

Morocco turns Arab spring into a summer of Reform

Youth & civil society at the heart of Public Policies

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Morocco

Arab Spring Impact on Moroccan youth & CSOs

I- Background

Civil society, a long history of advocacy

Morocco is conducive to the development of civil society, which has experienced a considerable boom since the late 1980s. In 1979, Morocco ratified the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights, and freedom of association, which has since become a constitutional right. In 2002, new legislation was adopted to facilitate the use of foreign funding by Moroccan Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Formal rejection of a legally registered association is rather unusual.

According to a national survey conducted in 2007 by the Moroccan High Commissariat of Planning, Moroccan CSO's accounts in 2007 about 45,000, equivalent to 150 NGO to 100,000 inhabitants. The survey revealed that 7 out of 10 NGOs benefit from volunteerism. In 2007, these NGOs recruited 352,000 volunteers, who participated with 96 million labor hour, which is equivalent to 56,524 full time job.

The surveyed NGOs work in different fields such as: development, Education, health, culture; sport, entertainment, human rights, housing. Their membership accounts more than 15 million, of which 2/3 are women. The survey also revealed the economic contribution of the projects done by CSOs, which worth 8.8 billion milliard dhs in 2007. As to youth organizations, there is an estimation of more than 5000 youth led organizations; or non youth organizations focusing on youth issues.

The past two decades have witnessed an increased participation and engagement of Morocco's civil society in Public Affairs, demonstrating that CSO's can inform & influence public policies.

With the amendment of the 1996 constitution making the political sphere more democratic, a multitude of civil society organizations and associations emerged on the national scene, advocating for and working to improve human rights, women's rights, economic development, education and health.

A vibrant civil society constructive dialogue with the state led the King of Morocco to establish in 2004 the first truth commission in the Arab world, which investigated the forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and other serious abuses of human Rights occurred between 1956 and 1999. The advocacy of civil society led the Moroccan government to award financial compensation to over 9,000 victims and survivors of these abuses and proposed safeguards against such abuses, which were included in the 2011 constitution.

This dialogue has also been demonstrated through reforms in women's rights, labour and ethnic rights. The family law, adopted in January 2004, secures several important rights for women, such as the right to divorce, the right to child custody in cases of divorce and raises the legal age of marriage from 15 to 18 years.

The new labor code, a fruit of civil society advocacy, also guarantees equal rights to workers in the private and public sectors. The nationality code, which was reformed in 2008 after a long battle by women's rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), acknowledges the principle of gender equality by allowing a woman to pass Moroccan citizenship to her children from a non-Moroccan father, an issue which is still hotly debated in other Arab countries.

And in 2001, pressure from Amazigh organizations led to the recognition and revival of the Amazigh language through the creation of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, which safeguards and promotes the Amazigh language, partly by introducing it in schools and universities. The latter was recognized in 2011 constitution as Morocco second official language.

Arab Spring gave birth to youth movements

The Arab Spring protests resulted in regime-change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and destabilized regimes in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, as well as Morocco. As part of the call for democratic reforms, the activists in the Middle East and North African region (MENA) are seeking the establishment of laws, mechanisms and institutions that guarantees individuals' social, economic and political rights, based on dignity, freedom, equity and social justice.

In Morocco, the protests did not start with youth movements but reach its peak during the Arab Spring. The kingdom experienced several protests and advocacy marches in the 80s and 90s led mainly by students' coalitions or civil society organizations. Self immolations happened during the 2000s when fresh graduates couldn't find jobs, burned themselves.

Yet, the 2011 Moroccan youth movements, inspired by revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, took another form and used social media and cyber activism to make their voice heard. Protesters have espoused a wide range of grievances, including a lack of balance of

powers in Morocco's political system, corruption, socioeconomic, abuse of authority and unequal share of powers and resources. Authorities have tolerated many of the protests, but in some cases security forces have used violence and arrests to disperse demonstrators.

II. Impact of the Arab Spring and Youth movements

In a March 9 speech, King Mohammed VI proposed a number of new political reforms. Reforms initiated in 2011 have included the passage of a new constitution, the creation of a new national human rights body, and the holding of early legislative elections. The moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party won a plurality of seats in the legislative elections, and is poised to lead the government for the first time. The monarchy has additionally pledged to strengthen economic regulations, improve transparency in the public procurement process, advance government decentralization, reform the justice sector, and expand press freedom.

Voicing opinions & proposing formal recommendations

The king ordered a consultative commission to be formed to revise the country's constitution. The consultations included for the first time vast consultations with civil society organizations who submitted over 200 Memorandums, out of which 55 demanded the creation of consultative councils.

According to some members of the consultative council, they observed an increased level of awareness of CSO's of social demands through the audacious memorandums presented to the commission in charge of revising the constitution

CSOs also played a key role in mobilizing Moroccan citizens to take part in the constitution referendum and vote in the pre-matured Nov 25, 2011 legislative elections.

CSOs also took the initiative to organized several forums and public dialogues across the country either physical or online to discuss citizens needs and priorities. Many youth NGOs hit the ground and organized direct dialogues with citizens under the theme "proximity dialogue for the constitution of people for the people", with the aim of explaining to them in the most simplest way the new changes occurring in Morocco and raising their level of awareness about the importance of participation

CSO's were also called upon to give their opinions about diverse topics such youth employment policies. The organizations' recommendations were taken into consideration in the employment strategy developed by the recently created Economic & Social Council.

The reform policy has introduced an ever unprecedented culture of public dialogue and consultations within governmental and non governmental institutions.

From youth apathy to youth activism

Historically, Moroccan youth have been apathetic and disillusioned with politics due to lack of representation. Despite a 2002 reform which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, young Moroccans, particularly those ages 17 to 25, did not heavily involve themselves in politics.

However, after the birth of the Feb. 20 Movement, a leaderless coalition that has orchestrated a number of subsequent pacific protests, demanding parliamentary monarchy and advocating political change, several youth have become more interested than ever in shaping the policies of the country. This has been demonstrated in a number of youth who took to the streets and those who participated in public forums to voice their opinion about the hottest political issues affecting their country.

The Feb. 20 Movement has also given birth to a new driving force in Moroccan politics. What has emerged is a new culture of political activism in which the youth are not only a part of the political scene, but leading it. Perhaps the most meaningful change sparked by the Feb. 20 Movement, however, is the shift from a leadership of middle-class, educated activists to a popular movement which has been more inclusive and representative of Morocco's lower classes.

Street activism or institutional revolution

Unlike other countries in the region, Morocco has witnessed both street activism led mainly by the February 20th movement and an institutional revolution led by youth wings of political parties and civil society organizations.

Prior to the pre-mature 2011 legislative elections, a coalition was formed composed of representatives of youth wings of political parties & civil society organizations who led a political communications and advocacy campaign putting pressure on state & political parties to establish a quota for youth representation in the parliament. Although the quota system is debated, and viewed by many as a non democratic system, youth and institutions considered it as the ultimate solution within the current context.

After several meetings, held with heads of political parties and the ministries of youth and interior, the new election code, voted by the parliament, allowed for the creation of a national list for youth. This has guaranteed 30 seats for youth in the parliament.

What has the new constitution brought to youth & civil society?

The articles mentioned in the constitution in relation to youth & civil society was the fruit of the CSO's proposals and recommendations. The articles stipulate the following:

- Article 33 institutionalized youth participation and allowed for the creation of the Consultative Council of youth & community work
- Article 12 reinforced the freedom of the creation of association & introduced the principle of democratic participation allowing civil society to be an integral part in state consultations.
- Article 13-14-15 allowed citizens to participate in formulating draft legislations, and present petitions, and fully participate in designing, implementing and evaluating public policies
- Article 139 allowed for the establishment of participative mechanism at the regional level to allow local citizen to participate in local decisions

Ministry in charge of relations with the parliament and Civil Society

After the appointment of Mr. Abdelilah Benkirane, leader of the Moderate Islamist Party (PJD) as the head of the Government, he had the task to form a new government.

The head of the government and the coalition parties who formed the cabinet gave a priority to civil society and add civil society to the missions of the ministry in charge of relations with the parliament. The said ministry will be liaising with CSO's and seek their feedback in drafting or amending laws. More interestingly, the constitution gave the right to citizens to participating in drafting bills.

Recently the ministry consulted with several CSO's with the aims of amending the law regulating civil society.

Government Program Menu for CSO's

The government, in its statement before the parliament; pledge to open public debate with youth & civil society; make the Consultative Council of Youth & Community Work functional; develop a national integrated youth strategy, ensuring coordination and synergy between sectors working on youth policies; creating regional youth councils; upgrading public spaces reserved to youth; developing CSO's capacity building and; amending laws regulating civil society allowing for more freedom but transparency in accessing public finances.

Increased CSO's initiatives

Youth with the help of several national and international organizations have created local youth councils aiming at developing a constructive dialogue with communes and elected bodies to participate in solving the most striking issues facing citizens at the community level.

2011, witnessed a slight increase in the number of CSO's coalitions formed for more coordination in issues of common interest. Whether these coalition have been effective or not, but it demonstrated how coordinated efforts are important for increased impact.

NGOs are currently holding public dialogue forums to discuss the creation of the consultative council of youth and community work. They have preceded the government in launching these dialogues as stated in its program. CSO's aims is not only to discuss the creation of the youth council and submit the list of recommendations to the head of the government, but rather participating in drafting a bill that would regulate the functions of this youth council.

And because, the constitution allowed CSO's to evaluate public policies, and because youth no longer want to be consumers of public policies, two initiatives are in the process of being created: a shadow youth government to monitor and evaluate sector policies, and a shadow youth parliament to monitor the performance of the parliament from a youth perspective.

III. Challenges facing civil society in Morocco

Despite all the opportunities given to Moroccan CSO's post Arab Spring, they still face a lot of challenges. These are as follows:

1. A number of CSOs have organized (formally or informally) into coalitions, forming the underpinnings of social movements advocating for human rights, women's rights, children's rights, the right of the Amazigh, constitutional reform, the problems of corruption, and so forth. While these efforts have been successful in promoting critical advocacy demands – as seen, for example in the area of women's rights and human rights – these coalitions have often been plagued by infighting and division, and have had limited success in taking their message to the grassroots.
2. The strong resistance to shifts from grassroots-based to professional organizations and the need to maintain independence through avoiding (over) dependency on foreign funding.
3. The technical difficulties involved in managing projects when reporting and proposal writing becomes a priority above fieldwork.

4. Although foreign funding is vital for the survival of a large number of CSOs, there is a general awareness of the associated risks and the possible negative effects of dependency on external funding. Some have described the risks in terms of becoming a “project business”, whereby NGOs have to adapt to the requirements of a funder’s calls for proposals instead of focusing on their own domestic agenda.
5. The limited funding of human resources and office costs leads to a situation wherein some NGO activists must handle several jobs while others have political functions. A Western model of full-time professional occupations is not yet established, which according to some NGO representatives constitutes a significant hindrance to the emergence of a strong and professional civil society.
6. A lack of coordination among international donors as well as among governmental agencies while working with or funding civil society work leads to the duplication of activities or the adoption of different strategies that are not always compatible. Most public and international funding is received on a project basis, which has several consequences mainly on the sustainability of actions undertaken under this particular project.

IV. Recommendations

1. Encouraging partnerships between youth organizations and local governments on special projects to improve public parks, renovate equipment and infrastructure. Youth organizations can develop the capacity to negotiate and maintain partnerships where joint contributions from local governments and the private sector fund infrastructure and equipment destined for youth or neighborhood improvements, instead of solely depending on foreign aid.
2. Encourage synergies and civil society donor coordination;
3. Strengthen civil society institutional and advocacy capacity & generate their knowledge on local governance;
4. Encourage the creation of networks & youth councils to provide a space for CSO’s to use mobilization and advocacy to improve services at the community level.
5. Encourage CSOs to take advantages of the openings in the constitution to participate in drafting legislations that concern youth.
6. Encourage youth movements to get organized in watchdogs for example; go beyond protests in the street; and start negotiations with the government.