

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

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

Country: **Tunisia**

The General Context of Civil Society in Tunisia

| Mohamad Al Agati |

IDENTIFYING CIVIL SOCIETY'S NATURE AND TYPE

The Tunisian revolution in 2011 brought out the potential of political, party and civil action, as the country witnessed an unprecedented boom in the spread of political parties and associations, of which their number, affiliates and activists increased. In fact, parties with different ideological backgrounds were established, including nationalism, Islamism, liberalism and leftism, and today there are almost 223 political parties. Moreover, during the elections, political coalitions came into existence, such as the Popular Front established in October 2012 and included a group of left-wing parties; some associations were also established and dealt with all society's classes, and mostly depended on awareness and educational work for young people, particularly in the first years after the revolution, as they were involved in developing the concepts of association work, networking, awareness-raising and consolidating the foundations of volunteering and civilization. This process lasted for a long time due to the lack of experience of activists and the prohibition of associations' work outside the state's control and the ruling party in the previous reign.

Until the end of the year 2018, the number of associations in Tunisia reached almost 21,146 according to the Center for Information, Training, Studies and Documentation on Associations (IFEDA). This constant increasing number indicates the high devotion for civil work, that in turn, indicates community awareness within the civil society in Tunisia after the revolution¹.

According to the same source², a fifth of this number is concentrated in the capital, Tunis, and most of them were established after the

revolution, especially that the associations' work prior the revolution was limited to charitable work within institutions affiliated with the regime, as well as in the Tunisian Human Rights League and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, which both are considered the two most prominent associations opposing the regime.

The number of civil society organizations has currently increased rapidly in Tunisia, and their specializations, fields of intervention and interests have diversified; most of them tackled human rights, cultural, sports, charitable, humanitarian, developmental and artistic fields. During the post-revolution period, Tunisia also knew many social and popular movements, most notably the youth movement "Manish Msemah" (I do not forgive) against the Economic Reconciliation Law, and the "Fash Nestanaw" movement (What are we waiting for?) against the Finance Law of 2018.

Furthermore, associations in Tunisia receive their funding from the government, as they allocate funds in the form of a grant or financial aid, in addition to foreign funding, which Tunisian law stipulates on the principles of publicity and transparency in their spending.

¹ Center for Information, Training, Studies and Documentation on Associations (IFEDA) http://www.ifeda.org.tn/ar/index.php?id_page=4&lang=ar

² Center for Information, Training, Studies and Documentation on Associations (IFEDA) http://www.ifeda.org.tn/ar/index.php?id_page=4&lang=ar

CHALLENGES

The Tunisian civil society faces several challenges and problems hindering its work, which are distributed as follows:

- Management problems: some associations have a lack of professionalism in dealing with the rules of management. However, associations management ignorance in implementing the law has led to a lack of transparency and democracy's principles, which are factors that affect their work and weaken their ability to influence.
- Funding problems: The process of obtaining public funding is complicated, as many associations, particularly emerging ones, are unable to follow and respect them. As for foreign funding, and despite its importance in helping associations to accomplish their projects, it has led in some cases, particularly when the associations are affiliated with parties, to implement party programs and organize election campaigns for them, and in other cases to impose programs on donor partners.
- Civil society-government relationship: Some good practices were implemented in the post-revolution period, mainly related to the participatory approach of civil society in decision-making and law and constitution's drafting. Today, however, they have become threatened despite its institutionalization in a ministry focusing on civil society and the development of an "assigned with a mission" plan to communicate with civil society through the ministries, Presidency of the Republic and Parliament, which has become traditional communication in many cases.
- Alliances and networking between associations: The absence of alliances and networking among the components of civil society is one of the main reasons for the lack of the relationship with the government, as this has an effect on limiting the ability of civil society to create a public opinion influencing decision-makers while formulating public policies³.

Despite all these challenges and problems, civil society has an effective role, even today, in making an impact on the process of democratic transition and changing legislation, as well as in the development process, as its work in this framework is not limited to only one, but to many levels, as associations work on increasing community awareness, changing the prevailing culture and ideas, moving towards legal change, issuing new legislations, and working with state institutions in the framework of partnerships to change and improve reality.

It is worth noting the important role of the Tunisian civil society, particularly the Tunisian Human Rights League and the Labor Union, in working on the process of national dialogue, which spared Tunisia political disorders following the assassination of opponents, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, which almost led the country to violence and war⁴.

The well-established organizations of Tunisian civil society, most notably the General Labor Union, led to the establishment of a national dialogue that was organized in the midst of the power crisis in 2013, and included various political parties. It has also mainly contributed to achieving political stability and the adoption of a new constitution in the country in January 2014.

Tunisian civil society performed a central role in the process of democratic transition, and is still seeking to develop its working methods and activities to play a crucial role in building a democratic and advanced Tunisia.



MEDIA AND PRESS STATUS

The wave of establishing associations coincided with the establishment of many media and communication outlets, the most prominent of which is the media of associations covering their associations' activities, especially that the interests of the private and public media are limited to associations during some occasions. Therefore, providing a convenient environment for the work of associations depends on the participation and actors in the legal, political, legislative, judicial and administrative fields, as reform of laws shall be accompanied by a human rights approach in the legislative policy.

COUNTRY'S GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL SYSTEM STATUS

The political system in Tunisia is distinguished by its openness to associations and the lack of restrictions on them, even those that operate in fields considered sensitive to the Tunisian society, such as the rights of homosexuals or ethnic or religious minorities.

COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, SECURITY AND SOCIAL SITUATIONS

The severe social and economic situations in the country, due to the high cost of living, high rates of poverty and unemployment and the unchanged conditions of young people who revolted to demand job creation, improve their difficult life conditions and secure their basic rights to work, health, education and housing, constituted a motive for establishing youth associations and movements to improve the economic and social conditions of the Tunisians. Furthermore, identity's issues, women's rights and freedoms affect the work of associations and people movements in Tunisia, and they were raised after the Islamists took the lead in the political scene in Tunisia in the aftermath of the revolution, and emerged largely to face some conservative ideas that increased.

³ A study focusing on the reality and challenges of civil society in Tunisia <https://bit.ly/28PPiuv>

⁴ Hala Yousfi, an article published in the 'Assafir Al-Arabi' entitled «Tunisian civil society, a new duality of power

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ORGANIZATION, AND MOVEMENT

One cannot talk about civil society in Tunisia without talking about the importance of the freedoms of expression, association, and association guaranteed by the new Constitution and considered as gains that cannot be withdrawn; thus, associations work to consolidate them. Furthermore, it cannot be considered that there is any restriction on the right to demonstrate despite the fact that it is subject to some restrictions and the authorities resort to violence to suppress the demonstrators.

CONTEXT, REGIONAL DIMENSIONS, AND COUNTRY'S SURROUNDING PROBLEMS

The internal factors and facts surrounding the work of associations are accompanied by external and regional factors and gives, the most prominent of which is the associations-international donors' relationship. There are legal restrictions that govern this relationship, as despite the possibility of obtaining foreign funding, the law stipulates the principles of publicity and transparency in their spending, but Article 35 of the Basic Law regulating associations stipulates that "Associations are prohibited from accepting aid, donations or gifts of countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Tunisia, or by organizations that defend the interests and policies of those countries"⁵.

Furthermore, it is worth noted that the situation in Tunisia allows access to information, and guarantees the transparent and flexible procedures to obtain foreign funding, which would reduce the risks associated with this type of financing, particularly concerning terrorism and money laundering.



⁵ Decree No. 88 of 2011 dated September 2011, 24 on organizing the associations

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.


Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
American University of Beirut
P.O.Box 11- 0236

 Riad El-Solh / Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon, Issam Fares Institute Building, AUB

 +961-1-350000 ext. 4150 / Fax +961-1-737627

 ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb

 www.aub.edu.lb/ifi

 aub.ifi

 @ifi_aub

 @ifi_aub

