



كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: **Bahrain**

Keywords: **Citizenship, Land policies, Housing policies, Social and economic rights, Bahrain**

Examining the Impact of Land Reclamation Policies in Bahrain on Public Housing and the Traditional Fishing Industry

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Land reclamation projects were initially introduced to respond to the increasing public housing demand in the kingdom, however, several sea plots have been turned into private properties which has caused a myriad of socioeconomic problems, including increased waiting time for public housing, greater restrictions on open water access, and, relatedly, a loss of an income source for fishermen

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

The total land area of Bahrain prior to land reclamation commencements in the 1960s was approximately 620 square kilometers (Noor Al-Nabi, 2012). From 2009 to 2013, Bahrain's area has witnessed a significant increase of about 10 square kilometers due to land reclamation projects. According to the Bahrain National Planning Development Strategy, the total area of Bahrain is expected to increase to 845.47 square kilometers by 2030 (Ghaleb, 2015).

Although the National Planning Development Strategy of Bahrain aims to respond to, and meet the national housing needs of Bahrainis, the trend of privatizing reclaimed lands has come at the expense of providing a sufficient number of public housing units. In 2017, the Ministry of Housing stated that Bahrain's social housing waiting list has hit more than 55,000 households whereas the available housing units are only 17,000 (AlMoussawi, 2017).

The reasons behind this imbalance include the fact that many reclaimed lands end up being either granted to or acquired by private entities that provide very small spaces for public housing. For instance, Diyar al-Muharrag, one of the new islands constructed on a reclaimed land, provides around 30,000 housing units; however, only 3,100 residential units will be included in the social housing program of the Ministry of Housing (Gerbich, 2015).

In addition, Bahrain's fish stocks are depleting at an alarming rate due to the increasing number of [private] land reclamation projects (Alwasatnews, 2015) which contradicts the promise to "preserve and strengthen environmental resources" as stated in the National Planning Development Strategy. In response to some disruption of the delivery of public services and the potential damage to environmental resources and destabilization of the local fishing industry, the Bahraini fishermen movement has conducted strikes and other civil protests to increase the visibility of the issues at hand. Moreover, citizens struggling to receive their right to public housing have also led protests against land reclamation projects and the continuous delays of public housing delivery.

This paper examines the divide between the original intent of the Bahrain land reclamation policies and the current impact of those policies. Moreover, the paper draws attention to the grassroots movements led by the fishermen community and by the Karrana village residents to protest against the privatization of reclaimed lands.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF NORANA ISLANDS AND THE ISSUE OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN KARRANA

In 2005, an area of around 9 square kilometers of the sea was registered as state property, with the idea to serve public housing projects for the residents of the village of Karrana (AlShehabi & Suroor, 2016). This area, which has been known as Norana, can accommodate around 30,000 housing units (Alwasatnews, 2009). However, it was later divided, with the approval of the king and the prime minister, into eight private plots (Alwasatnews, 2010). In 2013, the minister of housing stated during a parliamentary session that the government has not budgeted for any housing projects in the island of Norana (Alwasatnews, 2013). Moreover, although the land's ownership has been transferred to private investors, the national treasury did not include the Norana land sale revenues (AlHalwachi, 2010).

TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

Since 2010, residents of Karrana have been protesting against the construction of the Norana Islands and the delay of their housing project (AlHalwachi, 2010). The residents have communicated their dissatisfaction and rejection of the land reclamation projects through a petition that was signed by around 600 individuals and delivered to the Ministry of Municipalities and Agriculture Affairs (Alwasatnews, 2010). Without any changes, the Karrana protests have continued for over six years (Abdullah, 2016).

Norana investors have obtained their permit from the minister of municipalities and agriculture affairs without having sought the approval of the Northern Governorate Municipal Council. The council has stated that the Norana Islands construction is, therefore, extra-legal as it is incompatible with the National Planning Development Strategy. Accordingly, the council has filed a lawsuit in order to stop the construction work in the Norana area (Alwasatnews, 2010). However, the Supreme Administrative Court has refused to hear the case (Alayam, 2012).

TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

The Council of Representatives has formed an inquiry committee that aims to evaluate the efficiency of the government's management of public properties. The final report of the committee has shown that around 94 percent of reclamation projects have been carried out through illegal methods, given that undersea plots cannot be made private properties under the Bahraini law. Moreover, the report has indicated that many underwater plots were dedicated for public projects that serve the educational and housing needs of Bahrainis; however, the majority of these lands have been sold to the private sector without any financial benefits recorded to the public.

Privatizing the Norana Islands project conflicts with Article 2 of Law No. 20 of 2006 on the Protection of Coasts, Littorals, Shores and Seaports, which bans the issuance of private licenses for projects that carry out reclamation operations in public coasts or any of the aforementioned areas.

Norana is only one of many privatized man-made islands in Bahrain. While privatization of public property is prohibited in the Bahraini constitution, around 65 square kilometers of public lands were transferred into private properties, which, according to the aforementioned report, has resulted in a loss of around BD 15 billion to the national treasury of Bahrain (Mahdi, 2010).

THE BAHRAINI FISHERMEN MOVEMENT

Bahrain's massive land reclamation projects have had a detrimental effect on the marine environment and the livelihood of fishermen: fishery landings in Bahrain, along with fish exports, have dropped.

The government of Bahrain, in an attempt to preserve fish stocks, has imposed an annual temporary fishing ban lasting from March till July (Trade Arabia, 2014). This has eventually led to illegal off-season fishing (Alzeera, 2014). Moreover, due to these restrictions and the unclear new fishing boundaries, some fishermen were put under conditions that forced them to sail far from the sovereign coastlines of Bahrain. Consequently, a Bahraini fisherman was shot by the Qatari coast guard for unknowingly fishing in Qatari territorial waters (Mahdi, 2010).

TACTICS AND TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

Two tactics were employed by the Bahraini fishermen to raise awareness about the issue: protests and refusals to sell fish. These tactics were very powerful given their immediate impact on the daily life of Bahrainis. In 2009, around 1,700 Bahraini fishermen, supported by the Bahraini Fishermen Society and the Bahraini Fishermen Trade Union (Ala'ali, 2009), have led a week-long strike demanding compensation for the damages that they endured due to development activities, and revision of the land reclamation policies in Bahrain. The strike ended after the prime minister visited the fishermen community and promised to fulfill their demands (Trade Arabia, 2009).

POLICY OUTCOMES

Even after years of the fishermen's movement, the Shura Council has not responded to their demands. In 2017, the council rejected a draft law submitted by the Public Utilities and Environment Affairs Committee at the Bahraini Council of Representatives to establish a fund that supports Bahraini professional fishermen (AlSitri, 2017).

The measures taken by civil society actors, along with the members of parliament, with regard to the land reclamation projects in Bahrain have not resulted in any material changes on the policy level. Land reclamation policies are part of a bigger vision that aims to transform the economy of Bahrain into a market economy. That transformation seems to be taking precedence over the fisheries. While land reclamation projects do often attract foreign investments, the execution of these policies has shown that the planning process has not always been able to provide safeguards and alternatives for the traditional labor market and the underdeveloped rural communities.



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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf. Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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