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Reflections on Civic Participation and Emerging Leadership in the Arab World

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Abstract

Civic action in the Arab world has historically focused on philanthropic and charitable giving; even today, civil society's influence on government policies in the region is limited. Yet, there is a growing recognition that full development will be realized neither by the state alone nor by the state working in tandem with the public sector. It is increasingly clear that contributions from a viable civil society are essential to further public interests. While an active civil society is, we argue, the foundation from which emerging leadership for public wellbeing will most likely spring, a change in the quality or quantity of emergent leaders will not inevitably bring about expanded civic participation. In other words, we contend, civil society and emerging leadership are mutually constitutive, but not co-equal.

Introduction

The Arab world has a long, venerable, and vital tradition of civic participation in the area of philanthropy and charitable acts. Indeed, civic action in the region has historically focused primarily on charitable giving, most notably through the *waqf*, or Muslim religious endowment, to establish and support hospitals, schools, mosques, public gardens, and other charitable causes for the public good. Even today, charitable and other voluntary, apolitical endeavors are the focus of most civic action in the region with civil society's influence on government policies in the Arab world still limited. Yet, there is a growing recognition that, after years of government control, enabling civic participation beyond charitable work could help the state tackle persistent problems that have unnecessarily fettered the growth and full development of the Arab world by bringing into the public arena the diversity and flexibility that characterizes civil society.

Civil society is the non-coerced, non-commercial sphere of group or collective action catalyzed by common purposes and shared values. In theory, civil society lies outside the formal structures of both the state and the market. While in practice the boundaries are often blurred, a vibrant civil society can contribute in unique ways to the development of nation-states. Civic participation or engagement includes volunteerism, community problem solving, group membership, voting, and systematic attempts to pressure governments to provide social and economic services, among other types of engagement in civil society. In other words, civic participation spans the gamut from voluntary, apolitical organizations to elite-challenging entities. As such, civic participation can provide opportunities for a broad swath of citizens to express opinions and make decisions, even if initially only at the margins of society, to gain exposure to new ideas, and to augment their critical thinking skills. Because civic participation offers unique opportunities for individuals to acquire experience in working cooperatively toward a common goal, to develop bonds of trust beyond their established social networks, and to practice fledgling

leadership skills, civil society is the arena from which a diverse range of leadership for public wellbeing is most likely to emerge.

Emerging leadership is one subset of leadership that tackles complex social problems. Except in failed states, state actors regularly address public concerns, which is a core component of their mandate. They also bring political expertise and an understanding of the inner workings of the bureaucracy to the table, both of which are needed to further the public interest. But the state's need for the involvement of civil society is ever more apparent. And, while the marketplace is not a natural springboard for publically oriented leadership—as attested by the recent worldwide economic downturn that pointed to the clear and urgent need for the state to regulate the market to protect the public interest—there are examples of elite businessmen and businesswomen who have used their wealth and expertise to further public wellbeing in the region and beyond. In short, by highlighting the enabling role of civil society for emergent leadership, we do not intend to imply that state and market actors do not contribute to public wellbeing. Quite the contrary; the state is responsible for the provision of public goods and protection of the public interest, and we do not want to minimize those responsibilities. Nor are we suggesting that civil society could—or even should—take on those responsibilities. Furthermore, we do not intend to diminish the private sector's role as a key player in creating opportunities for gainful employment. Rather, it is our stance in this concept paper that civil society presents a more natural arena than either the state or the market for emerging leadership that, when contrasted with traditional leadership, is more open, flexible, responsive to, and idealistic in the face of intractable social or public issues. A key role of emerging leaders, we further contend, is to lobby the state to act for the benefit of all citizens, which includes the equitable provision of public goods to her citizens and regulation of the market to moderate its profit motive. In short, one role of emerging leaders is to be on the front line to encourage and, when necessary, challenge the status quo to further social and economic development.

While an active civil society is, as we have argued, the foundation from which emerging leadership will likely spring, a change in the quality or quantity of emergent leaders will not inevitably bring about expanded civic participation. In other words, we contend, civil society and emerging leadership are mutually constitutive, but not co-equal. Recognizing that innovative, inspired leaders cannot create a viable civil society in the absence of broader legal and structural support, our thinking about emerging leadership has shifted somewhat from an earlier study in which we focused on the personal attributes of emerging leaders that included but did not foreground the environment in which they lived and worked (Tapia, Underwood & Jabre, 2003). In this paper, we reorient our approach by highlighting the role of the broader environment in the emergence of leadership.

Leadership arises not only, perhaps not even primarily in most instances, from individual characteristics; rather, it is a complex role that evolves from a multiplicity of interactions. Leadership is, in short, more than the sum of its parts and will not arise if its various components are simply coexisting; the interactions of the factors that lead to leadership are key. Therefore, we will focus on the environment that enables such leadership to emerge. This approach is at odds with the dominant theories in the field of leadership studies, which tend to focus on individuals' attributes and skills, depict leadership as personal and vertical, and explore leadership primarily within existing organizational structures. To substantiate our claims, we will cover examples of socially driven leadership, including team leadership, consider the factors that enabled them, and discuss the constraints that impede the emergence of more examples.

Civil society as an enabling context for emerging leadership

Civic participation is expanding in the Arab world due to internal as well as external forces and pressures. As has been noted elsewhere, an educated public is more likely to demand civic, electoral, and political participation than is true of a less-educated public. In most Arab countries today, the majority of citizens has been formally schooled, and they expect—even demand—certain rights and increasingly embrace their social and civic responsibilities as part of their search for meaningful roles.

External pressures come from several sources, including perhaps foremost the information revolution brought about by access to the Internet and satellite TV networks, which has made the public cognizant that citizens in many other regions are actively involved in civil society and have gained the right to express their political voice. At the same time, international conventions on human rights and the rights of the child have been ratified by nation-states and supported by civic society organizations (CSOs) in the region, thus exposing the inequalities and discrimination against previously marginalized or underrepresented segments of society and leading to calls for more equality. Additionally, a range of international organizations has encouraged expanded citizen participation through their support of CSOs to advocate these rights.

This constellation of internal and external macro-level forces has led both to increased civic participation and a broader range of leadership. This leadership is typically critically conscious, civically engaged, and rooted within civil society. This leadership is community based, reliant on horizontal power and networks, and includes women, youth, and other previously marginalized groups.

A study of community leadership in the region identified young leaders who have emerged, some from very improbable circumstances, to further public wellbeing in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine (Tapia, Underwood, & Jabre, 2003). The

enabling factors common among these individuals included exposure to fresh ideas and new ways of doing things, development of a critical consciousness, the realization that the established normative order is ready to change, acquisition of new skills, and participation in team work, the discovery of new networks, and knowledge about a broad range of opportunities. These leaders arose from within civil society as a result of social needs, a broader range of opportunities, or both. The findings suggested that volunteer options are an important characteristic of an enabling civil society as it is through volunteer opportunities that individuals and groups gain skills and experience in civic participation and collective action.

Volunteer work with established CSOs was the starting point for many of these leaders as it broadened their social networks, opened new channels of communication, and exposure to pool of new ideas, perspectives, and opportunities, and once they were able to demonstrate their commitment to the larger society, lent them credibility. Of the individual leaders and leadership groups identified for the study, all but two of the individual leaders were involved initially in voluntary work early on in their leadership careers, reflecting the importance of civil society as part of the enabling environment.

Another central factor that enabled local leaders to evolve, according to the aforementioned studies, was that they felt connected to their communities. Because they sensed that they were part of, and not extraneous to, the community and had both experiences and history in common, they sought alternative solutions rather than accepting the situation as it was. As they chartered the way forward in community with others, they developed the conviction that they could mitigate, even overcome, social inequalities by working with others; thus they were able to take action.

This brings us to two other important attributes of emergent leaders, which is also vital for the development of effective civic participation, the first of which is to learn to critically assess their situation. While some individuals are naturally given to reflective thought and are aware of alternative approaches to the problems or obstacles they face, most people seem to benefit from programs that hone their critical thinking skills. Active participation can empower individuals and groups by enabling them to, in the words of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, “develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (2000[1970]: 83). Through this process of *conscientisation*, men and women learn to analyze critically their circumstances, come to recognize that the world is subject to change, and—given sufficient political, economic and social resources—ultimately are empowered to rise to the challenge of changing the world in which they live. In short, conscientisation is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for purposive action. Sometimes this happens naturally; at other times it is necessary to nurture critical consciousness.

The second attribute is the development of self- or collective efficacy. Civic participation and/or emerging leadership is often sparked when individuals or groups identify social issues that needed to be addressed *if and when* they also have a sense of efficacy, or the conviction that one can take positive action. Efficacy, or the conviction that one can take positive action, is a key factor in the ability to bring about change, whether in the self or more broadly (Bandura, 1997). Among the problems the emergent leaders redressed were: gender discrimination and unequal gender relations, customs or traditions that prevented youth from becoming active citizens, social and state censorship, and political sectarianism, among others.

Initiatives in the region

Locally initiated CSOs in the region are on the rise, indicating a growing interest in, and commitment to, the creation of spaces that engage individuals and groups in civic activities beyond their personal educational, employment and security concerns. A survey of the literature, including Internet-based sources, and studies conducted by the authors (Jabre, Underwood & Goodsmith, 1997, and Underwood & Jabre, 2008; Tapia, Underwood & Jabre, 2003) found an ample range of civic organizations as well as individuals engaged in furthering public wellbeing. We turn now to a discussion of several illustrative initiatives and emergent leaders.

Emergent leaders and endogenous initiatives

One of the emergent leaders identified in the aforementioned study, Khitam,¹ sought to break down gender barriers by working in the area of social development in her community in Jordan. Supported by her father, she was emboldened to defy her closed community and went door to door encouraging women to vote. She went on to assume the role of a change agent by demonstrating what a woman can do in local politics even as she motivated women to engage in income generating activities. Another young, female emergent leader, Yusra, had volunteered in many organizations, including a local health center and youth camps, before she became the first woman in southern Lebanon to run for office in a municipal election.

In Palestine, the youth club Taamun was established to obtain basic services such as water, agricultural production, and education while their country was under siege. The club was able to bring youth from different factions together, overcome the agrarian mentality of individualism to work together in the face of the repressive measures of occupation, including land appropriation, and allow youth to participate in the provision of essential services to the community.

¹ First names only are used in this publication as the goal is not to highlight individuals as individuals, but as illustrative examples of civic participation for public wellbeing.

Environmental concerns have also sparked civic participation. For example, **IndyAct**, the League of Independent Activists, a network of environmental and socio-cultural activists that provides mentoring and support to young people who are interested in change. It started during the July 2006 war on Lebanon, when a group of veteran and skilled activists from different countries came together to work on the worst environmental disaster in the history of the Eastern Mediterranean: More than 10,000 tons of fuel oil spilled into the sea due to the Israeli bombing of the Jiyeh power plant South of Lebanon. After the oil spill crisis was under control, the "Oil Spill Working Group" realized that in Lebanon and around the world there are many passionate, independent activists that have been trying to make a difference, but are unable to operate independently. **IndyAct** offers memberships and provides internships that foster passion with professionalism. When the independent activists become League Members they are provided all the support they require to lead their campaigns effectively and with minimal red tape. This support can range from providing office space, funding, training, strategic planning, campaign communication, legal support, researchers and experts, networking and contacts, campaign equipment, and volunteer teams, among others.

Initiatives supported by development agencies

While endogenous organizations engaged in furthering public wellbeing are essential to the development of civil society, externally supported initiatives have also contributed to an expanded civil society in the region. These programs can augment and bolster civic participation by providing opportunities to a broader range of individuals and groups, particularly those who do not have the resources or social networks to strike out on their own. These organizations can also provide training to expand the capacities of individual emergent leaders. We turn now to a few examples of externally supported initiatives.

*Arab Women Speak Out (AWSO)*² has been underway in the Arab world since 1999 and nearly one million Arab women from ten Arab countries have participated in it. The principal goal of the project was to give women the analytic skills necessary to re-orient their assumptions and to analyze critically both obstacles and opportunities, thereby enhancing the likelihood that they would be empowered to exercise agency (Jabre, Underwood & Goldsmith, 1997; Underwood & Jabre, 2008).

² Designed and implemented by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, funding for the project was provided by USAID Population and Democracy and Governance Divisions, European Commission through *Population Initiatives for Peace*, the Arab Gulf Program for UN Development Organizations (AGFUND) through the *Center for Arab Women Training and Research (CAWTAR)* and Investcorp Bank, E.C..

Lessons learned from the implementation of AWSO in various countries point to the importance of the exposure to new ideas and the acquisition of skills (self esteem, critical thinking, decision making, conflict resolution) as well as being encouraged to participate in community interventions and other civic activities, and to seek new opportunities.

Soheir, who benefited from participation in Arab Women Speak Out, is an example of how social activism can serve as a segue into political participation. Soheir capitalized on the many contacts she made as a teacher and a volunteer in literacy education for fire fighters in Aswan, Egypt, as the springboard for her successful run for local office. Soheir noted that it was “through her voluntary work that she became increasingly popular even with neighboring communities.”

Siraj is a youth leadership program that evolved from the Emerging Leadership project and is being implemented by Save the Children in five Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, West Bank/Gaza and Yemen. Its motto is “If your actions INSPIRE others to DREAM more, LEARN more, DO more and BECOME more, you are a SIRAJ [lantern].” With the objective of providing *enhanced services*, Siraj builds youth leadership capacities and provides shared learning forums for youth to learn about and exchange leadership resources, knowledge, and practices. The Siraj Leadership Tool Kit presents leadership competencies, case studies and skills to be examined and shared at the national and regional levels ensuring that emerging leaders are at the forefront of positive development approaches.

These are a few illustrative examples of civil society activities in the region; others are underway or in the development stage. Yet, many more civil society organizations would be established if conditions were more conducive to broad-based participation, bringing us back to the critical role of context in the evolution of diverse leadership.

Yet dominant leadership theories seem to be incongruent with this local reality. The science of leadership came from corporate America and the dominant leadership theories, workshops, and training courses continue to focus on individual or personal traits and skills building within a preexisting organizational structure. While a discussion of leadership theories is beyond the scope of this brief paper, we have already made the claim that leadership is contextual and relational. This stance is in keeping with Drath (2001), who argues that the theory of personal leadership is limited and suggests a *relational leadership* framework. From this perspective, leadership is not considered a pre-existing quality or trait, but rather an evolution that occurs over time and within the context of the environment, be that a team, group, organization, association, nation, or culture.

Most theories of leadership continue to portray authority as if it were predominantly personal, vertical, and in lockstep with the existing structures in society. While this

remains true at the central level in most of the Arab world, the examples we discussed above demonstrate that, over the past decade or so, power at the local level is slowly becoming more dispersed and horizontal. The move towards transformational leadership is growing and evidence of this is that the role of civil society is expanding, if irregularly and intermittently, through informal gatherings as well as with the formal establishment of CSOs that aim to provide a range of social services that are in short supply, to further economic development, or to influence change in the community or in the state at the national level.

Contextual Constraints to Emergent Leadership

The civil society organizations described above and their leadership, however, face difficult conditions given the limitations on the right of assembly and the right of citizens to engage in social action that are found in most Arab states. Emergent leaders who work in the arena of public wellbeing can often make inroads at the margins of civil society, but cannot—on their own—bring about a vibrant civil society. While they may attempt to broaden civic participation, political leadership may—and at times has—severely constrained civic action.

From the examples given above, it is evident that when opportunities—or the possibility of meaningful involvement—are available, a diverse range of people in the region takes part in civic activities. Given the demographics of the region, it is particularly important to create opportunities for youth who often have the time and inclination to volunteer, are typically interested in out-of-the-box approaches, are largely amenable to horizontal, team-oriented approaches, and, on the negative side, have limited options when it comes to gainful employment or meaningful endeavors. Yet, too often, national planners do not consider youth as productive members of society, and they rarely afford youth the option of participating in public affairs. On the contrary, youth are discouraged from taking any active part in local affairs, which results in alienation and isolation, leaving them more connected to the virtual world of Facebook networks than to their neighbors and peers in their own communities..

Women also face constraints to full participation in the public sphere in most of the countries of the region, if to greater or lesser degrees. Empirical evidence demonstrates that gender inequality slows economic growth, inhibits poverty reduction, impairs the health of young and old, women and men, and hinders the evolution of civil society (World Bank 1994: 7). Inclusive social development, or the broad-based participation of women as well as men, youth as well as their elders, from all sectors of society in social, economic and political life, enhances the overall wellbeing of individuals, families and communities (Sen 2000). Yet, women and youth are underrepresented in civic and leadership roles in most of the Arab world; they constitute a vast pool of untapped human potential to help mitigate social and economic difficulties.

There is a strong historical tradition of leaders among young people and women in the history of the region. There is a well-known story about an Umayyad Caliph who was approached by an Arab youth as a representative of his community. Upon seeing this youth, the Caliph said, "Let someone who is older than you talk on behalf of your people," to which the youth responded, "Oh, commander of the faithful, had advanced age been the criterion there would be in the nation many who would govern before you."

Re-constructing Civic Participation and Leadership: What next?

Building and strengthening civic participation, which is the basis for the emergence of individual leaders as well as of leadership groups can be a long process. As discussed above, people need to feel connected to their communities, identify a social, economic, or political issue that needs to be addressed, and have the conviction that they can make a difference, before they are likely to take action. This requires first and foremost that citizens from diverse backgrounds are allowed—even encouraged—to take action that contributes to public wellbeing.

The sense of connectedness to community must be cultivated and nurtured, particularly among young people, many of whom are experiencing malaise, alienation, and isolation from the broader society. The incorporation of community service into high school and university curricula could be a way to jumpstart young people's civic participation. This experience would help young people develop into active, engaged citizens rather than wait for an opportunity to emigrate or work in low-paying jobs.

To strengthen and extend civic participation, it is also important to tap into the deeply held values of mutual assistance and responsibility towards others that are widespread in the region. *Takaful*, Arabic for mutual help or guaranteeing each other, upholds the virtue of connectedness. There are many Quranic verses as well as *Hadith*, or traditions that admonish those who submit to God to work together towards the common good. A few are listed below.

Almighty Allah (SWT) says in the Noble Qur'an: "And hold fast all together by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favor on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love so that by His grace ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of fire and He saved you from it. Thus doth Allah make his signs clear to you: that ye may be guided." Noble Qur'an (3:103).

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: Faithful believers are to each other as the bricks of a wall, supporting and reinforcing each other. So saying, the Prophet

Muhammad (pbuh) clasped his hands by interlocking his fingers. [Sahih al-Bukhari]

Young people need role models they can emulate, role models whose actions are believable, relevant to their own lives, and feasible. While some role models will naturally come from their own communities, others could be promoted via the media, which has tremendous reach and influence. Given the influence of “star power” in the contemporary world, one idea to explore would be to promote regional satellite programs on *civic pioneers* along the lines of contests such as Superstar and Star Academy. Individuals or leadership teams who have contributed to public wellbeing would be featured, which might well have multiplier effects as some young people would likely seek to replicate the good deeds they saw featured on television. Development agencies might be interested in sponsoring this type of program.

Journalists and media outlets should be encouraged—or trained—to report on civic groups’ achievements, which would trigger public discussion, eventually leading to expanded and broad-based citizen participation. This would be most likely to happen if the media coverage included discussions of where and how people could become involved.

Given their proximity to, and connections with, the community, civil society organizations are well positioned to influence and challenge age and gender stereotypes, social norms, and practices. Civil society organizations must take a lead in overturning discrimination and challenging biases that limit the options of young people and women and prevent their social and economic progress. While the internationally supported groups (previously discussed) can provide important experiences in civil society strengthening, it is increasingly clear that support for a vibrant civil society must come from within Arab societies, ideally both from grassroots movements and from enlightened leadership.

Leadership development most fruitfully involves a combination of approaches from structured learning activities—such as workshops, courses and in-service training programs—to more informal approaches, such as apprenticeships and mentoring. Structured programs could include a mix of topics: self-reflection, personal awareness and commitment (individual level), team building, common goals, conflict management or resolution (group level), and political-economic awareness (societal level). Experiential learning is best suited for this type of training as it is of utmost importance for trainees to apply this learning to real life experiences and then analyze their experiences and decide upon their own directions. The development and emergence of diverse leadership requires the opportunities not only, or even primarily, to learn *about* leadership skills, but to practice leadership through experiential learning, which is most fruitfully provided through meaningful participation in civil society for social betterment.

To inform current practices, research about the knowledge, attitudes, and aspirations of people across the region regarding civic engagement and emerging leadership is clearly needed; studies in this are rare. At the same time, in-depth interviews with gatekeepers are necessary to understand their concerns about, and proposals for expanding opportunities for civic participation and widening the leadership pool.

Conclusion

Members of the status quo often fear the opening up of opportunities to the broad swath of society, as if access to opportunities were a zero-sum game. Yet, systems that are more open tend to engender new opportunities and, thereby, further the diffusion or wider distribution of involvement that is a prerequisite for social, economic and political progress. Borrowing from the multidisciplinary science of *Chaos*, Anderson and Carter (1997: 14) argue that: “An open system does not deplete its energy, but it actually compounds energy from the interaction of its parts.” If we replace “energy” with “opportunities,” we can conclude that opportunities and resources increase when systems—whether at the level of the family, the community, the state or the region—are open to broad-based participation.

Social change as it relates to the distribution of opportunities, including opportunities to participate in civil society, is underway. Arab leaders and Arab citizens alike must choose if they will be part of that change and help chart the path forward, or be pulled along a pathway that others have chartered. This will require the coordination of efforts across the three sectors—government, the private sector, and civil society. Encouraging civic participation for public wellbeing will prove among the best investments the region can make in today as well as in tomorrow.

Likewise, the Arab world is poised for significant changes in leadership as more of our current leaders retire. More than ever, a new generation of leaders is required to broaden and deepen the capacity of Arab countries to expand public wellbeing in their own midst, engage their fellow citizens constructively to further local as well as national and regional interests, and positively influence the global community of nations in a changing world. The economic crisis of 2008, which continues to unfold in unexpected ways with unanticipated consequences, will necessarily bring social as well as economic change in its wake. If the Arab world hopes to influence the social and economic changes that are currently underway within its own borders as well as beyond, it will be necessary to enable new and more broad-based forms of civic participation as well as nurture emerging leaders.

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