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Social Justice and the civil society between strategies of defense and development

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**Social Justice and the civil society
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The role of civil society in achieving social justice has emerged with its establishment in the very beginning, even if it was only excluded to the charitable aspect. The core idea was to improve the most marginalized and poor categories, even if the charitable work is not enough in that context. Civil society has reached a certain degree of maturity with the Arab revolutions. It attempted to play a pivotal role in achieving objectives of revolutions that raised certain slogans when they emerged and social justice was in the heart of them either directly or through other slogans such as Dignity and Liberty which are directed to social justice in a way or another. We cannot ignore the economic situation that is lacking social justice that led to eruption of these revolutions, as well as the first flame of these revolutions was the incident of Mohamed Bou-ezizi¹ in which the economic factor (poverty and unemployment) is correlated with rights (liberty and dignity).

Civil society by definition is matching point between citizens with their hopes and ambitions and the authority, thus, after the revolution the civil society shall play a pivotal role in consolidation and activation of social justice concept in Egypt. Achieving social justice as a target is related to multiple challenges and for instance, the international dimension, historic accumulations beside political, geographical, and developmental complexities. These challenges requires the civil society to develop its strategies and tools in order to be able to face these challenges depending on² opportunities created by Arab revolutions and made the demand of social justice essential. With the attempts of maneuver, and turning citizens into actors able to affect the status quo though trials of oppression, and opening new to maneuver within state institutions despite reinventing authoritarianism.

In this context, civil society should move towards achievement of social justice. In the meaning of seeking the status in where there is no injustice, exploitation, and deprivation from wealth or power or both. As well as absence of poverty and all forms of marginalization within the state. That state in which all citizens are equal in political, social, environmental and economic rights.

A state in which today's generations do not dominate rights of the coming generations, it should as well be based on justice, solidarity and interdependence. Civil society shall seek as well the state in which all citizens have equal opportunities to develop their capacities what gives them a chance to be part of the social mobility and gives the society the chance to sustainable development and progress. That state in which society is not subject to economic exploitation and enjoys independence of making economic, political, and social decisions.³

Civil society and social justice: Role and characteristics:

“The way of addressing people's rights is what differentiates between a society that lives on charity and a society that set fair rules for work and that it protects all the involved in production relations thus majority is not so poor. In short a society in which the states is

¹ A young Tunisian in his twenty-sixth, was selling vegetables and fruits in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, which has become one of the most famous Arab cities. When police confiscated his small primitive cart, claiming that it does not hold a license to street vending, thus, he put himself on fire. By that he was the spark of the Arab Spring that toppled Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali followed by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who stepped down from power.

² مفهوم العدالة الاجتماعية، مركز موارد العدالة الاجتماعية، <http://is.gd/gseG3T>

³ إبراهيم العيسوي، "العدالة الاجتماعية من شعار مبهم إلى مفهوم مدقق"، بوابة الشروق، <http://is.gd/VQbN1z>

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committed to achieve a suitable life for all citizens that is different from the state that neglects rights of the citizens what created a society that lives on charity".⁴

This concept is related to the development of the civil society from a charitable approach that is based on supporting the poor through aids; this was followed by the developmental approach in which the civil society is trying to enhance their capacities and skills to create a suitable environment to raise their living standards. This approach was developed as well to a rights-based approach in which the civil society tries to support the most needed and marginalized categories to organize themselves to benefit from the developmental work and on the other hand enhance their capacity to strongly demand their rights.

The role of civil society in activation of social justice mechanisms has its historic roots and its main features in different ages. There were different patterns of this role according to different historic stage and the specialty of each society in selecting, adapting with or creating its own mechanisms.

Yet the process of societal reorganization remains the common factor among all societies that witnessed a political transformation (from a dictatorship to a democratic regime) or violence and conflicts. It is supposed that the process of transformation is characterized with speed and surprises and conflicts, thus, it needs a plan to reorganize the society in order to avoid violations for basic human rights. This comes through inclusion of social justice mechanisms in a comprehensive strategy of transitional justice in which the regime represented by the two legislative and executive authorities and the civil society divide roles and tasks and responsibilities.⁵

The civil society witnessed development and effectiveness in the social and political spheres since the 20th century and particularly post Arab revolutions- in the Egyptian case- that involved civil society in issues it did not deal with before and achieved good results. For instance, issue of social justice, which was lately pivotal in many studies for its importance for developing societies that is waiting for democratic transformations. Late studies for nongovernmental organizations and civil society associations shows the change and maturity of their techniques, that civil society associations started to have an effect on societies and sometimes participate in policy making and implementing processes.⁶

Civil society and social justice between development and pressure strategies:

Civil society in numerous experiences contributed in achieving social justice through its projects and campaigns, and we can prove its impact in achieving some improvement in the lives of citizens or influencing policymaking process, not only local but also global in the face of policies that could harm social justice. Among the most prominent examples is the experience of Grameen Bank in Indonesia; which is an organization of microfinance and community development, the bank started in Bangladesh and provides small loans to the poor without requiring financial guarantees, it was founded by Muhammad Yunis in September 1983, and was awarded the Nobel Prize peace in 2006. The work of Grameen Bank is to harness and exploit the ability of the poor to innovate.⁷ The organization throughout its history witnessed successes over the past 15 years, and among these achievements and successes the 9.4 million of the worlds poorest that was helped by Microfinances institutions in partnership with Grameen Foundation to enable them to start their journey. More than 1.2

⁴ سلمى حسين، في نقد مبدأ (اتبرع. ولو بجنه)، جريدة الشروق، 2009/9/11، <http://is.gd/Jgx4BT>

⁵ نهي الدرويش، "دور المجتمع المدني في تفعيل اليات العدالة الاجتماعية"، <http://is.gd/J5HRIK>

⁶ Role of Governments and Nongovernmental Organizations, <http://is.gd/94Bm4Q>

⁷ Grameen institution, <http://is.gd/i28Axx>

million new borrowers received small loans because of the growth guarantee program at the institution. It helped nearly 200 thousand of the poor, farmers, and its work extended to the countryside in Africa, in countries such as Uganda and Kenya.⁸

As for the level of influence on policy, the campaign against the free trade agreement also known as WTO shall be considered a notable example on mobilization against policies that would harm social justice at the global level. Martin Core a former employee at the organization founded an organization “focus on global south” to counter the negative effects of the agreements issued by this organization –which he discovered through his work in the organizations- on third world countries. He used three basic strategies:

1. Awareness of Organization’s damages: through his writing, this was translated on voluntary basis by anti-globalization groups around the world. As well as enlisting voluntary experts from many countries and in different languages. This did not stop at policies of this organization yet it spread to mechanisms of non-transparent decision-making or democracy within this organization.

2. Networking with anti-globalization groups and civil society organizations and trade unions in third world countries particularly in East Asia, Africa and Latin America. Then the network expanded to include civil society organizations in the first world who were sympathetic with issues raised by the organization or those representing groups affected by these policies in these countries, which represented a kind of pressure on governments in this regard.

3. Pressure on the organization through official delegations of countries that adopted ideas put forward by the network, such as India, South Africa, and Brazil, both in their respective subject. In addition to external pressure via demonstrations and sit-ins in each round of the organized tours of the organization that depended primarily on self-interest owners. Besides, building bridges between sympathetic official delegations and stakeholders participated in the protests.

This campaign has achieved great success to the extent that some suggested it as one of the three basic reasons that stopped the work of the organization and has made the Hong Kong tour the last one to come up with an agreement. Hence, in the previous round in Doha was the output was weak and not valuable.

Strategies and Mechanisms:

Under international, regional and local contexts, the task of civil society is a difficult task in contributing to achieve of social justice in Arab countries. It is not only limited to development of mechanisms to improve the lives of citizens, and support policies that will develop the status of social justice, not only support community-based organizations that can carry the burden of this issue, but extends to face the domestic and international policies that will negatively impact the concept and its applications in reality.

Thus, strategies of supporting civil society in this context should be extended to local and international parties, most notably:

- Creating knowledge through studies on the existence of inequality, and determining an indicator for the root causes of the lack of social justice. This requires civil society organizations search for facts as well as gathering information and research. Besides, thorough analysis of the results, through community-based research, and making these researches reach the level of public awareness, as well as developing awareness of stakeholders of policies, especially parliamentarians. As well as the criteria, that can be

⁸ Grameen institution, <http://is.gd/i28Axn>

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measured by legislation and policies to detect their effects on social justice, positively or negatively. In this context, the concept should be dealt with in a broad sense and not confining it to a narrow range of dimensions, yet not the dilution of the concept and losing its real content based on the re-distribution of wealth in a just society.

- Construction of multiple companies and networks: the call for building networks between companies on one hand and civil society organizations on the other hand, which positively affect the strength of civil society. There must be networking and partnership between civil society organizations working in the field of social justice and other civil society organizations, in many areas, such as culture and media. As well as networking with the government itself in order to demand achieving social justice policies. Moreover, organizations that advocate for social justice can benefit from alliances with their counterparts in other countries to generate information, legitimize their activities, and bring additional pressure to work in the promotion of internal change.
- Influence on decision-making: to achieve social justice civil society organizations must influence public policy making process using different pressure mechanisms from programs and media campaigns and organizing mass demonstrations and releasing reports, and writing opinion pieces in the media and meeting with government officials and the formation of partnerships with government agencies. Moreover, taking the necessary measures for achieving social justice.
- We cannot neglect the role of development organizations not only in carrying out projects to contribute to the improvement of conditions, but through their projects to create repeatable models of development. That should be accompanied by process of empowering beneficiary groups and support them to organize themselves into entities that reflect their interests rather than primary or political loyalties, so they can adopt their cases on their own and not through intermediaries.