The Struggle for Civil Society in the Arab World

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Civil Society as a “Concept”

- The battle for Civil Society in the Arab World begin from the concept itself.
Tunisia: transformation of Power 1987
Civil Society between the authority and the Islamists

- Many Tunisian intellectuals raised the question of civil Society.
- Is the Ruler party “the Constitutional party” will accept the Political pluralism?
- Is the Islamists “the Renaissance party” will accept the women rights as stated in the “Code of Personal Status” which Bourguiba issued just three months after independence. In this magazine Bourguiba started issue legislation that led to the restructuring of the Tunisian society.
- There was a huge debate in Tunisia about civil society using this two arguments.
- (See: Mohamrd Karo: The Intelligentsia and the Civil Society in Tunisia, 1988).
Most of the intellectuals in the Arab World received the “civil society” concept through Antonio Gramsci, and the leftists intellectuals carry on the concept against the Authoritarian state and the Islamists in the same time.
Gramsci and civil society

- Antonio Gramsci has a negative view about civil society, departing from Marx, Gramsci did not consider civil society as coterminous with the socio-economic base of the state. Rather, Gramsci located civil society in the political superstructure. He underlined the crucial role of civil society as the contributor of the cultural and ideological capital required for the survival of the hegemony of capitalism (Ehrenberg 1999).

- Gramsci viewed civil society as the site for problem-solving.

- Agreeing with Gramsci, the new Left assigned civil society a key role in defending people against the state and the market and in asserting the democratic will to influence the state.
Arab leftists and civil society

- See bibliography: (Abdulkader Azzaghel, Azmie Bshara, Aziz Azma, Sadeq Jalal Alazem, Abed Al-Jaberie, Tayeb Tezeenie and others)

- They recognized between “Civil Society” or “Al-madnie Society” and “tribal Society” or “Al-ahlie Society”.

The Islamic term of the civil society

- The islamists use the term of “Awkaf” (Endowment) in front of the leftists.
- The subsequent of Treaty of Westphalia heralded the birth of the sovereign states system.
- The Treaty endorsed states as territorially-based political units having sovereignty.
- Before that the Ottoman Empire build or allowed the people to build “takya” (Public houses) to host the poor and the people in need.
- This is consider as a birth of the civil society when the people themselves become able to manage their social and economic life apart from direct control of the state.
The liberal concept

- The social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes set the nature of the relationship between the Leviathan and the people.
- In Hobbes’s paradigm, the formation of the civil society led to the formation of government, state, and laws.
- Hobbes’s concepts of the ‘state of nature’ and the ‘sovereignty of the state’ led to the later germination of realism that defined the nature of the relationship between the state and civil society.
The liberal concept

- John Locke moved another step when he said the basic rights of human beings are the preservation of life, liberty and property. Moreover, he held that the state must operate within the bounds of civil and natural laws.
Alexis de Tocqueville and civil society

- Alexis de Tocqueville after comparing despotic France and democratic America, conclude that the system of civilian and political associations as a counterbalance to both liberal individualism and centralization of the state.
- Hegel's perception of social reality was followed in general by Tocqueville who distinguished between political society and civil society.
Liberal civil society

- Tocqueville`s book translated into Arabic in 2005
- Liberal thinkers in the Arab World consider the concept of the civil society later on (Saad Ibrahim) they viewed it as a tool in the struggle against the authoritarian regimes.
Transformation of the concept

- The term “civil society” occupies an important place in the political discourses after the collapse of the Soviet Union especially with the success of the Solidarity in Poland.
Solidarity and the “Pop”
The Syrian Case

- In Syria 2000 again like Tunisia 1987, the intellectuals discovered the concept during the transition of power from the father to the son.
- The intellectuals were the first to grasp this opportunity. The pushing of the concept of “civil society” as an introduction to democratic reform.
- These discussions addressed the necessity of reactivating civil society after its long suspension by the authorities.
The Funeral of Hafez al-Asad, June 13, 2000
Hafez’s Son Bashar al-Asad Sworn in as President of Syria, July 17, 2000
Syria: Human Rights under the Heel of Military Intelligence
Civil Society in Syria

- The idea was establishing the “Friends of Civil Society Association” in Syria
- They define the ”Civil society, as we see it, is a group of social committees, parties, organizations, associations and free media which are nongovernmental; its essence is democratic choice, and democracy cannot be achieved without the awakening of society with its systems and organisations creating an atmosphere of critical dialogue between society and government. Activation of the organizations of the civil society is the sole path to building a real state for everyone and to creating an effective social movement.”
Bashar Al-Asad and civil society

- How do you see the idiom ‘civil society’ that is being talked about in Syria?
- There is a confusion between civil society and the institutions of civil society. The civil society is a civilized society that is the result of accumulation of civilizations during hundreds and thousands of years. Syria has a history that goes back to a more than six thousand years of human civilizations. To say that we want to build a civil society means that we want to cancel all this history and start with a new history. Of course this is not realistic, besides the fact that it means a rejection of this history and an attempt to get out of it.
A group of Syrian intellectuals released their first “Communiqué of the 99 Intellectuals” on 27 September 2000. This communiqué urged the authorities to cancel “the state of emergency and martial laws applied in Syria since 1963, announce a general amnesty for all political prisoners, facilitate the return of all exiled, establish a state of law, grant general freedom, and recognize the political and intellectual plurality, as well as the freedom to associate, the freedom of press, and free expression of opinion.”
Changes in the ideology

- This social mobilization—despite serious limitations—produced a new political atmosphere in Syria. Regardless of ideological differences between activists and intellectuals.
- The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and also in the political bureau of the Communist Party, which announced its new name—The Popular Democratic Party--after its sixth anniversary conference. These parties transformed in rhetoric, and in the public imagination, from dogmatic, ideologically-centered entities to proponents of democratic process
The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria

- The Muslim Brotherhood announced in May 2001 their “National Honor Pact for Political Work,” stating their dedication to dialogue, a “democratic political framework,” “abandoning violence” and to work towards “protecting human rights, and those of individual citizens.”

- The pact referred to the so-called “modern state,” which based on free and just elections as a principle of power alternation between all citizens. It is a pluralistic state, where visions, interpretations and attitudes vary. Opposing political factions as well as civil society play the role of observer and detector, so that the state does not fall into a cycle of tyranny and corruption.”
The Syrian communist Party

The Syrian communist Party, which adopted democracy as its policy program. Announced at its sixth conference, their program stated that “the popular party struggles for a national democratic order, based on the principles of freedom, equality and social justice.” It concluded that “there are no democracies that are different in their essence, designed according to each nation; there is one democracy. It is a system of modern and universal values and principles, based on the doctrine of liberty, ruled by the population. It is a state of institutions and alternation of power through free and periodical elections. The population chooses the government, observing and questioning power, always ready to reconsider it. It is a system based on the reign of justice, where all obey without any discrimination or exception, a law that guarantees both fundamental and pluralistic freedoms.”
Between Tunisia and Syria

- Both Tunisia and Syria under authoritarian regimes, this is why the activists and intellectuals discovered the “resistance” aspect of the civil society.
- In spite of the differences in the ideological backgrounds but they agreed at the end that they should accept the democracy and civil society as universal value.
- For the first time, the idea of democracy and civil society prevailed, at least within the opposition’s consciousness. The movement not only spurred the intellectuals but sprang the opposition political parties to settle on a peaceful political methodology, despite their vastly different visions of society.
The “Role” of Civil Society

- In other Arabic states which the regime less authoritarian and may be more open, the question was what’s the role of the civil Society in the public life or does the civil society can play a role in the democratic change.
- Egypt (17000 NGOs)
- Morocco (25000 NGOs)
Egypt
Morocco
“GNGOs”

- The Arab government adapted the concept by limiting the right to establish a civil society organization depending on the law (Egypt, Jordan, Syria …) or creating a governmental civil society organization known as GNGOs.
- Bahrain, Sudan, Tunisia, Egypt …
Sudan: When Civil society Becomes a Tool State Control
New Porn

- In other countries especially in the Gulf countries and Libya the number of the organizations are very small and they have very limited role in the public life.
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Bahrain
King of the African Kings
Conclusion

- The absence of the liberal aspect of the civil society in the Arab World.
- Lack in the number of NGOs.
- Strict laws limit the civil society.
- The limited role of civil society in the political change.