



Mediterranean Programme
10th Mediterranean Research Meeting



Florence & Montecatini Terme 25-28 March 2009

Workshop 10

*Spaces for Change? Decentralization, participation, and local governance
innovations in the MENA Region*

directed by

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Workshop abstract

Under pressure from Western governments and international organizations, Arab regimes are engaging in “authoritarian upgrading”. New (official) discourses emphasize rights, social justice, and citizenship. While past and current research analyzes these trends through the perspectives of “Good Governance” and theories on democratic transition at the national level, less attention has been given to processes of “authoritarian upgrading” at the local level, and their implications for local governance. For example, recent decentralization reforms (e.g. in Morocco) have devolved more resources and power to local governments. Similarly, a host of “participatory” development programs promoted by various donors have contributed to the exponential growth of “civil society organizations” (CSOs). Finally, donors and NGOs have experimented with innovative local governance arrangements (such as consultative forums under the UN’s Agenda 21 program). All these interventions have created a profusion of spaces in which citizens’ participation has the potential to enhance accountability and state responsiveness. The main questions to be addressed in this workshop are therefore: First, to what extent have such spaces led to an increased sense of entitlement to participate, shifts in political agency, and finally, incremental changes in power structures? Second, have decentralization reforms, participatory programs, and local governance innovations resulted in more efficient policy formulation and implementation, hence leading to more

effective basic service delivery to the people at the grassroots? In short, given that most of these new spaces for participation have been created “from above” (as part of “authoritarian upgrading”) or by external donors, what is the potential for genuine participation “from below” to bring about improved service-delivery and/or changes in local power structures that could challenge authoritarian governance strategies?

Workshop description

Rationale

Arab regimes are increasingly under pressure both from Western governments and international organizations (through aid conditionality and democracy promotion programs), as well as their own societies to grant more political and civil rights to their citizens. As a response, Arab regimes are engaging in “authoritarian upgrading” (Heydemann 2007). This entails opening up limited space for civil societies, permitting opposition parties to operate more freely, broadening press freedoms, and acknowledging the legitimacy of human rights. These processes have given rise to new (official) discourses of rights, social justice, and citizenship. Nevertheless, Arab regimes continue to regulate and police the boundaries of acceptable political practice.

While past and current research analyzes these trends through the perspectives of “Good Governance” and theories on democratic transition at the national level, less attention has been given to processes of “authoritarian upgrading” at the local level, and their implications for local governance. For example, recent decentralization reforms (e.g. in Morocco) have devolved more resources and power to local governments, yet their administrative, fiscal and political autonomy remains limited. Similarly, a host of “participatory” development programs promoted by various donors have contributed to the exponential growth of “civil society organizations” (CSOs), which are however tightly regulated by central governments. Finally, donors and NGOs have experimented with innovative local governance arrangements (such as giving CSOs observer status in local government councils or other consultative forums under the UN’s Agenda 21 program), yet so far they do not seem to challenge the existing power structures.

Nevertheless, all these interventions have created a profusion of spaces in which citizens’ participation has the potential to enhance accountability and state responsiveness. The main questions to be addressed in this workshop are therefore: First, to what extent have such spaces led to an increased sense of entitlement to participate, shifts in political agency, and finally, incremental changes in power structures? Second, have decentralization reforms, participatory programs, and local governance innovations resulted in more efficient policy formulation and implementation, hence leading to more effective basic service delivery to the people at the grassroots? In short, given that most of these new spaces for participation have been created “from above” (as part of “authoritarian upgrading”) or by external donors, what is the potential for genuine participation “from below” to bring about improved service-delivery and/or changes in local power structures that could challenge authoritarian governance strategies?

Theoretical approaches and methodology

The contributors to this workshop are encouraged to build upon theoretical approaches that emphasize the blurred boundaries of the “state” and “civil society” binary, such as the “state-in-society” and “polity” approaches. As Migdal et al (1994: 26) observe, ‘in the midst of arenas of struggles and accommodations, the boundary between the state and other parts of society may continually shift, as powerful social forces in particular arenas appropriate parts of the state or the components of the state co-opt influential social figures.’ In short, Migdal (2001: 63) calls for a move away from a perspective that simply pits state against society, and towards one that conceives of the state as part of society. The “polity approach” developed by Houtzager et al (2005) is similar to Migdal’s “state-in-society” approach. It focuses on how societal and state actors are constituted, how they develop a differential capacity to act and form alliances, and how they cooperate and compete across the public-private divide to produce purposeful change. At the local and individual level, recent approaches have focused on spaces for participation, deliberative democracy, political capabilities, and issues of citizenship (see Cornwall 2000, 2004; Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Gaventa 2004, 2006; Fung and Wright 2003).

Methodologically, the main implication of these theoretical approaches is to disaggregate the state. The workshop contributors are thus encouraged to analyze state-society interactions at the local level (or the periphery of the state), rather than focusing only on interactions between the “top” or center of the state and key social groups, and to present their results of multi-sited and multi-level research (Migdal et al 1994; Lund 2006; Mooij 1999). In short, workshop papers should be situated within an ‘anthropology of the state’, in which the institutional reality of the state is a negotiated and contested one, and treated as a product of informal bureaucratic practices as much as formal institutional arrangements (Pieke 2004).

Relevance to MENA scholarship

The papers in this workshop would make a substantial contribution to the literature on local governance in the MENA region. Within the scholarly literature on decentralization, attention is directed predominantly on a few prominent case studies of decentralization, such as Brazil, the Philippines, India (and the *Panchayati Raj*), Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa. North African countries have so far only rarely been the focus of serious research (e.g. Nellis 1983; Zyani 2002; Vengroff and Ben Salem 1992; Barka 2004).

This workshop would also play a pioneering role in bringing together various strands of the literature on local governance. Until recently, studies on decentralization in the MENA region tended to focus on the legal framework and fiscal aspects rather than the politics involved in decentralization reforms. The literature on decentralization and local government is divided between that written for the scholarly community and that produced for various agencies and NGOs involved in advocacy. Research projects are further divided along thematic lines and disciplinary boundaries such as law, anthropology, geography, public administration, finance and economics, and political science. In addition, several donors are working with the various MENA governments to build capacity in local government, producing an impressive number of reports and technical assistance outputs to guide decision-makers, but these are often not available publicly, and/or of a purely technical and de-politicized nature.

With regard to research on participation in local politics and in donor projects, as well as on local civil society organizations, past research has mostly focused on single case studies rather than cross-regional comparisons. A host of interesting detail is buried in consultants' reports, and in-depth ethnographic studies of "participatory" projects are mostly still to be written for the MENA region.

This workshop therefore encourages not only in-depth case studies within MENA countries, but also a comparative perspective across the MENA region as well as with other regions, e.g. by drawing on the literature on the politics of decentralization in Africa and Asia, and experiences such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre.

By focusing on citizen participation at the local level, this workshop would also complement the research agenda presented at previous Mediterranean Research Meetings. This agenda has so far mostly concentrated on the national, regional, or international levels, both in terms of authoritarian regimes - and the dynamics of regime change (2001), regime stability (2004), political participation (2006), and political opposition (2007) – as well as societies (e.g. the workshops on the subaltern classes in 2004, women's activism and the public sphere in 2005, and social movements in 2008).

Indeed, the previous Mediterranean Research Meeting workshops that concentrated on state-society dynamics at the local level were either pre-occupied with urban spaces (e.g. the workshops on public spheres in 2003 and 2004) or their conclusions are at present in need of updating (e.g. the workshops on 'Territorial Governance in the Mediterranean: New Paradigms?' and 'New Elected Local Authorities: Local Political Elite [sic] and their Social Position' in 2002).

Themes

Given the workshop's focus on new spaces for change at the local level, we invite paper proposals along three main themes that examine any of the following questions.

Decentralization

- What have been the political motivations for decentralization reforms in MENA?
- How much (administrative, fiscal, and political) autonomy from central government do local governments really have?
- Has decentralization 'brought government closer to the people'?
- What new spaces of participation has decentralization opened up, if any?
- Has decentralization contributed to an increased sense of citizenship, entitlement to participate, and political agency on the part of the urban and rural poor?
- Has decentralization impacted on the structures and operational modes of political parties at the local level?
- Have decentralization reforms contributed to the emergence of new elites that could challenge existing power structures, or increased the capture of local resources by old elites?
- What is the evidence that decentralization reforms have improved local service delivery?

Participatory Projects

- What forms of participation have been promoted by such projects (e.g. in rural development)?
- What is the character of new spaces created by such projects (e.g. closed, invited, claimed/created spaces; see Gaventa 2006)?
- Who participates in newly created local CSOs?
- What is the scope for “participatory” projects to contribute to the development of political capabilities on the part of their intended beneficiaries?
- Have local CSOs been able to improve local socio-economic conditions through service delivery (on their own or jointly with local governments)?

Local governance innovations

- Are local governance innovations in the MENA region part of “authoritarian upgrading” strategies or do they create spaces of participation that could challenge authoritarian regimes in the longer term?
- What can we learn from comparing various experiments with participatory governance in the MENA region (e.g. Agenda 21 processes, the National Initiative for Human Development [INDH] in Morocco)?
- How do such experiments compare with those in other regions of the world?
- Do these governance innovations lead to new types of (intended and unintended) interactions between local governments (political society¹), and local civil society?
- Or in more concrete terms, do new governance mechanisms encourage joint activities (co-production) between local governments and CSOs in service delivery and income-generating programs?

Expected papers and participants

We welcome empirical studies on the workshop themes that build upon the theoretical and methodological approaches outlined above. While they should be situated in their national contexts, these case studies should focus on the local level in one specific MENA country (in both rural and urban spaces), or compare two or more cases in different MENA countries, or include a comparison with an example outside the MENA region. The workshop directors intend to present papers that compare local governance innovations in Morocco with those in other countries. Contributions in both English and French are encouraged. It is hoped that workshop papers will form the basis for an edited book on local governance in the MENA region.

By using a multitude of channels to distribute our call for papers, we aim to attract both junior and senior academics and practitioners from a wide range of countries and academic disciplines, including public administration, political sociology, anthropology, political science, urban studies, geography, and development studies more broadly.

¹ “Political society” is understood here as ‘that loose community of recognized political parties and their operatives, local political brokers and councillors, and perhaps even lower-level public servants who depend upon the grace and favour of politicians’ (Corbridge et al 2005: 189).

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