

CITIZENSHIP CHALLENGES IN THE ARAB REGION

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The Arab Spring put forward a number of demands, headed by democracy, social justice and equality for all citizens. The revolutions were triggered by continuous violations of the political, economic and social rights of large segments of the population. While it cannot be assumed that all citizens who took part in the protests had the same ideological background, all their demands revolved to varying degrees around the concept of equality, justice and freedom. It is therefore not surprising that a number of minority groups that felt oppressed actively participated in the uprisings.

In Article 1 of the Declaration on Minorities adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992, minorities are defined in reference to “national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity,” adding that it is the duty of states to protect their existence (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2010). Based on this definition, the concept of minorities is not necessarily linked to numbers but rather to the positioning of a given identity within the country in which it exists, the discriminatory practices to which a community categorised as minority is subjected, and the struggle this community goes through to fight oppression and demand equal rights. This is where the relationship between minorities and citizenship emerges, since equality between all citizens before the law together with the preservation of the cultural specificities of each group is at the core of the concept of citizenship.

While the basic principles of citizenship, including equality between citizens before the law regardless of ethnic, religious or racial origins/affiliations are to a large extent universal, the concept of citizenship is largely influenced by the customs and traditions of the society in which it develops. That is why citizenship is quite a complex concept that cannot be studied from only one dimension owing to its multi-layered nature.

Citizenship is the key to solving problems faced by minorities, since it should lead to integrating individuals from a state of isolation within their communities (tribe, sect, clan

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and so on) into a larger community in which they can be granted political, economic, social, cultural and religious rights, while being protected against any discrimination to which they may be subject (Morcos, 2016). The dimensions for dealing with citizenship can be summarised as follows:

1. **The legal dimension:** All citizens should be equal before the law in both rights and duties, regardless of their religion, colour or race.
2. **The political dimension:** All citizens have equal political rights, including the right to vote, run in elections and join a political party, as well as the right to freedom of expression.
3. **The socioeconomic dimension:** Gaps between groups should be narrowed and all citizens should have the right to socioeconomic mobility.
4. **The cultural dimension:** All citizens have the right to preserve their cultural identity and practise their faith without restriction (ElAgati, 2015b).

The full potential of the concept of citizenship in the Arab region is hindered by a number of challenges related to all those dimensions.

The Legal Dimension

Before the Arab Spring, the concept of minorities had been instrumentalised by the regimes in order to consolidate their power. This led in some cases to the marginalisation of particular communities that were deprived of their cultural and political rights. Constitutions in several Arab countries did not take diversity into consideration, and regimes were very reluctant to modify articles linked to this issue. It was only after the revolutions that certain reforms were introduced into post-revolutionary constitutions. This was clear in the case of the Copts and Nubians in Egypt, women in Tunisia and Amazigh in Morocco. Nevertheless, most changes have not yet borne fruit and, in some cases, minority groups are still marginalised and unable to fully participate in state affairs (ElAgati, 2015a). The Amazigh in Morocco claim that some of the rights mentioned in the constitution were not applied, such as using Amazigh as an official language (Achtou, 2013). In Egypt, the right to return for the Nubians did not materialise and they continue to be oppressed (Sharif, 2017).

The Political Dimension

The traditional structure of the state in the Arab region constitutes a real challenge for minorities since it is not prone to social mobility and prevents certain categories of citizens from reaching some official positions. The structure of the state in many Arab countries is rather tribal or clan-based. One particular group may rule and control all resources, which is the case in Saudi Arabia, or members of a particular group may hold all powers, which is the case in Syria and Iraq. Under these circumstances, some specific groups are privileged at the expense of others depending on the regime's agenda and interests.

This results in the marginalisation of several communities that end up isolated and repressed, which was the case in Gaddafi's Libya.

It is possible in this context to use the term “neo-patrimonial state,” where boundaries between rulers and state institutions, administrative and political positions, and people and regime are blurred. This is a more accurate term to describe several Arab countries than, for example, authoritarian, since many countries in the region cannot be labelled as such. In fact, all Arab countries have one trait in common: the state is not impartial. Rulers in these countries tend to use the state as private property through which they can consolidate their power, and the transparency of political processes is hindered, as demonstrated in the way some elections are conducted (Abu Zaki, 2014).

In addition, minorities in many cases are stigmatised by the regimes that link them to some external powers in order to strip their demands of legitimacy. This is the case with Shiite minorities in the Gulf region, which are often associated with Iran, and revolutionary youth movements, constantly slammed for receiving foreign funds to undermine the stability of the state.

All these factors make it extremely difficult for minority groups to launch campaigns through which they can demand their rights (EIAgati, 2015b).

The Socioeconomic Dimension

Several regions in Arab countries are marginalised because of their geographical location and are therefore excluded from development plans. Territorial justice is generally absent in the Arab region, where highly secured communities are adjacent to slum areas and refugee camps and where citizens are constantly asked to donate to the poor while watching provocative commercials for luxurious products. Territorial injustice and geographical discrepancies have an impact on internal and external migration as well as on the issue of refugees. Despite the fact that only 5% of the world's population live in the Middle East and North Africa, this area is the source of almost half the refugees in the world, including five million Syrians (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). In addition, 60% of residential areas in the region are informal, which not only renders them unsafe for their inhabitants but also puts pressure on the infrastructure of cities where informal housing is widespread.

The link between poverty, unemployment, lack of development and terrorism is worth mentioning, although the nature of terrorist attacks differs from one region to another. For example, in Egypt, most terrorist attacks in 2015-2016 were committed in governorates with high poverty rates, which is the case of Sinai (450 attacks) and Fayoum (52 attacks) (The Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 2016).

Economic citizenship is a major problem in the Gulf region, especially in terms of the distribution of resources. Regions inhabited by minorities suffer from high poverty rates and shortage of resources. Authorities exploit these regions and take advantage of the rich elites there to portray a false image of development projects implemented in these areas while average citizens do not really benefit (Sayed Ahmed, 2016). Other problems include restrictions on occupying particular jobs, real estate ownership and establishing companies (Youssef, 2012).

The Cultural Dimension

A considerable number of minority communities in the Arab world have voiced their grievances over their inability to practise their cultural rights, mainly as a result of restrictions imposed by state authorities. These include refusing to acknowledge their languages as official, excluding their history from school curricula, and a general rhetoric that overlooks their contribution to the national fabric. This is the case of the Amazigh in North Africa (Achtou, 2013) and Nubians in Egypt (Azer, 2015).

The persecution of Iraqi Sunnis following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime is another example of discrimination against particular communities. According to a report released by Amnesty International (2016), houses of Sunnis in Mosul, Kirkuk and Diyala were attacked and burnt down by Kurdish militias in coordination with Yazidi groups. Sunnis also suffered after the emergence of ISIS since the group used Sunni grievances as a pretext for its brutal operations, and sectarian attacks against Sunnis were justified by the claim that they are all supporters of ISIS (Hassan, 2016).

The complexity of the problem is reflected by the fact that minorities are not only persecuted by the state but also targeted by other groups. This is seen in the example of Yazidis who were attacked by ISIS and the bombing of Egyptian churches by extremist groups. The same applied to impoverished Egyptian workers who were slain in Libya by militant extremists (Hamzawi, 2017). What complicates the issue even more is the reaction of the state to attacks against minorities by extremist groups and that in many instances inflicts even more injustice against the victimised minorities. For example, Coptic families were evacuated from the city of al-Arish in the Sinai Peninsula following sectarian clashes (Hamzawi, 2017).

Strategies and Recommendations

The rise to power of political Islam triggered fears of the establishment of religious states in the region and brought back to the surface the idea of the "caliphate" that does not acknowledge national borders. Concerns over such a scenario drove many to resort to a nationalist discourse that counters the Islamist view. This led to the growing popularity of the state and the army, both seen as capable of crushing the Islamist threat, hence adopting another one-track approach that prioritises the security of the state/nation over

the rights of its individual citizens. In fact, since gaining their independence from European colonialisation, Arab countries were never governed by regimes that prioritised the rights of citizens or the rule of law since religious, sectarian or tribal considerations always took precedence (Abu Diab, 2015).

However, the situation in the region is not isolated from international developments. The growing popularity of populist movements in Europe and the anti-migration discourse adopted by some European governments, as well as projects of reforms to curb immigration and impose restrictions on the cultural and social practices of minority groups may also lead to the deterioration of the conditions of minorities, especially Arabs and Muslims (Nazir, 2016). While the involvement of European countries in the Middle East varies, the rise of the far right in Europe and its discourse will undoubtedly have a serious impact on the region, especially as far as refugees are concerned.

Citizenship challenges continue to persist in the region, even though it seemed that after the Arab revolutions the opposite was supposed to happen, which is why it is necessary to look at the different levels through which citizenship principles could materialise.

On the legal level

Arab revolutions played a major role in the modification of constitutions in several countries in the region. However, the articles added to those constitutions have not yet been implemented on the ground and have not been translated into laws that guarantee equal political, economic and social rights for all citizens.

Such laws should include positive discrimination in favour of minority groups that have suffered from persecution over the years, such as allocating a specific number of seats for their members in different representative bodies from the local councils to the national parliaments, where different society components should be represented. Such a system has already been implemented in Iraq, with regard to religious minorities. Moreover, in Egypt 25% of seats in municipal councils were allocated to youths. It is important to follow the same path on different levels of governance.

On the policy level

In turn, legislative reforms will not bear fruit without clear policies that aim to implement this legislation. In Morocco, despite constitutional modifications introduced in 2011 and that included recognising the Amazigh language, citizenship rights of the Amazigh people are still contingent upon a set of policies that should put those modifications into effect. For example, courts in Morocco only use the Arabic language, which makes communication with judges difficult. The same applies to Nubians in Egypt as the 2014 Constitution recognised their rights, including the right to development and the right to protect their cultural identity in addition to the criminalisation of discrimination based on

race or colour. However, none of those principles materialised and they are, in fact, hindered by a constant clampdown on rights movements and trade unions or any other entities that can represent minority groups and ensure their active participation in the public scene.

In this context, we can identify some policies to ensure the active participation of minority groups in the public arena:

- Integrating members of minority communities into the society in which they live as part of the state identity and not as a competitor to it. Accepting and integrating their history, language and tradition by including them in school curricula, the media and cultural national events.
- Establishing independent councils inspired by the ombudsman experience in European countries to counter all forms of discrimination. Members of this body should be appointed by members of parliament and represent all relevant areas of expertise required to tackle minority issues, such as members of human rights councils, women's councils and so on.

On the practical level

Modifying school curricula is the first step towards promoting the values of citizenship. Current school curricula in most Arab countries do not highlight the diversity of the society and, in fact, portray their respective societies as ethnically and religiously homogenous, which is in most cases inaccurate. It is important for citizens to start learning at a young age to accept cultural differences and to learn to place citizenship rights before race, colour, sect, and the like.

Awareness campaigns that promote the values of diversity and citizenship are needed.

Major stakeholders in the field of citizenship rights, such as civil society organisations, minority group associations, the international human rights community and even progressive political parties need to put pressure on the state for the implementation of fair and balanced development policies that do not marginalise minorities. Emphasis should, in fact, be placed on the development of areas that have for years been marginalised so that their residents can get their full rights. It is also important for the state to stop choosing the privileged few from marginalised areas to represent the residents of these areas and project an unrealistic image of development projects carried out there. In addition to not reflecting reality, such arrangements also strip actual players in the field of citizenship of their legitimacy and place obstacles towards effective change in their way.

Investing in social capital is a major step towards dealing with different challenges pertaining to citizenship. Establishing ties between members of the community based on

mutual respect and trust creates a civilian space for citizens to take an active part in the public scene away from traditional tribal alliances and the control of the state (Fawzi, 2017).

Such changes need to happen as part of a broader democratic system that promotes equality, counters the racist discourse and allows civil society organisations to play a role in propagating a culture of diversity and multiculturalism. This will not be possible without a regime that acknowledges the importance of citizenship and that makes the conscious decision of representing all its citizens regardless of their race, colour or religion. The state also needs to be aware that implementing the principles of citizenship is not a top-bottom but rather participatory process in which both the citizens and the state need to work together to reach a formula that achieves equality and ends discrimination. Any attempt that overlooks this factor will be doomed to failure since it will only make a superficial change that does not encompass the different dimensions of citizenship.

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