



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Participation Now! Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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Civic Education and the Arab Spring: A Historic Opportunity

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What Happened in the Arab Region? A Complicated Delivery of a New Social Contract

An explosion of voice marked an era of Arab awakening – an era of voice; the Arabic word for voice and for vote is “saout”. The increased readiness for expression of opinion about politics and good government over the past 2 years crowned a persistent attempt to nurture civic and political engagement and to form social movements demanding dignity, freedom and social justice in the face of oppressive state machineries.

The Arab Uprising is an awakening that sets the record straight, declaring the bankruptcy of growth without socio economic inclusion; the instability of self-proclaimed democracy that lacks administrative, political and social accountability; the immaturity of thinking that toppling heads of states is enough to guarantee a qualitative rupture from the past.

Those past two years show the enormous challenge ahead for Arab transitions: to move towards a liberal agenda of freedom and to introduce distributive economic policies that help achieve social justice. We have to resist the temptation of reducing transitions to technical procedural fixes or to judge transitions in one or two year intervals. Transitions are historical moments of uncertainty as much as they are tipping points pregnant with profound transformation.

The Potential for Profound Transformation: A New Social Contract?

The old social contract in the region was one of stability in return for economic growth. Stability came with voicelessness and exclusive political participation. Growth came with social and economic exclusion as well as high levels of corruption that benefited the very few on top of the political and economic ladder. In the process, all social basic services suffered from bad quantity & quality and unequal access. Those with money could buy good services; those without the means were deprived of the services and the voice to make government (and private sector) accountable.

The dignity uprisings, thus, were about a new social contract of structural redistribution of wealth and income and clean, accountable government. This new social contract seems challenging at the moment: Why?

Firstly, distributive social justice is difficult to achieve because the Egyptian economy is in critical shape. Slow down after two years of uprisings has resulted in reduction of foreign reserves. Almost 50% of the budget is consumed by servicing the debt and covering the huge subsidy bill (food and energy subsidies); the subsidies service disproportionately the

middle class. Another quarter of the budget goes to paying wages and salaries; these are so low that no engineer or physician or teacher can survive without having 2 or 3 jobs. Whatever is left of the national budget is not enough to invest in physical infrastructure - which is needed to create jobs - and in basic social services - which are needed to expand poor people's capabilities. The situation economically is so intractable that the immediate Islamic dominated government will most probably resort to international borrowing and domestic charity-based economics instead of progressive distribution and structural changes of the economy. That is probably going to be seen by many as the best that can be done for now, but it must be said that this is not sustainable and not respectful of rights-based principles of just government.

Secondly, clean accountable government is also difficult to achieve because the newly arriving Islamic elite is very keen to ascend to all leading positions in the executive as well as in the economy, the media and in state sponsored civil society. Competing with a lingering old guard (not completely purged), the new aspirants to positions of power are not yet focused on instituting mechanism of accountability.

The most threatened in the process are civil society actors. They have been demonized under the old regimes by state institutions and by the media. They continue to be demonized today. The middle class is willing to accept the oppression of civil society if that brings stability back- claiming that stability is a precondition of economic recovery. The weakening of civil society (through regulations and media campaigns) does not bode well for a new social contract. It is civil society that provides the push for accountable institutions, both in the public and private sector. It is civil society that bears the enormous responsibility of growing citizens for a new social contract. The Arab middle class needs to be reminded of this fact.

Citizenship Education in the Arab Region

In moments of uncertainty, the values and skills of individuals are as crucial as structural change is. Therein is the main purpose of citizen education: the creation of citizens who appreciate the values of freedom and who own the skills and mechanisms of holding governments and markets accountable to a social justice agenda. Citizen education is a cornerstone of sustainable progress towards a new social contract.

How to achieve that? It is in the short run partly civic activism, partly media and partly independent arts and culture spaces. Fundamentally and in the long run what is needed is education with a human rights based approach to development as well as an empowerment ethos.

How Do We Get There? The Role of Civil Society in the MENA

Let us not forget where we are coming from. Civic education in post-colonial times in the Arab region was offered in elementary and high schools. The process was teacher focused, not student centred, and the inputs were mainly limited information & badly trained teachers.

The purpose ranged between:

- Allegiance to the homeland, where the ruler became an embodiment of the homeland and
- Cementing an Identity widely defined to gloss over ethnic or religious identities; in many instances the constructed national identity threatened to violate rights or at best not give those rights enough institutional and judicial guarantees).

Because of that, Arab youth learned to express voice in protest without soft skills or the institutional channels for constructive participation. Most voices nowadays are expression of protest without having skills of negotiation, compromise and consensus and without having the necessary information to advocate informed demands for “more” (wages, salaries, subsidies) or for different policies (structural distribution policies). This is very clear in the political party scene that is developing in the Arab region.

Another important implication of the above is a weak culture of consensus building, one that respects diversity and manages it without suffocating or demonizing those with opposing views. This has been a feature of politics in the past and is creeping back into the public discourse after the 2011 uprising. It is taking the form of demonizing and criminalizing civil society.

And let us not forget the basics. Almost all Arab states have achieved impressive gains in access to free primary education. Average net enrolment rate in primary schools jumped from 75 % in 1999 to 84 % in 2008. In secondary schools, the net enrolment rate in several states exceeded 70 % in 2007. The average number of years of schooling of the total population aged fifteen and above has risen appreciably in each country since 1960. Despite this progress, several Arab countries are unlikely to reach the target levels specified by UNESCO in its drive for “Education for All” by 2015. The overall adult illiteracy rate in the Arab region remains high (28 % in 2006). Dropout rates are also high. Early childhood and care education in the Arab region remain unsatisfactory; the proportion of children enrolled in preschool is less than 20 % (world average is 41 %).

The Arab region is also underperforming on quality. Arab states that participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) tests in 2003 and 2007 scored significantly below average. The scores in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test on reading, mathematics, and science in 2003 and 2009 were likewise significantly below average. Fifteen-year-old students from the Arab states who took the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) test in 2006 had the same outcome.

As we advocate for a departure from this past, we need to keep looking forward to a different citizen. One who understands that achieving social justice is conflictive and requires – at least on the part of the active elite- some considerable level of economic literacy. Because of history of lack of information, economic literacy of Arab secondary and university students is minimal. They do not know how a budget is put together or how to read one if they ever see one. They do not know the basics of planning, financing plans and monitoring results. They have neither understanding nor appreciation of conflict of interest. In fact what we are saying is that the entire elite has those very same deficiencies, including elites in responsible positions be that in the legislature or the media.

Because social justice requires a progressive program of achieving good quality and inclusive social and economic services and that has a cost, the course of development is conflictive at times. Thus, conflict resolution mechanisms and consensus building soft skills need to be developed so are critical thinking skills.

Main actors for Citizenship Education: Old and New

Who will help us get there? Again it is important to remember the old and new actors in the Arab region. The old actors include:

- State (public) schools and state media (radio and TV)
- State leaning arts and culture

Citizenship education is now advanced at the hand of a different set of actors, predominant among them new social media, new social movements, independent arts spaces, universities engaged in civic education and community action research and human rights local NGOs and legal public interest litigation lawyers.

Old

Nasserist nationalist school education
One party youth Caucasus

Radio “Voice of the Arabs”

Charity and service provision NGOs

Ideologically driven arts & culture

New

Action Research at Universities
Political Development Ministry or Centre (Jordan, Bahrain)
Social media

Deliberative Polling (e.g. Arab Debates)

Rights Based Activist and Developmental NGOs

Independent arts and culture spaces

This is on face value good news. Underneath the surface, however, is a challenge that requires innovative action. Those new actors are not accepted as legitimate partners in development. State institutions want civil society to provide services and not get involved in advocacy or accountability; the private sector is afraid of new civic actors especially if they advocate for socially responsible policies; the media is using new civic actors as material for sensational headlines.

This means that citizenship education needs to include a component on raising awareness of the role of civil society as a partner in development, i.e. a partner in service provision, advocacy of rights, as well as a watchdog to monitor policies and make the state and the market accountable to social justice goals. This requires documentation of real life evidence and results and then – most importantly – brilliant story telling in collaboration with media channels.

Engaging civil society actors in citizen education needs to be coupled with capacity development of the civil society sector. Civil society is still evolving in its internal governance structures. They are still divided between those who focus on delivering basic social services to the poor (charity approach) and those who advocate for collective and systemic change (empowerment). The convergence between those who focus on civil and political rights and those who focus on social economic and cultural rights is still nascent. Coordination and networking skills among all of those various types of civil society is at early stages.

The Role of Development Assistance

The most inspiring model of building citizenship is the EU. But the EU is locked into a post-colonial relationship of fear with the Arab region. European organizations need to free themselves of that fear.

Alternative Option: Principles engagement and that means engage the region as equals emphasizing that you Europeans are similarly pondering the European project’s challenge with voice, democracy and social justice.

Focus on democratization and social justice. Steer away from technical fixes and focus on how to redefine relations of power offering practical knowledge on how to redistribute wealth, income and assets. There are no clear solutions here, not event for Europeans.

Engage a new generation of Arabs. These are Internet based movements that cut across economic, ethnic, religious divisions and insist on accountability of government, showing high perseverance and civic engagement. But these alone are not sufficient. Citizenship education is necessary condition.



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A final reminder coming from an Egyptian Poet by the name of Abdel Rahman El Abnoodi who wrote (loose translation):

Power tempts because it is delicious; you come into it wanting to do well and before you know it, it turns you vicious.

Accountability and vigilant citizens would make power less delicious; a vision of justice to the powerless could make the powerful less vicious.

Readings

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