

Living in a lie & dying in silence: The trauma of civil society in the Middle East & North Africa

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Abstract

Veteran political activists and NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) express concern over the future of civil liberties. There is consensus that the region is currently witnessing a genuine crisis as a result of recent government efforts to crush political dissent in Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Iran. Many in the development field believe that civil society is the key to effective defense of civil liberties, and they are disheartened by civil society in the MENA countries because it seems to be characterized by only weak and uncoordinated NGOs. However, occasional outbursts of public opposition to oppression and the increasing strength of radical religious organizations demonstrate that civil society in the MENA countries has deep potential for promoting change. The potential of civil society is strictly constrained by government policies and practices that restrict expression and alienate Arab publics from government, the media, the international community, and each other. To resolve the crisis and prevent violent responses to government oppression, governments will need legal reform that enables expression in the media and the public.

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,'" Martin Luther King Jr. said on August 28, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Inspired by his words, we cannot keep living in a lie in the Middle East. We cannot overlook the urgency of the moment. The discontent of the mid-2009 will never pass until there is an invigorating outlet of freedom and equality. "The MENA lives in a lie and dies in silence" is not just a metaphor but also a reality in the absence of civil liberties.

The authoritarian regimes in the region have witnessed a blossoming of associational activity that resembles similar events in other autocracies prior to democratization, such as Egypt and Iran. The chronic failures of rulers to meet popular economic and political demands carved a public space in which new groups could "attract a following, develop a bureaucratic form, and formulate policy alternatives" (Entelis, 1999). Citizens were "drawn into political life to an unprecedented degree" as activists stirred waves of rage (Bellin, 1994), while complacent elites reeled from social unrest, amplified by sluggish economic growth and draining fiscal endowments (Henry and Springborg, 2001).

In that regard, it has become impossible to realize any sustained process of Arab democratization without establishing an effective civil society. In terms of both the total number of NGOs and their "density" (quantity of organizations per 100,000 inhabitants), Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories enjoy the largest and most active civil societies, the oil-rich Gulf countries the most enervated, and the other Arab countries fall in between.

