Power to the People?
(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Civil society and democratisation of the Arab world

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The literatures and debates on civil society raise several questions about the changing forms and potential role civil society may play in the discourse of democratising state–society relation. In this context, civil society could be viewed as a form of active political society that constitutes an independent and distinct domain between the individual and the state. Therefore, in analysing civil society in the Arab world we should identify the social forces that are included in civil society and explain their relationship to the state. It is asserted that democracy and democratic culture have been difficult to establish in this region of the world. As much as it is important to explore the varieties and strength of social movements and their role in consolidating the intervening space between public and private sphere, it is imperative to highlight the historical experience and socio-economic settings of the Arab region.

Arab societies cannot be understood apart from their historical transformation: demarcation of state boundaries by the colonial powers; the Zionist movement and the rise of the state of Israel; the frequent intrusion of the superpowers on the side of regional actors; and the nature of its political and economic relations with the West.

By the same token, while the international system and great powers stipulate the setting and often function as catalysts for political development in the region, it is as crucial to place the underlying factors that can lead to change within their regional framework. It follows that critical understanding derived from these particular circumstances are necessary to enable us to understand the political processes in the Arab world.

The aim of this paper is to briefly highlight the Arab political discourse and the historical context whereby the modern states came about. Thereafter, some of the problems in promoting civic and democratic culture
in Arab societies will be elaborated upon. Finally, we will examine how social movements can help to loosen the grip of political regimes and transform Arab states into democratic and legitimate organisations of domination. It has to be emphasised, however, that I am not putting forward prescriptions for civil society to achieve democracy; rather, it is an attempt at illustrating the complexities of the debate on Arab civil societies and democracy and, by the same token, highlighting the richness of the history of these societies.

The Arabic world of politics

In liberal democracies, politics are seen as the playing out of a set of ideals that people seldom encounter in the real world. The concept of the state is one such abstraction (Turner 1994, pp 23). The ideal-type Western modern state was historically grafted on to the culturally coherent ethno-religious or ethno-linguistic political entities called nations (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991). Further, in liberal democracies, abstract values serve as the basis for formation and regulation of political as well as civic institutions in the state. The political systems are organised and function in accordance with a defined set of rules, and society is sanctioned by a secular contract, embodying human-made laws that provide rules and legitimise authority (Turner 1994, pp 24).

Organising principles: Family and kinship

The organising principles of Arab societies, on the other hand, are embedded in a concrete social context where the family and the network of kinship are the Archimedean point to which individuals always relate. Even the idea of political action originating with the individual is regarded as alien, since it implies that the social environment in which he or she is supposed to act has been disregarded. Thus, in the Arab world the prime social values and moral responsibilities in both the private and the public domain are still located in the family and its kinship extension (Barakat 1993).

There are great variations between Arab states as regards natural resources, geography and even historical experience, including exposure to the West and colonialism, but since the creation of modern states following
the advent of Western colonialism, the manners by which Arab leaders govern have displayed a striking conformity, making their roles in practice so alike as to be interchangeable. This is the case irrespective of their title of sovereignty – marshal, president, amir, or king – and despite the fact that they have different personalities and have no common denominator that links them as regards background or education. Thus, with their outright authoritarianism, and also by making great efforts to resist democratisation, all Arab leaders are equally intent on using religious symbolism to gain legitimacy (Karawan 1992; Hinnebusch 1992).

The emergence of states in the Arab world on the ruin of the Ottoman Empire from 1918 and on could be characterised by the failure to develop modern nation-states with mature political structures. During this period, Arab states monopolised power not only through the penetration of civil society and through coercion, but also by preventing the emergence of autonomous socio-political groups. The establishment of genuine political parties and independent trade unions were prohibited. Allowed, instead, were the rise of informal and, at times, semi-official pressure groups based on extended families, tribes, religious functionaries, extended families of the new middle class and house trade unions (Hijazi 1980).

Civil society in authoritarian structures

An important feature of the Arab state came into being by the penetration of civil society and the transformation of its institutions – educational, cultural, religious – that have become mere extensions of state apparatuses. For example, under Egypt’s three military rulers, the officers’ corps has become almost a separate caste, living in their own enclosed world of subsidised housing and recreational facilities, just as political independence led to modern-day institutionalisation of families and social networks of tribes and religious or ethnic constellations. Contentious voices also resonate because the exclusionary structure of governance does not reflect the diversity of the population. Contrary to popular images, Arab societies are not homogeneous in ethnicity or religion (Hassan 1999).

Gerber (1987), inspired by Barrington Moore,1 elaborates a series of hypotheses about the significance of the Ottoman rural structures, particularly the absence of a major landed aristocracy, for the nature of
modern states, social transformation and revolutions in the Middle East. The absence of a landed upper class in the region up to 1900, and the weakness of this class when it finally did emerge, explains the absence of a coherent basis for the development of a democratic polity. The introduction of the Land Property Law in 1894 in Egypt is a case in point. The law was too arbitrary and lacked the time and space to develop and create a landed class equivalent to that of feudal nobility in Europe. This might explain the speed in implementing the land reform that was put forward by Nasser on July 1961.

The meaning of the state in the day-to-day life of ordinary Arabs, and its absence in the discourse of politics, is important in this context. While the Arabic *Maghreb* countries are relatively homogeneous in religious terms, and while the state does not necessarily contradict with ethnic origin (ie, Arab and Berber) and religion, the *Mashreq* (the Arab world from Egypt eastward to the Arabian Peninsula, Syria and Iraq) is highly heterogeneous. Many diverse ethnic and religious groups inhabit the state with unmistakably parochial communal loyalties that are often in conflict with the loyalty demanded by the state. Thus, the projected image of the Arab regional system is one of bewildering complexity (Hermassi 1987).

Every political crisis in the Arab world reveals the fragility of the state and its incoherent political institutions. The establishment of the state of Israel, the expulsion of the Palestinians, and the persistent military conflicts in the region all have contributed to a widespread siege mentality and belligerent political discourse. Perhaps most importantly, Western cultural symbols, modes of production and social values aggressively penetrated the Arab world, seriously challenging inherited values and practices, and added to a profound sense of alienation.

Within authoritarian cultures, where the political system is immersed in patron-clientalism and coercive interrelationships with the population, individuals who may be alienated by the state seek to find refuge from oppressive political structures. In such circumstances, Robert Putnam (1993) asserts, it is usually difficult for people to pursue the impossible dream of cooperation in the absence of social capital, the most effective precondition for civic engagement and cooperation for mutual benefit. Civic engagement is an emanation from the social and human capital of
the society that ultimately becomes a personal attribute of individuals within the same society. As such, people are capable of being socially reliable, simply because they are implicated in these norms and in the trustworthy civic networks within which their behaviour is internalised and ingrained (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Further, Putnam (1993, p 187) argues:

Stock of social capital, such as trust, norms, and network, tend to be self-enforcing and cumulative. Virtuous circles result in social equilibria with high levels of co-operation, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, and collective well being. Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating miasma of vicious circles.

Thusly viewed, authoritarianism is in part the result of both the kind of state-led economic development that occurred from the 1950s until the middle of the 1970s, and of the resilience of old classes, the adaptability of the new middle classes, and their consequent ability to thwart state policies. After all, authoritarianism cannot escape the logic of politics; on the one hand, where an authoritarian state is poorly institutionalised and enmeshed in clientelist relations with the society it governs, the imperative of political survival will significantly subvert political reforms. What makes these states unique are the ways these regimes penetrate their societies to implement policies and their ability to buffer their societies against pressures from regional and international systems. Following this logic, the Gulf States are a case in point: oil wealth has undoubtedly served to buffer the external pressures on regimes’ political capacity. The ruling families have been able to justify their existence and project support to their legitimacy by insuring that oil wealth has benefitted the populations.

The civil society, one could argue, became with time increasingly ineffective in shaping and formulating the state’s policy choices. The UN Development Program’s Arab Human Development Reports in the last few years, which have analysed what remains the only substantially unchanged region of the world, is a paragon of virtue. These reports illuminated in a chilling detail, as was stated in the 2002 report, the “deeply rooted shortcomings of the Arab institutional structures” that hold back human
development in the era of globalisation. They pointed further to the ‘freedom deficit,’ gender inequality, low levels of health care, education and information technology usage, and high unemployment that indicate clearly that the Arab world lags far behind the pace of global change.

The state as the embodiment of family and kinship

In Arabic political thought the term state, *dawla*, signifies a certain type of patrimonious institution that exercises power and authority delegated by a supernatural entity, Allah. Against this background and except for works on law and ethics, the state was discussed in a political context only as an abstract locus of order and disorder and, more importantly, as a God-given *fait accompli*. In the writings of Muslim scholars such as Ibn Khaldun, *dawla* refers to the continuity of power exercised by a clique of successive sovereigns. In Arab/Muslim history rulers have always exercised exclusive power (Hassan 1999). The conception of the state as an organisation of domination over a given territory had not existed. Rather, *dawla* essentially connotes a political body with three main components: a ruler, his troops, and a bureaucracy exclusively related to him.

What must be stressed is that *dawla* is distinct from society at large and from what has come to be known in modern times as the civil society (Al-Azmeh 1993). Arab societies have lacked independent urban centres, an autonomous bourgeois class, and a Weberian bureaucracy with legal liability, personal property and a cluster of rights which embody bourgeois civic institutions. Without these institutional and cultural elements, there was nothing in Islamic history to challenge the dead hand of the despot. Social structure in Arab societies has been characterised by the absence of a network of institutions mediating between the individual and the state. It was this social vacuum which facilitated the circumstances in which the individual was often deprived of any protection against arbitrary rule. The absence of civil society explained the failure of capitalist economic development and political democracy (Turner 1994).

The colonial formation of Arabic nationhood

In the Arab world, the nation-state came about as a deformed creation of Western colonial policies and their direct control over non-Western
societies. Following independence, their status as nation-states meant no more than membership in the UN. In reality, they had yet to build, as required by the theory, a truly sovereign state and ‘national’ society out of a myriad of linguistic, cultural and religious pluralities operating within their newfound states (Sheth 1989). The emergence of a common nationhood through civil society and citizenship in Arab societies involved a messy process of continuous manipulations among different ethnic groups with complicated relationships permeated by religious and historical bitterness due to the deliberate Ottoman policy of favouring the Sunnis in the state administration. The classical way to solve this problem has always been that the family or the group that holds the economic resources and political power bribes others, who are smaller or weaker (Hassan 1999).

The oil wealth has not been used to create a self-sustaining industrial society; instead, a society of corrupt rentiers, who over time have become more and more radicalised Islamist, has emerged. Luciani and Belblawi (1987) used the term ‘rentier politics’, whereby regimes use the state’s wealth to bribe a part of their society and to purchase the support of allies in order to strengthen their power base at home. The Gulf states are a case in point: oil wealth has undoubtedly served to buffer the external pressures on regimes. The ruling families have been able to justify their existence and project support to their legitimacy by insuring that oil wealth has benefited the populations (Mitchell 1999).

At the regional level, this policy is pursued to buy the goodwill of rivals, which often are stronger regimes. But, when religious, ethnic and historical enmities are deep and economic growth is slow, the classical (and often practised) pattern is to rely on dictatorial solutions to the problem of social, political and economic development. In the face of it, the bulk of investment in the rich Arab Gulf states in development has yielded a vulgar display of malls, half-built prefabs, and sterile plazas. The patina of the oil boom is cracking badly. By locating the state above and away from society, a new type of statism has been contrived. It has a pronounced clan-based, dynastic or military-dictatorial character. States could quickly integrate into the international system, but they would just as quickly destroy their own ‘would be’ social order (Sheth 1989; Springborg 1989).
Since 1970, many Arab regimes have remained in power and have created solid organisational structures around them, though one could only agree with Luciani (1990, p xiii) that “the state is a house of cards, its stability more apparent than real”. Despite the pan-Arab vocation of Arab states, it is ironic that they pursue a remarkable policy of isolation that “makes it difficult to cross an inter-Arab border, to call another Arab city by telephone, to get a work permit here, an export licence there, and a travel visa to almost everywhere” (ibid).

The weakness of civil constellations and the lack of democratic public sphere that balance the overwhelming presence of the Arab and Middle Eastern societies have given the state and regimes a free hand to marginalise great sectors of their populations. Moreover, the state overwhelmingly dominates the economy, leading to a structure best described as state capitalism preventing private enterprises (al-Naqeeb 1987).

**Arab states and the use of coercion**

In many Arab countries, the state ensures its continued rule through the use of coercion and terror. Migdal (1988) argues that this is the legacy of colonialism that has had disastrous effects on the civil constellations in the Middle Eastern societies. Moreover, the resilience of primordial arrangements in the rural areas that could challenge the state for social control is another worrying moment. These regional families and clans were more able than distant bureaucrats to meet the daily needs of the rural poor and could not only ignore central authority but also manipulate state bureaucracies to enhance their power, thereby further intensifying the climate of conflict.

Politics and power relationships within such states are defined by kinship and the regulation of social relations, governed by values, such as reciprocity and loyalty. Identity and loyalty are determined by one’s place in a tightly knitted and vertically structured social network, and it is the control over that network that guarantees the power basis for the political elite and the holder of power. Within this political order, where kinship is the principle that organises political relations and determines identity, control over means of production is central to political authority (Barakat 1993; Sharabi 1988; Al-Azmeh 1993). Furthermore, in Arab
societies, individual action is sanctioned and legitimised through two closely related premises, namely the God-given law and the immediate social network (usually kinship) that encloses the individual (Barakat 1993; Sharabi 1988; Ajami 1981).

For this reason, it is crucial at this point to make a distinction between political and societal institutions in their concrete manifestations, and to separate government from state. The famous declaration ‘L ’etat c’est moi’ has extraordinary political implications in the sense that leaders essentially are disguised in a modern facade of power interrelationships, as is aptly noted by Clifford Geertz (1980, p 20):

Structure after structure – family, village, clan, class, sect, army, party, elite, state – turns out, when more narrowly looked at, to be an ad hoc constellation of miniature systems of power, a cloud of unstable micro-politics, which compete, ally, gather strength, and, very soon over-extended, fragment again.

Since leaders can hardly create the current of events, they usually seek to float and ride with the tide and steer themselves on its track. Political actions, it is asserted, are quite often decided on the basis of imprecise knowledge and assumptions of a hypothetical quality. The actors can never take account of all the factors entering into any given situation, nor can they ever know all the results after action has been taken. Thus, politics deals with both the contingent and the unknown. Political solutions are temporary at best, irrelevant at worst.

But, in a modern world where the rationality of Western interests (or the so called globalism) dictates the power on others unilaterally, Arab societies today exist in a state not only of social but also of political turmoil, in which the entire social life – the body politic, economic and cultural activities – is changing more in reaction to external influence than due to processes and mechanisms within the society itself. The state emerges as an artificial entity that becomes disarticulated in the face of any political crisis (eg, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia and Sudan to mention only a few). Politics becomes the reign of coercion and a direct administrative intervention by regimes, rather than rule through mutual consent. The state itself becomes the embodiment of a civil group, based
on a social web of family, cousins and friends (Al-Azmeh 1993; Hassan 1999; Ajami 1981). Such circumstances constrain the choices open to the elite by limiting the knowledge necessary to formulate and execute rational political decisions. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that civil society, embattled and defunct, would seek to assert itself against the context in which the state operates.

**Arab civil societies and the prospect for democracy**

The normative confinement on human behaviour such as worldviews, ideologies, political cultures and the way people imagine their commonalities have attracted active and thorough academic attentions. The interest in democratic foundations and prospects, particularly in Eastern Europe, and Latin America has recently focused on civil society and civic culture as the bulwarks against authoritarianism and as a reliable path in pursuit for democratisation.

Putnam (1993) consciously ties this normative sphere and allows greater autonomy to the state and political traditions. He argues that the central principle to understand the democratic political development of a certain civic community lies in the way they practice their social interrelationship over time. If there are vertical and hierarchical social networks (the family and its extension in a primordial sense), it is unlikely that modes of trust, co-operation, reciprocity, and other social interrelationships bridging the separate family units – that which Putnam terms “social capital” – will ever be established. On the contrary, if the social networks are pluralistic, horizontal and extended beyond the family and its extension, then the civic precondition for active and rational social and political life will inevitably emerge. In a situation of deeply rooted insecurity, Putnam (1993) argues, distrust and an atmosphere of suspicion between citizens in the society have become normal conditions of life. In the cause-effect chain, this societal setting makes it impossible for people to participate and cooperate on the basis of common interest, simply because the gain of one individual would necessarily entail a loss for his fellow citizen, in a cynical zero-sum game.

Civic engagement during earlier periods of history encourages not only more societal involvement through incremental adaptation, but also
implicate both the level of economic development that may occur later, as well as performance of governmental and other social institutions. Putnam persuasively shows a vivid and firm connection between the density of civil society in history and the civic culture of the present. His contribution urges us to rethink theories of democratisation and renders the proposition that it is economic well-being that makes political development insufficient. As Putnam (1993, p 157) put it,

... economy does not predict civics, but civics does predict economics, better indeed than economics itself […] the contemporary correlations between civics and economics reflects primarily the impact of civics on economics, not the reverse.

The Gulf states and Libya are examples par excellence. Moreover, civic traditions not only have remarkable staying power, they are also difficult and slow to change. Thus, there are firm correlations between historical measures of civic traditions and current success with democracy.

By placing a class power model of democracy at the centre of their analysis, Rueschemeyer et al (1992) privilege domestic forces and generate a complex account for shifting regional or international patterns of political change. They stress that economic growth facilitates compromise between capital and working class which, in turn, speeds up the process of democratisation. By the same token, they express considerable scepticism about the prospects of democracy in world regions facing major economic recovery and growth. In the Arab world, however, leaders resort to repression because they cannot extract compliance through primordial institutions and cannot create effective new ones. In the long term, the state’s absolute control and oppressive reaction to popular demands may however run out of esteem and lose momentum and the conditions for liberalisation could begin to ease thereof (Hijazi 1980).

As for the discourse of interrelationships between state and civil society, the latter draws and inherits its distinguished political and societal features from the socio-economic realities; the dispersal of resources, social reforms and power interests that society naturally incorporate. In order to pin down this discourse, two dimensions of the relationship should be investigated: firstly, civil society as an independent and distinct domain of
social relations that embodies a course of action that can enhance political and socio-economic empowerment; and secondly, the paradoxical nature of associational life that often exist within civil society (White 1994).

Understanding civil society

In political theory, the term is taken to be the sphere of voluntary associations and public communications necessary and essential to avoid the dangers of radical democratic ‘fundamentalism’ and apologetic liberalism (Cohen and Arato 1992). Generally speaking, civil society is commonly taken to consist of those non-governmental civic institutions – such as houses of worship, family, clubs, guilds, and communal voluntary associations – that lie between the body politic of the state and the people within its territory. These prolific networks simultaneously function as the context whereby citizens communicate with the authority and, more importantly, they protect them from political misdeed. The right to private property, absolute sovereignty, and negative/positive rights, which set up the innermost power objects of politics, are all the emanations of the individuals. Yet, they define their individuality purely in their faculty to choose, or ability to act and pursue, or to retain self-preservation. Along this line of thought, the notion of ‘civil society’ is not only fundamental to the definition of political life in modern democracies, but is also a point of contrast between Western societies and those in other parts of the world, where the individual is not constituted as an autonomous entity that chooses and acts freely from social bonds and expectations (Turner 1994; Gellner 1991).

In social theory, civil society is a space where state and society interact with one another and allow continuous two-way communication. The achievement of differentiation and plurality in modern social institutions is justifiably taken into account. Social utopias of ‘de-differentiation’ can be avoided by a ‘three-level’ theory of society, where civil society occupies the sphere between economy and the state. The degree of heterogeneity and plurality of a given society not only reflects the extent to which civil society experiences a transformation along modern lines, but also implicates the possibilities of civil society’s ability to create and endure a coherent democratic polity (White 1994, p 388).
For Gramsci (1971), civil society becomes – through Marxian dis-equilibria – the means to perpetuate the hegemony of bourgeoisie and the engine behind popular mobilisation by the ruling elite. In fact, Gramsci viewed civil society in two intimately interrelated ways. Firstly, he saw it as a way of conceptually analysing the empirical relations between civic institutions and the state in the way they manifest themselves: in organisational (structural) and ideological (super structural) ways. Secondly, he looked at it as a ‘pragmatic’ action in order to prescribe a political strategy and program for the working class and other progressive groups, which Gramsci dubbed the ‘new historic block’ within civil society. Gramsci proposed that civil society be the arena where various social groups and classes struggle to undermine the hegemonic position of the bourgeoisie and prepare the transformation of (or revolution against) the capitalist state. His ‘political strategy’ of labour resistance to the domination of the party-state (as in the case of Solidarity challenging the Polish communist regime) seems to be relevant at this juncture (Keane 1988).

It is also important here to distinguish between civil society as an ‘ideal type’ concept (incorporating the attributes of ‘active rights’, or ‘absolute sovereignty’, or ‘voluntary civic institutions’) and the empirical realities. In reality, the boundaries that separate civil society from the state are usually characterised by opacity. In one case, the state may create civil society (eg, in many Arab states like Kuwait, Syria and Tunisia); in another case, the state may decide the content and form of civil society (as in Egypt). Or, the other way around: civil society may have an essential implication for the pursuit towards liberalisation and democratisation. The latter may materialise simply because the state and civil society are de facto overlapping within the public sphere, thus facilitating the condition for civil society to exert pressures for democracy on the state (Al-Sayyed 1992; Bianchi 1989; al-Naqeeb 1987).

By trying to understand civil society, Cohen and Arato (1992) sought to refrain from the unrealistic assumption of a powerless state, well-being without industrial rights or constitutional frameworks. For them, the concept of civil society contains a new vision of a ‘plurality of democracies’, that is a vibrant Tocquevillian ‘self limiting radical democracy’ consisting of voluntary associations, social movements, a well established
parliamentary body politic and a public sphere of free communication. Cohen and Arato develop their reconstruction of the theory of civil society in three parts:

Firstly, they situate their civil society within the tradition of social and political theory. Secondly, they use dialectical thinkers who are critical of civil society to develop their own version, in order to demonstrate the insufficiency of different conceptions that incorporate civil society into the state or economy. Thusly viewed, civil society would be the equivalent of the market in the economic domain and of democracy in the political domain. Thirdly, they propose the strengthening of a civil society, lying between the state and the economy, which entails plurality, publicity, legality, and privacy. Cohen and Arato (1992, p 349) further explain

(1) plurality: [as] families, informal groups, and voluntary associations whose plurality and autonomy allow for variety of forms of life: (2) publicity: [as] an institution of culture and communication; (3) privacy: [as] a domain of individual self-development and moral choice; and (4) legality: [as] structures of general laws and basic rights needed to demarcate plurality, privacy, and publicity from at least and imaginatively, the economy. Together these structures secure the institutional existence of a modern differentiated civil society.

Arab civil society

Civil society is part and parcel of the socio-economic structure and of the extent to which the institutional representation and coherence of different sectors are varied. The hybrid nature of Arab societies is clearly reflected on the civic institutions. Comprehending the implications of the diversity of associational patterns would give us a clue to the social movements that could facilitate the conditions for democratisation. At this point, the civic institutions whose activities focus on a more tolerant and vibrant democratic society should be encouraged. The movements with specifically political roles contra state authoritarianism, such as pressuring for democratisation, include leftist, liberal and ‘secular leaning’ constellations. However, plenty of those who hamper democracy can be found in organisations based on religious activism or on ethnicity and
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kinship (found mainly in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and the Gulf states). Finally, there are associations – such as trade unions and diverse agricultural associations – that are pacified politically, more or less, or marginalised outside the political system.

The fact that civil society is marginalised and in some cases suppressed or simply destroyed explains the fact that some groups lean to violence as an ideological expression for political demands. There are many factors that contribute to this modern reality in the Arab world. Among the pertinent factors is the undeniably traumatic experience of colonialism, which dismantled the traditional institutions of civil society. The emergence of highly centralised, despotic and often corrupt governments, and the nationalisation of the institutions of religious learning, undermined the mediating role of jurists in Arab societies. Nearly all charitable religious endowments became state-controlled entities, and Muslim jurists in most Muslim nations became salaried state employees, effectively transforming them into what may be called ‘court priests’. In the face of it, Islamism taps into an already distressed social and economic environment.

The most active and powerful opposition and even in some cases the dominant social forces within the Arab world in the last few decades have been the Islamist groups. As such they could have been enlightening forces for democracy and justice against repression and corruption, but literatures produced by Islamist movements follow the same path as the old one, namely, the obsession with family-related matters – sex, dress, segregation of the sexes – rather than with matters of social justice, political freedom or disobedience to tyranny (Ayubi 1991). For the Arab people, this authoritarian political discourse, in which people are denied the means and the possibilities to influence rulers in policy matters, emphasised their inability to resist or even question the tyrannical tendencies of their leaders.

Civil society in Egypt

The social movements in Egypt can be characterised by their organisational heterogeneity. They comprise both pluralist and corporatist features. The pluralist movements are mainly the professional syndicates of journalists, engineers, physicians and the Bar Association. The corpo-
ratists are the trade unions and agricultural associations. Ironically, the ‘corporatised’ social movements began in Egypt as self-governing groups in the 1940s when they were affiliated with the various Marxist groups, while the professional associations began as ‘hybrid’ social groups, made up mainly of middle class, business and religious associations that were directly or indirectly linked to the state (Bianchi 1994).

As for the presence of formerly organised political movements, the special character of civil society in Egypt has paradoxical consequences. It has enabled authoritarian regimes to rule without using high levels of systematic repression or institutional hegemony (unlike the cases of Iraq, Syria, Libya and Saudi Arabia). Yet, it has also thwarted the mobilisation by democratic means of the resources required for a socialist or a capitalist economic transformation. Therefore, Egypt exists in an evaluative deadlock, unable to initiate a genuine process for democratic transformation (Bianchi 1994; Hinnebusch 1992).

Egypt was once described by the prominent geographer Gamal Hamdan as the ‘land of imaginative extremes’. It holds out in this context too; there is a sort of pluralism without frameworks of autonomous institutions. There is freedom of speech, to a certain limit without active political participation. There is increasing economic liberalisation without lessening of the bureaucratic, or judiciary, obstacles to reforms. This is what might explain the paradoxical position of civil society; there is space for it to exist but no room for action (Al-Sayyed 1992; Springborg 1989).

Some might argue that in the absence of stable class formations and with the lack of a coherent working force due to the low level of industrialisation, the prospect of democratic transition is inevitably very limited. It was the working class that provided the most consistent pressures for democratisation in the great majority of the countries that experienced a democratic transformation over the last two hundred years. Whether, in a given country, middle class members were loyal supporters of democracy or not depended on the particular pattern of class relations that existed there.

Institutions do have essential implications in a variety of ways. The Arab states, having neutralised trade unions and pacified workers, seem to follow the prescription of the so-called ‘Chinese model’: seeking
economic development without any genuine political or social reforms. In this vein and against conventional wisdom, economic development can be best achieved within an authoritarian framework. This issue has also been debated, propounded, and, even worse, preferred by leftist groups alongside the regime’s mouthpieces (Hinnebusch 1992; Al-Sayyed 1992; Mitchell 1999).

Indeed, the state in Egypt exists with its variety of civic institutions through the imposition of what Bianchi called ‘ruly control mechanisms’. Unlike social movements that have a decisive role in creating institutional preconditions for a transformation to democratic polity in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere in the Third World, the social movements that constitute civil society in Egypt are not capable of undertaking a radical democratic shift. The civic institutions are disorganised and so penetrated by patron-client ties as to be incapable of aggregating the interest of society vis-à-vis the state.

Conclusion

Social movements make a difference, even in authoritarian Arab regimes. When effectively organised for collective action, social movements are endowed with political capital that gives them influence over public policy. In Egypt, the pace of dismantling the ramshackle welfare state built by Nasser was slowed down due to the opposition of organised professional syndicates and labour force, even though it was – and is – hopelessly disorganised and for the main part cowed by the state.

Social movements’ capacity to disrupt strategic industries and provide the regime with important political resources have given certain elements of civil society leverage over regime policy in Egypt, Morocco and Jordan to name only a few (Snider 1988). Islamisation of society and public life has negatively affected Muslims. In many Arab (and Middle Eastern) countries we notice that cultural and social life shifts toward embracing orthodox Islamic values in both public and private spaces. Further, as regimes have forsaken the task of providing systematic educational and employment opportunities to their constituents, the educational system has become an avenue for a large percentage of the rural and urban poor, seeking social and cultural advancement. Though first introduced as an
ideological fig leaf for authoritarian and corrupt regimes in the Middle East, the long-term consequence of Islamisation was to politicise Islam in these countries and reinforce the trend towards religious fanaticism and sectarianism.

Therefore, it is the sorrow state of Arab societies in the last few decades that a work of literature or art can engender and turn the entire state upside down. The assumption of a coherent civil society, moving toward democratisation, would be fruitful only if the constellation of civil society and social movements corroborate this process (White 1994). With the full articulation of ‘the new social movements’, the transformation toward self-limiting democracy can be accomplished in many Arab societies.

It is of great importance, too, to place the public sphere within civil society. The citizen’s right is “rather a political principle involving a new and active relation on the part of citizens to a public sphere that is itself located within civil society” (Cohen and Arato 1992, p 396). Democratisation is usually obtained and brought about through the public sphere, by well-organised working classes. A differentiated and plural civil society is indirectly a prerequisite for democratisation, only if the very same civil society makes up a contingent and vibrant public sphere. This is a task that seems, for the time being, difficult to accomplish in the Arab world, given the dominance of Islamist groups and their reluctance to work with other oppositional forces – let alone that habits of patronage and clientelism still infect all aspects of the state–civil society relations. This being so, the efforts at democratisation are incurably pulled awry.

Notes
1. Moore (1967) argues that the way ‘the agrarian question’ was resolved in each of his case studies is the key to the failure of building a democratic society, as the cases of Germany, China, and Russia demonstrated; or success of democracy, most notably England, France and the United States. The agrarian elite, he argues, remained strong enough to retain labour-repressive agriculture in alliance with a strong state. As he persuasively illustrates in the case of the German Junker, Russia and Japan, the bourgeoisie was weak and dependent on the state, and therefore, fascism was the outcome.

2. Introduced by Lord Cromer, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, as a reward to pro-British elite for their collaboration to overthrow the regime of General Orabi before the British invasion of Egypt in 1882.
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3. The Arab *Maghreb* refers to the five countries constituting North Africa: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania and the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

4. In tracing civic tradition several hundred years back in history to illuminate both coercive and material institutional legacies, Putnam finds that regions in Italy with strong civic traditions in the middle ages rose to civic-states in the Renaissance, generated stout measures of civic life around 1900, and helped to make democracy work in present-day Italy.

5. Like Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, the early Habermas and Niklas Luhmann.

6. For example in Latin America, the type of party system that became established was crucial for the fostering as well as consolidation of democracy (Rueshemeyer 1992, p 168-169). It had accelerated an effective access of the economic elites and local capital to policy making mechanisms and, thus, had become a part of the body politic.

References


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