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A New Awakening in the Arab World: Role of Civil Society in the Gulf Region.

by

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Abstract:

Democratic protests that began in the Arab World in 2010 have been a case of study, debates and discussions across the world. More than a decade later, the changes in the Arab region particularly in polity, governance and social culture have met with lukewarm responses from the international community. Yet the uprisings and the demands for installing democratic processes have sprung from the region with thousands gathering voluntarily to echo support. This brings in the role of various communities and of the civil society. The paper aims to reflect on the same.

Keywords: Arab, civil society, Gulf, democracy, human rights.

Introduction

The right of people to act collectively for the sake of shared interests, purposes and values is one of the building blocks of a free and open society, and exercising that right is the essence of civil society activity.

On 18th January 2010, the first protests happened in Tunisia following Mohammad Bouzizi's self-immolation. The protests were against the ill treatment of people and corruption by the police. Soon the "wave of unrest" spread across West Asia and North Africa engulfing about 21 countries. Since then, four years have gone by and government in four countries has been overthrown, elections have been held in five countries (Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Libya) and yet few other leaders have promised to recognize people's power though have not actually stepped down. So far most of the countries in West Asia and North Africa have undergone a political change in one way or the other. The "wave of democracy" is often seen by some as a "storm in the desert" however the fact remains that the region will no longer be the same.

Various factors have contributed in enhancing the wave of protests in the region and the role of youth in using technology and social networking sites cannot be more underlined. The democratic upsurge in the Arab world indicates a change in the perception of power in the region. Though most of the countries in West Asia witnessed

the protests in one way or the other, the impact of the protest on these countries varied. In some cases, autocratic governments were toppled whereas in other the governments reached a consensus with people. The Persian Gulf States too witnessed a wave of protest.¹ The struggle for political transformation has found resonance in the Persian Gulf region. Particularly the GCC countries which form a sub-region in the Arab world have experienced people's protests. However, as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen witnessed profound changes, the authorities in Gulf States were able to suppress the upheaval. This brings into focus the factor of civil resistance and the opportunities for the citizens to explore spaces for exercising freedom. The paper aims to examine the increasing role of civil society movement in the Gulf as a result of the democratic upheaval in the Arab world.

The Persian Gulf region:

The Persian Gulf region is in West Asia and is characterized by the existence of eight countries that include Iran, Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq of which barring Iran and Iraq the rest are GCC countries. The region is rich in oil and natural gas reserves and today holds the world's almost 50% of total oil and gas reserves, making it "one of the most vital and strategic regions of the world". It thus holds a significant geo-strategic position for political power play. Oil was first discovered in the region in 1908 in Persia, by 1932 in Bahrain, the first on the Arabian side of the Gulf, and in 1938 in Saudi Arabia. Soon major discoveries of oil were made in the other countries in the Gulf. With the discovery of oil, the Gulf States underwent social and economic changes and the most drastic changes took place after the sharp increase in oil revenues in mid 1970s. Oil brought new forces which restructured political life and the changes in the economy gave rulers direct access to external resources and money that were generated outside the local economy.² The tribal political system entails that most of the Gulf States have absolute monarchy and power is thus controlled by Sheikhs and/or Emirs. Political participation exists in Kuwait and partially in Bahrain. Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar have constitutional monarchy, whereas Oman and Saudi Arabia have absolute monarchy and UAE has federal monarchy.

Nature of civil society in Gulf

Traditionally the civil society organizations are largely seen as governmental-non-governmental registered organizations "having a controversial relationship with the regimes, partly as a survival mechanism, and mostly due to regime restrictions imposed on them". Historically charitable organizations (jam'iyat khayreyya) associated with mosque or Islamic religious organizations have existed for centuries. Charitable organizations have worked to identify the poor and to receive and distribute funds or to address community concerns, or there have existed public benefit organizations as foundations, NGOs or charitable organizations.³

Civil Society Organizations were generally seen as philanthropists and sometimes even as service providers. Also, CSOs' have limited capacities in maintaining strong relations with their constituency and their inefficiency

¹ Henceforth Gulf

² Jill Crystal, (1990), *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge University, p.6

³ Mervat Rishmawi, Tim Morris, (2007), *Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World*, Praxis Paper No. 20, INTRAC.

in mobilizing, networking and entering into coalitions, toppled by their lack of financial autonomy, led to rather limited and fragmented impact within their societies.⁴

The institutions of civil society within the Gulf region are not particularly strong and are dominated by socio-religious character compared with the associations of cultural and intellectual nature elsewhere. Though the civil organizations and associations have existed in the Gulf for a long time, in recent years the number of these organizations has increased dramatically all over the Gulf region. Though all the protests by groups during the upheaval, may not be effectively referred to as civil society, yet responses of organized group cannot be ignored. In Bahrain, the existence of groups for Human Rights and the role of Teachers' association and lawyers' group or the call for democracy by Teachers' Association and Jurists' Association in UAE are some examples. The use of technology and social networking sites, have given a new fillip to the civil society movement allowing many to form online groups. The resistance that came from civil society influenced the decisions of the authorities. Two countries have had the longest history of civil society movement in the Gulf viz. Kuwait (1919) and Bahrain (1921). UAE, Saudi, Oman and Qatar have followed soon.⁵

There are approximately 10000 community-based organizations working within the GCC region. This includes women's organizations, organizations working for the benefit of people with special needs, orphans, and senior citizens. Apart from these there are cooperative councils, labor associations, unions and foreign bodies. It excludes political groups. Most of these organizations are situated within urban centers. They involve over 1 million registered volunteers.⁶

The six countries have had varying experience with the civil society:

Bahrain: In February 2011, Bahrain witnessed protest, perhaps the earliest in any Gulf country Tpeople gathered at the Manama Roundabout which became the center of these protests with democratic demands and socio-economic justice. Bahrain's power is concentrated in the hands of Sunni and King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa is at the helm of affairs. Bahrain's population is Shi'is. The Al Khalifas have ruled almost a century and half over Bahrain. The earliest NGOs in Bahrain were in the 1920s the Al Adabi club, the Al Ahili club and the Oroba club in 1939.⁷ In 1999, the government created a Human rights Committee and subsequently the Union of Bahraini women's society was founded. With over 40 trade unions and women's organizations, Bahrain boasts of the largest number of civil societies in the whole of Gulf. Today Bahrain boasts of more than 500 NGOs. There is apprehension and debate over whether these can be rightfully considered as civil society in a democratic sense of

⁴ Rama Halaseh, Civil Society, Youth and the Arab Spring, http://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/150411/Chapter_13_-_Rama_Halaseh.pdf

⁵ Munira A. Fakhro, (2005), Civil Society and democracy in the Gulf region, 11th Mediterranean dialogue seminar: Security and development in the Gulf Region, Qatar.

⁶ Abdulnabi Al Alekri, Civil Society in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Region: A Literature Review http://foundationforfuture.org/en/Portals/0/Conferences/Research/Research%20papers/Civil_Society_in_Gulf_English.pdf

⁷ Mansoor Al-Jamri (1998), State and Civil Society in Bahrain, MESA, Middle East Studies Association 32nd Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL., USA , http://bahrain.wikia.com/wiki/State_and_Civil_Society_in_Bahrain

the term yet the fact remains that in the absence of significant multiparty political competition these, most anti state political activity is routed through these organizations.⁸ Bahraini Sociologists' Society, General Federation of Trade Unions of Bahrain, Bahrain Society of Women's Awakening, Awal Women Society, National Society for the Support of Education and Training, Society for the Support of Students, Bahraini Teachers' Society, Bahraini Dentists Society, Society for Cultural Renewal, Bahraini Society of Lawyers, Society of Democratic Youth are some of the organisations. In the post protest situation, the Bahrain Rehabilitation and Anti-Violence Organization (BRAVO) emerged largely from the controversial targeting of doctors and medical staff. The organization works from outside Bahrain for the purpose of rights in Bahrain, for the Bahrainis.

Kuwait

The CSOs in Kuwait are composed of public interest associations, trade unions, and informal groups such as cooperative societies. The law prohibits associations from engaging in political activities. Kuwait was one of the pioneering states within the GCC Region to establish a trade union, Kuwait Labor Union. It was established in 1961. This was the only union of its type to be established in the GCC until the year 2001 AD when the Kingdom of Bahrain followed suit. Similarly, the State of Kuwait was also the first in the region to establish a student union in the 1970s. It was also the first to offer licensing for the establishment of private universities alongside the Kingdom of Bahrain. In 1980, Kuwait was one of the first states within the GCC region to launch a full-fledged Civil Society Organization under the name of, The Kuwait Human Rights Organization. Kuwait is the only country within the GCC to form a Transparency Organization alongside the Kingdom of Bahrain. This organization is known as the Kuwait Transparency Society. In 1963, Women Cultural Social Society (WCSS) was launched in the country. In Kuwait there are many public societies and professional associations which serves women, children, youth, people with special needs, journalists, and professionals, consumer protection, transparency, In addition to that there are several syndicates ,which are under the umbrella of The Kuwaiti Trade Union.

Qatar:

In Qatar, in 2006, a law was passed to organize the activities of Civil Society. Several state-run initiatives have been formed over the past few years. These include: The National Committee for Human Rights, The Doha Center for Freedom of the Press, and the Arab Association for Democracy. Licenses have been granted to the Accountants Association, Family counseling centers, and centers for the protection of women are a direct result of such work. Other centers for the securing of children's rights, providing care for the elderly, providing care for orphans, and securing human rights have also been established in Qatar.

⁸ Sean L. Yom, (2005), Civil society and Democratization of the Arab World, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2005), p.15. <http://www.eden.rutgers.edu/~spath/351/Readings/Yom%20-%20Civil%20Society%20and%20Democratization%20in%20Arab%20World.pdf>

UAE

The Civil Society Organizations in the UAE include Doctors' Associations, Engineers' Associations, Journalists' Associations, Economists' Associations, and Human Rights Associations'. Other associations were also established for Women's' Rights and Associations concerned with the Environment. They receive support from their respective authorities as well as the Federal Government in Abu Dhabi, and are hosted in a large center that provides them with all running services needed free of charge. Public assembly and association are subject to government approval. Local authorities must license all private associations. All NGOs must be registered with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs but some unregistered NGOs operate openly without government interference.

The United Arab Emirates expanded its crackdown on civil society on May 2, 2011, by dissolving the elected board of directors of the Teachers' Association, and the board of the Jurist Association. On April 6, both associations, along with two other nongovernmental organizations, co-signed a public appeal calling for greater democracy in the country. The UAE government has also targeted individuals, including leading human rights activists. Representatives from organisations including the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWC), the Emirates Writers' Union and the Emirates Human Rights Association met in Dubai to discuss the role of civil society in development issues.⁹ Although the UAE does indeed have an active civil society it is mostly concentrated in altruistic and environmental endeavours or those that enjoy government patronage.¹⁰

Saudi Arabia

In comparison with the other states even in the region, an almost complete absence of Civil Society Organizations within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is seen as far. Those that do exist are either charity organizations or relief efforts. Only recently did the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia show interest in the development of Civil Society Organizations. The King declared the creation of an independent journalists' organisation in early 2003. The formation of an independent human rights organisation was announced in mid-2003. The National Organization for Human Rights was established in Saudi Arabia in February 2004. Largely what are seen are organisations having received Royal Decree, such as Culture Associations; The National Center for Human Rights; Organizations that support women including. All civil society organizations established in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are classified as community charity organizations. In the year 2005, the number of Civil Society Organizations established across the Kingdom reached a total number of 329. Amongst the famous civil society activists in Saudi Arabia is Wajeha Al Huwaider, the co-founder of The Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia. In the time of protests, other activists both secular and religious

⁹ Civil Society Crackdown Widens, Human Rights Watch, 13 Ma, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/03/uae-civil-society-crackdown-widens>.

11. Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, The Civil Society Movement in the Arab Gulf States, September 24, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sultan-sooud-alqassemi/units-of-the-civil-societ_b_720583.html.

have found themselves in detention or sentenced to prison terms and forced to sign a statement agreeing to cease all forms of activism.¹¹

Oman:

With absolute monarchy, Oman does not have wide number of democratic civil society organisations. It is forbidden to establish associations whose activities are inimical to social order, or are secret, or are of a military nature. There are not many NGOs permitted or active in Oman. Civil society is limited and weak. There are about a dozen registered NGOs and 42 government approved women's associations and are organisations are more for charitable work.

Conclusion:

The Civil society movements in the Persian Gulf may vary in the nature to comply by the general understanding of civil society as identified in the democratic countries. Many of them are charitable and/ or social institutions with funding from the government and largely working under government instructions. The Persian Gulf states are rentier states and are politically controlled by the Shaikhs/Emirs as there exists a strict monarchical structure. The protests that began after those in Tunisia in 2011 and rocked the Arab world demanding more democratic reforms saw a role of civil society apart from a huge protest by youth. It however at the same time witnessed a sudden and severe crackdown by the authorities as many civil societies and their existence was questioned and continuous to remain so. However, the region has witnessed unprecedented increase in awareness and demand for further democratization as many groups continue or have begun operate from outside the region. The power and authority of the states thus stands challenged leaving more options for exploring possibilities of democratic participation in governance and increased expectations towards the same in future times.

¹¹ Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, The Civil Society Movement in the Arab Gulf States, September 24, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sultan-sooud-alqassemi/units-of-the-civil-societ_b_720583.html.