

CDDRL Inaugurates New Program on Political Reform in the Arab World

The Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL), a major research center within Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, inaugurated its new Program on Good Governance and Political Reform in the Arab World with a conference on May 10 and 11, 2010. The conference, titled *Political Reform in the Arab World: Problems and Prospects*, featured internationally renowned scholars, practitioners, journalists, and activists from across the Arab world, Europe, and the United States. The discussion revolved around pathways towards political reform in the Arab world and the need for change in the region. The conference was organized around seven thematic sessions: the economy, media, existing regimes, civil society, political opposition, youth politics, and the role of international actors. A final session discussed prospects for reform.

According to conference participant Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, roughly three-quarters of the world's Muslims live under democratically elected governments. The other fourth, which Dr. Ibrahim dubbed the "Empty Quarter", live in the Arab world. Why has democracy struggled to gain a foothold in the region and what are the prospects and problems facing political reform? Over the course of the two-day conference, the participants debated these and other questions and identified several possible answers.

Challenges to Political Reform

During two days of discussion and debate, conference participants identified the most challenging barriers to reform in the Arab world as resistance from ruling regimes, weak civil societies, rentier economies, and inconsistent international involvement.

The path towards change in the Arab world is not likely to be paved by the regimes themselves. Top-down reform is difficult because incumbent Arab rulers perceive genuine political and institutional reform to be detrimental to their interests.¹ Recent decades have shown several false glimmers of hope, with a new generation of leaders coming to power and some implementing economic and legal reforms.² However, many steps towards liberalization have been designed to alleviate pressure for deeper political reforms.³ Indeed, a small series of reforms taken in the 1990s were so modest that they have since become known as "the façades".⁴ Furthermore, efforts to make national security actors more accountable and more professional are undermined by competing power elites that have an interest in penetrating and regulating state institutions.⁵

Challenges to the ruling regimes that push for political reform can come from civil society actors as well as political opposition groups. However, both have suffered from a number of obstacles.

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⁴ Riad al Khouri

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For nearly fifty years, Arab rulers have suppressed civil society in an effort to resist reforms,⁶ and have often suppressed the voices of the opposition. Some rulers have tried to delegitimize civil society by portraying it as a Western concept imposed on Arab society from the outside.⁷ Co-optation is another strategy used by many regimes. Several opposition groups have been rendered voiceless through being lured into toeing the regime line, and some regimes have tried to co-opt civil society by creating “governmental non-governmental organizations” (GONGOs), which neither represent nor have contact with the general population.⁸ GONGOs hinder the formation of grassroots civil society groups who have the potential to lay the ground for political reform. They also divert resources from real NGOs to government-approved initiatives.⁹ In much of the Arab world today, civil society as well as political opposition groups exist in an extremely restrictive legal environment. Restrictions are more severe on groups that openly engage in politics or advocacy and therefore some groups try to depoliticize and disguise their activities in order to survive.¹⁰ Political reform can only happen if it is primarily driven by political agents within each country, and thus the restrictions on civil society and political opposition are crucial to examine as an impediment to reform.

However, some conference participants noted that a more open environment for civil society would not automatically lead to political reform. As one participant put it: associational life does not equal democracy.¹¹ There is no formula showing that an expansion of associational life and other phenomena variously characterized as civil society ultimately results in political liberalization and democracy, or that democracy results from social struggles per se. It would be misleading to interpret recent and current social struggles in the Arab world as indicators of democracy in the making. While there have been important social struggles around several issues in the Arab world (such as workers rights), no country has yet experienced a broad and unified social struggle whose objective is specifically democratization.¹² It would also be misleading to perceive a rise in the raw number of civil society organizations as an indicator of liberalization. This is not only because some NGOs are less liberal than their governments,¹³ but also because simple quantification overlooks the key issue of governance within civil society organizations. Badly governed organizations can be vulnerable to corruption or nepotism and fail to represent their constituencies.¹⁴ Political change is enabled by accountable civil society groups who in turn act as a watchdog monitoring the government’s behavior and working to push for reforms.¹⁵

Economic distortions are another serious impediment to political reform. Some countries in the region qualify as rentier states because their economies are dominated by unearned external

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income that flows directly to the government.¹⁶ In some Arab countries the external income is oil revenues; in others, it is foreign aid.¹⁷ In both cases, these external rents skew the state-society balance in favor of the state, reinforce autocratic rule, and can lead to both petty and grand corruption.¹⁸

Much of the discussion of how to overcome the dynamics of rentierism focused on the private sector. But one speaker noted that a shift towards the private sector would simply lead business leaders to engage in rent-seeking behavior and that the only long-term solution was the establishment of accountability networks.¹⁹ Others questioned whether private sector forces would drop their support for existing regimes and push for political reform, given that businesses depend on stability.²⁰ Yet others cautioned against limiting the definition of “private sector” to the crony capitalists that benefit from the status quo and urged that the term include entrepreneurs that are shut out of opportunities and that have a stake in institutional reform²¹.

For political reform to be viable, it has to first originate from and be driven by the inside and not be dictated from outside. However, the Arab world has historically seen much involvement by international actors. The ineffective and inconsistent nature of this involvement – mainly by the EU and the USA – was identified as a major barrier to democratization in the Arab world. The EU has many reform initiatives and projects but these efforts are poorly organized and less effective in practice than they seem on paper.²² The highly publicized US push for reforms during the Cold War and immediately after was also a failure,²³ although several participants noted that it had some positive, albeit limited, results.²⁴ Conference participants were also critical of the US government’s support for regimes that remain resistant to political liberalization.²⁵ The principal deficiencies of Western efforts to promote democracy have been a lack of consistency – with the West vacillating between reform promotion and realpolitik – and an incoherent strategy – with the West pursuing business-as-usual policies toward existing regimes while simultaneously calling for reform and offering support to civil society groups.²⁶ The lack of consistency has continued under the Obama administration, which, according to some participants, places a lower priority on promoting political reform than the previous administration,²⁷ while other participants pointed out continued support for Arab civil societies and for government reforms via the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the

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²⁰ Laith Kubba

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²² Richard Youngs

²³ Sean Yom

²⁴ Nathan Brown, Mohammad Al-Momani, Tarek Masoud, Aboubakr Jamaï, and Radwan Ziadeh

²⁵ Hind Arroub, Joel Beinin, Hicham Ben Abdallah, Sean Yom, and Gamal Eid

²⁶ Olivier Roy and Nabeel Khoury

²⁷ Amaney Jamal

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) programs.²⁸ There is much scope for further scrutiny of the work of such programs, the political agendas driving their work, and their effects on reform prospects.

But regardless of the extent of international facilitation, the path towards political reform is one paved internally by actors working on the ground. The conference presentations showed that viable economies, an active civil society, and effective political opposition groups all play a role; however, there are several obstacles in the way that have sustained the “Empty Quarter”.

Prospects for Political Reform

Despite the above barriers to reform – on which much of the conference discussion focused – participants also identified a few silver linings. Notably, economic growth and technological innovation are areas that hold significant prospects for reform.

Participants described specific mechanisms through which the drive for economic growth in the Arab world is creating space for political reform. Regimes are forced to open up certain spaces to reform in order to encourage continued growth and attract foreign direct investment. For example, Qatar’s growing global economy has created pressures and encouraged local advocates for legal reforms in line with global norms.²⁹ While the conference participants generally agreed that such efforts may not represent regimes’ genuine desire for political reform, they expressed some hope that they can serve as a starting point for further reforms in the future.

The youth bulge, particularly when combined with high levels of unemployment, represents a challenge for Arab governments, with the potential to undermine the prevailing social contract. In order to overcome this challenge, regimes have been forced to reach out to the private sector to create jobs. This outreach creates institutional opportunities for public-private dialogue and engagement with the wider society, giving civil society organizations the opportunity to have some influence on the policymaking process through advocacy.³⁰

Though there are some opportunities for reform inherent in economic growth, it is important to keep in mind several caveats when thinking about the issue. The participants agreed that economic growth is not automatically tied to political reform.³¹ It is the opportunities this growth creates and the way in which other actors leverage them that matters. Part of this involves greater international openness and other changes in social and economic structure that are conducive to democracy. Participants also warned against the argument that there needs to be a certain level of economic reform before political reforms can be made because this line of reasoning has just given Arab leaders an excuse to avoid political reforms.³²

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²⁹ David Mednicoff

³⁰ Abdulwahab Alkebsi

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³² Laith Kubba and Aboubakr Jamaï

Technological advances constitute the second major area that conference participants felt had potential for advancing reform in the Arab world. According to one speaker, technology has allowed Arab civil society to rebound after years of authoritarian repression.³³ Egyptian cyber-activist Esraa Rashid discussed the importance of networking websites such as Facebook in her own campaigns for reform. Sites like Facebook create an open forum for dialogue that places important reform issues such as free elections, constitutional change, and repealing emergency legislation on the political agenda.

However, participants were cautious about overstating the potential of the Internet as a new way of organizing and mobilizing support, particularly among youth movements. The fact that Internet penetration is still low in many Arab countries has limited the impact of online movements thus far, though the potential for future growth in the cyber arena is almost limitless.³⁴ For example, cell phones have penetrated much further into Arab societies and present another strategy for political activists to educate and mobilize bases of support. Ultimately, arguments for political change must not be driven by technological determinism. The new media are ultimately just a new tool; in their own right, they do not automatically lead to democracy or political reform.³⁵

What is laying the ground for reform is how the new media are used. Political pressure on journalists remains a major problem in the Arab world, especially when reporting on issues considered threatening by the regimes.³⁶ This is where bloggers in the Arab world have come to play an influential role: By raising important topics that are too sensitive for news journalists to address directly, they pave the way for the old media to cover those issues indirectly through reporting on the bloggers themselves.³⁷ The new media are also enabling ordinary people to have a political voice in the public domain by becoming citizen journalists.³⁸ That does not mean that bloggers and online activists do not suffer from the same political pressures exerted on other political activists and on journalists. However, communication technologies are helping build synergies between different kinds of activists and thus helping strengthen the existence of raw ingredients for political change.

Areas for Future Study

The barriers and prospects for reform mentioned here indicate a serious need for further attention. In particular, the discussion crystallized three particular avenues for further study that CDDRL's Program on Good Governance and Political Reform in the Arab World can pursue.

Civil society organizations have a crucial role to play in pushing for political reform in the Arab world, but this role is not yet well understood. Discussions of Arab civil society often employ different definitions of the term. The conference participants agreed that in order to take

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advantage of the full potential of civil society, it is important to develop a sophisticated typology of civil society organizations in the Arab world.³⁹ Important things to incorporate in this typology include the different forms of repression that civil society groups face, detailed ways in which civil society organizations themselves may be corrupt, and major accomplishments by civil society that can be built upon to support political reform. By conducting grounded analysis based on empirical data, the program here at CDDRL can generate a better understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics in which Arab civil societies operate, which will be valuable for both academics and practitioners interested in reform.⁴⁰

A second idea that came out of the conference was the fact that many of the new youth, activist, and opposition movements in the Arab world – the same groups that have harnessed the power of modern technology– are not prepared to put their ideas into action. Their goals are generally framed in the negative and they lack both clearly articulated objectives and blueprints for how to implement them. If promising movements such as these are to succeed in the political realm, they will first need to develop strategies that will help them transition into functioning political actors.⁴¹ It is thus important to address the factors that would enable this transition.

Finally, one topic that clearly stood out for many participants was the important roles – be they positive or negative – played by Arab governments in achieving any modicum of reform. Because of their central roles, scholars involved in work on political reform must learn how to engage Arab governments on reform issues in order to create common ground that can eventually lead to critical dialogues on political reform.⁴² Moreover, the international and regional influences on, and dimensions of, Arab government action are often critical for understanding and increasing reform prospects.⁴³

Conclusion

The problems facing political reform in the Arab world are severe. There are no silver-bullet solutions and reform will not happen overnight. But we should not be dismissive of small steps forward: increasing exposure of Arab regimes to international norms, growing economic opportunities and technological advances that open up space for communication and mobilizing all are promising developments. As this inaugural conference has demonstrated, CDDRL's new Program on Good Governance and Political Reform in the Arab World is committed to understanding the challenges facing reform and lighting the path to better governance through detailed, grounded analysis and interdisciplinary research.

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⁴⁰ Saloua Zerhouni

⁴¹ Nathan Brown, Laith Kubba, and Lina Khatib

⁴² Ellen Lust

⁴³ Hicham Ben Abdallah, Abdellah Hammoudi, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and David Mednicoff.