CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE MODERN MENA REGION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Akbar Valadbigi and Shahab Ghobadi

Abstract: *The unfolding unrest in the Middle East opened new debates on the relationship between social capital and civil society. This work has a threefold focus: first, it explores how the existing stock of social capital spurred on the contemporary civic activities in the search of constructing stable democracies across the Middle East; second, it examines how civic movements in this region can contribute to increasing the current deficit of social capital; and third, it analyses the implications of the deployment of social media tools in the recent uprisings. This work suggests that although the Middle Eastern states have always been subject to severe violence and supressive political systems, civil society organisations and the stock of social capital has been steadily rising.*

Keywords: social capital, civil society, democracy, uprising, social media, internetworked social movements

Introduction

It has been widely argued that civil society and social capital are on the rise in the Middle East; processes of which may yield stable democracies, an elusive but increasingly tangible goal. Over the past years, considerable scholarship has been devoted to exploring the relationship between civil society and social capital and a number of scholars have pointed to the proliferation of civil society in South America and Central/East Europe as a key ingredient for their more robust levels of social capital when compared to more politically arrested Middle Eastern or African states, where civil society has, so far, been negligible.[1] Regarding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) some argue that the region's social capital deficit is rooted in the belief that either civil society does not exist – to any significant level – in most Middle Eastern countries, or, where it

does exist, it is too embryonic and fragile to be of consequence. The link between the rise of civil society and the development and deployment of social capital begs articulation to pave a way forward by revealing the consequences from obstructions to civil society in MENA and finding ways to overcome these.[2]

Such an investigation is certainly topical since conclusive evidence suggests that those political communities laden with social capital – defined as 'the norms and networks that enable collective action'[3] – benefit from more effective governance and more stable democracies. Social capital is a vital, yet underappreciated, asset which refers to a class of assets inherent to social relations, such as social bonding and bridging. With MENA states experiencing great transformations to their *body politik*, encouraged by new forms of social capital, manifest in modern technologies, it seems that new governance blue-prints are being drafted and these are likely to define intra- and extra-state relations for the foreseeable future. Thus, as this work sets out to determine the unfolding dynamics in MENA politics, it does so through the dual-lenses of civil society and social capital since these are, perhaps, the most fluid and pervasive conceptualisations for the triumph of political discourse over robust but decidedly archaic forms of authoritarianism.

Civil Society and its Contextualisation in MENA

The concept of civil society was popularised around the end of the 18th century and occupies space in a variety of political vocabularies, including: liberal, Hegelian, and Marxist. This diversity has resulted in the term lacking a consensus-based definition as to what it actually implies.[4] Indeed, looking back at some of the great thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and Hegel, concensus surrounded only the distinction between the state and civil society where the state rules over a certain organised society. This is the basic framework through which those without political authority live their lives; conduct their economic transactions; maintain their family and kinship ties and religious institutions. However, with the 1989-1991 collapse of the USSR and its proxies in Central and East Europe the term "civil society," re-entred public lexicon and became an analytical concept since the experience of Soviet oppressive produced a recognition that civil society does not exist independently of political authority;

they maintain a symbiotic relationship. At present, "civil society" is deployed to illustrate how clubs and organisations (among other groups) may act as a buffer between state power and citizens' lives – it is a bridge between state authority and individuals.

In MENA, state-level coercive and financial power remains embedded in the political authority of the state, which sufficiently monopolises and mobilises state resources – which dwarf those available to the state's social, economic and political opposition – for state objectives. Hence, at present, the civil society debate waging in the region focuses on changing formal governance structures, rather than substantive changes to state-society relations, since prior to the construction of a reflective civil society, resources must be more formally and fairly distributed, imputs made to be more transperant and leadership more accountable.[5]

Since few MENA states have voluntarily allowed for such adjustments, civil society remains a largely contested concept in the region. This has not meant total political submission, only that the way in which civil society manifests itself in MENA is markedly different from other regions. In fact, there are three clear, approaches to civil society in MENA. Firstly, the Western approach which views the Arab/Islamic belief system(s) and patriarchal tribal organisation as obstructing certain "universal" values such as tolerance, civic values, and personal freedom. From this perspective, the rise of Islamic revivalist movements are seen – myopically – as resistance to modernity. The second approach, corporatism – borrowed from analyses of Latin America – is superimposed on MENA where processes occur in which the state dominates all forms of economic and civic participation. Centralisation, one-party rule, pervasive state security establishments are deeply imbedded in the state though express independence from state structures. The third approach equates civil society with Western-style formal NGOs in the private and voluntary sectors. In the policy circles concerned with democratic transition, it is routinely agreed that such NGOs foster political liberalisation and democratisation from the grass-roots level. NGOs' independence from regimes and opposition movements are the defining characteristics of MENA civil society.[6]

Sater captures this definitional impasse well when he suggests that 'there is no link between civil society and democracy: societies do not take two tablets of civil society at bedtime and wake

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up the next morning undergoing democracy.' He argues against the view that civil society is 'deficient, corrupt, aggressive, and hostile,' claiming that these are 'general views of Middle Eastern civil society.'[7] Despite such rhetoric, it is clear that there is a positive link between the depth and density of civil society and individual freedoms. Therefore, to denounce civil society as not contributing to democratisation misses the point. Instead, it is clear that in MENA, and beyond, constructing a sustainable and reflective civil society encourages enhanced dialogue between different segments of society and paves the way for new discourses and, eventually, new modes of governance. However, the essential linkage between civil society and such political reform rests on the notion of social capital, which has come to occupy important intellectual spaces yet remains somewhat elusive. While such a presentation is indeed essential (and occurs below), it is necessary to provide a brief synopsis of the state of civil society in MENA so that discussion can turn to evaluating the region's sources and expressions of social capital with few obstructuions.

Civil Society in MENA

With discourses on civil society continuing to evolve – and face innumerable official (governmental) and unofficial obstacles – it is unclear how the political elite in the region define or even understand civil society. However, despite decades of social fragmentation and political abuse various elements of civil society have taken root throughout MENA which transcend cultural, national, religious and ethnic divides. It is therefore prudent to conceptually trace civil society as a means of laying the foundations for further analysis.

Throughout the 1990s, hope was galvanised regarding political reforms that would lay the cornerstone for real democratisation and economic de-monopolisation. While such optimism was visible throughout the wider MENA region, it was especially pronounced in the Arab world where political developments in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, and Yemen suggested that the grip of authoritarianism was loosening. In those countries it seemed that the growth of civil society (organisations) coupled with alterations to global politics – notably the conclusion of the Cold War – and the

revolution in communications technologies, conspired to elevate discourses on human rights which bled into the very heart of the establishment(s) in those states and produced an air of change. It is not that there was wide expectation for the complete overhaul of the existing political systems in the region; rather it was acknowledged that the route to political representation was underway.

To be sure, the present regional upheaval is the direct result of the forms of civil society that had been developing, albeit haphazardly, for nearly two decades. In fact, the clear overtones of democratic reform (notably in Egypt and Tunisia) indicate the manifestation of civil society demanding greater synchronisation between the governed and governing. This partially explains the zeal many have displayed for the unfolding revolutions; the stakes are tremendous and failure is seen as not being an option, not least because of the very real fear of violent reprisals if current elites are not displaced.

This not-so-subtle fear has had an important knock-on effect in terms of constructing a basis of social solidarity within MENA states and between their respective populations. For instance, Cairo's Tahrir Square, the location where many tens of thousands of people from across Egypt's socio-poilitcal and economic landscape demonstrated day upon day until the ultimate collapse of Mubarak's regime, has come to symbolise the social revolutions throughout the region with many places being popularly renamed after Tahrir, including Tel Aviv's tent-city, the focal point of Israel's social protest movement.

Thus, it is possible to suggest that as MENA (at large) takes its first steps towards proper civil society, it is automatically producing a form of social capital which itself is propelling further moves towards the fulfilment of democratic transition. But what is social capital and how has it permeated into MENA? To answer the later part of this question, it is necessary to dwell on the former.

Social Capital and the Recent Uprisings in the MENA Region

Conceptually, "social capital" has filtered into various social sciences since the 1950's and has come to imply so many different phenomena that scholars have began to evaluate social capital for what it is not, rather than for what it is. While this may seem as an

over simplification, consider its broad charicteristics: "connections among individuals," "social networks," and the "norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" that arise from them. In other words, social capital consists of the entire spectrum of social relations from the mundane to the epic. Yet, there has been a concrete attempt to produce some meaningful assessment of social capital and so, an auxillary term has come to capture its essence, namely "civic virtue;" a term intended to highlight the reciprocal nature of social capital implying that social relations themselves are, essentially, a network. Indeed, a society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.[8] Rather, isolation runs counter to the idea of social capital and its now inherent civic virtue.

Putnam, a leading scholar of social capital, set its benchmarks according to levels (active membership) and depth (frequency of activities) of participation in civil society, particularly voluntary organisations. Intense participation promotes and enhances social norms and trust, which are central to the production and maintenance of the collective well-being.[9] Alternatively, sparce and haphazard participation produces societies which lack agreed upon norms of exchange and widespread distrust. Indeed, Halpern insists that

> There is a considerably body of evidence showing that high social capital is associated with more effective and less corrupt government [...] communities with high social capital foster more civic citizens who are easier to govern, a ready supply of co-operative political leaders, and a fertile soil in which effective government institutions can grow.[10]

Over the past decade, the theme of social capital has has fully entered the policy parlance and debates in both transitional and more established polities alike, though has experienced a monumental proliferation in MENA over the course of the past twelve months as revolutions and uprisings sweep the region.

While Haezewindt argues that the term social capital has given researchers, planners, and decision-makers a new common language, it is clear that in MENA, and in light of upheaval, there is an "understanding gap" between existing and would be decision-makers where the former regard it as a rhetorical devise to mobilise opposition movements against the existing order, the later consider social capital as the glue which bonds various segments of society

together in the process of formulating a new, more reflective political enterprise.[11]

The struggle for consensus extends well beyond the frontiers of discourses and debates over social capital and civil society. Instead, discourses in MENA echo the rapid, and irreversible, changes on the ground. Hence, it is important to gauge what marks this latest – in a long history – round of upheaval, as unique. At a glance, MENA states are still economically and industrially sluggish, ethno-religeous tensions unremitted and state-society relations wrought with distrust. However, there is one empowering difference, one which was cautiously introduced by the region's political elite in a bid to appease growing discontent, namely the advent of cheap, user-friendly and difficult to regulate communications technologies such as computer networks, the internet and mobile telephone services.

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The Power of New Media

The recent spate of civil unrest in MENA underscores the hotly debated role of technology and social media as agents constructing and reinforcing civil society, encouraging and enhancing social capital and ultimately fostering the conditions for political change. Indeed, the use of such technological instruments – notably Facebook and Twitter – has been deployed to mobilise collective protests, provide logistical support for ensuing demonstrations, and as a conduit for alternative histories of events – in opposition to "official" reportage. This, in essence, has worked to crack authoritarian monopolies on command, control and communications structures. Indeed, Chia articulates that the MENA

> revolts also mark a change in the way information is communicated and used to mobilise people. The recent wave of revolts in the Middle East is probably no different from any previous cases of civil uprisings before the advent of web-based communication technology. However, it sends a strong message of the mutual influences that technology and social communication have on one another. Web-based interaction might have started out as a technological innovation, but its functions have been

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adapted and altered to support wider social and political developments.[12]

Langman (et al)[13] argues that the emergence of internetworked social movements and their participatory mobilising networks anticipated new forms of politics that merge some of the structures and strategies of previous movements, while extending the possibilities of social movements in new directions. Today, large mobilising networks must be chartered across extremely complex webs of communication, online and offline, that inform complex, dispersed, and quickly changing fields of organising, decision making, and coordination.

A growing body of literature speaks to issues of new, transnational NGOs.[14] But the more recent internetworked social movements, which are far less structured, more open and participatory, and articulated across a wide range of issues, cannot easily be understood within the existing frameworks.[15]

The radical differences between internetworked social movements and earlier movements have not been fully debated. There is no simple answer as to how and why people become involved in democratic social movements. The internet makes the question especially complex. Does the net enable recruitment, or do people already disposed to activism manage to find activist groups via the internet? Do such movements attract the alienated and marginal, or the more engaged?[16] Are activists rebels, or have they come from activist backgrounds? Movements are not only struggling for access to social power but also for 'the right to participate in the very definition of the political system, the right to define the system in which they wish to be included.'[17]

Once print media enabled the move of consciousness from the local to the emerging "national" levels of shared identities as citizens, the internet has enabled new forms of consciousness, community, and identity and new forms of connectivity at transnational levels. It is, then, crucial to understand that internetworked social movements often engage in democratic practices outside mainstream media and even outside the existing political structures.

Langman (et al) further asserts that the internet, with its widespread access and ease of use, has both democratic and anti-democratic potentials. While large numbers of people mobilise via the internet for progressive social ends, various fascist, racist, and other

anti-democratic forces are also using it. Social scientists, they assert, need a better understanding of the social nature and implications of such movements and the new, growing arts and technologies of "internetworking" and net-based "cyberactivism."[18]

Civic Activism and the Imact of Media Technology

Research suggests that social networking technologies can influence governments, bottom-up civil participation, and new social dynamics. Such has been proven accurate when weighed against the strength of the recent uprisings in MENA where social media tools have integrated online and offline identities while playing a critical role in the dramatic changes sweeping the region.

Take Facebook and Twitter as cases in point since both have had their user base grow considerably in a relatively short span of time. At present, Facebook has over 677 million users (as of April 2011) with people from the Middle East constituting the greatest number of new users. At the same time, mobile users have exceeded 250 million subscribers in MENA with new users numbered at some 80 million over the past 15 months.[19] These figures suggest that such a technological proliferation is either running concurrent with, or even leading, the social activism currently unravelling decades of political misrule.

January to April (2011) witnessed a substantial shift in favour of MENA's usage of social media for the expressed purpose of political mobilisation and civic activism from the (relative) safety of being online rather than on the street prior to a confrontation. Alternatively, social networking technologies are also being used by governments to engage with citizens and encourage their participation in government processes, to set up false meeting points to arrest opposition activists and to monitor and control information. This cyber game of political capture-the-flag is truly remarkable and thus the pitched battles which have occurred on the proverbial "Arab Street" find their orign on the "cyber street."

This phenomenon is also not entirely novel since, as noted above, many leaders in MENA tolerated, even encouraged, the proliferation of communications technologies as a means of appeasing increasingly frustrated, and youthful populations. For instance, Jordan's royal family embraced online outreach during the reign of

(late) King Hussein, who is said to have been a leading example of internet pioneering.[20] In Palestine, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad accepts emails from followers on his Facebook page,[21] while many other Arab Leaders have Facebook profiles in English but do not accept email or friend requests. When Tunisian President Ben Ali was in power, his Facebook page was replete with content and photos, but it was replaced shortly after he fled the country by a news report dated 15 January 2011 headlined: 'Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali forced to flee Tunisia as protestors claim victory.'[22] In Syria, Facebook is tolerated even at the highest levels of government: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma al-Assad have individual Facebook profiles among a robust selection of Facebook fan groups.[23]

Social networking has changed expectations of freedom of expression and association to the degree that individual and collective capacities to communicate, mobilise, and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead to even greater voices, political influences, and participation over the next 10 to 20 years. These changes could be said to have accelerated in early 2011. However, blogging and social networking alone cannot be expected to bring about immediate political change. It only facilitates the long-term impact, the development of new political and civil society engagement, and individual and institutional competencies.[24]

While the battle between states and civil society wages, one thing is increasingly clear: social media (re: Facebook and Twitter), has truly assisted protests to spread to national levels and provides governments with new means of countering such protests.[25] In this struggle however, it is evident that civil society holds all the cards and those cards increasingly bear a single slogan: Democracy.

Towards Stable Democracies in the Middle East: Avenues and Obstacles

Deploying social media for the purpose of constructing and maintaining civil society which contains a bulk of social capital requires a process of legal and political codification to solidify gains and rewrite the metaphorical rule-book of social relations. This entails the birth of sustainable democratic institutions. Therefore, the revolutions in MENA ought to be regarded as democratic by objective. This democratic wave has, in turn, produced a new agenda for

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discussing the role of civil society in the transition to stable democracy. In order to evaluate civil society in the Middle East the identification of the embedded social forces is mandatory.

The fractured – but recovering – nature of MENA societies is reflected in the civil institutions currently under construction. Understanding the implications of the diversity of associational patterns provides a clue to the social movements that could facilitate democracy. Here, the civic institutions whose activities focus on a more tolerant and vibrant democratic society should be encouraged. However, there is a plethora of those which hamper democracy based on religious activism and/or ethnicity and kinship (re: Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria). These two systems cannot coexist; one must be made subservient to the other. In a bid to construct working democratic systems, it is the former which must triumph while the later is abandoned to the footnotes of history.

Despite obstacles there have been some positive developments towards democratisation across MENA. Increased awareness within the relatively minute civil society in MENA, Schulz believes, has contributed to regional networking, fostering new cooperation, and creating a more vivid debate around democratic issues. Globalisation itself increases the awareness and networking between external actors and the Middle East. This, in turn, strengthens the chances to establish and consolidate a vivid and democratic regional debate. Civil society not only acts within in each country in this region, but also it has also increasingly developed transnational networks, thereby constituting a forerunner in regionalisation and democratisation in context.[26]

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Conclusion

This article suggested that the recent uprisings in MENA sparked new debates over the relationship between social capital and civil society. It demonstrated how the stock of social capital is closely associated with the rise and development of civil society and sought to show that those societies which are endowed with higher levels of social capital enjoy more stable democracies, higher qualities of life and deeper levels of social solidarity. The article argued that while there is a hostile climate towards civil society in MENA, and social capital's stock is relatively low compared to other regions,

current events has raised the level of civil society from embryonic to a slightly more mature version. It was also argued that tendencies toward civil society have been present since at least the 1990s; however due to numerous factors, a successful, stable democratic culture has not yet been established. With regard to exploring the influences of social media tools, and especially the internet, in the recent wave of revolts which undermined several undemocratic regimes of the Middle East, this work argued that such media tools were used as agents for communication, mobilisation, and disseminating their message across the region.

In addition to reviewing the past and present state of civil society in the Middle East, this work investigated the symbiotic relationship between social capital and civil society. Social capital attempts to contribute to the development of civil society and transition to stable democracies. The current literature on the relationship between social capital and civil society, however, has not given justice to the bridge between the two, as further research on these areas can provide policymakers with a better understanding of how to engage their people in handling public affairs.

Recommendations

This article investigated the interactions between social capital and civil society in MENA. Although civil society has marginally risen, and the stock of social capital has enjoyed resurgence, it is not enough. Therefore the following recommendations, if taken, are meant to propel the region out of its slumber so its people may enjoy the same liberties and rights as they currently demand:

1. The removal of patrimonial relationships between the state and society can enhance prospects for modern civil societies, and as a result more stable democracies;
2. Establishing indigenous organised labour in this region can make the formation of more stable democracies more likely;
3. Empowering well-organised groups to pressure the ruling elites to open political spaces will contribute to the emergence of civil society;
4. The activities of civil society should complement the functions of the state and other shareholders towards strengthening the stock of social capital;

5. The elites of the Middle East should exhibit their commitment and emphasise on the role of civil society in restoring and reconstructing hope and confidence in the conflict-ridden communities of the region;

6. States can prevent serious negative impacts on social capital by not undertaking activities that are better left to the private sector or civil society;[27] and,

7. Developing new political and civil society engagements and making use of individual and institutional competencies to accelerate the establishment of stable democracies in the region.

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