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Jordan's Public Forums Initiative

By Ibtisam Al-Atiyat

It was against the background of a series of UN human development reports (2002-2005) that a group of Arab researchers and activists joined forces to address the challenges associated with the region's intricate democratic transition. In 2005, the group established the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy (ANSD) to respond to the major deficits highlighted in the UN reports, including a varying lack of freedom and a general lack of women's emancipation.

Supporting a bottom-top democratic transition was set as the main goal for the network, as well as a major challenge. Indeed, our work as a group and as individuals has often proven that citizens in the seven Arab countries represented in the network have not only limited access

to political processes but also, and most important, less interest therein. It was time to seek an alternative approach. An approach that holds the potential of rebuilding people's trust in democratic governance and helping overcome the alienation of citizens, which was created by seasonal elections of dysfunctional institutions and merely 'cosmetic' participatory approaches to decision making.

To realize this objective, the ANSD entered into a joint-learning agreement with Kettering Foundation in 2006 and launched the Arab Public Deliberation Initiative. The teams representing Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Algeria, and Bahrain selected issues of major concern prevailing in their respective countries and started creating issue books and

Jordan's Public Forums Initiative

undertaking nationwide issue forums. Several forums on political participation and electoral law took place in Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, and Lebanon; in Algeria, environment was the issue of focus; in Bahrain, the issue of equal pay; and in Jordan, the issue of unemployment was deliberated in as many as six forums.

Public issue forums were new to the network members who have moderated and conducted the forums. The method of deliberation was also new to the Arab public although it reminded them of a process of a "democratic" public consultation known to Muslims as *Shura*. To the Arab public in Bahrain, Algeria, and

al Adjustment Program (SAP) prescribed by the World Bank and the IMF, aiming at stabilization at the macroeconomic level and controlling the country's soaring debts. By the end of 1980s, the socioeconomic side effects of the SAP began to unfold. Jordanians were confronted with a new bitter reality, in which their fuel and food would no longer be subsidized and an era of almost free health services and quality education ended. Even worse, in a resource-limited, non-oil producing country, the government would not provide jobs and spend unlimited amounts on civil servants' retirement plans. Poverty and unemployment became every Jordanian's nightmare.

The lack of efficient methods to make their voices heard led citizens to riot in 1989. On April 18 of that year rioters marched the streets in the big cities, expressing their frustration and disagreement with the new changes and blending the social with the political. Citizens rejected the changing role of state and the end of subsidies, and they also demanded an opening of the political arena and the

sacking of the then-prime minister.

Unlike speculations, the government did not respond with the use of force. In that year, elections took place after over two long decades of suspension under the application of martial law. Political parties became publically active, and the National Charter—one of the major national documents in addition to the constitution—was collectively drafted guiding this new era of democratization and ensuring that all political actors were devoted to the country's progress. With a new press law and more freedoms of association granted (which later became more restricted), Jordan became the model in the Arab world. A model where every voice, including that of the Islamists who are banned in other Arab countries,

are granted the right and access to political power.

The Government and Civil Society Failing Citizens

Since then, the government continued with its controlled political opening and initiated a reform agenda that includes a political, economic, and judicial reform. While keeping the focus on macroeconomic policies, political reforms kept focused on civil and political rights. Civil society became more preoccupied with the best electoral system to follow and campaigned against restrictive laws and regulations framing associational life. This has left social and economic issues without any serious attention.

Over time, poverty and unemployment, although seen as important social and economic issues, have become less recognized as political. The more civil society demanded civil and political rights and the more the government responded to such demands, the more citizens have felt alienated from debates and processes creating the democratic project. To express their frustration, citizens rioted again in 1996, and incidences of citizens selling their votes were reported 11 years later during the elections of 2007.

The message in these actions was clear. What is being debated, at the government, as well as civil society, level does not represent people's interests or demands.

Deliberative Forums: The Potential and the Challenges

When it first started experimenting with issue forums, the Jordanian team did not realize that it had touched the heart of the democracy problem. Indeed, people needed more effective channels to express themselves and spaces where they could state their views. As the government has its experts, and civil society has its activists and intellectuals who debated democracy in closed circles, people looked at both institutions as elitist and less representative.

Through the forums, citizens felt the difference immediately. "It feels like someone has eventually decided to listen to what we have to say," said a participant in one of the issue forums in Karak, a city in southern Jordan. In the forums many marginalized

"It feels like someone has eventually decided to listen to what we have to say," said a participant in one of the issue forums in Karak, a city in southern Jordan. In the forums many marginalized groups, such as youth and women, have also felt included in the discussion and search for solutions.

Jordan, the forums identified the often-missed connection between people, social and economic interests, and democratic transitions.

In what follows, I focus on Jordan's forums on unemployment. I describe why the issue of unemployment was picked, discuss the challenges often associated when governments, civil society actors, and the general public address issues and seek solutions; and finally speak about the potential of issue forums from a participant's perspective and thrash out challenges faced by the team conducting the forums.

Why Unemployment?

The economic crisis Jordan suffered in the mid 1980s led to a push for a Structur-

groups, such as youth and women, have also felt included in the discussion and search for solutions. A young participant from Zarqa, a city in the middle of Jordan, explains: "I always felt that unemployment is a problem for adults to solve; but how can they, since they are not affected by it as much as my age group is?" To many women the mentioning of their unemployment status in the text of the issue book meant a lot. A female participant in a forum in Irbid north of Jordan said, "Even today, many would still argue that solving the unemployment problem requires sending all women to 'where they belong' that is, back home."

Also in the north, participants said that the forums help them understand that there is a political facet to unemployment. A participant said, "I attend most of civil society activities on democracy and political participation. While many of these were useful, one always feels more weight given to panelist's views over that of the audience. Also, no one takes the time to explain the links between electoral systems, which are always brought up when democracy is debated, and the increasing prices of commodities and endless unemployment problems. These are the issues that concern us as people."

However, despite sensing significant differences between the forums and other forms of events they used to participate in, participants also highlighted some challenges. "What is next? How is this going to help solve the problem? What should the forum's outcome look like and where should it go to?" These were a few of the questions raised by some participants as the forums ended.

Indeed, leaving participants to puzzle with such questions did serve the purpose of the forums. It showed that this process, *if as inclusive as it should be*, has the potential of arriving at well-informed, thoroughly deliberated decisions that meet the needs of everyone. And this is what Jordanians were always looking for, right from the moment they went rioting in the streets in the spring of 1989.

Ibtesam Al-Atiyat is a member of the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy. She was a Kettering Civil Society Fellow from February to July 2009. She can be reached at ibtesam73@yahoo.com.

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The Kettering Foundation provides a limited number of fellowships for staff members of organizations in other countries that are working with citizen-related matters. The fellows participate in the work of the foundation, in addition to pursuing their own research. The fellowships usually last for five months, beginning either in February or in July. The core elements of the fellowship curriculum include:

- exchanging ideas and insights based on the fellows' experiences and triggered by a set of readings on deliberative democratic approaches that serve as an ongoing theoretical orientation to the overall work of the foundation
- attending workshops, seminars, and other meetings to learn about aspects of deliberative democracy, including framing issues for public deliberation; convening and moderating citizen forums; and other ways of engaging citizens in civic life
- a research project that explores topics directly related to the foundation's priorities for research at the time of the fellowship
- moderator training for conducting public forums through attendance at a Public Policy Institute
- a major independent research project developed by the fellow in conjunction with his or her sponsoring organization
- participation in regularly scheduled foundation meetings and project groups

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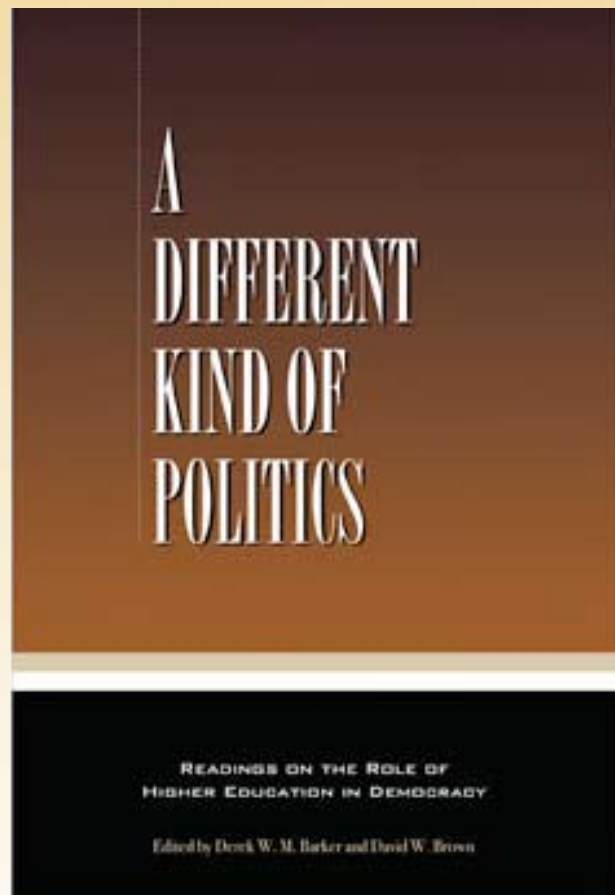
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