Islamic Civil Society Organizations as Actors of Change in Egypt and Jordan

Bezen Balamir Coşkun[1]

Abstract*:*   *Many people in MENA region perceive formal politics as illegitimate, corrupt and authoritarian. Thus, when searching for agents of change and reform, one has to look beyond the formal politics. In this vein, in the region there has been an increasing interest in civil society. Generally, academic interest as well as institutional interest tends to focus on secular organizations and overlooks religiously-based ones. Given the fact that, particularly in Muslim states of the region, Islamic civil society organizations make up a large part of civil society. Many Muslim social welfare organizations in the region engaged in activities such as education, health care and financial assistance to the poor. For example, in the cases of Egypt, Jordan and Turkey new variety of Muslim organizations has emerged to engage in voluntary social welfare activities, but in other ways than traditional welfare organizations. Besides providing traditional charitable services, they offer health and environment awareness campaigns and vocational training programs. In short, they assign Islam an important role without applying the language of political Islam. Instead, they view Islam as instrumental in helping the individual to become an active and useful citizen. In this regard, this article seeks answers to the question of whether these organisations can be considered potential agents of change or rather as preservers of the status quo. Do they employ Islam as a means of control or empowerment?*

Key words: Informal politics, Egypt, Jordan, Islamic civil society organizations

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Introduction

The forms that shape human behaviour are not limited to the formal ones. A complex web of informal institutions also exists. This is even more true in the Middle Eastern context where forms of authoritarian rule, widespread mistrust of the state institutions, persistence of primitive loyalties and invasive role of bureaucracy are, in different degrees, common characteristics of political systems in the region. In spite of the existence of influential informal institutions throughout the Middle East and the North Africa, literature on Middle Eastern politics takes little account of informal institutions and informal politics.

The popular uprisings in some of the Middle Eastern and North African countries prove us that informal political groups can be extremely organised and have capacity to challenge the formal political structures in the region. It was really quick that the popular uprising in Tunisia had the domino effect in other Middle East and North African countries. The informal challenges to authoritarian formal political structures in the Middle East and the North Africa highlighted the fact that civil society could demand reforms in formal political structures. A quick look at the main actors in popular uprisings in the region could show the influence of Islamic civil society organisations.

Many people in the Middle East and North Africa perceive formal politics as illegitimate, corrupt and authoritarian. Thus, when searching for agents of change and reform, one has to look beyond the formal politics. In this vein, there has been an increasing interest in civil society. Generally, academic interest as well as institutional interest tends to focus on secular organizations and overlooks religiously-based ones. Particularly in Muslim states of the region Islamic civil society organizations make up a large part of civil society. These organisations have been attracted popular support by offering welfare services. Given their popularity and their power to organise, Islamic civil society organisations are becoming more influential in their respected societies. In this regard, this paper seeks answers to the question of whether these organisations can be considered potential agents of change or rather as preservers of the status quo. The first part of the paper reviews the definitions of and theoretical approaches to the concept of informal politics. This part is followed by a discussion of the interactions between the state and informal politics. The last two sections analyses the cases from Egypt and Jordan.

Informal Politics

Mainstream comparative research on political institutions focuses primarily on formal rules. However, the forms that shape human behaviour are not limited to the formal ones. A complex web of informal institutions, which are not formally codified in official documents, also exists. In the mainstream literature, informal institution has long been associated with secondary, even unproductive, institutions. The roots of this intellectual conservativeness are fixed in the historical developments that exalted the formal and denigrated the informal. In this article, informal politics refers politics done outside the state, outside the written and clearly identifiable rules.

Informal politics may be antagonistic to the state; for instance, opposition in many of the states has been set up clandestinely benefitting of the wide grey areas left empty by states' inefficiency and its incapability of control over informal networks. Informal politics may be sympathetic or supportive of the legitimate or illegitimate power; for instance, the networks built between political elites and local notables to strengthen state authority in the peripheral areas of the country.

In his comprehensive study on informal politics, Burkhard Conrad discusses informal politics within the two contexts, informality in developing societies and informality in modern societies, and proposes two hypotheses: "informal politics is based upon an act of *Vergemeinschaftung* in which traditional relations determine all political interactions. Thus it is an

a priori fact before all formal and law-based politics" and "informal politics is based upon an act of *Vergemeinschaftung* or social integration that tries to avoid the harshness of rational law; thus it is an a posteriori reaction to formal politics in a modern context."[1] Conrad argues that informal politics is either a priori or a posteriori to formal politics. That is to say, laws as the base of all formality are the distinction between two kinds of informality. In traditional context, political behaviour is mainly governed by traditions, rules and particular social hierarchies. The community is based on personal relationships such as patron-client relations.[2]   State, law and bureaucracy are the basic institutions of modern society and basis of formal politics. On the other hand modern informal political behaviour can be described as an "action of reaction" to formal political institutions. According to Conrad, informality "tries to overcome rational, political processes where they seem to become unbearable, violate individual notions of fairness or create an atmosphere of social indifference."[3] Particularly, social groups who are alienated from the formal political structures are organised in informal political structures. The study of informal institutions and informal politics is now common in political analyses. These researches mainly analyse the cases from East Asia, Russia and former Soviet Republics.[4] Informal institutions, now active players of political life, assume importance upon appreciation of the holistic nature of political behaviour, which cannot be fully understood without attention both to the formal and informal components of political systems. In his analysis of Japan-Taiwan relations Phil Deans underlines the importance of informal politics in Japan's relations with Taiwan to deal with substantive issues through informal networks. Deans calls this informal mechanism as virtual diplomacy.[5]

Generally, current scholarship explains the emergence of informal politics as a result of kinship based cultural legacies. Yet, there exists a number of studies that analyze informal politics from different angles. Rico Isaacs discusses "how the uncertain and contingent process of transition is instrumental to the emergence of informal politics and the durability of authoritarianism in Kazakhstan, and that informal political relations and behaviour are important to understanding non-democratic and democratic paths in former Soviet states."[6] In his analysis Isaacs applies cultural path dependent processes to point to the importance of informal politics in explaining the consolidation of authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan.

With the collapse of the Soviet system the informal actors evolved through the systems of clientalism, patronage, and mafia style organisations. Obviously, in these conditions, formal state institutions cease to be operational, and negative informal institutions thrive. The rate of the rise of such informal institutions in the transitioning post-Soviet countries was even taken as the measure of state weakness.[7] The predominance in the literature of infamous samples of the kind of informalism that manifested in the early post-Soviet states contributed to the consolidation of the view that informal institutions are negative institutions. However, informalism is an important aspect of human societies, even of the modern ones. The view, which treats the informal as a normal and indelible aspect of human social behaviour, challenges the traditional modernist view. It conceptualises informal institutions as functional or problem-solving, recognising their positive role in providing solutions to the various problems of social interaction.[8] Misztal argues that there is no fixed relationship between the formal and informal, and that therefore the important issue that demands attention is how each society finds its own mixture of rule-bound formality and rule-independent informality.[9]

In spite of the richness in informal institutions in the region, literature on MENA politics takes little account of informal institutions and informal politics. This is due to the difficulty for the scholar to penetrate into the unwritten codes, traditions and networks. Above mentioned, this article attempts to discuss Islamic civil society organizations in general, Islamic welfare organizations in particular as among major political actors in the region. The brief review of the study of relations between informal politics and state structures will be followed by the analyses of cases from Egypt and Jordan.

Informal Politics and the State

Since 1990s, the sovereignty and near supremacy of the state have been challenged. The contemporary world order consists of different political groupings which do not fit within the accepted categories of nation-state. These groups have been evolving in ways which do not match the general standards of political and economic development.[10] For example, in Lebanon, where the central state has been comparatively weak for decades, the political culture associated with the various confessional communities as informal political groups. During the 1980s and 1990s many groups in Israel employed initiatives to create alternatives to different governmental services. These initiatives created the grounds for evolution of substitutive informal institutions. The existence of these actors other than the nation-states poses a challenge to the traditional concepts of the world order and the very fabric of the state system. Furthermore many of these political groups operate across boundaries. What links these groupings and movements are a series of political, cultural, social and economic attributes associated with the type of non-state informal entities.[11]

Globalisation, the quest for democracy and new processes of collective identification have enabled people to become increasingly aware of the social divisions within states. Hence, various ethnic, regional, and associational identities have challenged the state. These identities have political overtones with cultural, economic or ideological arguments. As a consequent of these processes, a vast number of non-state organisations have appeared to challenge the formal structures of the state system. Among all, some religious organisations invoke loyalties never achieved by a nation-state.

In the less consolidated nation-states, competitors to the established order can be located within informal political groups, many of which are organised by people who do not recognise the state's supremacy. While there is an academic interest about these political groups and some information about the way in which they operate, their political significance has not yet been fully analysed. Furthermore there is no adequate political theory to account for these trends within contemporary societies.

Political scientists have focused their attention to institutionally recognised actors and processes, such as political parties, governments and elections. Thus, a gap exists in the study of the relations between formal and informal political structures. In most of the contemporary political systems there is a shift in the nature and form of political engagement. Rates of participation in the formal politics are getting lower and stagnant, while citizens' distrust of politics, politicians and political institutions is higher than as it was ever be. This reflects in popular disaffection and anger towards formal political institutions. In his book "Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust" Pierre Rosanvallon, attempts to fill this gap by underlining the growing importance of non-conventional forms and actors of political life. Rosanvallon argues that while some conventional forms of participation are declining, protest activities are rising. According to Rosanvallon, the civic vigilance that social movements exert is political, and is essential to the development of a democracy of expression.[12] According to Rosanvallon a society has capabilities to resist the "positive sovereignty" of formal political institutions with the "negative sovereignty" of civil society.[13] The reservoir of mistrust within society can be organized as a "critical sovereignty." Rosanvallon stresses that a democratic society needs the capacity to enforce the democratic norm found in the Justinian code: Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbatur (What touches all should be decided by all).[14] The most difficult and important task of political theory is the diagnosis of broadly recognized problems, framed in such a way that solutions come into focus. In this respect, Rosanvallon names the pathology. He calls it "unpolitical democracy, a term he uses to identify not the lack of either politics or formal democratic institutions but, rather, a condition in which actions cannot be related to common problems, narratives, and rules, such that the people might be said to rule themselves."[15]

Bureaucratic polity theorists, interested in the institutional or formal aspects politics. In this perspective, authority derives from any official position or is sanctioned by law. They often think of power as something derived from official authority. However, power has a strong connotation of legal authority since it is not easy to discriminate strictly between formal and informal power.[16] There exist situations which a man without an official position can exert power in formal political system even though their intervention is not based on law. For example, a businessperson who gives financial support to a political party or military leader to influence the decision-making of the government.

Helmke and Levitsky suggest a research agenda for the study of informal institutions in a comparative perspective and emphasize social and political aspects. Generally, informal politics appears as an alternative to formal structures as a result of three structural conditions: ineffective formal institutions, government failure combined with blocked conventional democratic channels of influence and compliance with the spirit of the formal rules.[17] The effectiveness of the formal political structures is evaluated by the extent to which rules and procedures are complied with in practice. Inefficient provisions of governmental services motivate citizens to adopt alternative strategies.[18] The level of compliance with formal rules is expressed by citizens' interpretation of whether following informal rules is expected to produce a substantively similar or different result than that expected from adherence to formal rules. When citizens view formal and informal rules as converging, there is a high level of compliance with formal rules.

Helmke and Levitsky define informal institutions as "…socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels."[19] Based on this definition, Helmke and Levitsky suggest two dimensions that lead to a fourfold typology of informal political structures. The first dimension is the degree to which formal and informal politics converge. The second dimension is the effectiveness of the relevant formal institutions. Given that there are two categories in each dimension, Helmke and Levitsky reach a fourfold typology of informal politics:

Table 1. Typology of Informal Politics

1. Dimension Effectiveness of Formal Institutions	2. Dimension degree of formal - informal convergence	Relation between Informal & Formal politics
effective	outcomes converge	complementary
effective	outcomes diverge	accommodating
ineffective	outcomes converge	substitutive
ineffective	outcomes diverge	competing

Complementary informal politics address contingencies which are not dealt with in the formal rules, or facilitate the pursuit of individual goals within the formal institutional framework. Accommodating informal politics create incentives to behave in ways that alter the substantive effect of formal rules, but without directly violating them. Substitutive informal politics achieve what formal institutions were designed, but fail. Informal politics get strengthened where state structures are weak or lack authority. Competing informal politics incentives in ways that are incompatible with the formal rules, meaning that to follow one rule, actors must violate another.

In many contexts, informal institutions are more effective than formal ones in shaping political outcome. This is even more true in the Middle East and North Arica context where forms of authoritarian rule and invasive role of bureaucracy in the market are common characteristics of the political systems in the region. The following section will discuss the interactions between formal and informal politics and Islamic civil society organizations in the region as potential agents of change vis-à-vis the formal political structures in the region.

State, Civil Society and Political Change: the Middle East and North Africa

Civil society has become a hot topic in political science. In the literature there exist hundreds of different definitions of civil society. Generally, the term refers to all voluntary institutions and associations that exist outside the state, such as churches, clubs, civic groups, professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations.[20] Civil society activity is supposed to moderate attitudes, promote social interaction, facilitate trust, and increase solidarity and public spiritedness. Participation in civil society allegedly teaches citizens to be engaged.

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of studies on the role of political, economic, social and cultural dynamics in political change. While many of these studies differ on the degree of importance that they attribute to the various forces responsible for the political change, most agree that civil society plays a crucial role in influencing the political system.

Civil society organisations are defined as "self-organising and self-regulating groups with corporate identities that are autonomous from the state."[21] To become politically relevant, and to become agents of change, civil society organisations should have three characteristics: Encompassing and respecting pluralism and diversity; having issue-driven agendas and putting pressure on the state for opening up; and having sufficient powers on their own or, be complemented by other civil society organisations.[22]

In general, civil society cannot overthrow an authoritarian system. To pressurize the state for change, civil society work with what Alfred Stepan calls `political society.' As Stepan defines, political society as the politicization of civil society organisations for political change.[23] For civil society organisations to become agents of political change several conditions must be in place, including "the weakening of the state resulting from its failure to deliver its promises or to fulfil some of its functions; the cultural alienation of the state from society; political effects of economic adjustment and liberalisation; and the existence of social actors able and willing to mobilise various constituents for specific goals ..."[24]

Civil society organisations tend to develop in response to a breakdown in the functions of the state in some specific area. They emerge and organise themselves to satisfy those needs and functions which the state has been unable or unwilling to deliver. By serving as alternative sources of information and communication, civil society organisations may directly challenge the legitimacy of the state and erode its capacity to control society.[25]

Civil society organisations are made up of social actors, who are located strategically in society with their access to communication networks and means of mass mobilisation, and the degree to which they can safeguard their autonomy from the state. The deterioration of the state creates the conditions for the (re)emergence of civil society, but this does not mean that civil society is always competing with formal state structures. As discuss before, not just competing civil society organisations, as agents of informal politics, could not just be competing but also, be complementary, substantive or accommodating.

Given the popularity of the topic in political science in general, it is not surprising that the topic has found its way into Middle Eastern studies as well. Many scholars have interpreted the expansion of civil society activity in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa as reason to be optimistic about the region's chances for political liberalization and even democratization. The development of civil society is seen as a crucial step for a free Middle East.[26]

There exists number of civil society organisations in the Middle East as well as in North Africa. Historically, there have been three civil society organisations in the region that have enjoyed considerable autonomy and independence from the state: the clergy (ulema), tribes and tribal confederacies, and traditional merchants known as the bazaaris. In the Middle East clergymen have guarded their independence from the state and, especially in recent years, have seriously challenged the powers and legitimacy of the political elite.

Most of the Middle Eastern states gained their independence rather late, from the 1920s to the 1940s, and was followed by radical and transformative revolutions throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Nasserist revolution of 1952 in Egypt inspired similar events in Iraq in 1958, in Syria in 1963, in Sudan in 1964 and in Libya in 1969. Meanwhile, populist regimes came to power in the Maghreb following the withdrawal of the French from the region. Beginning with Tunisia and Morocco in 1956 and Algeria in 1962. All these states launched massive campaigns to enhance their control over society by building up structures of modern bureaucracy. State-led capitalism led to the urban classes became directly or indirectly dependent on the state and its patronage. The bureaucratic middle class was also heavily dependent on the state and its pursuit of rentier economic policies.[27] As Cantori points out, the state has legitimised some groups while prohibiting others that consist of associations of physicians, journalists, lawyers and engineers from doing so.[28] This implicit understanding that has emerged between the various social groups and the state has challenged recently in places such as Jordan and Egypt with the rise of Islamist activists to leadership positions within many of the independent and professional associations. Since 1990s a growing variety of autonomous or at least semi-autonomous groups and organisations have appeared in Middle Eastern societies, ranging from religious endowment organisations to private social clubs. It was argued that Middle Eastern leaders are 'facing persistent crises of government,' with old political remedies no longer yielding traditional results.[29] Among all, Islamist movements and Islamist civil society organisations have been gaining power and popular support in the region.

Mainly the nature of civil society's influence is dependent on political context. In the lack of strong and efficient political institutions, rise in civil society activity may deepen political problems rather than mitigate them.[30] This is what has happened in many parts of the Middle East. The expansion of civil society in the Middle East and North Africa is best understood as a reflection a declining effectiveness and legitimacy of states in the region. Civil society has served as the base from which Islamist movements have launched an impressive challenge to the status quo.

Islamist movements and civil society organisations in the region, as opposed to political parties, can espouse their moral and political values without working with the regime. The Islamists have argued that it is nearly impossible to change the political order changing the ideas, values, and attitudes of society. Gradually, most Islamist movements in the region have moved in the direction of establishing political parties. The most important case in point is the Muslim Brotherhood which led the way to the establishment of political parties in most Arab countries. The Brotherhood is active in Egypt. It is permitted to exist as a movement in Egypt but is not allowed to form an official party. Yet, Brotherhood members are permitted to run for elections. The Brotherhood has contested elections regularly in Algeria too as a moderate force compared with the slightly more radical umbrella organization, the Islamic Salvation Front. Parties linked with the Brotherhood are also legally active in politics in Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Yemen. It remains as a movement in other Arab states where political parties are banned. It has banned outright in Syria and Tunisia. In all of these states the Muslim Brotherhood has worked on two key shared goals: liberalization of regimes in all Arab countries, which strengthened the Brotherhood at the polls, and an anti-imperialist agenda of opposing American interventionist policies in the Muslim world.[31]

Besides the politically inclined Brotherhood like Islamist movements, Islamists play a prominent role in civil society organisations in the Middle East and North Africa. The following sections will analyse how the Islamic civil society organisations in Egypt and Jordan, and the challenges they have posed for formal political structures in these countries.

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Beyond Kefaya? Islamic Civil Society Organisations as Agents of Change in Egypt

The latest development that ended up overthrowing Hosni Mubarak, the President of Egypt for the last 30 years, show that Islamists have been playing a prominent role in civil society organizations and their status as rising oppositions has pressed the regime for political change. The Egypt case demonstrates that "the necessary precondition for the rise of Islamism has been the declining efficacy and legitimacy of the Egyptian state."[32] Since the end of 1990s, this development has turned to a successful revolutionary situation. Before 2010, what has occurred in Egypt was a "stalemate in which the existing regime retains political power while ceding substantial control over the societal and cultural spheres to the revolutionary challenger."[33] This stalemate was a result of Islamists' ability to expand their presence in civil society. The expansion of civil society in Egypt and other Middle Eastern and North African countries over recent decades can be considered as a sign of profound political failure, and as an incubator for illiberal radicalism.[34]

Rapid population growth made it difficult for the Egyptian state to live up to the promises it had made to its citizens in return for political support. Economic decline made such promises unsustainable. As a consequent of this decline, by the end of the twentieth century, the Egyptian state had been failed. The state could no longer provide jobs, social services, or a sense of hope to its citizens. The government resisted to the liberalising trends occurring in other parts of the world, and showed authoritarian and repressive tendencies as problems mounted. Hence, the Egyptian state increasingly estranged from the society, and left its citizens with disappointment.

Against this background the contemporary Islamist movement in Egypt emerged. Islamist movements were not be affected by state repression because the state did not want to be seen as attacking religious organizations. In a short time Islamic civil society groups have moved in the political, social, and economic void that the declining Egyptian state left behind. [35]Islamist organizations became the main actors in cultural and community life in Egypt. Islamic civil society organisations have become providers of social welfare services that was supposed to be provided by the state under normal circumstances. Islamic organisations have involved in almost every area of welfare system from health care and housing to education and employment help. Even the ones with no no political agenda highlighted the state's inability to provide such assistance to belittle the government's credibility. As Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, then minister of youth and sport in the Mubarak government, pointed out these groups are "seeking to gain the support of the average Egyptian one by one, inch by inch, through the provision of welfare facilities, Islamic schools, Islamic clinics, technical schools, economic institutions for profit, social insurance, monthly payments for the poor."[36]

In the last decade one of the most notable development in Egyptian civil society was the emergence of Muslim youth organisations. An increasing number of upper middle class young people have started engaging in voluntary social welfare activities. In a short time they formed their own organisations to engage in social welfare activities, but in other ways than many traditional social welfare organisations. Their activities are associated with advocacy and awareness raising aimed at mobilising young people to participate in civil society.[37] To give an example; Resala (Message) began as a student initiative at the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University in 1999 and has become the largest voluntary organisation in the Arab world, with 25 branches and more than 50,000 volunteers. Resala targets poor and underprivileged people all over Egypt and engage in activities such as orphanages, educational programmes, awareness campaigns and food distribution. The volunteers in these Muslim youth organisations are in their 20s or early 30s, and the majority of them are women. They are college students or recent graduates from universities in Cairo, and the vast majority belong to the upper middle class who focuses on reconciling Islam with modern life styles (Sparre 2008). Even though most of these Islamic civil society organisations' activities fall under the category of social welfare, and they are not politically inclined they have succeeded in creating new forms of political awareness particularly among younger Egyptians by underlining the incompetency of the state.

Since the end of 1990s, a new generation has been emerged in Egypt mostly thanks to Islamic civil society organisations which provide platforms for Egyptian society to develop alternatives to the regime. From 2006 on, Mobarak's regime have been confronted by waves of social unrest, but protests remained localised and sporadic. In 2008, movements like 6 April Youth Movement linked social unrest with political demands, and they have played a significant role in the emergence of new instruments of political expression and mobilisation.

Through creating alternative ways and means to solve their social problems themselves, the citizens realised that they want to participate in decision-making as well. Almost 2 million people from students and doctors to the jobless poor gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo to express their opposition to Mobarak's government which has alienated from its people. As civil society organisations' activities prove that just by organising efficiently, as ordinary people, they are able to provide most of the social welfare activities without state intervention. The confidence they gained through civil society activities has helped to change people's perception about the government and the state.

It is not wrong to argue that Islamic civil society organisations play an instrumental role in activating the uprisings in Egypt against the regime. By combining their message with action and offering alternatives to the existing regime, the Islamists have strengthened their standing, hence, they have appealed among different sectors of Egyptian society that feel estranged from the state and betrayed by the government. In Egypt, Islamic civil society organisations challenged dominant patterns of political alienation by promoting a new ethic of civic obligation that mandated participation in the public sphere.

A similar pattern can be seen elsewhere in the Arab world. Just as in Egypt, by 1970s the implicit social contract struck between governments and their citizens began to fall apart. Economic decline set in across much of the region; demographic trends exacerbated economic problems and created a large pool of unemployed, destabilizing urban migrations. States lost popular support by being unable or unwilling to respond to these challenges. In this regard, Islamist groups stepped into the political space thus opened and satisfied the basic economic and social needs of citizens. In the following section, Jordan case will be discussed.

People vs. All the King's Men in Jordan

While the 1952 constitution declares Jordan a constitutional monarchy, the king retains power in the country. Institutions outside constitutional structures namely the royal court and the intelligence services report directly to the king. As a result of the electoral system parliament has a majority of independent members, unaffiliated to any political parties, who represent a range of tribal interests and who provide weak scrutiny of the executive.

Although it is far from being a democracy, Jordan is one of the better off countries among the Middle Eastern and North African states in terms of civil and political liberties. In Jordan, political parties are legal, parliamentary elections are held regularly and the reform process started in 1989 brought positive changes.

In general, compare with the other Middle Eastern and North African countries, the Jordanian civil society organizations enjoy one of the most favourable political environment for participating in political liberalization of Jordan. For example, the Charter on Civil Liberties (*mithaq*), written in 1989 by a committee which included major Jordanian civil society groups, and the National Charter, which sets guidelines for political party activity and affirms the state's commitment to rule of law and political pluralism. The Jordan First campaign was launched in October 2002 by King Abdullah. The campaign intended for a unified society with sense of loyalty to their homeland, and pride in their Jordanian, Arab and Islamic identity. With the Jordan First campaign King Abdullah invited civil society institutions and the private sector to increase their contributions in building a modern state through focusing on achieving economic, social,

and political development, fighting unemployment, and improving the standard of living. The campaign calls upon the government to construct an atmosphere of tolerance and democracy.[38] However, the picture is not all rosy. There exist civil society organisations and initiatives that were closed for advocated political changes. Polls show that 74.6 percent of Jordanians fear punishment or retribution by the authorities for criticising the government.[39]

The right of assembly is restricted through the requirement of prior consent for all public meetings. The regime also interferes with the activities of non-state actors (professional associations, NGOs, not-for-profit companies) which are not allowed to be involved in 'political' issues. In 1989 Jordan initiated a political reform process, which began with the holding of parliamentary elections, which had been postponed since 1967. A National Charter for the expansion of political freedoms and the space for civil society was declared in exchange for recognition of the legitimacy of the monarchy. However King Hussein was quick to undermine the reforms. Until King Hussein's death in February 1999, liberalisation was used as an excuse of reducing opposition to unpopular economic policies. Political reform had been initiated, not as an end in itself but rather as a strategy for regime survival under the pressures of economic discontent derived from the International Monetary Fund. Since then, repeated commitments by King Abdullah and his government to democratic reforms have not been fully implemented.

The deteriorating regional situation and continuing economic problems have pushed King Abdullah to clamp down on political and civil liberties and rely on the pervasive role of the security services. The situation is best described as "one of highly regulated freedoms within specific 'red lines' with close monitoring and regulation increasing notably in the past five years."[40] In 1999 King Abdullah's accession to the throne intensified expectations for political reform. The king prioritised administrative reform and the fight against corruption in the public sector. Security concerns dominated the agenda and brought about restrictions on political activity. Between June 2001 and June 2003, King Abdullah issued 211 provisional laws and amendments, many of which constituted a reversal in civil and political liberties, which poses challenges to successive reform initiatives.[41] Thus, various reform initiatives have failed to be implemented as a result of the resistance of status quo forces among the ruling elite.

In Jordan, there is a growing vibrancy in the civic realm, nevertheless, most observers agree that what has been occurring in Jordan is a state-led process of "managed liberalisation."[42] This arrangement and the implicit understanding that has emerged between the various social and political groups and the state, has come under pressure in recent years in Jordan with the rise of Islamic groups and activists. For a long time Jordanian government dealt with these challenges by reducing the overall significance of their oppositional statements.[43]

Against the backdrop of these circumstances, many Jordanians view their formal political system as corrupt, illegitimate and authoritarian. They have no confidence that official politics could provide any solutions to the country's problems. The stalemate between the state and society, civil society organisations in general, Islamic welfare organisations in particular have attempted to fill the gap. In this respect there are more than 800 social welfare organisations in Jordan, the majority of which are explicitly religious. The emergence of an educated middle class has led to more participatory organisational structures and practices in many civil society organisations.

These social welfare organisations reflect the depoliticised character of Jordanian civil society. According to the Jordanian law, no civil society organisation is allowed to engage in politics. Most social welfare organisations are clear of explicitly political activities. Yet, despite their apolitical nature, these organisations are highly political. As Petersen argues these organisations "provide a space for activism and participation, thereby perhaps facilitating change and reform, albeit at other levels and in other ways than the formal political system."[44]

Perhaps not as strong as in Egypt, a bottom-up civil movement has been developing in Jordan. Jordan was not immune from the popular protests in the region. The country has been hit by by weeks of street protests over prices and political reforms in the wake of demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt. To pacify the growing popular anger King Abdullah fired the government in

February 2010, and named a new prime minister who he said responsible for enacting true political reforms. Most Jordanians appear to support their monarchy, though they have sought a new government. Jordanian demonstrators have also called for a change in the constitution to enable the people to elect their prime minister, rather than having the government's day-to-day head appointed by the king.

Conclusion: Islamic Civil Society Organisations as agents of change in the Middle East and North Africa

Many people in the Middle East and North Africa have no trust in the formal political system and they do not see it as a relevant tool for change. Therefore, potential agents of political change must be found outside this system, for instance among the large group of informal organisations in the region. In this article it is argued that when identifying potential forces for reform and development in the Middle East, we should turn our attention to other actors than the formal ones. Furthermore, we must take into consideration civil society organisations in which Islam plays an important role. In countries such as Egypt and Jordan, formal political participation is not an option for the vast majority of people. In addition, the number of advocacy organisations is small and their influence relatively weak, and due to their secularist approach, advocacy organisations are not being able to enjoy popular support. Instead, both moral and financial support is given to Islamic civil society organisations working within the field of social welfare, focusing solely on the provision of basic necessities to the poor.

According to Rosanvallon a society has capabilities to resist the "positive sovereignty" of formal political institutions with the "negative sovereignty" of civil society. The mistrust within society organized as a "critical sovereignty."[45] Free from the pressures of the regimes, which has left the social and cultural domain to Islamic civil society organisations, these organisations are successful in providing social services to people. Going back to the typology of relations between informal and formal institutions, Islamic civil society organisations have started their missions in 1990s as substitutive to the state. By the end of 2010, these organisations challenged the formal political organisations and appear as one of the main competitor to the state. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s the regime in Egypt have experienced a downfall and alienated from its people. At this point, Islamic civil society organisations has attracted popular support and strengthened as an actor of change in Egypt. On the other hand, despite the freer environment for civil society organisations, these actors were not that successful to bring about a regime change in Jordan.

Both cases confirm Conrad's argument of social groups who are alienated from the formal political structures are organised in informal political structures. According to Conrad informality tries to overcome rational, political processes where they seem to become unbearable, violate individual notions of fairness or create an atmosphere of social indifference.[46] Both in Egypt and Jordan informal political behaviour can be described as an "action of reaction" to formal political institutions.

NOTES

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[2] *Ibid.*, 259.

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