

Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East

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Acronyms

CDA	community development association
DISK	Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions
FIS	Islamic Salvation Front
IMF	International Monetary Fund
PVO	private voluntary organization
RP	Rifah Party
SFVO	Street Food Vendors' Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

To what extent is “pressure from below” requisite for meaningful policy change and institutional reform conducive to social development, and for people’s livelihoods and rights, in the Middle East? What forms of activism are gaining prominence in the current period of socio-economic restructuring in the region?

Prior to the advent of political-economic restructuring in the 1980s, the Middle Eastern countries were largely dominated by either nationalist populist states (Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria), or pro-Western rentier states (Arab oil states, Iran). These authoritarian states pursued a state-led economic development strategy. Oil income offered the rentier states the possibility of social provisions; and the ideologically driven populist states dispensed significant economic and social welfare in education, health care, employment, housing and so on. Yet the oppressive nature of both types of states restricted political participation and the development of civil society organizations. Indeed, in many cases, there was demobilization or, at best, controlled mobilization of certain segments of the population. These political economies then frustrated any attempt to develop participatory institutions or culture.

The arrival of liberalization and marketization in the Middle East during the 1980s brought about important socioeconomic changes. The free market economy has made consumer commodities available and enriched society’s upper strata, while it has also increased income disparity. State provisions have been undermined and poor people must rely chiefly on themselves for survival. Meanwhile, the globalized notions of human rights and political participation have placed economic rights and citizen participation on the political agenda, opening up new areas for social mobilization.

Collective responses to these new conditions have varied. The use of coping strategies and massive urban cost-of-living protests were early reactions to aspects of neoliberal policies during the 1980s, as in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. The urban uprisings, however, seem to have given way in the 1990s to institutional methods of dealing with austerity. While trade unions are continuing to push for living standard adjustments—opposing aspects of structural adjustment policies—they nevertheless represent only a fraction of the total workforce in the region. The vast majority of the labouring classes remains dispersed in the informal urban economy. In general, trade unions have failed to link community concerns to those of the workplace. For this reason, urban grassroots movements may find a space for collective action in the community or neighbourhood, rather than the workplace. People are, for the most part, facing the same challenges of day-to-day living: finding secure housing, being able to pay rent, acquiring urban amenities, and having adequate schools, clinics, cultural centres and the like. Community-based struggles for such “collective consumption” through institutional settings characterize, in some sense, “urban social movements”. However, community activism in the form of urban social movements is rare in the Middle East. Local soup kitchens, neighbourhood associations, church groups, or street

trade-unionism are hardly common features in the region. The prevalence of authoritarian and inefficient states, the legacy of populism, and the strength of family and kinship ties render primary solidarities more pertinent than secondary associations and social movements.

There is, however, an argument that considers the Islamist movements in the region as the Middle Eastern version of urban social movements. No doubt Islamist movements—notably that of social Islam—represent a significant means through which some disadvantaged groups survive hardship and better their lives. These movements contribute to social welfare not only by direct provision of services and assistance to the needy; they also tend to compel rival social groups and institutions, such as state agencies and secular NGOs, to do the same. Despite these contributions, it is doubtful that Islamism can mobilize at a grassroots level for social development. Its religious exclusivism, discrimination against secular forces and religious minorities, as well as women who conform to Islamism, defeat any idea of free participation.

Does the explosion of NGOs in the region compensate for both the partial retreat of the state and the shortcoming of political Islam in mobilizing at the grassroots for social development? Indeed, because of their small size, efficiency and commitment to the cause of the poor, NGOs are seen as a real means for grassroots participation in development. They are sometimes viewed as a bulwark against the creeping spread of Islamic fundamentalism by offering an alternative outlet to the Islamist agenda. Most accounts point to the vital role of NGOs in the provision of social safety nets and valued services. This seems true especially in countries where the state has been defunct or non-existent—such as Lebanon during the civil war, and Palestine. However, social development is more than survival, relief and a safety net. It also means achieving certain social and economic rights, and self-sustenance, which may be achieved when active mobilization and participation prevail. But Middle Eastern NGOs in general fail to provide such conditions. Apart from cultural and structural reasons—such as clientelism and hierarchy—the problem is that very often NGOs are attributed with development qualities and abilities that they do not possess. However, the socioeconomic conditions of the Middle East seem to be conducive to a particular form of activism—a grassroots non-movement that I call the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”. This refers to non-collective direct actions of individuals and families to acquire basic necessities (land, shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities) in a quiet, unassuming fashion.

While quiet encroachment has a longer history, the spread of Islamism and NGOs gained momentum during the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s. The growth of these types of activism (along with social movements associated with women and human rights) coincides with the relative decline in traditional, class-based movements—notably peasant organizations, co-operative movements and trade unionism. Meanwhile, growing economic informalization and urbanization in the Middle East shift popular needs and demands. Struggles for wages, for example, lose ground to broader concerns about jobs, conditions of work, cost of living, and urban collective consumption, health care, education and transportation. Thus emerges a salient feature of grassroots activism in the region (aspects of which may be observed elsewhere): it is

characterized less by demand-making movements than direct action, individual, informal or institutional. Through direct action, grassroots groups and their middle-class supporters make themselves heard; they create realities on the ground that the authorities sooner or later have to come to terms with, adjusting their policies accordingly. In short, "pressure from below" in the Middle East experience is highly relevant to social development. Given the gradual retreat of states from their traditional social responsibilities, the poor in the Middle East would be worse off had grassroots actions been totally absent.

Résumé

A quel point une "pression de la base" est-elle nécessaire pour permettre des changements politiques significatifs et des réformes institutionnelles propices à un développement social, ainsi que pour garantir les droits et les moyens d'existence des peuples du Moyen-Orient? Quelles formes de militantisme sont en train de devenir importantes dans la période de restructuration socio-économique que traverse actuellement la région?

Avant l'avènement de la restructuration politico-économique des années 1980, les pays du Moyen-Orient étaient largement dominés soit par des Etats nationaux populistes (Egypte, Irak, Libye, Syrie), soit par des Etats rentiers pro-occidentaux (pays arabes producteurs de pétrole, Iran). Ces Etats autoritaires poursuivaient des stratégies étatiques de développement économique. Les recettes pétrolières permettaient aux Etats rentiers d'offrir des prestations sociales; et les Etats populistes, mus par l'idéologie, dispensaient une aide économique et sociale importante en matière d'éducation, de santé, d'emploi, de logement, etc. La nature oppressive des deux types d'Etat restreignait cependant la participation politique et le développement des organisations de la société civile. Il y a donc eu, dans nombre de cas, démobilisation ou, au mieux, mobilisation contrôlée de certains segments de la population. Ces systèmes économiques contrariaient, en somme, toute tentative de développer des institutions ou une culture participatives.

L'arrivée de la libéralisation et du marché, dans les années 1980, s'est accompagnée de changements socio-économiques importants. L'économie de marché a rendu les denrées de consommation disponibles et enrichi les couches supérieures de la société, tout en augmentant l'écart entre les revenus. Les prestations de l'Etat ont été minées et les pauvres n'ont plus compté que sur eux-mêmes pour survivre. Entre-temps, les notions devenues mondiales de droits de l'homme et de participation politique ont inscrit les droits économiques et la participation des citoyens à l'ordre du jour politique, ouvrant de nouveaux domaines à la mobilisation sociale.

Les réponses collectives à ces conditions nouvelles ont été diverses. Le recours à des stratégies de riposte et à des manifestations urbaines massives visant à dénoncer le coût de la vie ont constitué les réactions initiales aux aspects des politiques néolibérales des années 1980, ainsi qu'on l'a vu en Egypte, en Jordanie, au Liban, au Maroc, au Soudan et en Tunisie. Les soulèvements urbains semblent cependant avoir cédé la place, dans les années 1990, à des

méthodes institutionnelles de faire face à l'austérité. Tandis que les syndicats continuent de réclamer des ajustements du niveau de vie—en s'opposant, par conséquent, à certains aspects des politiques d'ajustement structurel—ils ne représentent néanmoins qu'une fraction de la main-d'œuvre globale dans la région. La vaste majorité des classes laborieuses demeure dispersée dans l'économie urbaine informelle. Les syndicats, en général, n'ont pas réussi à lier les préoccupations de la communauté à celles du lieu de travail. Pour cette raison, les mouvements populaires urbains peuvent trouver un espace pour une action collective dans la communauté ou dans le quartier, plutôt que sur les lieux de travail. Les gens font face, pour la plupart d'entre eux, aux mêmes défis de la vie au jour le jour: trouver un logement sûr, être en mesure de payer le loyer, acquérir des équipements urbains, avoir des écoles, des cliniques, des centres culturels adéquats, etc. Les luttes basées sur la communauté pour une telle "consommation collective" par le truchement de cadres institutionnels caractérisent, en un sens, les "mouvements sociaux urbains". Le militantisme communautaire sous forme de mouvement social urbain est cependant rare au Moyen-Orient. Les soupes populaires locales, les associations de quartier, les groupes confessionnels ou le syndicalisme de rue sont des particularités peu communes dans la région. La prévalence d'Etats autoritaires et inefficaces, l'héritage du populisme et la force des liens familiaux et parentaux rendent les solidarités primaires plus pertinentes que les associations et les mouvements sociaux secondaires.

Selon certaines théories, cependant, les mouvements islamistes dans la région seraient la version moyen-orientale des mouvements sociaux urbains. Il est indéniable que les mouvements islamistes—notamment ceux de l'islam social—représentent un moyen important permettant à certains groupes désavantagés de survivre à la pauvreté et d'améliorer leur vie. Ces mouvements contribuent au bien social, non seulement en fournissant directement des services et une aide aux plus nécessiteux; ils ont également tendance à obliger les institutions et les groupes sociaux rivaux tels que les organismes nationaux et les ONG laïques à faire de même. Malgré ces contributions, il est douteux que l'islamisme puisse mobiliser au niveau populaire en vue d'un développement social. Son exclusivisme religieux, la discrimination dont il fait preuve à l'égard des forces laïques et des minorités religieuses, ainsi que des femmes qui se conforment à l'islamisme, mettent en échec toute idée de libre participation.

L'explosion des ONG dans la région peut-elle compenser le retrait partiel de l'Etat et les

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