KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST ASIA

POLICY PAPER 1

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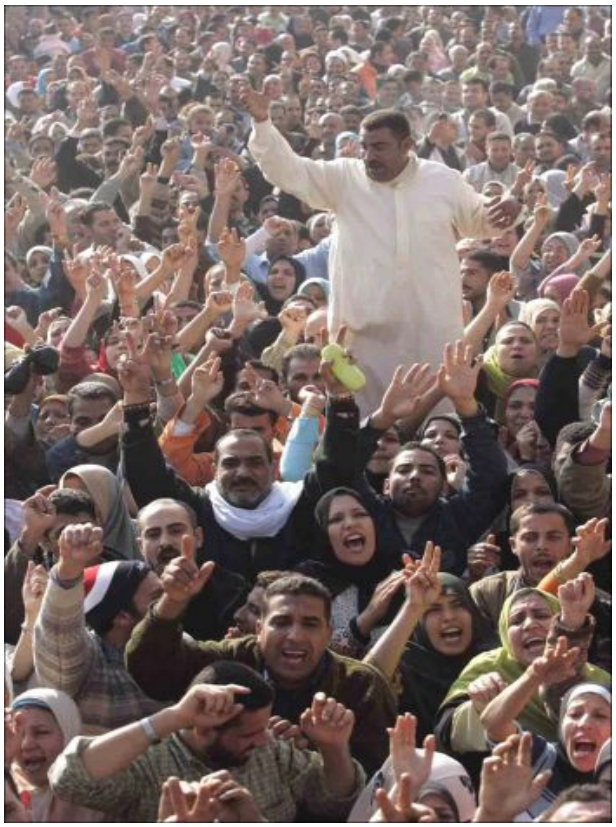

RE-THINKING CIVIC ACTIVISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
AGENCY WITHOUT ASSOCIATION?

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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First published in March 2011 by the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, a joint initiative by

Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
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www.hivos.net

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Design: Tangerine – Design & communicatie advies, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Cover photo: Mahalla, December 9, 2006. The first in the wave of strikes, involving more than 20,000 workers. Photo by Nasser Nouri. (Creative Commons License.)

ISSN 2210-3473

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Introduction[1]

'*Strengthening civil society and upgrading authoritarian systems of rule are not necessarily incompatible. Tocqueville, it turns out, is not the best guide to the promotion of democracy, at least in the Middle East*' (Heydemann 2010, *The Uncertain Future of Democracy Promotion*).

Despite the sustained and genuine efforts of committed civic activists, and a 'surge' of civil society organisations and democracy promotion over the course of the past two decades in the Middle East, hopes for genuine and far-reaching democratic reforms have reached an apparent dead-end. As Leenders and Heydemann aptly put it in their forthcoming book on authoritarianism in Iran and Syria; 'today, in many ways the authoritarian regimes in the region are more adaptive, vibrant and in many cases more unyielding than ever before'. This is in apparent 'stark contrast' to civil societies in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, which also faced authoritarian regimes and yet managed to engender democratic changes. Consequently, this Middle Eastern 'democracy deficit' has led to disappointment, disenchantment, despair and even over-determinism among (some) academics and activists in the region and internationally, who feel that the 'exceptional' and 'peculiar' Middle East is doomed to be governed by authoritarian regimes.

This policy paper aims to shed light on this topic and is part of a series of policy papers from the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, initiated by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam. These papers disseminate the key findings and conclusions of the programme and also devise policy recommendations on how international actors can support democratisation processes in the Middle East. Since research is still ongoing, this policy paper does not address all the key findings and conclusions of the programme. It does not cover, for instance, the role played by Syrian Governmental Non-governmental Organisations (GONGOs), the private sector and Iranian civil society in social changes. These topics are currently subject to investigation by our researchers and forthcoming books, policy papers and policy briefs will shed light on the democratisation potential of these social actors. Instead, this policy paper is an initial and modest attempt to critically reflect on and synthesise some of the key findings and conclusions of the programme *to date.* This analysis is based on working papers and (expert) meetings with regional activists and researchers and also utilises other relevant publications outside this programme.

These findings are not exclusively academic or exclusively activist based, but rather, the result of interaction between the two. Thus, it combines academic theoretical assumptions and activist realities at a grassroots level. It is precisely this interaction – that is at the core of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia – which makes these insights interesting for a broad audience, including academics, activists and policymakers.

I will begin with a brief account of the main theories on civil society in Middle East and their practical implications for civic activism in the region. I will then focus on the characteristics of the context in

[1]This policy paper wouldn't have been possible without the assistance of many individuals. The author wishes to thank Michiel Beker, Josine Stremmelaar, Paul Aarts, Gerd Junne, Juliette Verhoeven, Reinoud Leenders and other colleagues of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia for their constructive comments on the draft.

which civic activists operate. This is followed by a discussion of the role of the 'unusual suspects' — new media and private sector – in democratisation processes, particularly in Syria and Morocco. Then, I will address the concepts of active citizenship, civic culture and social non movements. Finally, the conclusions of the policy paper will be presented.

Theoretical Assumptions and Practical Implications

In his working paper on civil society in Morocco, Cavatorta notes that theories on civic activism and democratisation in the Middle East assume that civil society is either weak, since it is not heavily informed by western liberal values (liberal democracy theory), or strong but 'uncivil', undemocratic and illiberal, because Islamic organisations dominate the civic space and their ethos and values are by nature undemocratic (revisionist theory). Or, that it is simply created by, beholden to or fully co-opted by authoritarian regimes (Cavatorta 2010).

The above-mentioned theoretical assumptions, implicitly or explicitly, inform the democracy support programmes of international actors – both non-governmental and governmental – in the Middle East. The practical implications are far-reaching and clear-cut: civil society in the Middle East - Islamic and secular alike - cannot contribute to democratisation; worse still, it reproduces and strengthens authoritarianism. To what extent do these theories reflect regional realities regarding the relation between civic engagement and democratisation?

Reality Check: Back to Context

The findings of this programme surprisingly suggest that, despite their different hypotheses and conclusions, the above-mentioned theories have one thing in common: they employ the concept of civic activism as an explanatory variable to explain the Middle East 'democracy deficit'. The reason for upholding this almost mythological notion of civic activism as the engine of democratisation is threefold: the normative assumption that civic activism is conducive to democratisation per se, the explosion in the number of civil society organisations in the Middle East over the course of the past twenty years, and the perceived paramount, positive and decisive role of civil society in democratisation processes in Eastern Europe and Latin America (adapted from Cavatorta 2010). Our findings corroborate an increasing body of theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence that show the limits of a perceived a priori and automatic correlation between civic activism and democratisation.

Cavatorta explains this issue succinctly: 'The liberal democratic theory is overly normative in relation to civil society, the role of civil society in the democratic transitions of Eastern Europe and Latin America has been overestimated and overemphasized, and empirical evidence points out that civil society in Middle East is as much a product of bottom up activism as it is a top down strategy of survival'. What, then, are the characteristics of this context and how does it impact civic activism?

Authoritarian Atmosphere

It emerges from our findings that civic activists in the Middle East operate in a complex and complicated authoritarian context, which constrains their margins of manoeuvre to contribute to sustainable and meaningful democratic changes. This authoritarian context creates distinctive dynamics. It is, therefore, paramount to place democratisation support, in the form of civil society, in the wider historical, regional and global perspectives and to examine the internal and external structural factors that sustain authoritarianism, as it is these (and not civic activism) that are the explanatory variables for the 'democracy deficit' of the Middle East. These factors are oil (and related rents) and patrimonial networks, international support, international competition, structural heterogeneity, (perceived or real) outside threats and cultural factors (adapted from Junne 2009 and Diamond 2010).

How do these factors impact civic activism? In many Middle Eastern countries, *oil revenues* constitute an economic foundation of political authoritarianism. Such revenue provides regimes (in so-called rentier states) with the financial means to suppress, co-opt or buy off dissent, as well as to strengthen patrimonial and patronage networks. The 'no taxation without representation' formula is inversed in this case, as the state is less dependent upon levying taxes on its citizens and, thus, less inclined to listen to their demands. It can buy off discontent, subsidise basic needs and alleviate painful economic reforms. It can also sustain multiple security services that crush any dissent well before it becomes a threat. The rentier state is deeply embedded in society since it creates entrenched patronage and patrimonial networks that have little to gain from (regime) change. The 'resource curse' leads to the co-optation of large segments of society – including segments of civil

society – and structurally weakens the capacity of civil society to mobilise masses for democratic change. This does not imply, however, that there is an automatic correlation between more oil and less democracy; oil can also be a source of socio-economic crises if high expectations generated by high oil revenues are not met. In addition, the exclusion of certain social strata from 'universal' public goods, such as pensions, which are seen as 'civic entitlements', could result in protest and discontent (Harris 2010). Currently, research is on-going into the relationship between social security policy and regime resilience in Iran. The key findings of this research will be presented in a forthcoming book and policy paper of this programme.

International (western) support for authoritarian regimes provides these powers with the money and 'international legitimacy' to silence internal dissent. The West justifies such policies by invoking geo-strategic and geopolitical interests and the 'Islamist threat'. For instance, since the mid-1970s, Egypt received a total of US$78 billion 'developmental' and military aid, while Jordan has received, on average, $650 million per year from the US since 2001 (Diamond 2010). The resilience of the House of Saud is another telling example: Despite 9/11 and its impact on Saudi-US relations, it is expected that the two countries will continue to maintain a close relationship. Four factors are crucial here: oil, security, Saudi Arabia's role as the moderate power in the Arab-Israel conflict and the country's prominent role within the Arab and Islamic world. Continuous support from the US government enables the House of Saud to improve its already high 'YIPPI' score (years in power per incumbent) (Aarts 2007).

Middle Eastern states are late industrialising states. In the face of fierce *international competition* they are compelled to protect national economies. According to Junne: 'An autocratic regime leads to an economy run by cronies who will not make it more competitive, and an uncompetitive economy needs protection by a regime that control the flows of goods, people and ideas'. That being said, partial or controlled economic liberalisation also goes hand-in-hand with authoritarianism. Furthermore, it creates crony capitalism and corruption, as is the case in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Syria, to name only a few examples.

The *ethnic*, *religious and sectarian heterogeneity* of Middle Eastern states sustains authoritarianism. Even though large segments of the populations may hate their regimes, it is also clear that they prefer the stability of the known – of the status-quo – to the uncertainty of (regime) change and chaos. In such a context, change (even if peaceful) is often equated with chaos. Junne remarks that 'in such a situation many people behave as if they support the regime'.

Fuelling nationalism against *real or perceived outside threats* is not unique to the Middle East. However, regimes in the region are well experienced and skilled in fabricating threats and use regional conflicts in order to suppress internal demand for change. The Palestinian question and the Western support for Israel only aggravate the (perceived) adversarial image of the West in the region. Regimes use this perceived Western threat and intervention, coupled with a history of colonialism and the Iraq war, to portray genuine activists partnering with international actors as 'agents of the West'. A major example is Syria. Even though the Baathist-Arab nationalist ideology of the Syrian Baath party has lost much of its credibility in the eyes of most Syrians, Sottimanao (2010) suggests that the regime has skilfully utilised the impact of regional conflicts, particularly the Arab-

Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue, to bring about a public discourse centred around antagonism against the West and the 'Zionist Entity', i.e. Israel:

> *'From Hafiz al-Asad's 'strategic equilibrium' (with Israel) to the strategy of resistance embraced by [his son and successor] Bashar, antagonism never ceased to function as a mechanism of authoritarian rule. Authoritarian governmentality dictates Syrian political choices in war and peace; it lays a set of conditions for change; and it acts as a constraint on the possibility to imagine Syria's future.'*

To what extent does *patriarchy* constitute a pillar of political authoritarianism? Certainly, patriarchy is not unique to the Middle East and one needs to be extremely cautious if the easy cultural explanation of authoritarianism is to be avoided. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the impact of patriarchal structures on authoritarian behaviours and patterns of what I term 'internalised authoritarianism':

> *'Patrimonial networks are an important part of culture. They are not only part of state-financed structures and private enterprises, but also of civil society organisations. Leadership is highly personalized and largely unquestioned. In a society in which all kinds of organisations form autocratic structures, it is unrealistic to expect that politics would be organized otherwise' (Junne 2009).*

Culture is not static, however, and demographic transformations that result in smaller families could undermine the patriarchal foundations of authoritarianism. Once again, Junne elaborates on this issue:

> *'Patriarchal family structures survive in (usually faith-based) societies where there are large families, relatively large numbers of children, and where there is usually a male heir. Recently, family size in the Middle East has declined quickly, albeit at different rates in different countries, to the extent that family structures in Iran are no longer so very different from those in France. Smaller families, with a greater chance of a female heir and fewer household chores may lead to more equal rights for men and women.'*

Upgrading Authoritarianism

It is often argued that Middle Eastern regimes are outdated, irrational and doomed to fail. Over the past two decades we have witnessed these regimes radically changing their strategies, with the aim of perpetuating the principles and pillars of authoritarianism. Today, the regimes are much more adaptive, strong and skilful in sustaining their grip on power, broadening social constituencies, appropriating democracy and democratisation discourse, containing and co-opting civil and political societies. While repression is still a potent pillar of their rule, this characterisation fails to capture the 'learning and adaptation capacities' of these regimes to contain and manage social change.

Heydemann (2007) aptly notes:

> *'These emerging strategies of governance have undermined gains achieved by democracy promotion programs, and will continue to blunt their impact in the future. If democracy promotion has, even if unintentionally, provided Arab regimes with new tools for securing authoritarian forms of governance, should it be continued?'*

The upgrading of authoritarianism's 'cocktail' comprises repression, regulation, co-optation, appropriation of NGO functions, emergency security laws, patronage, selective economic liberalisation and legal frameworks that fragment and disorganise political oppositions. In this regard,

Syria is a good case study: Asmaa al-Asad, wife of the Syrian President, is the official sponsor of the GONGO *Syria Trust for Development*. The Syria Trust consists of seven NGOs covering women's empowerment, youth, rural development, education, tourism and the environment. The cousin of the President, Rami Makhlouf, holds 55% of Syria's first private telecom company, Syriatel (Heydemann 2007). Contrary to conventional wisdom, upgrading authoritarianism does not attest to the 'peculiarity' of Middle East authoritarianism, but rather, refers to its integration into the seemingly emerging 'Global Authoritarianism'. China's *'tri-partite model'* is increasingly seen as *the* model to be emulated: political oppression, economic liberalisation and technological advancement mixed together in a 'holistic authoritarian approach'. Despite these challenges, upgrading authoritarianism has inherent limits. Upgrading authoritarianism is not a proactive strategy, but rather, a reactive response to internal and international socio-economic and political changes. Moreover, regimes differ in their states of 'upgradedness'. Hence, its cohesiveness and coherence should not be overstated. How, then, do civic activists operate in and react to an authoritarian context and upgrading authoritarianism?

Ambiguous Dynamics

The authoritarian context creates a complex and distinctive dynamic between civil society and the state. Diverse research papers show that ambiguous state policies, procedures and regulations create an ambiguous atmosphere which affects, and is reflected in, the nature of civic activism. This context creates alternate openings and closings; in other words, it creates the conditions for and defines the contours of change.

In his paper on Sunni Islamic civil society in Syria, Donker notes that diverse (rival) intelligence services and ministries deal with civil society, resulting in a fragmented response from the regime. For this reason, it is crucial for activists to know regime actors personally and to rely on patronage and non-democratic means to obtain and deliver benefits for their associations and beneficiaries. This also applies to the interaction between the state and secular activists. In such a context, the boundaries between state and civil society are not always clear-cut. However, this does not automatically render activists puppets of the regime. In fact, following the withdrawal of the state from the social sector, the regime needs the support of Islamic activists in order to strengthen its domestic legitimacy and provide socio-economic assistance to poor segments of society. In their research on the Islamic Zayd Movement in Syria, Pierret and Selvik (2009) conclude that contrary to conventional wisdom, the rise and development of this movement shows the limits rather than the strength of upgrading authoritarianism. As a result of its social base amongst the pious urban middle class, the social capital derived from religious leaders' status, decades of grassroots mobilisation and organisational capacity to manage socio-economic projects, the Zayd movement has shown a degree of independence *vis-à-vis* the state, resulting in a partnership rather than a patron-client relationship. However, this does not signal a symmetric relationship; the Syrian state can forbid the activities of the Zayd movement, or any other organisation, at any time it chooses. Nevertheless, this case study shows the importance of going beyond traditional assumptions about the state being an all-powerful force that manipulates compliant social actors and suppresses restive ones.

This ambiguity is also evident in 'soft' authoritarian states such as Yemen and Morocco. Research on Yemeni civil society reveals the extent to which state policies can either hamper or encourage civic activism. Compared to other countries in the region, Yemen has a vivid, strong and diverse civil society, including tribes and religious leaders, which contributes to limiting authoritarianism and takes on the role of intermediary between state and society. Yet repressive legislation adopted in 2001, as well as co-optation and state intervention in civil society, have reversed much of the freedom of association granted in the 1990s (Bonnefoy & Poirier 2009). Co-optation techniques range from the *cloning* of independent civil society and opposition political party structures to encouraging *false* or *artificial membership* in independent organisations with the aim of manipulating voting or designing a new majority and their political orientations. Consequently, the organisation Women Journalists Without Borders had to change its name to Women Journalists Without Chains since it was *cloned* by a government oriented organisation. The Journalist Syndicate and the Writers Union were also apparently victims of government-engineered manipulation and intervention (ibid.). Compared to the rest of the region, the legal procedures governing civil society activism in Morocco are quite liberal. However, a huge discrepancy exists between legislation and realities on the ground. In a seminar on civil society in Morocco at the University of Amsterdam in 2009, it was remarked that according to Moroccan law, civil society organisations need only acquire a certain document to start an association; in practice, however, the authorities simply never issue this document if the ethos of the organisation is considered 'controversial' by the authorities (Cavatorta 2010).

Morocco: Strengthened Civil Society and Strengthened Authoritarianism

The new Moroccan personal status law (*Moudawana*) introduced in 2004 has been cited by (some) scholars, policymakers and practitioners as the empirical 'proof' that a strong civil society is crucial for bringing about democratisation in the Middle East. This code ensures more equality between women and men in a number of ways, including: the removal of the guardianship requirement, which was necessary for a woman to marry once she came of age, raising the minimum marriageable age for women from 15 to 18 for women, restricting polygamy, expanding the possibility for women to initiate divorce procedures and mandating that a repudiation be a matter of judicial supervision (Cavatorta 2010). According to this analysis, this historic and monumental victory would not have been achieved without decades of relentless advocacy by the strong women's movement and it proves civil society's role in the democratisation process. The findings of our programme reveal a different reality, one that takes into account the complex political context within which the law came into being. Without denying the role played by the women's movement, the King's role was decisive and the process may even have served to upgrade authoritarianism. Not only did the King push the law through Parliament, the undemocratic way in which reforms relating to such an extremely important social issue were introduced, meant that the overwhelming majority of Moroccans were ignored. This has also eroded potential support from important social groups for the law. In addition, since these reforms are not embedded in society and not embraced by the majority of political and civil society, there is a very real risk of potential reversibility. As Cavatorta (2010) points out:

> '*If the political conditions change and such legislation becomes an impediment for the King to the preservation of his central role and power, he can quite easily reverse it. In short, legislation of this type rather than being imbedded in the social corpus of the country through*

a process of information and debate about it is simply a bargaining chip. Today, the women movement has come out as the beneficiary, but what if tomorrow the King decides that he needs to please a different constituency and utilizes the family code as his bargaining chip by changing it back?"

This takes care of the 'usual suspects' in the civil society scene, but how do 'unusual suspects' – digital activists and the private sector – operate in this ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere?

Unusual Suspects, Usual Ambiguity?

New Social Media in Syria: Digital Dictatorship or Democratic Blessing?

The global debate on the role of new media in social change and political liberalisation is divided between so-called '*digital optimists'* and '*digital pessimists'*, with '*digital realists'* caught in-between. While digital optimists firmly believe in the capacity of new media – especially Facebook and Twitter – to democratise authoritarian regimes, the pessimists believe new media could actually strengthen authoritarianism.

As research findings show, this dichotomy also applies to Syrian activists. However, both groups can agree on one observation: despite tight regulations, security surveillance, filtering and blocking of websites, they manage *to some extent and within the very limited margin for manoeuvre* to use new media as an awareness-raising tool to counterweight the culture of fear – which aims at the atomisation of society, creating mistrust among citizens and enhancing international isolation – as well as to facilitate the formation of networks of citizens who do not know each other personally and who would never have trusted each other had they met casually (Shaery-Eise–nlohr forthcoming paper). Despite the fact that as of June 2010, only 17.7 % of Syrians have had access to the internet [2]digital activists have employed new media to wage a variety of campaigns, mobilising Syrians from different backgrounds – secular, Islamic, men, women – for social change. Examples include: the National Campaign against Honour Crimes, which managed to collect signatures of thousands of citizens on a petition that was sent to the President, Parliament, government and media; the Personal Status Law Campaign, which succeeded in sending the draft conservative law – considered a setback particularly in terms of women's rights – back to parliament to be studied again; the campaign to support a child that was raped by four men in Aleppo; and the campaign to reduce the price of mobile phone calls and services (Sawah 2009). Thara online magazine, owned by Etana Press in Damascus, is seen by women as a social network site outside the direct control of the state and Islamic charities. It helps raise awareness of women by providing information and legal documents on women's rights. The Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression publishes information omitted by the official media, particularly subjects such as human rights, children's and women's rights. Since their website is blocked inside Syria, their reports are sent to 11,000 subscribers via e-mail. Human rights activists use the internet to highlight human rights violations, arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances. Despite the huge risks, political opposition and civic activists were relatively successful in utilising new media to circulate petitions, collect online signatures and post statements on sensitive political issues. The Damascus Spring Committee and the Committee for the Rehabilitation of Civil Society made use of the internet to post articles and circulate statements; the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change and the Beirut-Damascus/Damascus-Beirut Declaration were widely circulated online and collected signatories (Kawakibi 2010).

[2] www.internetworldstats.com/me/sy, last accessed 17 January 2011

How, then, does the regime respond to these apparently 'digital gains'? Blocking is a favourite practice and currently, 250 Syrian and foreign sites – mainly oppositional, religious and human rights websites – are blocked. A game of 'cat and mouse' ensues as activists react to blocking by using new proxy servers and, in turn, the government changes its proxies every day. Yet the regime also uses 'soft' approaches by allowing and even encouraging *digital commissioned criticism:* some critical websites and bloggers are allowed to remain online as long as they do not cross the 'red line' of criticising the President or his family. This maintains a *façade* of pluralism (Shaery-Eisenlohr forthcoming paper). The regime benefits economically from new media since Asad and Makhlouf family members own most of the private IT companies. The digital administrative branch of the security services, responsible for supervising online activism, is composed of highly educated people, many with PhDs obtained in the West. One of their strategies is to pose as activists and try to influence discussions and articles on opposition websites and human rights groups on Facebook (Meeting Report Syria Media Seminar 2010).

These findings show a *dual determination* of both activists to counter the culture of fear *and* autocrats to contain, co-opt and manage digital activism. The internet itself is a neutral medium; the context in which it is used, along with the goals and meaning*(s)* people attach to it, determines its democratisation potential. The notions of 'internet, Facebook, Twitter revolutions' and the game of 'cat and mouse' between digital activists and authoritarian regimes are misleading and counter-productive as they obscure and oversimplify the complex and unknown effects of these technological developments. The Web is clearly a battlefield between activists and autocrats, however, it is an asymmetrical struggle. 'Playing the game' *itself* can become an act of activism and, in this way, escaping the government's eye can take up all of the activist's time (Meeting Report Syria Media Seminar 2010).

Shaery-Eisenlohy remarks that: 'Syrians know that this virtual counter public is not the type of resistance that would bring down a regime, but they also know that the resilience of authoritarianism is not simply due to the citizens' fears but is deeply entwined with local, regional, and global politics and economic interest. They do their share of breaking the culture of fear with their limited possibilities and with the knowledge that the virtual counter public might just be another trick of the Orwellian regime' (Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia Newsletter, Issue 1, October 2009).

The Private Sector in Morocco: Limits to Democratisation Potential

Can the private sector be an agent of democratic change? What is, if any, the link between economic and political liberalisation? More importantly, how do authoritarian regimes combine economic liberalisation with political oppression?

Until recently, academic researchers and practitioners aiming to support democratisation in the Middle East have largely focused on 'traditional' civil society. Acknowledging the authoritarian context in which these organisations operate and the constraints involved, they broadened their focus and 'discovered' an 'unusual suspect', i.e. the business sector as a unit of analysis and potential partner in democratisation processes.

If there is one country in the Middle East where the private sector could contribute to democratic change it is Morocco. This is for two reasons: compared to other countries in the region, which largely adopted socialist economic policies in the 1960s and 1970s, Morocco has maintained a fairly liberal economy since independence in 1956, although political liberalisation was limited and under the supervision of a strong monarchy (Boussaid 2010).

According to research findings on state-business relations in Morocco, the private sector could either be a device for social control or an agent of social change, depending on both the characteristics of state power and the structure of the private sector. In an undiversified economy characterised by a limited number of economic players and centralised state power, patronage pervades state-business relations. Businesses may lobby directly for access to rents rather than agreeing on a common economic platform and call for the regime's transparency and accountability. In theory, business associations could contribute to political liberalisation if the economy is diversified, and if sectors or firms of different size can organise themselves in an umbrella organisation that represents and defends their interests and ensures a level playing field economic sector.

Historically, the Moroccan business sector has been characterised by a dense network of commercial ties, few dominant holding companies and kinship relations among just a few families, with the King as 'the largest businessman' due to his dominance in the country's largest conglomerate Omnium Nord African (ONA) and possession of vast royal land holdings. The banking sector is highly concentrated and of an oligopolistic nature, with a few public owned banks, while most of the private banks have foreign shareholders (Boussaid 2010). Until the 1990s, the main business association Confédération Générale des Entreprises du Maroc **(**CGEM) was apolitical and had a patron-client relationship with the state. Since then, CGEM has become more independent, more assertive and has called for a more level playing field and transparency. This was partly due to the emergence of a new modern, assertive and independent-minded business class; ironically, it was also because the state wanted CGEM to further liberalise the economy and break opposition against economic reform. This interference by King Hassan II led to the incorporation of more small and medium enterprises that are not part of the patronage networks into CGEM. In turn, this opened a window of opportunity for more transparency and accountability.

The unintentional outcome of this ironical interference was a more professional, efficient, and more independent CGEM that could finance itself through membership fees (Boussaid 2010). By the mid-1990s, therefore, there were genuine hopes that CGEM could be an agent of meaningful social change. These hopes proved to be short-lived, however, as the state staged an aggressive strategy, using the anti-corruption campaign of 1995-1996 to get rid of independent-minded figures within CGEM and co-opt the remaining business leaders. It was telling that the anti-corruption campaign was directed by the Minister of Interior Al Basri and not by the Minister of Economy and Finance. Al Basri had held this position for two decades and was regarded as the strong man of the regime during the reign of King Hassan II. This aggressive interference in the development of the private sector clearly demonstrated the political will of the 'liberal' monarch to prevent the emergence of an independent and strong CGEM that would represent the interests of its members and become an agent of social change (Boussaid 2010).

Beyond Dichotomies, Democratisation Discourse and Associational Agency

Active Citizenship: Bridging the Politicisation/De-Politicisation Divide

One of the daunting dilemmas this programme has been grappling with is to what extent civic activism in ('hard') authoritarian states such as Syria should be of a politicised nature in order to contribute to meaningful change. At the core of this dilemma is the recognition that if civic activism is too politicised, social actors' survival will be at stake and regimes will tend to further restrict civic space. At the same time, de-politicisation increases the risk of co-optation by a state that can use civic society as a fig leaf and display a façade of pluralism (Civil Society in West Asia Newsletter, Issue 1, October 2009).

How do civil society and political society interact in an authoritarian state, and how do they impact democratisation processes? The theoretical findings of our programme show a complex dynamics. In his theoretical paper on the relation between civil and political society, De Vries (2010) refers to four theories that deal with the interaction between both societies: the liberal, the critical, hybrid and complex theories. As mentioned in the introduction – based on the liberal pluralist notion of civil society – traditionally, NGOs have conceived civil society as the engine of democratisation and so they do not (sufficiently) take into account the role of political society. The critical theory assumes that political society is instrumental for democratisation, with civil society playing a minimal role, if any. Referring to Langohr, De Vries notes that:

> *'In many Arab liberalizing regimes advocacy nongovernmental organizations have risen to the position of opposition parties. This role decreases chances for democratisation because "these organizations generally advocate the interests of a specific group and are almost entirely dependent on foreign funding. Langohr advises to focus on opposition political parties when looking for democratization, because advocacy nongovernmental organizations are not suitable for the job.'*

But how could opposition parties be the engine of democratisation if they are operating in the same ambiguous authoritarian context as civil society does? Both the liberal and critical theories have been criticised for their exclusive emphasis on either civil or political society as the engine of democratisation. The hybrid notion combines liberal pluralist and critical notions. Essentially, it regards top-down political and bottom-up civil society to be complementary for democratisation. Rooted in Western liberal democracy, however, this notion does not reflect the reality of an ambiguous authoritarian context in which both societies in the Middle East operate. De Vries comes to the conclusion that the above-mentioned three theories are either exclusivist (liberal and critical theories) or assume an automatic correlation between civil and political society (hybrid theory). Hence, he concludes that the interaction between both societies is context specific and, therefore, a fourth notion is required – the so called complex notion – that takes the context into account.

Being highly complex political, economic and social processes, simplistic notions of democratisation that concentrate solely on civil or political society as the engine of democratisation do not reflect the complexities of these processes. Both concepts should be seen in terms of interactive dynamics rather than in isolation. Findings show that interaction between the two societies is context/country

specific: in a 'soft' authoritarian state such as Morocco, the need to concentrate on constitutional changes that limit the power of the monarch may make political parties crucial for this process (Cavatorta 2010). In a hard authoritarian state such as Syria, however, the overt politicisation of civic activism could be counter-productive since the state defines politics in a moral register and views any political activism as antagonistic and bent on regime change (Civil Society in West Asia Newsletter, January 2010). Particularly in the case of human rights and democracy advocacy groups – the natural partners of Western NGOs – the risks of mixing up civil with political society are great, as they could easily end up playing the role of opposition political parties, even if they have no aim to engage in such a role.

This finding is supported by research on the Damascus Spring/Autumn, a period of intense political and social debate, which started after the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000 and continued to some degree until autumn 2001. The Syrian activist and writer Wael Sawah, a former leftist who spent ten years in prison, points out:

> *'Political activities have their domain: the government, the parliament, political parties, and the street. The domain of civil society is cultural, social, developmental, and ethical affairs. Civil society's mission is to defend values that are political in their core, such as democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights, but with non-political tools and methods. This is the result that has been accepted by most political forces and civil society groups in Syria.'*

This sobering conclusion was the result of the realisation by an important segment of Syrian civil society that the new regime of Bashar al-Asad could not be pressured into initiating reforms if demands for democratic change were presented in an overtly political manner (Civil Society in West Asia Newsletter, January 2010). Despite this 'lesson learned' by Syrian activists, it remains a daunting task to know how to address human rights violations without being forced to overtly 'confront' an authoritarian state. The jury is still out on this complicated issue.

These findings on the Damascus Spring/Autumn reveal the potential of the concept of active citizenship, which could bridge the divide between political and apolitical civic activism in a hard authoritarian state. Active citizenship refers to activists who are aware of the authoritarian context in which they operate; who realise state repression, yet think and act politically, even within their own immediate sphere. They do so, however, without being overtly political or using political tools. The aim of active citizens might not be regime change or revolution, but rather, promoting solidarity, social justice and an inclusive social order (adapted from Bayat 2010). Active citizenship is at least superficially apolitical and non-confrontational but is, in essence, political; for through their activities activists and citizens redefine the meanings of activism and politics in an authoritarian state.

Research on Syrian civil society shows that active citizenship has been at the core of the National Campaign against Honour Crime and the Personal Status Law Campaign. Both important campaigns are characterised by the fact that they were not overtly political; that they mobilised diverse segments of Syrian society – secular and Islamists (moderate and conservative), as well as nongovernmental and governmental organisations alike – and successfully made use of new media. A group of secular organisations comprising Syria's Women Observatory, the Syrian Women's League, Al Thara Magazine, the National Association to Develop the Role of Women and the newspaper Al Nour Weekly were leading the National Campaign against Honour Crime and managed to win the support

of influential Islamic figures, such as the Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun and Islamic Member of Parliament Mohamad Haabsh (Sawah 2009). The successful results of these cross-sector 'coalitions for change' were a) the amendment of law 548 that ended the exemption of male murderers from penalty if 'they took their wives by surprise committing adultery' and b) stopping the revision of personal state law that was seen as the most devastating blow to women's rights in Syria's modern history. Obviously, not all Islamists were supportive of these campaigns. Neither do these two campaigns signal the end of ideological differences between both camps. Yet, it demonstrates the potential of active citizenship to transcend these differences by bringing about 'coalitions for change' – no matter how loose, fragile and ad hoc these might be – centred around very specific issues that aim to create incremental social changes without confronting the state in an overtly political manner.

Civic Culture versus Culture of Fear

Authoritarian states sustain themselves not only through sheer repression but also through a culture of fear that aims at atomising (civil) society and creating mistrust between activists. This paralyses critical and independent thinking and portrays the heterogeneity of society as a recipe for chaos and civil war. It also presents the autocrat as sole arbiter and saviour who guarantees stability.

Yet it would be misleading, counter-productive and naïve to only focus on the state as the sole source of authoritarianism. Society *and* civil society too could harbour and even nurture authoritarian tendencies and attitudes (internalised authoritarianism*)*. Bayat (2010) eloquently elaborates this issue: 'It would be naïve to read too much into society at the expense of demonizing the state. Just as states may be oppressive and authoritarian, societies can be divided, individualized, conservative, and exploitative'. Thus, state and (civil) society are not – and should not – be separated, but rather, treated simultaneously and seen as a a continuum, as much as circumstances and context allow. In this regard, support for advocacy associations that target the state's violation of human rights and promote democracy is essential, but not sufficient to facilitate meaningful change in the long run. These associations are, by and large, elitist and mostly dependent on foreign funding. The issue is how to counter a culture of fear and the atomisation of (civil) society. Based on meetings with Syrian activists, as well as research findings on civic activism in the Middle East, East Europe and Latin America, it emerges that civic culture stands out as an area that might contribute to slow, albeit too slow sometimes, yet meaningful changes in authoritarian states in the Middle East. Here, civic culture refers primarily to principles of freedom of expression, tolerance, plurality, solidarity, inclusive social order, critical and independent thinking and gender equality. It aims to counter the culture of fear through 'change from below'; creation of a 'democratic' civil society preliminary to 'democratising' the state. Civic cultural activities do not necessarily need to take place in the contentious political space, but rather, in the more 'safe' social and cultural spaces. In this sense, civic culture is closely connected to active citizenship.

In her research on dissident writings in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Glasius concludes that realising the limits of 'democratising the state' without first 'democratising society', former dissidents and activists opted for building 'civil societies' based on values of solidarity, public truth-telling, ideological plurality and non-violence (Glasius 2010). More importantly, it shows the need to build a

'democratic' civil society that is good for its own sake, whatever and wherever it may lead to. Glasius points out:

> *'Probably the most interesting findings of this have been those relating to the strategies and aspirations of East European and Latin American dissidents. Western audiences love the mythology of a brave, non-violent resistance prevailing over a brutal regime, whether it is the Madres of the Plaza del Mayo or the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia. More recently, they have been prepared to fall in love all over again with the more doubtful 'colourful revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Lebanon. But they have not been attentive to the strategy of building 'democratic' civil society for its own sake as opposed to trying to initiate transition at the top, nor to the rich conception of democracy as encompassing workplace, neighbourhood or cultural circles practicing democracy alongside, and in dialogue with state-based institutions.'*

Despite undeniable contextual, cultural, social and political differences between Eastern Europe and Latin America, on the one hand, and the Middle East on the other hand, these findings corroborate the views of some segments of Syrian civil society activists and researchers, who see the potential of civic culture as an interesting concept that aims at change from below and 'democratic' civil society as a small step towards 'democratising' and 'socializing the state' *once the political opportunity arises*. At (expert) meetings aimed at sharing preliminary findings of our programme, Syrian activists and researchers referred to the crippling effect of the culture of fear on civic activism and the subsequent need to revive a civic culture that encourages participation in public affairs and democratic dialogue *within* civil society (Kawakibi, *Syrian Civil Society: Voices from Within*, forthcoming).

Social Non-Movements: Agency without Association?

According to mainstream Orientalist views, Middle East societies are stagnant, static, monolithic and, consequently, 'peculiar' and 'exceptional'. Therefore, culture – which is virtually equated with Islam – is deemed responsible for the region's 'democratic deficit'. This leads to the inevitable question: what does change constitute in an authoritarian state where organised dissent and opposition is oppressed? Are there social actors, other than organised civil society organisations, that challenge authoritarianism, exclusivist Islamic movements, conservative and patriarchal family patterns?

In his recent book on social-non movements in the Middle East, Bayat elaborates on:

> *'societal, incremental, invisible yet pivotal change precipitated by ordinary people who are not civil society activists. These changes are the result of social non-movements that refers to 'collective action of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers or ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognised leaderships and organisations' (Bayat 2010)*

Social non-movements are closely connected with the concept of the quiet encroachment of the ordinary: non-collective but prolonged direct actions of dispersed individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities essential for their lives (land for shelter, urban collective consumption or urban services, informal work, business opportunities, and public space). In the Middle East, these non-movements refer to the mobilisation of urban poor, women and youth.

A spectacular example of a social non-movement is the role played by *ordinary* Iranian women over the course of the past two decades in reconfiguring their role and social status without directly

confronting the state. The One Million Signature Campaign initiated by Iranian activists in 2007 managed to mobilise ordinary women and progressive men, as well as religious and secular segments of Iranian society against misogynous laws. However, this campaign faced fierce repression from the state and opposition from conservative men. Acknowledging authoritarian and patriarchal constraints on organised activism, *ordinary* women turned to unorganised social non-movements, by asserting their presence in everyday life, pursuing education, sports – for instance, climbing Mount Everest, contesting and winning in male-dominated car racing, jogging in public parks – arts, music, working outside home. This mundane *politics of presence* has resulted in a reconfiguration of the role of women as public actors and a subversion of the conventional public-private gender divide (adapted from Bayat 2010). This social non-movement has had a far-reaching impact on the traditional assumption about women's role in society and gender equality. The politics of presence and the quiet encroachment of ordinary Iranian women, along with disgruntled youth and critical intellectuals, were the driving forces and the catalyst behind the Green Movement *once the political opportunity emerged* as a result of the disputed election of 12 June 2009.

However, despite their important potential impact in the long term, social non-movements –everyday society activism, quiet encroachment of the ordinary and the politics of presence – are no substitute to social movements, civil society activism and the politics of protest. Rather, they are tiny steps to acquiring societal spaces and further claims through organised activism once the political opportunity arises. In this regard, Bayat asserts:

> *'Yet it is crucial to recognise that not only does authoritarian rule routinely impede contentious collective actions and organized movements, it is also unrealistic to expect a civil society to be in a constant state of vigour, vitality, and collective struggle. Society, after all, is made up of ordinary people, who get tired, demoralized, and disheartened. Activism, the extraordinary practises to produce social change, is the stuff of activists, who may energize collective sentiments when the opportunity allows.'*

In the same vein, only social movements can contribute to the 'socialisation of the state' through establishment of new life styles, new facts on the ground, modes of thinking, behaving, being and doing. The developments in Iran and Turkey highlight this process. Bayat refers to the socialisation of the state as:

> *'Conditioning the state and its henchmen to societal sensibilities, ideals, and expectation. Socialization of the state is, in effect, "governmentality" in reverse. For instance, the Islamic regime in Iran was compelled to recognize and minimally act upon the popular desire for secularization, democratic polity, and civil liberties, which Iran's social movements had since the late 1990's helped to articulate. Similarly, the fact that Islamic AKP has bowed to Turkey's secular democracy is neither simply a sign of deception nor merely the fear of backlash from the Turkish army. Rather, it is a position that has been nurtured and shaped by the secular democratic sensibilities of Turkish citizens, both religious and secular.'*

These findings corroborate the conclusions of a recent insightful study by Fundacion par las Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior (FRIDE) on democracy aid, which is based on 500 interviews with local civil society organisations across 14 countries around the world, including Morocco and Egypt. In this report, Richard Youngs remarks:

> *'First, Local stakeholders do not want donors to give up the ghost. A sense of realism is required that democracy aid is unlikely to have dramatic results. In many states the*

obstacles to reform may be too great even where donors are playing a courageous and well-proportioned role. Democracy aid may be limited to tilling the soil in preparation for incremental change over the long term. However, despite all the difficulties of recent years, and erstwhile 'overstretch' of some Western governments' democracy support policies, there is patent demand for more donors to do more. Second, civic leaders want better linkages between democracy assistance narrowly defined and the broader set of policies and influences pertinent to political reform. This was probably the most potent message conveyed to our researchers: democracy aid must be seen as part of a more holistic whole. In many target countries a view prevails among democracy promoters that they, the donors, must wait 'until the time is right', without them doing much to hasten that 'right time.'

Conclusions

The overall objective of this policy paper was to critically reflect on, synthesise and disseminate key findings of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia *so far* and the potential contribution of international nongovernmental organisations such as Hivos to meaningful democratic changes in the region. The sobering findings of this programme are corroborated by an increasing body of theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence that looks critically into the a priori positive correlation between civic activism and democratisation in Middle East (and beyond).

The key theoretical and empirical findings demonstrate the following:

- Civic activists operate in an ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere characterised by *distinctive* dynamics of interaction between state and social actors. This, however, does not render civil society actors puppets of regimes or disqualify their activities. Civil society is quite strong in the Middle East and there is (limited) space for civic initiatives. Yet civic actors have to engage in a complex ambiguous interaction with the state and walk a tightrope between co-optation and confrontation; between commissioned criticism and active citizenship.

- In such a context, the theory of change based on conventional democratisation discourse – with civil society as the engine of democratisation – does not reflect the regional reality of the Middle East. Moroccan and Yemeni case studies show both the strength of civil society and the limits of democratisation discourse through civil society.

- There is a need to de-couple civil society and democratisation and to re-couple civic activism with the context: contextualised civil society is good for its own sake, whatever and wherever it may lead to. In addition, there is a need to employ a neutral conceptualisation of civil society: civil society can be an agent of democratic change as long as the context allows.

- The state is not the sole source of authoritarianism. Society could also produce and harbour authoritarian tendencies. State and society should not be separated, but rather, be conceived as a continuum, since empirical evidence suggests that the demarcation line between them is often blurred, mixed and negotiated.

- Sobering as this analysis is, it is not – and should not be – interpreted as 'The Case for Doing Nothing'. 'Transition to democracy' is an extremely complex socio-economic and political process. Civil society is *only one* (f)actor that effects this process. Based on our findings we cautiously argue that contextual and structural factors may be determinate in this process. International support can only play a positive role if it is informed by a sense of sober realism, which takes to heart and addresses the authoritarian context.

- International actors should have an eye for 'unusual invisible incremental changes' beyond project cycle management, four-year business plans and log frames: (very) slow social and structural changes, social non-movements, everyday society activism, quiet encroachment

of the ordinary and politics of presence. Despite their long term importance, social non-movements are no substitute to social movements and politics of protest.

- New social media possess the potential to contribute to meaningful democratic change by providing activists with platforms that help counter the culture of fear, enhance networking and lobbying international support. But autocrats, too, use these media to contain, co-opt and manage digital activism. New social media should be conceived as neutral instruments: the context in which they are used, along with the goals and meaning(s) people attach to them, determine their democratisation potential.

- The private sector could be either a device for social control or an agent of social change contingent on state structure, the structure of the private sector itself and the extent to which the state monopolises, co-opts or allows the emergence of independent umbrella associations that represent their members and ensure a level playing field for competition. In other words, as an 'unusual suspect', the private sector operates in the same ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere as 'traditional' civil society does. In an undiversified economy characterised by a limited number of economic players and centralised state power, patronage pervades state-business relations. Businesses may then lobby directly for access to rents, rather than agreeing on a common economic platform, and call for (more) transparency and accountability.

- Active citizenship possesses the potential to bridge the politicisation/de-politicisation divide between overt and not-overt civic activities, to transcend ideological differences between Islamic and secular civil society, as well as between 'independent' civil society and GONGOs/regime related institutions. This would result in 'coalitions for change' – no matter how loose, fragile and ad hoc these might be – centred around very specific issues, such as women's rights, which aim to create incremental social changes without confronting the state in an overtly political manner.

- Civic culture helps counter the atomisation of civil society and a culture of fear and mistrust between activists by encouraging participation in public affairs and engaging in not-overtly political activities in the 'safe' social and cultural sector. Thus, civic culture contributes to 'change from below', 'democratising' civil society preliminary to 'democratising' the state.

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About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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