

Common Democratic Themes in the Arab World

During the round table discussions, the specific conditions and characteristics of democracy in each of the six countries have been presented through the eyes of a diverse array of actors. Although there are many differences, corresponding to each country's particular circumstances and stage of economic, social and political development, there are nevertheless common threads interwoven in the fabric of these diverse situations. These "threads" were also the topic of intense discussions engaged in by presenters as well as observers during the round table – discussions which mirror and reiterate, almost to the last grimace, smile and sigh, debates which are going on within and among the diverse actors throughout the Arab world. The following section presents an overview and analysis of these common democratic concerns as they emerged during the presentations and discussions.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

The diversity of opinions at the round table on the relationship between religion and politics reflected an important concern throughout the Arab region, particularly with regard to the validity (or lack thereof) of Islamism as an acceptable participant in political discourse. Some members of the round table argued that the arena of democratic discussion must be reserved solely for secular political discussion, since religious politics are perceived by their adherents to possess a "sacred" quality that automatically disqualifies those operating outside its framework. Others maintained that political Islam already constitutes a viable political opposition and as such must be included in any political dialogue, rather than ignored and marginalized. Ostracism, it was pointed out, could lead to further polarization within a number of societies and thus hamper, or obstruct, real democracy.

Feelings on this issue are generally high and it is possible to distinguish the broad outlines of two different camps: on the one hand, those who wish to mainstream religion, or at least argue for the inclusion of its protagonists in democratic dialogue; on the other, those who argue vehemently that "all religions are oppressive and exclusive" and, as such, anti-democratic. This debate is not new to democracy, but it does have special relevance in the context of a large Islamist movement throughout the Arab world – a development which is difficult to ignore or sideline. It is noteworthy that many women in particular tend to be most concerned with the possibility of Islamists coming to power. One participant voiced this concern by arguing, "Democracy should not include [violence] or be itself violent...and violence for me as a woman is to want to apply *sharia*¹ literally". And yet there are many others, men and women, who would counter that application of the *sharia* is the key to solving many social, political and even economic ills of the Arabs. For these people, the slogan "Islam is the solution" has come to denote not only a return to God spiritually, but a revamping of man-made laws and customs to conform to those supposedly ordained by God.

A complete reconciliation between these different camps may not be possible, but the split over how to handle Islamists points to the need to develop of some form of democratic "rules of

¹ *Sharia* is the body of Islamic law, and one of the features that all Islamists would prioritize in their political agendas, and claim the necessity to implement once/if they come to power.

the game”. It is noteworthy that the split is reflected in the diverse attitudes adopted by various Arab leaders *vis-à-vis* Islamists in their countries. The late monarchs of Jordan and Morocco finessed the problem, convincing many of the moderate Islamists to participate in the existing system and have their own representatives elected to the respective parliaments. Conversely, other Arab leaders, as in Algeria and Egypt have tried to co-opt some aspects of Islamist thinking and viciously clamped down on its adherents.

While rulers have adopted various strategies from the relative “security” of their positions of power, other political activists mirror the split more intensively and in a less organized or cohesive manner. Both for these activists as well as their power-wielding counterparts, democratic rules of the game would draw up much needed parameters of “dos and don’ts”, which would in turn apply to all parties – Islamist, leftist, or otherwise, whether in or out of power. Although it may seem like common sense, recognition of the need to agree on democratic parameters can neither be taken for granted nor assumed. One of the questions that arose repeatedly in the discussions was whether it is possible to include Islamists in any democratic dialogue.

Once there is some form of agreement on the rules of the game, debate may well shift to a more constructive dimension. In other words, the real question would not any longer be *whether* party *x* should be included, but *how* to include diverse political currents, i.e., what are the conditions for inclusion in a democracy? On this point, a definition is important, particularly in the context of the second issue in the debate on religion and politics, namely, confessionalism. The extent to which society should be polarized and ruled according to religious communities is a subject of much debate, with Lebanon being the major case study. Despite the 1989 peace treaty of *Al-Ta’if*, most Lebanese commentators argue that the division along confessional lines stipulated by the treaty may in fact consolidate, rather than ease, confessional tensions in the long run. Political rule along confessional lines is therefore perceived as at best a necessary evil that should be moved away from at the earliest opportunity. Yet how to achieve this change remains under discussion; once again, there is a visible cleft between those who argue for a complete separation between religion and politics, and those who see such a separation as unrealistic and untenable.

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Western democracies resound with questions regarding the diminishing popularity of certain long-established democratic institutions, such as parliaments, political parties, and, in some areas, local government/councils. A number of recent elections – presidential, parliamentary, local and European – indicate a relative apathy among voters, many of whom question any “real difference” among the various political parties or their leaders. Particularly in Europe, the move towards more centrist politics raises questions not only about the future of political ideology, but also about the viability of political parties versus other institutions such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or specialized interest groups.

The Arab world is not immune to similar questions – although in the Arab context, the issues leading to these questions tend to arise from the consequences of decades of authoritarian rule,

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conflict, overblown state bureaucracies and widespread corruption. The role of political parties in general has repeatedly proved itself to be a necessary basis for any political reform or development. Whether it is the credibility of a party's political ideology, its capacity for mass appeal, its leadership ability and political know-how, its distance from authoritarian rule, or the increase in the number of women politicians, all these issues have at root the role and functioning of political parties. The emergence of a variety of NGOs (the six Arab countries visited by International IDEA alone boast more than 35,000 such organizations) has not only challenged state structures, but also provided viable alternatives to political parties.

It is possible to say that the weakness of political parties – and the subsequent mediocrity of their opposition to ruling regimes – is but a reflection of the impoverished state political discourse itself. Many of the oppositional parties in the Arab world today were effectively “allowed” to come into existence by the ruling regimes themselves. Furthermore, many of the leaders of these opposition parties seem reluctant to bow out of their positions. Thus the absence of democratic practices within these various parties raises serious doubt as to their capacity to rule democratically if they were to come to power. An example of this assertion can be seen in Morocco where the attempts of the current ruling coalition – led by a former staunch opposition party – to clamp down on certain protests raise doubts about its understanding of democratic principles. Such behaviour in fact leads to scepticism about extent to which such parties constitute a real alternative to those already in power and/or whether the parties are in tune with (or care for) public opinion.

Political parties are not the only democratic institution to come under scrutiny and discussion. The judiciary (and its function in regard to legislation) is another important question in the democratization process in the Arab region. The main issue here is twofold: the primary concern is the extent to which the judiciary is genuinely independent of the state or the ruling regime. A related issue is how to strengthen the judiciary by ensuring the implementation of a great deal of already existing legislation, thus bridging the gap between the *de jure* and *de facto* situations. In this context, various concerns regarding constitutional reform were often voiced. In both Jordan and Egypt constitutional reform is often under discussion, particularly those questions concerning the *sharia* as the basis of law and the separation of powers.

Another democratic institution that generated discussion and features prominently in many studies on democracy is the media. In most Arab countries, the media tends to be state-owned and thus controlled. The importance of the media as an avenue for the dissemination of information as well as a vehicle for communicating ideas, educating, polling, debating and discussing cannot be underestimated. A crippled media is a crippled means of information and debate. Furthermore, a controlled media is both an indication of an entrenched status quo and a source of long-term resentment. In many Arab countries the censorship of diverse media branches – radio, TV, newspapers and magazines – has led to intense debates. In Egypt and Jordan in particular, attempts by the governments to introduce new laws which would severely restrict journalists and other information specialists resulted in demonstrations and frantic lobbying against the proposals.

Opposition spokespersons argue that government control of media means alternative viewpoints are not afforded the same opportunities to reach the masses that governments have. Nevertheless, many of those involved in the print media in particular have found creative ways of evading censorship requirements; e.g., some of the newspapers are registered to organizations based in Cyprus. And Beirut, traditionally a haven for Arab intellectuals to publish their otherwise censored books, continues to function as an alternative forum.

The advent of satellite dishes means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to censor the variety of information on all the airwaves consistently. How Arab governments are choosing to react to this differs from one country to another. In general, however, there is a governmental awareness that nothing can be done, short of some drastic and impractical measure such as banning satellite dishes. Instead, some governments seem to be investing in launching their own satellite channels to counter the influence and popularity of other channels.

One issue concerning the relationship between the media and democracy that was mentioned by representatives of several Arab countries involves journalists and the election coverage. In most Arab countries journalists voiced the dilemma of conflicting loyalties during the coverage of elections. Among the questions facing journalists are whether to be completely honest and thus risk embarrassing a candidate or a party that they strongly support and that is fighting against difficult odds, or how to report honestly without risking their own lives or careers. A code of conduct for a democratic media seems to be a requirement to protect journalists and insure their freedom of expression and coverage of events.

ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

This is one area in which the call for action was unanimous. The issues involved here can be broadly divided into two categories: there is a lack of information on viable alternative electoral systems and their respective impact, and there is the problem of providing for “free and fair elections” in contexts in which rulers may not necessarily want to give public opinion free reign.

In Jordan the problems arise from the changing political climate (including problems arising from the earlier presence of Islamists in parliament which disturbed pro-government forces) and the need to minimize the chances of parties abusing electoral processes. Lebanon meanwhile continues searching for an electoral system adequate to deal with confessionalism and the resulting political, structural and practical complexities of a system, which has brought former warlords into parliament as legitimate members. Yet another country, Yemen, is interested in constructing an electoral system which would justly reflect the voices of different sectors of the population (particularly the unhappy southerners) and also deal with tribal allegiances. Moroccans are concerned mostly about fraud and how to handle different interest groups – politicians, journalists, members of the public, etc. – in the electoral process. Egyptians are particularly interested in topics related to popular participation in electoral processes (ranging from political apathy to voting, registration, ballots and the counting of votes), as well as the means of safeguarding against government control and falsification of results. For these reasons – among others – many Arab civil society actors are keen on comparing their situation with

others to learn more about different kinds of electoral systems, their applicability and their results. It is no coincidence that a number of the currently-existing electoral systems are modelled along those of former colonial powers, giving rise to a need for more and comparative information on various electoral possibilities. International IDEA, which has already provided advice on possible electoral systems to Jordan, is well-placed to assist in these endeavours.²

Those holding power in Arab governments have traditionally demonstrated reluctance to relinquish their power, and the Algerian situation is usually taken as an example of what happens to governments which decide to implement “free and fair” elections. In other words, there is a very real fear on the part of many of the Arab regimes that free and fair elections would oust them from power in no time at all. A common excuse promulgated by non-democratic leaders is that the Arab people do not know what is good for them and they might therefore abuse democracy, were it not controlled. As a result, elections – when and if they are to be held on whatever level – have to be “carefully monitored” and their results equally carefully “handled”. In the meantime, governments promise to undertake the necessary education of the people and prepare them for “total” democracy. Yet how this preparation is to be carried out remains unclear. Against the background of this general scenario, the Moroccan experience stands out as unique: after opposition parties gained more votes than the government during parliamentary elections, a leader of one of these parties and former dissident was actually asked by the King to form a government. In spite of widespread recognition that elections by no means constitute the sole requirement for democracy, and furthermore provide no panacea, there is nonetheless a firm realization that they remain an integral aspect of democratization processes as such, and need to be understood and made optimal use of.

ENHANCING WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women constitute more than 50% of the population of each country in the Arab world. Yet, the percentage of women in parliament does not exceed 3% overall.³ The proportion of women in other political decision-making positions is equally low, despite the absence of formal statistics on the issue – a situation which itself requires resources to redress. In particular the female participants of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Yemeni and Moroccan delegations to the International IDEA round table noted that the fact that half of the population does not enjoy equal access to decision-making occupations constitutes a serious and, indeed, unacceptable bar to any democratic endeavour.

While there is no question that the low numbers of women in political positions is a serious lack, it is also necessary to address the question of how to maximize the impact of those already in politics. An aspect of the problem mentioned during the round table is the presence of “alibi women”, or tokens – the select few women who are appointed to specific positions and then touted as an indication of women in power. As with other instances of such tokenism, these

² See Andrew Reynolds and Ben Reilly et. al. *International IDEA’s Handbook on Electoral System Design*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 1997.

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 1998 statistics on Internet www://http.ipu.org

“alibi women” tend, for a variety of reasons, to distance themselves from efforts to deal with low female representation or any other gender-related matters. At the same time, these female tokens are used by the male-dominated ruling elite as evidence of a “commitment to women”, with the implication that they are fulfilling their responsibilities in that regard. As many engaged women activists argue, however, the issue of enhancing women’s political participation goes beyond tokenism and is to a large extent dependent upon the presence of strong and committed women politicians.

Over the last 10 years, a number of initiatives have concentrated on enhancing women’s political participation. Advocates of these initiatives have tended to be mostly NGOs and international and/or intergovernmental organizations, with some government assistance in the corresponding countries. Most of these attempts have succeeded in prioritizing the issue and bringing it to the fore on a number of levels. International conferences in particular, such those in as Nairobi in 1985, Cairo in 1994, and Beijing (and Huairou) in 1995, have provided significant momentum and outreach to all local, regional and international initiatives. In the meantime, many of the donor organizations have themselves prioritized gender concerns throughout their development programmes, resulting in widespread familiarity with the notions of “women in politics” and “women in development”.

These are important steps which have, in the passage of time, constituted giant leaps forward. What remains is a concentrated effort to deal with the issue of women’s political participation not merely as a factor of numbers, but also as a means of enhancing the impact of those women who have already braved social, cultural, economic and political barriers to reach position of significant political clout.⁴ As with the above mentioned case of democratic institutions, a certain myopic view of women’s achievements in the Arab world has set in, with the low numbers of women in political institutions serving to consolidate this myopia. Two important facts remain, however: the traditional definition of politics has straight-jacketed women all over the world and led to a serious misrepresentation of their efforts and their achievements; furthermore, Arab women in particular, in view of their complex situation (colonial legacy, lack of resources, and conflicts within the societies, to name but a few), have achieved a great deal over the last decade.

To date, little effort has been made to collate the data on sex-segregation that would be necessary for the understanding of women’s voting habits, for example the questions of how many women vote, or how, and on what basis. Neither is there clear information about how many women are in which political positions, or how they arrived there. What, it must be asked, are the needs of women politicians? How are they able to work in a male-dominated environment, which itself is still struggling for democracy? Questions such as these need to be posed, researched and discussed, and the answers disseminated.

⁴ See Azza Karam (Ed.) International IDEA’s Handbook on *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 1998.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

“Why are economic “reforms” good and advocated at every opportunity, but political reform bad and obstructed at every opportunity?” This is one of the questions, voiced by a one of the participants at the round table, that is on the minds of many in the Arab world. “Development” – primarily economic and social – is always on the agenda of Arab rulers, as it is on the agenda of all developing countries. In fact, according to official rhetoric, development is a byword for the “three Ps” – progress, prosperity and peace – but not politics.

The assumption behind the apparent schizophrenia is itself flawed, for it is, after all, logical to assume that once people’s basic needs are fulfilled, they will turn their attention to the others: political/ideological, spiritual, and secondary material needs. However, it is equally significant that even when poverty reigns and people are mainly concerned with their daily bread, it is erroneous to assume that they will not be interested in political development. In fact, as examples from all over the world show – from poor and rich nations alike – human rights issues related to expression, association, and participation will inevitably appear on the political agenda at some point in time. Why then do Arab regimes promote one type of development and attempt to deny the other?

The answer to the question is evident throughout this report. It is possible simply to argue that political development, i.e., democracy, is seen as threatening to the majority of Arab regimes. In many Arab countries, the military is the most privileged sector of society, politically, socially and economically. As the history of other nations indicates, neither the regimes nor the military power that supports them tend to relinquish power easily. This is one of the factors behind the controlled dosage of political freedoms allowed to many Arab peoples today.

As in many such conflict situations, it is important to consider “what is in it?”, so to speak, for the rulers or ruling regimes of the Arab World. Economic development has long been an avenue to increased power – nationally, regionally and globally. After all, the more resources a nation has, the more it can fulfil its needs, and the more likely it becomes to acquire standing as “potential [equal] partners” with the powerful nations of the world. This understanding stands in contrast to the perception of the same ruling elites that to decentralize power to their people in all probability effectively means to lose their own power.

The above “win-win/lose-lose” logic espoused by many rulers and ruling regimes was one of the features discussed during the round table. This points to the fact that important concepts such as “power-sharing” and the delegation of authority are not a part of the thinking of many of those in power in the Arab world. Accountability and transparency to a public which can ultimately oust you from power is almost non-existent. Neither is the idea of allowing the people a free choice from among a wide variety of credible and experienced potential political leaders who are competing for the public’s attention (and votes) with varied and clear agendas. Whereas this reluctance on the part of the *de facto* leaders could be – and often is – dismissed simply as a feature of “poor democratic culture”, the fact remains that there is a genuine absence of political management training. This lack parallels the Arab situation, where in effect

charismatic power politics has dominated the scene for several decades. In other words, starting at a very early stage and continuing through its educational establishments, the Arab world needs to train and mentor political leadership and management. At the outset, however, the issue of what present leaders have to gain from such a change must be pragmatically confronted and addressed. It is unrealistic to assume that a revolution is stirring and will eventually explode to allow many Arab peoples to say how they wish to be governed. It is more reasonable to operate on the assumption that current Arab ruling regimes can learn to see that it is in their interest to work towards tangible political reforms.

Linking economic to political development has, over the last five years in particular, increasingly dominated the attention of international organizations and governments. One of the outcomes of this linkage is the concept of “conditionality”, or making efforts towards political reform a condition of being granted development aid. Although some recipient countries have accepted this conditionality, the Arab world is one of the regions where conditionality has raised both ideological as well as practical difficulties.

On the other hand, initiatives existing within the context of the Euro-Mediterranean (Euro-Med) partnership agreements and resulting from the debates and initiatives of the Barcelona process stand a good chance of overcoming many of these sensitivities. The major challenge that these initiatives may face is to inspire commitment to them among the larger NGO communities and particularly at the grassroots level. At the time, despite some of the rhetoric, many of the Euro-Med arrangements and their related effects operate in the same way as most international conventions and treaties – i.e., with a top-down logic that rarely trickles down to the masses at the base.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

The previous point concerning the activity of NGOs brings us to the ongoing discussion in the Arab world regarding freedom of association, or the extent to which non-governmental organizations are allowed to form and operate. Non-governmental forums range from political parties to voluntary associations of varying sizes, objectives and means. As mentioned earlier, many of the existing political parties in the Arab world which are not a part of the government are allowed to exist only through the beneficence of the ruler(s) – a situation which inevitably compromises their freedom to manoeuvre as an opposition. Partly as a consequence, many of the existing political parties have lost their credibility, and with it their popularity among the masses. It is also true, however, that some of these parties are struggling with an ideological vacuum in what is in any case a global absence of grand and credible political schemes. In addition, the structure of the parties themselves mirror some of the general institutional socio-political problems such as lack of transparency and corruption.

That said, however, the fact remains that setting up a political party with legal status remains one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish in many parts of the Arab world. There are many active units which, in all but name, function as a political party, but without legal standing, and are thus prey to any governmental clampdown. Withholding of legal status is a key feature in

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the policy of a number of governments, and is carried out through the law courts. The process whereby an association applies for recognition as a party is usually a long and complicated one, designed to discourage any potential applicants. Parties which meet the criteria laid out in the various constitutions (e.g., a party may not be based on religion, promote schisms within the society, or work against the country's national security interests) are few and far between, because the legal clauses are often interpreted from the vantage point of those in power.

It is interesting to note that the participants in the International IDEA round table were more concerned with the reform of political parties than with gaining official recognition for them precisely because of the crisis of confidence engulfing most political parties. Some party leaders in the Arab world argue that they are seriously hindered in their performance because of the difficulties imposed on them by the ruling regimes. These difficulties range from lack of resources, to harassment of members and occasional clampdowns. Whereas these claims are difficult to challenge, it is also a fact that internal democracy in any institution need not be a function of material resources or external circumstances. The question that is uppermost on the minds of many, therefore, remains how to rekindle the faith in political parties and encourage them to be more democratic.

In most of the Arab countries an issue generating much debate and tension with governments is the law governing associations – their formal registration, funding and functioning. Whether in Egypt, Tunisia or Morocco, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) bitterly complain about repressive laws. In Lebanon the situation is somewhat different because the debated issue is rather the government's attempts to impose more restrictions on a relatively liberal law that dates back to the Ottoman period. The main point of contention between the NGOs and the government is similar to that of the political parties: the government attempts to control and dominate the thinking and activities of these organizations. Typically governments attempt to use the law of association to censure activities having a political impact which they interpret as "troublesome". In fact, many of these restrictive laws (particularly in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen) stipulate that an NGO should not be involved in political activities at all.

In some of these countries, laws make it difficult to obtain foreign funding for activities and entitle governments; to ban organizations receiving such aid if they see fit; to appoint government officials to the boards, or even divert the assets of one organization to another. Whatever the context and the specific stipulations, the main complaint remains that NGOs generally feel heavily censured politically and economically. In the words of one NGO activist, "it is as if our hands are constantly tied". Such activists would argue that democracy is about empowering civil society, and NGOs form the bulwark of the process. In effect, to hamper the activities of NGOs is to disempower key civil society institutions.

Governments tend to counter with the argument that what is at stake ultimately is "national security", and that to allow these organizations to operate without control might render them vulnerable to "manipulation" by external interests. In addition, the governments contend that these organizations need some form of supervision to enhance their own professionalism and ensure that they are serving national concerns rather than those of a particular group or

individual. It is the government's obligation, they often claim, to protect the people from those who have interests other than those of their own nation's in mind – even if these are well-intentioned. The underlying notion in some countries is related to the funding issue,⁵ the logic being that organizations which obtain foreign funding are susceptible to having their agendas influenced by these donors, or to benefit the donors in some way at the direct or indirect expense of the government/country. This big-brother, state-centred logic is endemic to the structures of government in the Arab world; yet it must be pointed out that debates over the issue of funding do not differ in substance from those conducted in the US and the UK with regard to political parties. National security is thus often used as an excuse to clamp down on the activities of associations within civil society as well as on individuals.

Another situation in which national security is used to justify certain repressive government actions is that of "terrorism". Participants in the round table were keen to stress that Arab states were able to overcome differences among themselves – a prodigious feat at the best of times – by using the argument of national security and invoking the need to clamp down on "terrorist activities" as defined solely by themselves. In other words, Arab governments stand united against insurgents – mostly Islamists – in the name of national security.

The counter argument, or proposal, put forward by civil society actors in the Arab countries is that national security is not, and should not be, solely the domain of the state. By appropriating national security in this way, the state often risks or actually perpetrates undue violence against the institutions and actors of civil society. Indeed, they would argue that the concept of national security needs to be seen in a holistic sense and accordingly be shared by political parties, civil society and the state. In other words, what is required is a definition – or a redefinition, as the case may be – of this concept in such a way as to clarify its content, context, and parameters. Such a clarification would facilitate a shared engagement in the issue of national security, with the implication that current state restrictions on the freedom of association, and indeed of opinion, would not be necessary.

One of the recurrent questions emerging from the abovementioned themes relates to existing regimes and their involvement in the democratization process, or even their willingness (or lack thereof) for democratization. "What is in it for me?" is a legitimate question that Arab leaders have uppermost on their minds, and which determines the extent to which they are willing to facilitate or obstruct democracy. It is true that the Arab world has lost two of its longest-serving leaders (Kings Hussein and Hassan of Jordan and Morocco respectively) within six months, and that we are now faced with new (and younger) leaders and thus new strategies. It is also true that changeover is something that will inevitably happen across the Arab world in the not too distant future – with some new leaders more predictable than others.

What needs to be studied in each country respectively are questions such as: is it easier to be democratic or authoritarian? which approach is more profitable in the short-term and in the long-term? what do the rulers have to gain from democracy and what do they have to lose? It is

⁵ For a related argument see the sections on economic and political development, p 11, and the protection of activists, p 15.

necessary that attempts to answer these questions – among others – form the mainstay of any programme to facilitate and enhance the democratic processes in the Arab world.

PROTECTION OF ACTIVISTS

This issue was mentioned by almost all participants and is indeed a problem common to the entire Arab region – and not just the six countries present at the round table. Government-supported activism will continue to be a deterrent to democratization endeavours in the region as long as democracy is seen as a gift or a favour to be bestowed by the ruler(s) on the people, rather than as a right and an obligation of government. As one participant explained, “This is a favour that can be revoked according to whim, and [activists] are made to know this, and therefore almost live in fear of it”. The issue of safety is not marginal: it is connected to the notion of the stability and security of the population, indeed to citizenship itself, and in turn, to respect for human rights in general.

However, not only have organizations like Amnesty International existed and operated for a number of years, in addition, a multitude of support groups and organizations have emerged to lobby governments for or against particular decisions relating to human rights and/or democracy issues. The impact of such organizations is hard to gauge, though it is certain that they have contributed to a general improvement and have certainly been useful as a locus of recourse for those with grievances. The fact remains that these international and/or “foreign” organizations operate within an environment which is sensitive to “external intervention” – particularly that originating in western countries.

Hence, those who attempt to offer protection to activists have only a limited effectiveness and, at best, a conditional and more or less selective impact on the problem. Establishing this protection can be achieved only by convincing the governments in question that respect for democratic norms and values is actually beneficial to these same governments – or to any ruling body. How this endeavour is to be carried out remains a subject of much discussion and debate. What is certain is that the mechanism for convincing ruling bodies of the need to actually respect democratic principles is an issue lying at the heart of any attempts towards real democratic reform throughout the Arab world. In fact, this need will constitute a running thread throughout these discussions.

DEMOCRACY AND THE PEACE PROCESS

The peace process between the Arab countries and Israel plays an important role in impacting on the extent to which Arab rulers have been able to push ahead with democratic reforms. Participants at the round table pointed out that in both Jordan and Egypt, for example, public opinion on the legitimacy of the rulers was closely connected to acceptance (or lack thereof) of any attempts to normalize relations with Israel. In Jordan, public opinion against the peace arrangements signed by the late monarch with Israel effectively led to the withdrawal of the King’s “permission” for further democratization endeavours. Likewise, Egyptians have experienced a serious clampdown by the authorities whenever discussions relating to normalization of relations with Israel were taking place. A similar scenario recurs almost

inevitably in the Palestinian territories. This situation presents a paradox in which peace settlements lead not to a democratic wave in the region, but to more repression on many political activities and public freedoms.

Some participants indicated as well that the perception dominating the minds of many of those in the Arab region is that “peace” imposed through the existing balance of power – as has been the case until now – is unjust and therefore undemocratic.

It is important to note that there are obvious differences in the extent to which democratization endeavours have been affected by the peace process. In Tunisia and Morocco for example, the peace process with Israel has not featured in the internal political agendas. In fact, the late Moroccan King Hassan was well known for being instrumental in bringing together a number of Arab and Israeli leaders, and the Moroccan Jewish community – unique perhaps in the Arab world – is visibly and peacefully integrated in the larger society.

In general, it may be said that the countries which share borders with Israel are those whose political discourse on democracy is most directly connected to events relating to Israel and the peace process.

GLOBALIZATION

For the last few years the Arab region, as other areas of the world, has been struggling with the impact of globalization.

Without entering into debates on the definition of globalization, participants at the round table reviewed the main challenges imposed by this trend on the Arab region. The consensus was that, in addition to its positive aspects (e.g., circulation of information, access to news and the better sharing of international experiences), globalization has had in many respects not only a negative impact on the Arab region politically and economically, but also has deepened identity crises and threatened local values through an emphasis on consumption and market culture.

Globalization has taken place without participation in global political decision-making processes, and its economic benefits have not been shared globally. Consequently, the economic gap between the Arab region (as part of the Southern Hemisphere) and the Northern has increased tremendously in the past years.

By way of conclusion, globalization constitutes an important challenge in its impact on political, economic and cultural developments related to the democratization process in the Arab region.