Supporting Public Participation in Egypt

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Public participation in Egypt has historically been attached to the issue of national liberation, an issue of highest priority until the evacuation of British forces in the 1950s. But the perennially low rates of participation since that time must be explained by a number of socioeconomic and political factors, including cultural and historical traditions, economic barriers, the limited reach of international civil society groups, and the lack of modern examples of popular, if not democratic, participation in Egyptian public life. Encouraging citizens to participate in decision-making is a multidimensional issue that is complicated by the interaction between these various elements. Some progress is already occurring, thanks to globalization and increasing efforts among Egypt’s leadership to open the political process. Changing Egypt into a participatory society, however, will require further fundamental adjustments to the legislative framework, new approaches to education and the media, an improved economic situation, and the establishment of transparency and accountability in Egypt’s institutions to win the trust of the Egyptian people.

Hindrances to Public Participation

Public participation has historically been attached to the issue of national liberation, which was the issue that headed the list of Egypt’s priorities until the completion of the evacuation of British forces from Egypt during the early 1950s.

Although the national liberation period was characterized by fairly balanced leadership culled from the major political parties, a state achieved through transparent elections based on the 1923 Constitution – the constitution that forms the basis of modern democratic practice in Egypt – yet this period, it seems, did not succeed in creating an elite political democratic group steeped in those constitutional principles. This was reflected in the period following liberation, which did not witness the same level of widespread public participation in decision-making.

In spite of the continuous changes in the political, economic, and social environment in Egypt, the rates of public participation are still below desired levels. A number of issues have shaped the current situation:

The Cultural Environment

Egyptian culture, in its various dimensions, has always had great influence on the political behavior of Egypt's citizens. This influence has generally not helped to push the political participation process forward. Given this, we need to examine those elements that have the most impact on the cultural environment.

Centralization: Egyptian culture reflects a clear tendency toward centralized decision-making. This starts with decisions made within the family borders through decisions made in the workplace and up
to political decisions made in the various political parties or decisions made within civil society institutions.

Effect of Historical Experience: Political work in Egypt has rested on the dichotomy between “patriotism” and “treachery,” meaning that whoever practices politics according to the government’s rules and principles, within its own institutions, and to achieve government goals is to be considered patriotic and deserving of reward. On the other hand, whoever practices political work in circumstances adverse to such principles and goals is considered a traitor and should be punished. This concept has bred fear in the minds and hearts of many politicians, many of whom have preferred to remove themselves from such a risk, especially given the widespread popularity and trust enjoyed by the political leadership among the non-politically-active public. This cultural effect still exists in the minds of many citizens despite a recent increase in freedoms and relative democratization.

Weakness of Group Work Culture: Egyptian society suffers from a weakness in group work ethic – a general preference for individual work in various fields; this weakness stems from the fact that group work obligates various commitments such as coordination and interaction with others. It is not possible to promote public participation except within a culture that identifies the importance of group work.

Attitude Toward Youth and Women: Strong public participation cannot be achieved without the participation of society’s various sectors. The activation of women’s roles in political life and in social activities generally represents a big challenge to Egyptian society, since there are still some conventions, which are not widely prevalent in society but still exist in some sectors, that deem women unfit for any political participation.

The same is true of youth participation; many believe that youth are not adequately mature to be participating in politics or even discussing it, and that it is better for youth to concentrate on their practical life either in terms of their education or their search for jobs.

**The Economic Environment**
It is obvious from the historical experiences of several countries that the most economically depressed categories of society are the least willing to participate politically in order to change their circumstances. In Egypt, a number of economic factors influence participation, including unemployment and the high cost of participation:

Unemployment: The process of searching for a job and the trials following it to improve one’s income, where incomes are low, is considered one of the main hindrances to citizen participation in political and social affairs.

High Cost of Political Work: The economic circumstances of both the country and the citizen as well as the limited capabilities of many institutions with respect to political and social work results in a transfer of the financial burden of political work to the citizen himself. The direct economic cost of participation is therefore a deciding factor in whether the citizen will participate or not.

**Political Environment**
Egypt’s political environment is colored by a number of elements, including the legal framework guiding political work, the weakness of political parties and novelty of civil society, education, and the media:

The Legislative Framework: Many of the rules related to public and political work need to be reviewed, as many of these rules were issued under different political circumstances, and accordingly do not reflect a real desire to deepen democratic practices in general or citizen participation in particular. The current legislation related to practicing political work hinders political participation, which in turn hinders a transition to a system that allows greater participation.

Weakness of Political Parties: Political parties are considered the main school for bringing up political cadres, as well as providing the legal frame in which political work is practiced. Nonetheless, most political parties in Egypt suffer from the following essential problems:

- Unclear program and vague political speech
- Inability to attract youth
- Centralized decision-making within the parties
• Domination of historical leaderships
• Avoidance of modern political tools, including limited use of large-scale conferences and other tools to reach out to the masses in a way that is publicly recognized.
• Poor financing
• Eruption of historical conflicts

Such problems make politics less interesting in the eyes of the public and diminish the public’s desire to participate.

Novel Civil Society: Civil society is novel not only in the sense of the newness of its institutions, but also in their limited reach both thematically and in terms of their activity. In addition, civil society groups are centralized in the large cities and only rarely appear in outlying areas, except for activities related to religious institutions.

Education: Education is considered one of the most complicated and is among the most influential factors on participation, as the relation between education and participation is two-dimensional. The first dimension is the correlation between political awareness and educational standard. The second dimension is the instruction an individual gains from the educational process, which both transfers values directly and provides students with the tools to think critically and/or scientifically.

The Media: The state controls both the audio and visual media sectors in a way that does not allow equal chances for other and different currents of thought or media outlets to be heard or seen. This in turn reflects on citizen political awareness, and particularly on his/her awareness of the importance of political participation.

The effect of print media is, of course, limited by the fact that a large sector of Egyptian society is illiterate.

Regional and International Environment

Although society and political participation is considered an internal affair tied to a nation’s constitution, laws, and culture, yet we cannot ignore some external effects such as the Palestinian situation, globalization, international support for local civil society, and international reform initiatives.

The Palestinian Case: The accelerating political developments in the Palestinian occupied lands are of major interest to Egyptian citizens. This results in a larger tendency toward public interest in external affairs, which accordingly affects interest in internal affairs and interest in political participation. Accordingly, citizen interest in political participation depends largely on how such participation pertains to such major issues.

Globalization: The globalization phenomenon has been connected closely with the fast transfer and exchange of information and the government’s inability to control the media any longer. This has resulted in a dual effect on the issue of participation. On one hand, it facilitates the provision of information and analysis to a large number of people, supporting their need to participate and promote change. On the other hand, it supports some of the isolated movements that find globalization a cultural threat to the nation. The communication revolution has also contributed to making some sectors of society feel inferior due to the vast differences in standards of living around the globe. Such issues do not encourage the needed development of political and social participation.

The Nature of International Support for Local Civil Society: International funding agencies have contributed to supporting civil society organizations in Egypt. That said, support was not directed to all forms of civil society work, but exclusively to organizations that addressed issues of top concern to Egyptian society, instead of to other organizations addressing controversial, but perhaps more crucial, issues – issues to which most of society cannot relate under the current economic, political, and cultural circumstances.

International Reform Initiatives: A number of Western nations have submitted initiatives for developing democratic practices in the Arab world according to Western views. It is most important here to be aware that the success of such initiatives – despite the benefits and incentives they offer, as well as concealed disincentives – depends on setting a suitable internal atmosphere politically, economically, and culturally on one hand, and on the other hand, such international reform initiatives should be framed with relation to a society’s values and circumstances.
Strategies for Supporting and Strengthening Public Participation

Updating the Legislative Framework: The legislative framework should be updated to provide political parties with better opportunities and wider horizons for political work. We also need to develop rules for NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and professional and labor syndicates, as well as monitor political rights and ensure political and public participation.

Developing the Educational Process: Educational reform must be approached from two sides. The first is to speed up efforts to eliminate illiteracy. The second is to develop school curricula that strengthen students’ critical thinking and scientific thinking skills as well as set the basis for group work, equality, and respect for differences of opinion among them. Such efforts should include some grounding in legal and political knowledge, to help strengthen their feeling of belonging and the ability to participate.

Developing the Media: The role of the media in supporting participatory culture is major – and entails media's educating the public and introducing and spreading the values that support participatory culture. The media may also play a major role in strengthening citizen awareness of issues by introducing themes in an objective manner and ensuring that coverage steers clear of being dominated by a small selection of trends.

Improving Economic Performance: Improving national economic conditions and citizens’ standard of living is a major encouragement to get citizens interested in strengthening their role in decision-making and in political and societal participation generally.

Transparency and Accountability: Citizen awareness of facts, especially those related to government practices and the government’s integrity and effectiveness in achieving public welfare, is considered a foundation stone in efforts to strengthen the feeling of belongingness and the desire to participate. This is closely related with citizen trust in national institutions, which deepens when they see that delinquents are being punished and when corruption is being eliminated.

Activating Political and Public Participation Today

It is obvious from the reasons leading to the fall of participation rates that encouraging citizens to participate in decision-making is a multidimensional issue that is complicated by the interaction between the various elements. In order to achieve real change leading to greater participation, it is necessary to carefully set goals with timelines for each goal and to build on what has already been achieved and on historical experience. Such a reform plan must also take into account society’s need for reform and its ability to grasp it. A number of factors being covered by the current reform process may be observed here:

Developing Political Party Life: The political domain is currently witnessing increasing efforts to develop political parties as the main tool for public political participation. This has been demonstrated by the development that took place in the National Democratic Party along a number of lines:

- **Fundamental Development:** where the party’s basic system is amended, resulting in changes to the party’s organizational chart, the creation of new posts, and reorganization of membership and financial and administration affairs, among other developments.

- **Intellectual Development:** where the party’s main principles are developed within a new intellectual framework, in a manner that takes into consideration current political, economical and international developments, and at the same time calls for increasing political participation and social responsibility in politics.

- **Leadership Development:** where new leadership in the party demonstrates the continuity between different generations of party leadership.

Other political parties are also witnessing great efforts to develop their leadership or programs, a fact that elicits optimism and builds faith in further improvements to come.

Raise the Profile of Human Rights Issues: The establishment of the National Council for Human Rights illustrates the growing importance of human rights as a fundamental issue. A law issued by the People’s Assembly subsidiary to the President gave this council a big boost. Its formation also
reflected increasing interest in ensuring widespread political rights, based mainly on supporting public and political participation.

Establishment of Women’s Rights: Within the framework of strengthening the basis of equality between man and woman in both rights and duties, came the recent passage of the Egyptian nationality law [by which a child can acquire Egyptian citizenship through his or her mother], which aims to increase women’s sense of belonging and desire and ability to participate in society and politics. Another two examples of efforts to activate women’s participation are the establishment of the National Council for Women and the National Council for Motherhood and Childhood.

Increase Youth Involvement: Indications are that youth participation is increasing – demonstrated by the youth of new members of government and several new Shoura Council members.

Summary

Despite the disparity of success in the various fields mentioned above, we are optimistic that we can build on what has already been achieved in order to support public participation among the various categories of society. It is important to note that some areas are still in desperate need of development – chiefly education and the media, as well as updating the legal framework to enable syndicates and civil society organizations to perform their role. The positive interaction of these groups with the reform initiatives for Egypt’s welfare and social values will contribute to efforts to settle urgent regional issues as well as those made to improve economic performance. All the above contributes to strengthening public participation.

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