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# Civil Society in Egypt: A Catalyst for Democratization?

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Over the past decade, it has been noted that the West (mainly Europe and the United States) tends to view civil society as a catalyst or engine for democratization, especially in the Arab world. The role played by civil society in some countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America leads to a hope that other countries can make a successful transition to democracy even if they are still confronting some problems of democracy consolidation. Undoubtedly, this trend also reflects the West's will to find a reliable partner, capable of achieving a transition to democracy in a region that is characterized, on the one hand, by authoritarian Arab governments reluctant to implement significant reforms, and, on the other hand, by a secular opposition unable to counterbalance the power.

Thus, strengthening civil society seems increasingly to be the watchword at meetings, seminars, and conferences in the official and academic spheres. Recently, at the European level, the development of civil society has appeared to be the only way to achieve democratization in the Arab world

Within this framework, Arab NGOs have been heavily funded, especially those of Egypt. Here, the question arises: *To what extent can Western aid granted to civil society in general and NGOs in particular help to achieve a democratic transition and be considered an engine of democratization in a country like Egypt?* To answer that question, I outline some challenges to the idea of funding a civil society-engine of democratization, and argue that the West's "strategy of indirect promotion of democracy"<sup>2</sup> cannot succeed in Egypt, at least in the short term.

## 1. Proliferation of NGOs or consolidation of authoritarianism?

The Egyptian regime cannot be called authoritarian, but rather "semi-authoritarian," according to Marina Ottaway<sup>3</sup>; or "liberalized autocracy," in Daniel Brumberg's phrase.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, this regime is able to consolidate its authoritarianism while putting in place measures that can be considered more or less liberal. For such a system, the proliferation of NGOs is less likely to be a means of empowering groups seeking to change the regime's strategy than a part of the controlled-liberalization strategy itself. The presence of these NGOs and their various activities, even those seen as anti-government, can be viewed as outgrowths of a *policy* of controlled liberalization.

Thus, the government has much more to do with promoting civil society than civil society has to do with democratization.<sup>5</sup> This situation creates a plight for donors, who find themselves funding organizations that bolster the regime's survival strategy, rather than organizations with a realistic chance of affecting this strategy.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. A "romantic" Western vision for civil society?

We should be wary of romanticizing civil society. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can play a positive and effective role in the democratic transition process only if they have two prerequisites:

First, they must have a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the regime.<sup>7</sup> But in a country like Egypt, the regime in place does not hesitate to co-opt NGO leaders and activists by giving them better positions elsewhere in governmental or semi-governmental organizations while letting them retain their positions as head of the NGOs.<sup>8</sup> An important example is the appointment of Hafez Abu Seada, director of one of the largest and oldest NGOs in Egypt, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), to the board of directors of the National Council for Human Rights, a governmental or semi-governmental institution. Beyond leaders of NGOs, the regime is working to co-opt the game itself by creating organizations that are supposedly work in the fields of advocacy and human rights. The result of that a large proportion of external funding aids institutions that pose no threat to the government's plans. Examples include the Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations, the National Council of Human Rights, and the National Council of Women.<sup>9</sup>

For NGOs to make a difference, they also must possess the capacity to build alliances with other sectors of civil society as well as a clear agenda for advocacy and, where appropriate, militancy.<sup>10</sup> Through alliances, they can pressure the government for socioeconomic or human rights reforms.<sup>11</sup> However, structural deficits afflicting Egyptian NGOs interfere with their ability to ally with other NGOs, and hence their ability to play effective leadership and mobilizing roles.<sup>12</sup>

These structural deficits are of two types. The first is the absence of internal democracy and transparency. These NGOs, especially those of political nature, are most often centered around a charismatic personality, and feature a staff with scant experience.<sup>13</sup> The situation probably promotes authoritarian leadership of these NGOs.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the imbalance between the voluntary and professional side and staff within these NGOs affects their ability and their effectiveness. Donors, consequently, must give qualitative rather than quantitative aid if they want to enhance the effectiveness of these NGOs, a problem afflicting mainly the assistance offered by the European Commission in Egypt.

### **3. Receiving funds versus acquiring a social base?**

Certainly, without external funding, NGOs of an advocacy type or political in nature may never emerge. The Egyptian government prohibits NGOs from receiving funds without its permission, which is rarely granted.

Even if permission is given, the culture of the country can be a real obstacle. The public has relatively little interest in politically active organizations, by contrast to its considerable interest in organizations of a religious nature that provide economic and social services; these social service NGOs are much likelier to receive local funds for their activities.<sup>15</sup> This creates contradictory interests between external donors interested in democratization, on the one hand, and the community, relatively uninterested in political activism, on the other. Political groups in general have little or no social base.

An additional problem is that the democratization-oriented NGOs compete for external donors. Scarcely any cooperation between them exists, which weakens their ability to lead and mobilize effectively.<sup>16</sup>

### **4. Nongovernmental partner in the government?**

The government welcomes partnerships with NGOs working in development and providing services, especially given the rising Egyptian population.<sup>17</sup> These organizations, unlike those in Latin America, for example, do not possess a dual agenda combining development and democratic change, so they do not mobilize the population to demand democratic reforms.<sup>18</sup> USAID in 2001 implemented an action plan for Egypt, under which it would stress aid to NGOs that combine their activities with advocacy or democratic change, but this approach is still limited and relatively ineffective.<sup>19</sup> One must ask, then, whether these organizations are generally reinforcing the government's authoritarianism rather than challenging it.

### **5. The Islamist dilemma**

A further problem is that Islamist NGOs in Egypt tend to be more effective than secular ones, yet the Islamist ones tend to be excluded from external funding. (The Islamist organizations do not necessarily want external funds.<sup>20</sup>) The result is two categories of organizations: secular ones with limited effectiveness, a weak social base, and access to outside aid; and Islamist ones with greater efficiency, a stronger social base, and no outside aid. These two categories confront each other rather than cooperating, and thus are unable to act as a combined catalyst for pressuring the government for greater democracy. Donors generally do not promote such cooperation.

### **6. Civil society, a catalyst for democracy?**

One way of framing the issue is whether we wish to foster the *demand* for democracy, by increasing the capacity of civil society organizations to pressure the government and rally the citizenry; or whether we wish to foster the *supply* of democracy, by enhancing the ability of state institutions to behave consistently with democratic values. In a famous article, Berman showed that civil society in Germany in the 1930s failed to achieve greater democracy. Highly mobilized, facing state institutions that were weak and unable to meet their demands, the organizations sided with the Nazi party.<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, this situation differs from that currently in Egypt, but the point is that civil society is not invariably a catalyst for democracy; the political and cultural contexts play a crucial role.

The West knows that the dynamics of democratization, in terms of political openings or more radically in terms of regime change, could at least in the short term lead to instability. The Muslim brotherhood, for example, is the only viable opposition in Egypt; it could assume power. The 2005 legislative elections confirmed this danger. For this reason, the West is seeking to promote democracy indirectly through civil society, an approach with limited promise.

## Notes

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**2** For further information about the Indirect Strategy for Democracy Promotion in the Arab World, see CAROTHERS Thomas, Is Gradualism Possible? Choosing a Strategy for Promoting Democracy in the Middle East, in CAROTHERS Thomas (Editor), *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 2005, pp 243-245.

**3** OTTAWAY Marina, *Democracy Challenged : The challenge of semi-authoritarianism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 2003, p3.

**4** For more on "liberalized autocracy", see : BRUMBERG Daniel, The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 13, n4, October 2002, pp57-67.

**5** DENEUGEUX Guilain, Promouvoir la démocratie et la gouvernance dans les pays arabes : Les options stratégiques des bailleurs de fond (*Democracy and Governance Promotion in the Arab World : Strategic Options for Donors*), dans BEN NAFISSA Sara, *ONG et Gouvernance dans le Monde Arabe (NGOs and Governance in the Arab World)*, Karthala and CEDEJ, Paris- Cairo, 2004, p87.

**6** YOM Seon L, Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol 9, n4, December 2005.

**7** HAWTHORNE Amy, Middle East Democracy: Is Civil Society The Answer?, Carnegie Papers 44 (March 2004), p11.

**8** On cooptation, see Policy Failure et Political Survival : The Contribution of Political Institutions, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol 43, n2, April 1999.

**9** YOM Seon L, Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World, *op.cit.*

**10** HAWTHORNE Amy, Middle East Democracy, *op.cit.*, p11.

**11** YOM Seon L, Civil Society and Democratization, *op.cit.*

**12** Interview with Ms Nihad Rageh, director of the USAID project for strengthening NGOs' capacities at the NGO Support Center, Cairo, 17 October 2007.

**13** AL AGATI Mohamed, Challenges that Face Civil Society in Egypt, paper presented at the 2 nd Subregional Conference of the EuroMeSCo at Alexandria, April 2007.

**14** Field observation.

**15** Interview with Mr. Ayman Abd AL Wehab, Head of the Civil Society Unit at AL Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), Cairo.

**16** Ibid.

**17** DALACOURA Katerina, US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East since 11 September 2001: A critique,*International Affairs*, May 2005, pp976-977.

**18** HAWTHORNE Amy, Middle East Democracy, *op.cit*, p12.

**19** Interview with Nihad Rageh, *op. cit*.

**20** AL Sayed Kamal Mustapha, Helping Out is Hard to Do, *Foreign Policy*, n117, Winter 1999- 2000, p25. See also AL Sayed Kamal Mustapha, in NORTON Augustus Richard, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, EJ Brill Leiden, New York Koln, 1995, pp282-290.

**21** DENEUGEUX Guilain, *op. cit*, p87. See also CAROTHERS Thomas and BRANDT William, Think Again: Civil Society,*Foreign Policy*, n117, Winter 1999-2000, p 21.