

Time for democracy



Egypt, as well as other Arab societies, is afflicted by a significant amount of poverty and illiteracy resulting in a lack of knowledge and awareness of human rights and it suffers from a set of tightly bound values and traditions exemplified by submission and dependency. This clearly precludes any democratic process and stands in the way of creativity and free thought, thereby preventing improvement and development. There are many societal and cultural obstacles to human security (among them, the prevalence of tribal, ethnic and family allegiances), but the Government and its policies are the main political threat.

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Government authorities as political obstacles

It is easy to identify government authorities as the main political obstacle to the human rights movement. Egypt has lived under a plethora of nationalistic slogans, most of which border on the chauvinistic and demagogical. These slogans are characterised by contradictory assertions, so that even during the worst eras of dependency and subordination, its regimes solemnly claimed to protect national independence and national sovereignty. Most regimes adopted the single party logic. In the best of cases there were various parties that struggled against the majority ruling party that had control over everything. The consequences today of these regimes and their logic are a clear lack of popular participation, the absence of freedom of thought and expression in all of its forms as well as the absence of the right to assembly and to form independent organisations and groups. This has weakened the ability of society and individuals to create and sustain both group and individual initiatives to the extent that society has become isolated and deprived of all tools and methods to participate in public and political affairs. Egyptians are impotent when it comes to demanding democratic rights and freedoms.

Current Arab legal systems can easily make applying international human rights conventions an impossible feat. The weaknesses and flaws in Arab constitutions, accompanied by the battery of freedom-restricting laws whose primary logic is to safeguard internal security present another huge obstacle to any human rights movement. At the same time, in an effort to gain acceptability at the international level, some states are working towards signing international conventions although they neither believe in them nor intend to apply them. Such moves are part of the regimes' window-dressing, employed to give them the appearance of modern states that respect human rights. This posture also conspires to undermine recently established human rights movements.

Towards a conciliation-based reform

Social reform is a vast process, requiring a consensus among the partners responsible for the achievement of the desired goals.

A critical element in the process of determining the direction and goals of any social reform programme is a close analysis of the nature of social dynamics along with the map of economic and social class, the individual's share of the total national social resources and the total domestic product in relation to the volume of internal and external debt. Such an analysis pushes the vision of comprehensive social development towards achieving substantial and measurable improvement in specific social indicators. Such analyses however should be accompanied by a comparison of the individual's share of the gross domestic product (in Egypt, according to the World Bank, it was USD 1,200 per year in 1999) with those of neighbouring states. This comparison allows us to aspire to an even higher per capita income and a more just distribution of these resources and assets.

The spread of poverty

International development reports inform us that the ratio of poverty in Egypt reaches 33.9%, while absolute poverty is 7.6%, which makes the total of those suffering from poverty in its different forms 41.5% of the overall population (World Bank, 1999). It is also a well-known fact that 96% of the population inhabit only 4% of the total land area. In addition the ratio of individuals in need of provision, that is, those dependent on another person's income, reaches 77%, the highest ratio globally (World Bank, 1999). A deficient distribution of economic resources and assets continues to exist, with 20% of the population owning 70% of the land.

The spread of poverty represents the main challenge facing the mechanisms of reform. Poverty is usually accompanied by unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, disregard for women's rights, environmental problems and limited access to social and health services. These factors contribute to the increase in the levels of disease and death rates as well as to decreased economic productivity. Poverty is also directly related to spatial distribution, inappropriate housing and the inappropriate use and illogical distribution of natural resources.

Poverty and social values

The general trend in social values is still characterised by patriarchal principles exemplified in obedience and submission to authority. The vast majority of Egyptians do not have the basics of reading and writing and of critical thinking skills and free expression. This leads to poor and ineffective participation in public affairs, and a serious lack of awareness, which are ultimately the result of abuse in the mechanisms of power and the disproportionate ownership of resources.

The circle of corruption

Egypt is experiencing a widening of the circle of corruption within the government apparatus and between the Government and the private sector. This has reached levels that threaten development and form a barrier around social and economic improvement and democratic reform.

Participation as a triangle

Participation, as defined implicitly above, is none other than the interlacing of three main complementary factors: the Government, civil society and the private sector. Their relationship is akin to the relationship between the sides of an equilateral triangle. The triangle symbolises the importance of balance and co-operation in the face of the conflict of interests that impede social integration and increase marginalisation and intolerance. Among the factors that constrain the balance of interests is a group of deficiencies that distort the sides of the triangle.

The State is hegemonic and exercises complete control, depending on its bureaucratic apparatus to allow the Executive to interfere in the Legislative and Judicial realms.

Civil society is caught between conceptual confusion, disorganisation, and the inability to fund itself. It continues to re-shape itself and find a role for itself as an effective and strategic partner in human development.

The private sector does not recognise the concept of social capital, which sets the conditions and mechanisms of the internal market to guarantee its sustainability and its ability to compete.

Building a civil society that provides for legal and political guarantees entails the following:

- Democracy and decentralisation for human development.

- Effective popular participation in political decision-making and human development through ensuring the participation of weak and marginalised social groups and those most prone to poverty such as women and children.
- Development and amendment of laws that conflict with democratic concepts and the principles of participation and human rights.
- The importance of allowing freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and the formation of parties and groups.

NGO responsibilities

In the process of civil society building and to achieve a just and balanced human development, NGOs carry important responsibilities, such as:

- Starting up and executing both short term and long term projects in order to raise popular awareness among NGO members and society in general, and holding training courses on effective popular participation in social administration and political decision-making.
- Motivating NGOs themselves and the State in all activities and projects that target social and human development.
- Taking up a popular monitoring role in co-operation with government authorities over the State's work and performance.
- Directing efforts towards finding means of self-funding from the local community to obtain the highest degree of independence.
- Providing exemplars of NGOs and initiating pioneering projects in the fields of combating poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and in providing job opportunities.
- Releasing NGOs' creative energies and new initiatives by freeing them from bureaucracy. Focusing on grass-roots organisations and providing them with support.
- Ensuring that the relationship between NGOs and donors is based on co-ordination and mutual co-operation built on equality and partnership, in which NGOs from developed countries do not have advantages over local NGOs. This assumes that social democracy and participation play a critical role in the process of development, and is achieved by giving priority to actual local requirements based on just and balanced development.

Political reform and democratic dialogue

The Egyptian political regime is well aware that national and democratic movements such as parties, unions, civil society organisations, and writers and thinkers have for decades been demanding com-

prehensive political and democratic reform. They demand a shift from a single-party State where the security apparatus wields control over legislation, institutions and organisations, to a modern civil State where all citizens are equal before the law and where the legislative and judicial bodies enjoy independence. It is a State where all citizens are partners in policy-making and decision-making, based on its respect for civilians and human rights, with no discrimination between individuals because of religious belief, sex, race, social class or political orientation.

The national democratic movement reserves the right to struggle towards all-embracing democratic political and social reform and to demand of the official National Democratic Party to place reform at the top of its priorities. This is especially relevant in the light of the new vision and commitment the Party has declared for itself. Such a step will constitute the basis of an open dialogue between the Government and opposition parties and civil society organisations. It is worth noting that all opposition parties such as the National Progressive Tagamu' Party and the New Al Wafd Party as well as the Lawyers' and Journalists' Syndicates, the Judges' Union, and human rights organisations, during the first and second Justice Conferences held in the 1980s requested democratic political reform from the Government. Among the more important of these requests are:

- Amend legislation in order to comply with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration on the Right to Development and all other agreements relating to rights and freedoms that Egypt has committed itself to.
- Cease the state of emergency that Egypt has been under for years on end. Remove state security courts and limit military trials to situations of war and general crisis. Release all prisoners and detainees who have not been tried.
- Provide legal and political guarantees to form parties, unions, associations and all other forms of peaceful, civil groups, and ensure their complete independence.
- Free the media from government control and allow the establishment of private media companies.
- Allow political dialogue and debate in the media between political parties, civil society organisations and human rights groups.

- Pass appropriate legislation and policies to guarantee free and fair elections in order to open the way for a multi-party system and participation in government which will allow authority to be passed on to others.
- Have all elections (presidential, parliamentary and gubernatorial) supervised by independent judicial bodies, and work towards applying the principle of equal opportunity among citizens to exercise their political rights, including the right to being nominated and elected to office.
- Establish the complete separation between the ruling National Democratic Party and the State and its institutions. This is to be accompanied by the President relinquishing his position as head of the Party in order to be the head of all Egyptian citizens, and limiting the power of the Executive in accordance with the Constitution.
- Pass laws on local governance to stimulate popular participation without the interference of the executive or security apparatuses or the control of the National Democratic Party. Such laws should enable the exercise of free and direct elections and participation in the local administration and popular supervision over the Executive.
- Reform and amend economic and social policies relating to wages, health and education that threaten the quality of life of ordinary citizens and widen the circle of poverty and unemployment, working towards instating alternative plans for human and social development in order to achieve social justice and protect all citizens' economic and social rights. ■