is simply to draw attention to the point that foreign agendas might obstruct a comprehensive perception and thus an adequate response to the prospect of democratization in the Arab world.

3. Civil Society Demand (vs. Offer) of Democracy in the MENA Region

In the next section, we will not answer questions such as whether or not the Arab peoples have the right and deserve, like any other group of human beings, to experience and live in a free and democratic society. Even if such a question is legitimate, as a normative quest for what is good and suitable for the Arab societies, it hardly captures real political issues and processes. Irrespective of the possible benefits of democracy and democratization for the Arab countries, those terms will be used as analytical concepts (Schlumberger Olivier, 2000: 106). For this reason it is important to provide first some basic definitions of democracy.

The term democracy is derived from the Greek, Demos Kratos, or people rule. According to the majority of authors (Robert A. Dahl, 1998, Bernard Crick, 2002, Olivier Giraud and Philippe Warin, 2008, Giovanni Sartori, 1987, and Robert D. Kaplan, 1997), democracy is the political system through which political elites come to power with the commitment to respect and implement the core values of human rights and political liberalism. Democratic governments come from free and fair elections, which are held regularly and in which the majority of citizens (usually 18 years or older) are allowed to vote. Yet in order to be considered a real democracy it is not sufficient to hold regular elections if only one party or a single predominant clan is the key player in the political arena. In addition to political representation, through a competitive and pluralistic multiparty system, there must be an effective separation of powers, accountability for abuse of power and finally a sustainable implementation of human rights, be it civil or political, socioeconomic or cultural. Thus democracy has two main faces: substantive and procedural. The first is linked to the equal opportunities offered and guaranteed by governments to all their citizens to enable them to enjoy a minimum standard of rights, services and goods. The second (procedural) is related to free elections, separation of powers, independence of the judiciary, majority rule, respect of opposition and minorities' rights, among other instruments of representation and political participation. The lessons drawn from old democracies' experiences show that democracy is a political system which is inextricably embedded in social institutions and norms that shape the behavior and actions of political agents. This fact is important for home-driven agendas for democratic reforms since it means that democracy is definitely not a ready-made model or a commodity suitable for export and import.⁶ Last but not least, real existing democracies are not perfect, anyone can measure how imperfect they are,⁷

⁶ The Christian Science Monitor (2003) observes that "Democracy is not a case of Coca-Cola that one can import into a country. Democracy is institutions, structures and a kind of culture. We're talking about things like an independent judiciary, free press, a culture of political participation — all of these things which can't be brought into a country overnight on a cargo plane."

⁷ In his comment on my paper, especially the paragraph on democracy, Paul Beran (Centre of Middle Eastern studies at Harvard) underlined the fact that most definitions of democracy are quite generous. He asked the following important questions: "Do political elite really support human rights? Or do they support the rights of their constituents? Is it about supporting human rights and liberalism or supporting the achieving of political legitimacy by the ballot (whether or not that process is free, fair and open)?"

but no one can ignore how very dynamic and adaptable they are. By most standards, no political system other than democracies can offer pragmatic solutions for today's problems while constantly trying innovative solutions for tomorrow's challenges.

Let us now examine the current situation in the Arab MENA countries that are mainly perceived as “undemocratic”. As both external and domestic pressures for democratic reforms increase, the Arab political regimes are re-organizing their strategies of governance to adjust to new circumstances (Heydemann S., 2007). In the context of the ongoing demand for democracy, what are the kinds of political reforms reasonably expected from authoritarian regimes? What is the rationale behind the reforms undertaken by those regimes? Are they implementing an agenda that is explicitly designed to gradually change the name of the “undemocratic game”? Or, are they just recycling old mentalities and practices around policies which aim to preserve if not strengthen authoritarian regimes?

Obviously stereotyped⁸ ideological views contending linkages between authoritarian rule and the “Arab” culture⁹ or Islam are concepts too oversimplified to be useful for our research. The depictions of “the Arab” political culture as irrational, undemocratic, menacing, anti-Western are ideas into which some scholars have evolved for the sake of ideological convenience or political agendas.¹⁰ In general, the authors and institutions

⁸ “...The reason people stereotype can be simply summarized in stating that there is a present lack of knowledge and laziness to find the truth. Many times people find that it is too difficult to take in all of the complicated information about other people. With the desire of most people to do as little thinking as possible, it takes too much time to come up with an accurate assumption of someone. People want to categorize and organize the world into neat, little groups.” (Wikipedia, 2009)

⁹ Why autocrats use and abuse the “emergency powers”, hide their authoritarian rule behind weak and façade institutions (parliaments, courts, multiparty system, etc;) or control and harass the independent press? The answers are not cultural- as some orientalist and western analysts allege – but political. Among others, there is the unwillingness of dictators and their entourage to share the exercise of power. It's noteworthy that, for decades, some key foreign powers has accepted and even encouraged this situation in exchange for political stability to secure access to energy supplies, and more recently to control immigration flows not to mention the “international war against terror”.

¹⁰ Augustus Richard Northon (1995: 1) alerts us that “today there is an alarming tendency for informed observers to argue passionately for basic freedoms in the west, while reacting with utter skepticism to the simple proposition that these same basic freedoms also have a home in the world beyond the familiar confines of “our”

behind those depictions – especially those belonging to extreme rightwing and neo-conservative ones – often tend to overemphasize what they themselves want to show or hear. Tangible or disagreeable facts about the Arab world that challenge their own views are systematically glossed over or repressed. In fact, beyond such extremely unreliable views dedicated to obscure the image of the Arab societies, there are at least two important differing views on the nature of Arab democratization. While some observers believe that ongoing political reforms in the Arab world have the potential of generating, in the long run, positive effects on the governing elite, institutions and societies at large, others maintain that such an optimistic conclusion comes closer to wishful thinking than to an analytical evaluation of the dominant pattern of authoritarianism which is perverting and taking advantage of the whole process of reforms, be it political or economic liberalization.

4. Towards a Rise in Civil Society Activism

Scholars with “optimistic” assessment of the political situation in the Arab countries argue that, in the aftermath of the cold war end, the Arab world like other regions has witnessed a politically significant "Third Wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1991¹¹; Diamond, Larry Jay 1996: 20-37). Over the past two decades, considerable progress has been made across the Arab world in economic, technological and social spheres – with standards of living relatively rising, the information society’s technologies spreading and the substantial rise in influence of civil societies’ NGOs. The most significant variable within this course of progress is that Arab societies are becoming a more fertile place for political change than ever before. In the past, the people’s mood was characterized by a widespread resignation and acceptance of the existing state of affairs, but today it is increasingly inspired

world. Any dichotomization of humanity is alarming but this one also has a self-fulfilling quality to it, especially since leading statesmen and policymakers in the west now contemplate building policies on the presumption that the world is cleaved culturally between those with a yearning for freedom and those content to live in bondage.” See also (Mishal Fahm Al-Sulami 2003).

¹¹ In this study, Huntington's purpose seems to be the development of a general understanding and theory on democratic transitions. While comparing tens countries, mainly in Asia and Latin America, from non-democratic to democratic political systems during the 1970s and 1980s, he refers to the widespread international push toward democracy during this period as the "third wave".

by civic engagement and mobilization. As Bassma Kodmani (2008: 52) observes, "A new feature of Arab societies is the political awakening taking place all around. In varying degrees, societies are no longer as quietist as they once were. Although one cannot speak of an emergence of a culture of democracy yet, states of mind and attitudes are nonetheless changing." This relatively profound reconstituting of Arab societies is taking place beyond the spheres of highly educated people. There are growing numbers of modest and ordinary people who have a clear preference for democracy not only as the best way to fulfill their individual aspirations for freedom¹² but also as a gradual and peaceful method for change. Such democratic attitude is noticeable, for example, in most current demonstrations and protest gatherings against poverty, unemployment or political motivated arrest (mainly against Islamists). In spite of the fact that the issues at hand might leave demonstrators very passionate and angry, they often conduct peaceful chanting marches and carry banners, culminating into organized rallies near government official symbols, such as parliament and ministries. Police and military authorities often use systematic and disproportionate force to disperse these non-violent forms of activism.

The most common characteristic of civil society in MENA countries is the growing number of civic movements and networks. They are attracting, both from left and right, a large spectrum of people (human rights activists, writers, artists, lawyers, teachers, students, etc.) who share the common goal of making their governments more democratic and respectful towards their basic human rights. What is notable about those people, who are increasingly socializing¹³ to democracy's norms and values, is their ability to criticize and expose more openly¹⁴ the abuses and weaknesses of the repressive regimes. This new trend is altering the old language of politics in the MENA and authoritarian regime can no longer exercise their brutality as usual. The voice of civil societies is more vibrant than ever before all over

¹² "The Arabs, according to international surveys, have the greatest thirst for freedom and are the most appreciative of democracy out of all people in the world" (Rima Khalaf, 2005 : 10).

¹³ Socialization to some democracy' norms and values (like pluralism in opinions) is benefiting greatly from the possibilities of knowledge and interaction that the information society offers: independent press, satellite television, mobile phone and the Internet.

¹⁴ For example, Egypt's "Kifaya! (Enough!)" movement openly opposed President Mubarak's re-election (Sept. 2005) and the progressive transfer of power to his son, drawing support for an end to such a troubling hereditary succession under a republic.

the Arab world, but there is a lack of strong political parties to contain and channel such momentum and impulses from the public. The creation of a more open political system is not something society can provide on its own for many reasons, one of which is state control over how the civil society sphere can operate (Dimitrovova, 2009) (Berriane, 2010)¹⁵. At best, the civil society's influence on the political change process is strictly contingent on its ability to be embedded into genuine alliances and mediations building with diverse stakeholders, including political parties, businesses, trade unions and all influential people from the state apparatus. Bernard Crick (2002: 106) states that "to be effective, active citizenship demands not just will and skill but some knowledge of institutions." A lack of general awareness of the political arena, and how to use advocacy and coalition-building techniques efficiently to affect the decision-making process, prevents the development of an active citizenry that is able to make its voice heard. By creating mutually reinforcing relationships¹⁶ and broad-based collaboration among the key actors, civil society NGOs can enhance their lobbying efficiency while ensuring that the voice of the public is heard and properly transformed into public issues on the political agenda. Public mobilization and a political articulation/aggregation of interests must go hand in hand to exploit more effectively the openings that authoritarianism itself produces.

5. Transparent Ballot: Real Progress or Just an Alibi to Cover Facade Democracies?

The rising tide of civil society's support for a democratic outcome along with the external pressure is pushing most Arab political regimes to be more sensitive to free elections, more respectful to the ballot boxes. People today are much more alert to the electoral process manipulation and very few would believe election results of surrealistic nature, where candidates are

¹⁵ See Yasmine Berriane's paper in this 2010 JESR' special issue on local governance in the MENA region.

¹⁶ The main objective of the cooperative relationships between civil society, business and other institutional affiliations is to facilitate resolution of collective problems. The social capital and the material resources, available through, and derived from, such a cooperative network should be used to implement the collective action strategy, but there is always a risk of abuse and corruption. See Amaney A. Jamal (2007)

elected by more than 95 percent of the total votes. It seems that massive election fraud promoting desired puppet candidates to parliament, or one-party elections endorsing the candidates of the party in power, are no longer suitable for the new era of human rights and democracy promotion. Consequently, political regimes in most Arab countries began to show signs of political liberalization by introducing some slight modifications to the electoral system. To encourage this shift towards free elections in the Arab world, much technical and material support has been offered to this region by western donors and global NGOs. An analysis of the Moroccan case provides three important lessons to inform our understanding of the potential of free election in the democratization process.

Firstly, there is a general trend that Morocco is turning the page of old practices of authoritarianism, especially systematic violations of human rights. Some reforms undertaken during the last decade have undoubtedly proved that this country is moving towards more openness and democratization despite some persisting archaic structures of power and the corresponding elite's practices paint a somewhat different picture. The most praised development is the Moroccan experience of transitional justice¹⁷, but the election process has also benefited from a series of reforms instituted by the Ministry of Interior: the production of an accurate voter list, a digitalized system to count votes, a monitoring commission including international observers and domestic NGOs, the mediation of the Advisory Counsel for Human Rights (CCDH) are among the factors that contributed significantly to the credibility and efficiency of the September 2007 legislative elections.

¹⁷ Since the early 1970s, thousands of Moroccans (some of them leaders or militants engaging in politics but others were just ordinary citizens) were subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance. In the 1990s, however, endogenous battles of human rights activists along with external pressure resulted in a gradual process of dealing with this dark past of systematic violation of human rights. This experience initiated by Former King Hassan II culminated in the work of the Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation Commission (Instance Équité et Réconciliation (IER)), established by the successor to the throne, King Mohammed VI. Since January 2004, the IER has been working on addressing this terrible issue by investigating some of the worst abuses in Morocco, listening to victims who are still alive and arranging reparations for them and their families. It is noteworthy that the Commission was the first truth commission in the Arab world. For more details: see the international centre for transitional justice web site: www.Ictj.org and the Moroccan Advisory Counsel for Human Rights (CCDH) : www.ccdh.org.ma

Secondly, Moroccans and their political regime seem to have very different understandings of the election process itself and its outcomes. Despite the transparency and efficiency of the elections process, the clear message sent by voters, either through abstention (63%) or protest and blank votes, is the pressing need for real and deep political reforms to re-establish trust of greater numbers of citizens to engage in the political process. According to the findings of a qualitative study produced for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI 2008), the large majority of respondents believe that Moroccan politicians are out of touch with people's concerns. The elections were perceived as having no direct impact on people's lives. This perception is particularly widespread among people from disadvantaged urban and rural areas, which showed the lowest rates of participation during the 2007 legislative elections. Those elections' results were defined as a "failure" for the politicians and a "victory" for the citizens, because, according to the latter, the most significant result from the elections was the low rate of participation. The respondents affirmed their general mistrust of the political system as the following examples reflect:

"I asked myself: if I vote, what could I change? Things will remain the same, whether I vote or not," (Student, Rabat, 18-25 years old).

"There isn't an automatic relation between voting and improvement in people's daily lives. And, in addition, we do not have confidence in the political parties." (Student, Rabat, 18-25 years old).

"I cast a null vote because there were too many parties and I didn't understand the difference between them," (Woman, Agadir, rural area).
"If you participate with a null vote, you confirm that you are a Moroccan citizen, but you say that you do not have confidence in the system," (Man, Casablanca, slums).

"The reticence of Moroccans at the polls proves that the elections will not change anything and confirms the lack of confidence in the candidates," (Man, Smara, urban).

"I did not vote because I have had enough of their lies," (Woman, Agadir, 20-30 years old, rural area).

“People have lost hope. It is for that reason that they did not vote. We have voted many times for the same people, but nothing has ever changed,” (Woman, Nador, 25-35 years old, rural area).

Thirdly, in any political change, there is a need to differentiate government change from regime change that inevitably impacts on how government change plays out in practice. In fact, a change of government, which means changing governing parties, may or may not lead to a regime change. In order to be effective, the latter requires fundamental transformations creating and sustaining a transparent, responsive and accountable government. In other words, elections are an essential aspect of democracy, but they are only a step towards pluralistic and open political system which respects the rule of law and offers the best political and economic alternatives to its citizens. The question is not only allowing people's will to be expressed freely, but also what this expression means to the broader process of policymaking, resource allocation and distribution not to mention the enhancement of accountability at all authority levels. Countries like Morocco, Egypt, Syria and Kuwait among others which hold elections, also allow the same ruling class to hold a monopoly on politics and economic wealth. The key positions in the state and business, whether in monarchies or republics, are not open to competition and their holders interact and retain considerable range of powers. By selectively recruiting on the basis of clientelism and patrimonialism, the incumbent regimes are reinforcing the predominant attitude against democracy shared by those who control and benefit from authoritarianism and its monopolies. The results of this situation are repressive regimes, economic inequality and tight restrictions on the ability of ordinary people to influence the political process. If by its nature the democratic process is an open game and thus ensures a constant renewal of elites, it is clear that the ongoing Arab democratization allows very limited renewal and thus maintain a great deal of continuity in the structure of power.

According to those who have a “pessimistic” view of democratization in the Arab world, the modernization of elections in Arab countries is no more than a superficial success story. Elections did not make the authoritarian rule more peaceful or, in practice, more transparent but only more complex. Free elections are an integral part of a transformation towards new forms of authoritarianism. The hopes and expectations concerning the electoral process are not realistic because neither the formation of governments is automatically linked to election result, nor the legislative branch is endowed with the appropriate power to enable

parliamentarians to fully assume their responsibilities¹⁸. When looking at government and parliament relations from the viewpoint of the separation and balance of power, that Montesquieu discerns and advocates in politics, one cannot help being astonished by the imbalance that exists between the executive and the legislative branches in the Arab politics. Wider representation in the parliaments has not been matched by wider participation in the policy process. The government formulates by decrees immense quantities of laws via its administrative and bureaucratic system, whereas the laws promulgated by the parliament are very limited. As long as the executive is pursuing this ‘hegemonic and arrogant’ attitude towards parliament and more widely towards municipalities and communes, the Arab representative democracy and its democratically elected leaders will be an alibi to cover ‘democracies without democrats’ (Ghassan Salame, 1994). For the Arab parliaments to become more representative, more effective at lawmaking, and more capable of oversight, due attention should be given to separation of powers and the empowerments of parliamentarians.

6. The Use and Abuse of Local Governance’s Strategies: Why is Local Governance Strengthening Rather than Challenging Authoritarian Rule?

The local governance’s policy-oriented literature¹⁹ assumes that promoting participatory democracy and reforming state bureaucratic institutions and processes are the key elements to the improvement of human development. The local governance package, made of decentralization reforms and participatory mechanisms, is therefore viewed as a strategy that should be adopted to address the challenges of promoting local democratic institutions and reducing poverty. “As part of the overall governance system of any society, decentralized governance offers important opportunities for enhanced human development. However, if improperly planned or poorly implemented, decentralized governance can also be a challenge that may

¹⁸ “Capable representative institutions connect people to their government by giving them a place where their needs can be articulated, by giving them a say in shaping the rules that govern them, by providing them with a recourse if governmental power is abused, and by contributing to the procedures and values that sustain a democratic culture.” (UNDP, 1999).

¹⁹ Mostly the publications (reports and policy-papers) of the United Nations Development Program UNDP, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD and EU Commission

easily frustrate local efforts to enhance human development. Organizationally, decentralized governance, refers to the restructuring of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions at the central, regional and local levels according to the principal of subsidiary, thus increasing the overall quality and effectiveness of the system of governance, while increasing the authority and capacities of sub-national levels,” (Robertson Work, 2002: 434).

Creating and/or strengthening autonomous local leadership in Arab countries requires governments to democratize the political system and expand the managerial capacity in local public institutions. Many socioeconomic issues, in urban as well as rural areas, often arise from the over-centralization of the decision-making in the hands of central bureaucracies. The more pressing need is therefore subsidiary in decision-making and more administrative and political decentralization in order to be able to perform and implement efficient socioeconomic development policies. In fact, decentralized governance reform is a very sensitive but critical entry point to assess the real gains brought by the democratization process in the Arab world. Equally important is the fact that the imperative to decentralize state bureaucratic institutions and its related decision-making processes is also in response to the need to improve people’s quality of lives and address the ever present problem of poverty which is prevalent in many Arab countries (Wassim Shahin and Ghassan Dibeh, 2000; Banque Mondiale, 2004; Royaume du Maroc, Haut commissariat au plan, 2004). But how should the tension between decentralization projects and the ancient mode of centralization, which has its roots in social structures and political values, be handled? How should centralization and decentralization complement each other?²⁰

No political concept is increasingly used, and misused, by the MENA governments than that of decentralized governance. For more than a decade, nearly every political regime in that region has claimed to abide by local governance principals and strategies; but indeed very few of those regimes have really reformed their politics and institutions to achieve such a goal. What has been presented/implemented as decentralization in recent years in most MENA countries is merely a ‘deconcentration’, which is a process by which central government relocate and disperse its agents on a

²⁰ “Does centralization always mean an abuse of power? What about the UK, with a highly centralized government (for England) that also works with highly powerful local government?” This central question was raised by Paul Beran in his comment on my paper.

geographical basis, from the capital down to regions, provinces, cities and districts. Deconcentration does not involve the full transfer of responsibility, decision-making and resources to the local authorities; there is only a delegation of some administrative and management responsibilities for specified functions. While political decentralization provides an enabling environment for strong local leadership (meaningful resources, legal powers and autonomy in decision making), deconcentration, by contrast, aims to maintain (through the State's external services) or even strengthen the central government's authority throughout national territory. Without legal authority and/or meaningful financial resources, local authorities' influence on local public policies remains constrained.

The conception of Arab states as inherently centralized structures is at the foundation of any prospect for decentralization reforms. The underlying assumption is that Arab political regimes will not typically adopt decentralized governance without pressure from the international system since local authorities in the Arab countries are too weak and poorly funded to exert real pressure on central government. Paradoxically, the Moroccan efforts at decentralization, started in the 1970s, offer a favorable opening to enhance the prospects for improved decentralization. They denote an incremental movement towards political decentralization and an acknowledgment by the ruling elite of a need for change. They have also favored some spaces for political participation. Seemingly, the participatory approach is becoming part of every public program like the local agendas 21, the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) launched in May 2005, or more recently the reforms of the communal chart (2008). Obviously, in order to consolidate the democratization process, the participatory approach should seek more transparency and efficiency (Jari M., 2006: 37-53; Ortwin Renn et al., 1995). Moreover, decentralized governance, as part of the overall governance system, demands more than just the enactment of new laws or new spaces for public deliberation; it requires a fundamental policy shift and adjustment. For central government, this means restructuring its relations with local government shaped for decades by the politics of patronage. This also entails revising the norms and processes that govern local fiscal policies. For local authorities, this means engendering leadership with a strong local identity and enough experience to implement local public policies. Needless to say that narrowing the gaps and forming synergies between central and local governments is neither a linear nor an instantaneous process. It requires political will, long negotiations, resources, citizens and communities' support.

7. Key Policy Implications and Recommendations:

1. Democratic transitions have the potential to introduce new ideologies which local authorities can mobilize to serve their own goals. In the same vein, local governance's participatory strategies provide local leadership (political parties, NGOs, communities, businesses) with new opportunities, and those political windows should be used wisely to socialize and interact with the central government's bureaucrats, and hopefully to engage with them in strategic partnership based on mutual trust and commitment.
2. For decentralization to be effective and local authorities' institutions to become more autonomous, it is necessary to give due attention to revenue generation and appropriate fiscal reforms and not just administrative and political decentralization. The revision and simplification of the tax base is a key element to the building of self-financing capacities of municipalities and communes.
3. The increasing complexity of societal problems requires, both at national and local levels, some appropriate technical expertise, but this does not mean that public decision making should be delegated to networks of agencies and committees formed by technocrats and managers. For decentralized governance to be effective, adequate emphasis needs to ensure that the increased role of experts and the growing use of managerial instruments do not lead to the 'myth of depolitized governance' (conflict-free) (Jobert B. 2003: 273-285). There is no technocratic solution to political issues, and it is necessary to give due attention to mediation and conflict resolution (Cedric H. Grant and R. Mark Kirton 2007).
4. For local public policies to be well informed and legitimate there is a need to involve the people who are and will be affected by the outcomes of the policy process. On one hand, the participatory approach should ensure that those who are involved (experts, facilitators, communities) do not corrupt the process of participation by taking advantage of it and, thus, destroying the spirit of cooperative efforts and the related social capital. On the other hand, participation should not be used only as a ritual or as symbolic event, "people feel cheated if they are asked to participate only to find out that the decision has already been made," (Thomas Webler and Ortwin Renn 1995: 26).

5. International law, multilateral conventions, global summits and conditionality call attention to states' obligations, and as many Arab governments signed on the UN guidelines on decentralization,²¹ local authorities in the Arab countries have now a legal ground on the basis on which to claim implementation and follow up at the local level.

Conclusion

Despite the high-volume rhetorical commitments to democracy made by Arab political leaders, it remains to be seen whether they can effectively foster new democratic order by sharing or even leaving power. The election reforms alone are insufficient to fulfill the task at hand and, more importantly, the modernization of the elections has so far had little effect other than restoring and reviving obsolete and archaic norms of legitimacy. The electoral prospects are heavily dependent on how autocrats and their centralized bureaucracies behave. This is true with regards to the misappropriation of state power to the benefit of one faction and its entourage of relatives and clientele who have not only privatized the state and its resources but also exert influence over the policy-making through the structure of lobbying, the judiciary through corruption, and public opinion through state-funded mass media. Indeed, the cards are stacked in favor of the prevailing political regimes. The well-rooted structure of authoritarianism, characterized by powerful dictatorships that ignore the separation of powers and exert significant control over the state, economy and society, puts those regimes in a position to constrain what democracy promotion does. On the level of Arab centralized bureaucracies and local governance, decentralization and participation are perfectly compatible with nonsense and authoritarian rule. The rationale behind local governance reforms in the MENA region reflects an attempt to combine the positive elements of the purely façade decentralization and the reinforcement of the iron fists of centralized systems through deconcentration. The real objective of local governance campaigns is neither to create solid and autonomous local institutions, nor to help create local leadership and empowered communities, which are able to harness their local resources and strengthen their regional identity; but rather to capture the loyalty of targeted and malleable local notabilities to help government implement their centralized

²¹ See UN-Habitat (2007) International guidelines on decentralization and the strengthening of local authorities.

policies. If this requires engaging in some ruse, superficial reforms or creating participatory rituals, then ruse, superficial reforms and participatory rituals it is. The MENA political regimes use local governance strategies for their own purposes, and they do so with undeniable effectiveness, which makes them so dangerously seducing and attractive.

In summary, there is a need, for both analysts and “developers” to return to basics and focus again on some old vital issues (such as citizenship, freedom, conflict, government, etc.) for democracy and development that the current programs of local governance have chosen deliberately to ignore or to consider only partially and superficially. In the last analysis, despite its innovative managerial methods and participatory practices, local governance ideology seems to be no more than a necessary utopia designed in a way that gives a say to the have-nots while achieving effective protection of the interests of strong groups and powerful lobbies.

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