

## **DECENTRALIZING TO MUNICIPALITIES IN ARAB SPRING COUNTRIES**

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Decentralization - as a way of structuring public administration, in order to give local people and communities more control over their own affairs and to promote human development - is being closely considered for adoption by some Arab Spring countries.

Historically, there is no left- or right-wing political outlook that is more inclined toward decentralizing power to sub-national levels. Right-leaning political proponents seek decentralization because of its efficiency and ability to promote self-management. Left-leaning protagonists appreciate its propensity to create conditions which can increase shared benefits and dismantle systemic causes of poverty locality by locality, in time leading towards overall societal reform. Both political outlooks share a scepticism of centralized planning and in fact view it as a primary cause of social problems.

The Kingdom of Morocco was perhaps the earliest champion of decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa, starting from 2008. The primary inspiration to adopt this structure for the nation is derived from its desire to promote human development hand in hand with greater autonomy for its regions. This early commitment to decentralization for development is a key factor in explaining Morocco's relative political and social stability during the Arab Spring.

However, the level of effectiveness of its implementation may very well decide the nation's future in a region of sweeping, transformative and unpredictable change. Morocco now must further codify and implement more effectively laws and policies it has already established in order to achieve the participatory democratic and development future it seeks.

Morocco's decentralization model rallies central level support and sub-national public and private partnerships toward achieving community-driven human development. The nation's municipal charter, which requires locally-elected council members to create development plans based on the participation of the people, with budgetary project support from the provincial and national levels, is an excellent decentralized pathway to human development.

However, its implementation is painfully lacking. Municipal development plans have been submitted without variation from across a whole province. Council members filled with the best of intentions lack the know-how and skills required for facilitating participatory planning and creating development action plans with the people.

Decentralizing to the municipal level, which is the closest administrative tier to the communities themselves, is efficacious but must be accompanied by community-based training in facilitating participatory democratic planning.

The Lebanese draft law for decentralization released on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014 contains very positive features including the diffusion of power to elected local officials and the budgetary

allowance for sub-national management of human services. However, the sustainability of the decentralized system necessitates that funding is directed toward development projects that the intended beneficiaries themselves identify and manage.

In Iraq, considering the sectarian war that now ensues, it appears that the optimal time to have adopted a federalist system may well have passed. Federalism is a decentralized management system that empowers provinces to determine major parts of their fate.

A tragic misfortune - in addition to the US invasion of Iraq itself - is the loss of the historic opportunity that reconstruction presented and that could have in itself created a sustainable decentralized system, with the result that every single Iraqi would now be enjoying wide-ranging socio-economic and environmental benefits that would profoundly enhance their lives. Participatory development approaches could incorporate processes of community-based reconciliation towards the creation of local development action plans defined by the participants. Had such approaches been adopted, with the budget of 60 billion dollars that was available, a bottom-up development movement would have been created across the entire nation.

As unachievable as it seems at the present time, decentralization of power to sub-provincial levels, as close to the people as possible, appears the only viable way for Iraqis to feel more in control of their lives and to have even a modest chance of experiencing the person-to-person, Sunni-to-Shia interaction that can, in actual fact, build localized processes of acknowledgement of each other, peace and shared development.

In Egypt, an amended Local Administration Law has been drafted that would institutionalize decentralization. However, incorporating still the participatory method, as in Morocco's model, where the private-public sectors and local communities are engaged in the management of human services, will help address the destructive municipal corruption (the more eyes on the same budget and project, the less corruption). The Jordanian government believes that decentralization is a vital part of its future and the Bahraini leadership, too, suggested its necessity at one point.

With the threat of instability, governments are now reluctant to disperse power; however it is that same dispersion which, counter-intuitively, will enable their own survival. Can political leaders trust in the fact that an empowered people that are supported to meet their own self-determined needs will not turn and undermine the nation that has brought them this vital opportunity? Just as we learned - too late - in Iraq that communities do not destroy reconstruction projects that they themselves create, so too we understand that they will not attempt to sweep away leadership of a nation that both codifies into law a strategy and provides the necessary support for decentralized development driven by participatory democracy to take place. Arab Spring nations ought to feel far more concerned about the delay rather than the implementation of such measures.

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