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# **Democracy in the Arab World**

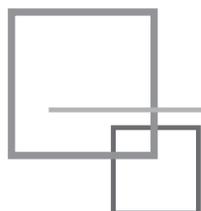
## **An overview of the International IDEA Project (2003 – 2004)**

*This report is based on the outcome of a project carried out by International IDEA, in cooperation with the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), aimed at discussing democratic reform in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen. The project was made possible thanks to a generous grant from the Government of Germany, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.*

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## Summary

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- This report is the synthesis of the findings from a project to promote discussion on democratic reform in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen.
- The aim of the project has been to contribute comparative analysis and information on good practice so as to enrich debate on democratic reform in the three countries. At the same time, the project has sought to develop initial recommendations for consideration by various stakeholders that may also be valid for other Arab countries engaged in democratic transition, or for the international community that is interested in supporting the process of reform in the Arab world.
- The project has focused on three interconnected themes seen as entry points to help establish a reform-oriented agenda: electoral system reform, the political participation of women and the development of political parties.
- The challenges, opportunities and recommendations identified in the report are the result of the work of research teams in each of the three countries together with the contributions made during the regional meetings organized by the project.
- Regarding **electoral processes**, recommendations to governments and national stakeholders include the need for greater independence and professionalism in election administration, systematic authorization for domestic election observation, the establishment of mechanisms for the resolution of electoral disputes, equal access to the media for political parties and some regulation of campaign financing. On electoral system design, the introduction of mixed electoral systems is suggested so as to improve

representation and legitimacy. There should be broad national debate on electoral reform as the best way to achieve consensus.

- To enhance **the political participation of women**, it is recommended to governments and national stakeholders that more serious consideration be given to the potential of electoral systems, as well as to affirmative measures and gender quotas for political parties and other institutions. Gender issues are best promoted through specific structures inside government as well as specific public institutions such as an ombudsperson on discrimination against women. Civil society should gender-mainstream its programmes and regional networks and alliances built to support the gender dimension in democratization agendas.
- To enhance the **development of political parties** as effective actors in democratization, it is proposed that political party law should be modernized and stronger guarantees of freedom of association should be established. In the short term, parties should move to democratize themselves, whether or not legislation is used. Inter-party dialogue should be facilitated at regional and national levels.
- There are distinct opportunities for democratization in the region. However, each country needs sufficient space and time to develop its own reform agenda and democratization strategy and to craft its own democratic institutions according to its particular cultural, political and historical circumstances.
- For a successful engagement in support of democratization, international actors need to develop credibility by establishing collaboration based on genuine dialogue and long-term commitment, avoiding value judgements and a priori positions regarding democracy.

# 1

## IDEA's Project on Democracy in the Arab World

Since its foundation in 1995,<sup>1</sup> International IDEA (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) has been working towards assisting democracy worldwide. Although no 'wave of democracy' has swept over the Arab region, many important developments in the direction of political reform and modernization are taking place and may well gather further momentum for securing peace, prosperity and democracy in the near future.

### Objectives

The critical challenges facing democratization in the Arab world reflect themes that are central to IDEA's work in general—the conduct of free and fair elections, the political inclusion of women, and the functioning of political parties. A regional perspective is crucial to understanding the trends in democracy in the Arab world. IDEA's efforts aim to provide a forum for dialogue within and between Arab countries, seeking to identify and establish good democratic practice in the region.

IDEA's work in the Arab world started in 1998 through a number of exploratory missions, culminating in a regional conference in Stockholm in 1999. A follow-up in the form of a project became possible in late 2002 with funding from the Government of Germany.

The objective of the project has been to contribute comparative analysis of and information on good practice in democratization in order to enrich debate about democratic reform in

<sup>1</sup> IDEA has currently 23 members representing democracies on all continents: Australia, Barbados, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, Cape Verde, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, Germany, India, Mauritius, Mexico, Namibia, the Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and Uruguay. Two countries are observers: Switzerland and Japan. IDEA also has four associate members: the International Press Institute (IPI), Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights (IHR) and Transparency International (TI).

Egypt, Jordan and Yemen. It has aimed to identify the main challenges and opportunities for reform that may also be valid for other Arab countries engaged in democratic transition or for the international community that is interested in supporting the process of reform in the Arab world. The project has focused on the factors that will contribute to support a reform-oriented agenda, using as entry points the issues of electoral system reform, the political participation of women and the development of political parties.

## Organization

To carry out the project, IDEA contracted a regional coordinator, based in Beirut, thus ensuring a presence on the ground in the region. The project, supervised by IDEA from Stockholm by a programme manager, was carried out by the coordinator working in partnership with the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND).

The project was self-standing but intended as the preparation for a longer and deeper process of dialogue within the three countries concerned. It comprised two complementary types of activity in the initial phase: at the regional level there was research and discussion on electoral issues; and at the national level there was research and the beginnings of a more in-depth dialogue on women's political participation and political parties, as well as electoral issues.

On electoral issues, case studies from Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as from the three focus countries, were prepared by local experts on many aspects, including the links between electoral processes and political parties, civil society, minorities, women, the media, and election funding and monitoring. Regional-level conferences were then held in Jordan (in collaboration with the The Jordan Institute of Diplomacy) and Egypt (in collaboration with Cairo University), in July and August 2003, with the aim of mapping out the most urgent areas for reform and preparing policy recommendations as a basis for further debate. The Jordan seminar was very much focused on the issue of election quotas for women. The Cairo seminar, in contrast, concentrated more on the role of Islamists in elections and the place of minorities, such as the Copts in Egypt.

At national level in the three focus countries, IDEA set up teams of experts representing different viewpoints who carried out in-depth studies of electoral reform, gender in politics and the functioning of political parties, consulting various local stakeholders. The three expert teams were brought together at a workshop in Beirut in October 2003 to review the preliminary conclusions and help in drawing up the country reports.

## 2

## The Political Context

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Internal pressures and advocacy for change have raised awareness and precipitated debates about the nature and need for reform processes in many Arab countries. Such debates have drawn in a diverse range of groups articulating interests and defining their own political programmes. In this context, electoral processes, women's participation and political parties have emerged as central issues in political reform agendas in the Arab world.

The establishment in the mid-1990s of pan-Arab and transnational satellite television and radio channels widened space for debate that was not subject to national-level restrictions and censorship. In addition, the ratification by many Arab governments of international conventions related to political and economic reforms and the abolition of all forms of discrimination against women have offered new leverage for change. Demographic trends (60 per cent of the population in these countries is under adult age) are giving added impetus to demands for further economic and political reform.

As a result, many reforms have been introduced in countries like Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, while political openness has been developing in Yemen. Advances continue in Jordan and Morocco, where reforms were already in progress. Despite the existence of relative freedoms, Egypt, the largest Arab country (population 70 million) remains under emergency law, in place since 1981.

The first United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) (2002), prepared by Arab scholars and experts, identified the three most important development challenges facing the Arab world as deficits in knowledge, freedom, and women's empowerment. In the conclusions of the AHDR—echoed in the declarations of many Arab reformers and regional networks—the way forward in Arab countries is seen as lying through 'promoting good governance' and 'reforming the state institutions, and activating the voice of the people'. Emphasis was placed on:

- comprehensive political representation in effective legislatures that are based on free, honest, efficient and regular elections;
- legal and administrative procedures which guarantee citizens' rights and are compatible with fundamental human rights, particularly the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association for all; and
- women's participation in political, economic and other societal institutions.

By focusing on electoral systems and processes, women's participation and political parties, IDEA's project on Democracy in the Arab World, as defined in the second half of 2002, was directly related to these themes and to the reform agendas being elaborated in the three focus countries, Egypt, Yemen and Jordan.

The second AHDR (2003) has since focused on one of the three challenges identified in 2002—the building of a knowledge society. It acknowledges that since 2002 there has been some progress in the advancement of women and in some aspects of popular participation, 'yet these bright spots, accompanied briefly by dawning awareness of the need for reform, were partly eclipsed by new setbacks in the area of freedom of opinion, expression and association'. The need for extensive dialogue and consensus building around agendas for political reform is more important than ever. It is hoped that the IDEA project can contribute to this process.

# 3

## Specific Themes

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### 3.1. Electoral Laws and Systems

#### *Main Findings*

IDEA's project started shortly after elections in Jordan and Yemen. However, legislative elections are not of long standing in many Arab countries. They are a new phenomenon in some Gulf states (for example, Bahrain and Qatar) and have taken place only intermittently in the Mashreq and the Maghreb because of political instability, emergency laws, and regional and internal conflicts and disputes (for example, in Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria). They have taken place and are taking place in many instances without real or fully functioning democratic party systems (Iraq, Syria, Tunisia) or without the participation of women (Kuwait). With the possible exception of Morocco, few legislative elections in the Arab world have led to elected bodies that have produced both an effective government and an effective opposition. The dominance of the executive authority over political life in most Arab countries and the absence of the concepts of accountability and monitoring tend to confine legislative bodies to a somewhat marginal role, although they can provide a significant indicator of confidence in the ruling powers.

Nonetheless, parliamentary elections remain an important event, and there is scope to support change in the culture and approach adopted by those who participate in them. These elections can be exploited to present new ideas and political programmes, and to try to offset the decline in participation of some segments of the population in public life and political work.

Egypt, Jordan and Yemen have different electoral systems. In Egypt, most members of parliament are elected in districts that have two seats each, using a two-round majority/plurality system. In Jordan, the system used in recent years has involved voters voting for

one candidate only, with electoral districts of varying sizes, from one member upwards. The candidates receiving the largest number of votes in each district emerge victorious. In Yemen, the first-past-the-post system - simple plurality in single-member electoral districts - is in use. This electoral system produced an imbalance in the 2003 election between votes obtained by parties and their representation in the parliament, with the government party's 58 per cent of the vote translated into 76 per cent of the seats.

Electoral systems are indissolubly linked with the form of political institutions and political party systems, and these three countries all illustrate this. Each country has chosen an electoral system that might not be the ideal one for its political life, as is widely recognized in discussions about democratic reform. It is thus important to study these systems and other legal procedures connected with elections when debating change and reform.

In all three countries, there are calls for minor and major reforms of the electoral systems and laws. Some relate to the electoral system chosen and others address the set-up of the legislature or the balance between the chambers of the legislature. In Jordan and Yemen, politicians and civil society actors are calling for a new electoral law that would ensure better political representation and fairer participation in the parliament. They are also proposing mechanisms that can strengthen civil identities over tribal, family and communitarian identities. In Egypt, reformers are more worried by the role of money and the media in elections and think that reforms should make the electoral process more transparent and inclusive of different political interests. What seems most important is to continue an informed discussion of different options that would help to establish legislatures which have both the capacity to do their work efficiently and the breadth of representation which is accepted by the public as balanced and fair, and therefore legitimate.

### ***Recommendations***

The following initial recommendations are designed to facilitate further discussion.

- a) **The creation of independent electoral management bodies would enhance the credibility of elections.** In Egypt and Jordan, there are many proposals from various sides stressing the importance of having an independent national body to administer elections, although there are different views about what the exact set-up of this body should be. Apart from the Palestinian Election Commission, Yemen is the only country in the Arab world that has an independent electoral management body (EMB) which has played a positive role in the evolution of electoral democracy in the country. It is important to enhance electoral professionalism in the region, and exchange of ideas between election administrators should be supported between countries. International IDEA's wider EMB network can be expanded to bring together Arab election administrators at a regional level.

- b) **Mixed electoral systems may improve representation and legitimacy.** In all three countries there have been calls for reform of the electoral systems, and some analysts advocate mixed systems. This is often proposed with a view to ensuring a wider representation and a more proportional reflection of the election results in the elected chamber. It is suggested that voting on political party lists (one of the two components of a mixed system) will strengthen the role of political parties. Depending on how parties form and develop, it may provide the opportunity for political parties to learn over time how to put forward platforms that are more in tune with the hopes of their electors, and for citizens to make electoral choices based on policies rather than primarily on personality.
- c) **Re-districting is necessary to improve fairness in the short term.** While it has been pointed out that the electoral systems have to be changed in the longer term, there is a more pressing need to review the electoral districts so that the number of seats in each electoral district better reflects the size of the population. Any positive step in this direction should be welcome, while waiting for a more comprehensive review.
- d) **Upper houses need gradual reform.** In all three countries there is some support for a bicameral legislature in connection with proposed mixed electoral systems. At present, the members of the equivalent of an upper house are normally appointed by the government, king or president. The system of appointing members of the upper house should gradually be phased out in favour of public election of the members, with the objective of making the upper houses fully democratic in the longer term.
- e) **Attention needs to be focused on the media and financial regulations.** It has been proposed that election law should, at a minimum, give all candidates access to the state media (particularly radio and television) to present their platforms or position free of charge. As elsewhere, party and campaign financing is a concern in the democratic process, the aim being to maintain as far as possible a level playing field and avoid undue influence of moneyed interests. The Arab countries should participate in regional and global discussions on the subject and develop their own approach to controlling election advertising and the financing of campaigns.
- f) **National election monitoring should be viewed as positive.** It is important to allow national independent organizations and civil society to freely monitor the various phases of an election process, especially when doubts surround the fairness, transparency and neutrality of elections. National observation of elections is not alien to the Arab world (civil society organizations are permitted to observe elections in Yemen, Morocco, Lebanon and Palestine) and Arab states should see national observation as a key element to safeguard the reputation of the elected government, its legitimacy and the freeness and fairness of the elections. The non-governmental organization (NGO) community

could be encouraged to campaign for its systematic right to observe elections at national and local level.

- g) **Sanctions for electoral violations should be adopted and implemented.** In all three countries, frustration has been aired at the fact that the sanctions that do exist are seldom applied to those who are guilty of infractions of the electoral law. Another crucial element is to ensure that there is an independent, open and efficient electoral dispute resolution mechanism (whether through the judiciary or through a special tribunal mechanism) for the administration of the electoral process.
- h) **A wide range of actors in society, inside and outside government, should be involved in the reform debate.** A national forum, comprising government, non-governmental actors and political parties, may be a mechanism for forging consensus on new election laws. In Jordan and Yemen, where parliamentary elections have been held recently, it is a particularly appropriate moment to start a reform process aiming to put in place a consolidated election law that has broad support by the time of the next parliamentary election.

## 3.2. Enhancing Women's Political Participation

### *Main Findings*

Increasing the role and participation of women in public life is central to discussions about the development and democratization of modern states. These debates are indeed central in the Arab world because of the limited opportunities of Arab women compared to those in other parts of the world. Although women constitute more than 50 per cent of the population in each of the Arab states, their participation in the public sphere is minimal. This is perhaps best illustrated by the absence of women from the parliaments. On average, the number of women in parliament does not exceed 6 per cent, and the participation of women in other decision-making bodies is equally low.

However, the minimal political participation of Arab women is widely recognized, and measures to ensure that women play a more active role in public life are now becoming a high priority among Arab women activists and organizations concerned with the advancement of women. The UNDP, together with other national and international actors, has been successful in focusing attention on the importance of women's political participation if Arab countries are to achieve their full development potential. The UNDP Arab Human Development Report of 2002 was instrumental in this regard, noting that the three main obstacles to human development are the deficits related to knowledge, the empowerment of women and freedom.

The three country case studies from Egypt, Jordan and Yemen highlight the fact that the issue of women's political participation in the Arab world is more than an issue of women's rights. It is important to link the issue of women's political participation to the still disputed modernization paradigm, or at least to the prevailing perception among a high proportion of the Arab population that women's rights and democracy are alien imports, and that modernization equates to westernization. This dichotomy may seem stereotypical to many, but it manifests itself nonetheless in discussions and dialogues on democratization, and did so in the course of the International IDEA programme. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the notion of dialogues between the Arab world and the 'West' is but one approach, and that other approaches including promoting dialogues within Arab societies to reach a 'general agreement' about the concepts and foundations that govern the entire political and social project need to be explored.

Regarding the participation of women in the three countries, the comparative overview reveals that there are no legal impediments to women voting and standing for election in any of the three countries. While women are participating more and more in the election process as voters (reflected in the increase in registration levels in all three countries), the number of women elected to parliament in Yemen and Egypt has fallen in recent elections. In Yemen there has been a backward slide in the number of women representatives, with only one woman being elected to the parliament in 2003, meaning that 0.3 per cent of the total number of seats was occupied by a woman—down from two in the previous parliament. In Egypt 2.4 per cent of the representatives elected in 2000 were women, down from 9 per cent in the 1980s. Only Jordan has seen an increase in the representation of women, largely attributable to the women's quota, thanks to which six women were elected to parliament in the 2003 elections (no women were elected in the 1997 election).

There are obvious obstacles that affect the participation of women as candidates. While the pool of candidates for public office is typically more than 50 per cent female at the start of the election process, by the end only a handful of women put themselves forward as candidates, and even fewer are elected. Several researchers and discussants in the dialogue process have noted that it is not necessarily organized Islam that is most alien to women's political participation; more often it is the very traditional structures and traditions of tribes, which are an important factor of social organization in Jordan and Yemen. In highly patriarchal and traditional societies, socialization patterns emphasize politics as a male domain, and many voters view men as better leaders than women. Voting proceeds largely on the basis of tribal affiliation and electors are likely to vote on the basis of their tribal or religious affiliation rather than to follow a political ideology or issue-specific platform.

The three case studies also point to institutional factors such as the nature of the electoral system and the organization of political parties which affect women's political participation. Majority or plurality electoral systems are used in the three countries under discussion—

systems which are widely acknowledged to be detrimental to the election of women compared with a proportional representation system. The presence of women in political parties as members or in influential positions is minimal and often merely token. Women find it difficult to raise the funding needed to compete for election, and political parties tend to view women as ‘vote banks’ rather than as active participants in decision-making bodies. These factors must be considered together with the weak political organization of Arab women in some countries: civil society groups and women’s organizations are not sufficiently mobilized to support women’s candidacies. In the face of these challenges, calls for the implementation of quota systems guaranteeing women’s representation in parliament are increasing in Yemen and Egypt.

In June 2003, Jordan introduced a system of reserved seats for women, but the way in which seats were allocated has resulted in calls for reform. The workshop in Amman a few weeks after the election gave a rich insight on how stakeholders view the law. They are divided between those who think the quota adopted (six seats, or approximately 5 per cent of the seats in the parliament) was not enough, those who believe that quotas without other positive measures will not change the patriarchal structures of the society, and those, even if very few, who think that quotas will only bring in women whose interests are similar to those of the ‘male political class’.

In Yemen, the issue of women’s participation is considered by many as the most important issue in the country because of the very low level of women’s representation in public institutions and processes and the high level of illiteracy among women (the highest in the region, more than 65 per cent of women being illiterate). IDEA’s partner on this theme, the National Council for Women, is lobbying for a quota law, a new educational approach, and encouragement for women candidates in elections. The challenge is extremely long-term as cultural considerations remain a major impediment to change.

In Egypt, where the situation of women has improved in the past few decades in terms of education, health and enrolment in the labour market, the deficit remains in the political participation. Women’s groups and different political movements are pressing for amendments to the law that will end discrimination against women. They are also campaigning to bring about cultural change that can ensure a stronger female presence in institutions. Many are optimistic and believe that this will happen if efforts can be better coordinated.

While some effort has been made to increase women’s political participation in terms of numbers, a further challenge is enhancing the impact of those few women who have braved social, cultural, economic and political barriers to reach positions of significant political clout in decision-making bodies. In the dialogues about the role of women in politics during the course of the IDEA project, it has often been highlighted that women in politics need

support not because they are less competent than men but because there is a tendency for them to be marginalized once inside the system. They are also less likely to have the political experience and networks needed to function within the 'all boys network'. The few women who are elected should be empowered to be able to make a real contribution to politics and policy development.

In conclusion, support for the enhancement of women's political participation must take a multi-pronged approach, and there are actions that need to be taken by the individual states, by civil society and by the international community. In the three countries under consideration, official bodies have been established to promote the empowerment of women, and these bodies have an important role in setting the agenda of reforms that are needed. However, when international organizations and actors take part in the promotion of women's political participation, it is important that the local context is taken into consideration. The best way of doing this is of course to work in partnership with national women's organizations and civil society organizations working on human rights, democracy and women's rights.

### ***Recommendations***

The following initial recommendations are designed to facilitate further discussion.

- a) **The potential of the electoral law as a means to achieve more political participation of women should be recognized.** In the three focus countries of this IDEA project, researchers and commentators have come to the conclusion that a first-past-the-post system works against the inclusion of women. Proportional representation or mixed systems are seen as the remedy. While electoral systems alone do not determine the level of representation of women, they are important because they can be, and regularly are, changed. Compared to the cultural status of women or level of development, electoral rules are more malleable and may offer opportunities for the inclusion of women in the short term. It is important for democracy advocates and women's organizations to familiarize themselves with the issue of electoral reform and to become active participants in such discussions, presenting recommendations on legal arrangements that will enhance the political participation of women. IDEA can provide assistance by sharing experiences from other Arab countries as well as other regions of the world.
- b) **Positive action measures and quotas for women need to be developed and applied to current constitutional and institutional arrangements.** Jordan has recently experimented with quotas, with mixed results. The number of women in the parliament increased but at the same time the women who won seats were not necessarily the most representative of Jordanian women as a whole: one-quarter of the population lives in Amman, yet no woman from Amman was elected to the parliament. Yemen does not have a quota for women in the electoral system, and only one woman holds a seat in the parliament. Egypt was one of the earliest countries in the world to adopt a quota

for women, in the 1970s and 1980s, but this was rescinded in the late 1980s, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of women in parliament. Organizations working to promote democracy and women's political participation need to take a proactive stance on the issue of quotas and positive action, while at the same time raising awareness of and support for such measures. Additionally, in so far as most of the upper houses in the region continue to be appointed by the government, the king or the president, there is obvious scope for more women to be included through the appointment process. There is a role for the international organizations involved in investigating the use of quotas, such as IDEA, as well as local women's groups, to support such initiatives.

- c) **Gender mainstreaming should be pursued with civil society organizations.** Women's movements bear a double burden in that they have to target both state institutions and civil society groups when lobbying for women's issues. Women's organizations find themselves coordinating initiatives with democracy-oriented NGOs while at the same time combating the traditional and patriarchal nature of many of these groups. In providing democracy assistance, the international community could raise more systematically the issues of gender mainstreaming and make it a more prominent feature of capacity-building endeavours for civil society organizations.
- d) **Regional networks and alliances of women, for women, need to be supported.** In Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, as in most of the Arab world, there is a women's movement, with varying degrees of political influence. It is important to promote a transfer of experience and knowledge between women in the region, on various levels. For example, cooperation between women parliamentarians should be encouraged. Cooperation between democracy NGOs with a gender-sensitive agenda is essential so as to increase capacity to articulate viable democratic reform agendas and concrete legislative proposals that will enhance women's political participation. Building advocacy alliances that transcend national borders for international conferences and cooperation is another important instance of this. The democracy assistance community can be of support here in organizing regional exchange programmes and conferences and by translating and disseminating experiences from other regions, in Arabic, at these events and more broadly.
- e) **Specific public institutions and structures can be effective in enhancing the treatment of gender issues and the political participation of women.** In the Yemeni discussion, it was proposed to consider the establishment of a ministry for women's development, to give formal recognition to women's issues and make them more permanent and prominent on the government agenda. Experiences from many countries have shown that such mechanisms have been instrumental in placing women's issues squarely on the political agenda and institution-building processes. The three countries of the IDEA programme have official bodies that are tasked with furthering

women's participation in public life and the development process—a national council for women or equivalent. These bodies are important but there may also be other functions that remain to be institutionalized, for instance, by introducing an ombudsperson on discrimination against women. IDEA could facilitate the exchange of ideas and dialogue at the regional and national levels to assist in identifying appropriate institutional mechanisms.

### **3.3. Political Parties**

#### ***Main Findings***

Parties, as institutions vital for modern democracy, need to be strengthened in many of the newer democracies in order to assume their responsibilities for representing public interests, providing political leadership, ensuring the accountability of government, and consolidating democracy more generally.

In parts of the Arab world, political parties are also important vehicles through which meaning can be given to the concept of citizenship. This role is extremely important in Yemen where the tribal structure of society is a substantial obstacle to modern political organization. National political parties could play a unifying role in a country that has long been divided between northern and southern provinces. This applies also to Jordan, where family and community ties play a similar role to that of the tribes in Yemen. Political parties that can address cross-cutting national issues can assist social integration, thus enhancing stability and counterbalancing other sources of volatility. In Egypt, as elsewhere, well structured and effective political parties are necessary to enable meaningful participation in elections and political institutions and to promote a broadly-based democratic culture that takes divergent social interests into account.

Political parties, therefore, could bring greater stability and inclusiveness, providing a more effective link between the citizen and the government. In none of the three focus countries, however, are parties seen in this light, nor, it would seem, do the parties see themselves or act in this light. Political party life is determined primarily by the attitudes of the ruling regimes and the political environment in which parties operate. The lack of internal party democracy and the weakness of opposition parties are related to the lack of a level playing field for political parties and a generally undeveloped role for parties in the political system.

Each of the Arab countries has also seen its own distinctive evolution of political parties. The political landscape in each country has been determined by a number of socio-economic and political factors, including the legacy of one-party regimes and external factors dating back to the Cold War, as well as constitutional and legal provisions. There is nevertheless

broad consensus that both the external regulatory environment of parties and the internal party bureaucracies need modernization if parties are to play their crucial role in democracy building as avenues for groups in society to articulate and advocate their political agendas.

In Egypt, there is a deep controversy over the much disputed Political Party Law no. 40 of 1977, which is seen by many as imposing unfair constraints on parties and as detrimental to the growth and evolution of political parties. The law obliges parties to conform to certain principles such as the 1955 revolution, socialism and sharia law while at the same time it demands that they should prove that their agenda is distinguishable from those of other parties. The general legal environment also limits freedom of assembly, expression and opinion, and restricts party activity to party headquarters or the party media.

In Jordan, the past still weighs heavily on the party system. Party law is less of an issue, the main challenge being to develop the capacity of parties to play the dynamic role that is required and expected of them. This should ultimately mean a role in the executive branch of government, as indeed is the wish of the state, reflected in the recommendations of the Jordan First initiative. Despite this, some observers note that the prevailing political culture is hostile towards political parties and tends to see them as a threat to the country's security and stability. Yemen's constitution (and its 1994 and 2000 amendments) enshrines party pluralism and gives great freedom for parties to be formed and carry out their activities, even though formal approval is required for a political party to be set up. The problem is rather the lack of regulations to oblige the political parties to operate in a transparent way as membership organizations. What is seen as a crisis of internal party democracy could be tackled by amending the Political Parties Law.

In all the three focus countries, opposition and ruling parties alike are considered to have an internal democratic deficit. One of the main problems parties face is the building of party organization, beginning with units on the lowest level, but it is argued that it is extremely difficult to run an internally democratic party without an open society and sometimes with serious restrictions on opportunities for political mobilization and outreach. A feature that is common in the three countries is that political parties are approved and registered not by an independent judiciary but by a specialized body (in the cases of Yemen and Egypt) or the Minister of the Interior (in Jordan).

### ***Recommendations***

The following initial recommendations are designed to facilitate further discussion.

- a) **The reform of political party law, in accordance with modern democratic practice, should be the subject of a broad public debate.** This would raise sensitive issues about the nature of the political system and the dominant position of the political elites, but it could also focus on the duties and responsibilities of parties, the role of regulation

and public funding, parties' relationship with the legislature and their role in developing government accountability. Legislation for internal party democracy may be appropriate if sufficient guarantees can be incorporated to avoid abuse. Each country will need to take a different path. In Egypt, for example, although some argue that a review of the constitution should be the starting point for a comprehensive political reform process, it is also possible to imagine a more gradual political liberalization that could focus at an early stage on widening the space for political parties.

- b) **Parties should start work on their own internal reform.** There is a prevailing view in the three countries that the political parties must get their internal affairs in order first. While waiting for an opportunity to engage positively and constructively with the government, opposition parties would be wise to spend time on modernizing and democratizing their structures and building coalitions with civil society for democratization and civic education. This applies equally to ruling parties as well: a dynamic and vibrant party in government can indeed set the pace of reform. An important aspect of modernization would be to enhance the political participation of women, possibly by trying to ensure a certain number of women (for instance, 50 per cent) in decision-making bodies in the party. Another important issue for parties is reaching out to young people.
- c) **The inter-party dialogues should be continued, on national and regional levels.** Important steps have already been taken here, for instance, with the setting up of the Coordinating Committee of Parties and Political Forces in Egypt in 1997. While looking for every possible opportunity to make headway at home, parties also benefit from regional exchange and cooperation, sharing experiences and building stronger capacity through transfer of knowledge and best practice between countries and parties. Provided it is scrupulously even-handed, the international community can play a helpful role in terms of organizing and facilitating regional dialogues, conferences and exchange of information between political parties

## 4

# Political Reform in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities

IDEA's country studies indicate three levels of engagement to create change and implement reforms.

- The legal environment: the amendment of or creation of new legislation that can promote women's participation, strengthen political parties and reform electoral processes. This level concerns mainly governments and parliaments, but it also concerns political parties, research centres and other civil society organizations that should create a dialogue space with governments in order to reach consensus on new laws and measures.
- Internal governance and capacity: political parties and women's organizations should develop strategies for change and create alliances in order to give an example that governments could follow. They need to be democratic and representative in order to gain credibility, build confidence and construct a strong public opinion base to support lobbying efforts.
- The social, cultural and economic environment: reforming and opening economic sectors in order to enable more women to join in productive activities; and changing educational curricula to raise awareness of women roles, the importance of political parties, a citizenship culture, and freedom of choice and election. This level also concerns the media and information sectors. The media play a major role in shaping people's minds. Any reform plan should be mirrored by independent and free media where different stakeholders present their views and people choose those who best reflect their interests and values.

## **4.1. Strategies and Needs of Local Reform-minded Groups**

IDEA's partners and local reform-minded groups in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen recommend a strategy consisting of:

- creating national alliances among all reform groups in each field. These alliances can organize campaigns and present concrete proposals for amendments to the law with detailed reform agendas reflecting priorities and time concerns;
- using the available media and educational programmes to promote reform projects and proposals, and to mobilize movements and groups that can increase the democratic pressure on governments and other stakeholders to introduce the desired reforms;
- starting a national dialogue in each country to negotiate roles and responsibilities in implementing reforms, and create partnership between the different sectors of the society to support these reforms; and
- establishing capacity and alliances to support regional and national networks, and forums where groups from different countries can learn from each other's experiences and possibly amplify the impact of their work. Regional collaboration is very important because it will help deepen reform efforts and influence democratic performance at the national level.

## **4.2. The Role of International Institutions and Other External Actors**

The researchers and experts who contributed to IDEA's project were of the view that international institutions could support reform agendas by facilitating dialogue and bringing comparative experiences to the table.

The credibility of these international institutions is a very important factor, and their profile as democracy promoters with no hidden agendas will be critical for effective engagement in the Arab world. Even those governments which are usually sensitive about foreign intervention may be willing to cooperate when the donors and international actors show interest in promoting democracy without a priori positions or value judgments.

The Arab world is at a crossroads. The choice is between on the one hand inertia, as reflected in the present institutional context and the ineffective policies that have produced such substantial development challenges, and on the other hand new efforts to ensure that an Arab Renaissance anchored in human development and democratization will be actively pursued.

Few in the region openly reject reform, but few are pushing consistently for it, even if new initiatives are starting (the latest being the reform and development plan for the Arab League) and more declarations and commitments are made (the latest being the Sana'a declaration on democracy).

International institutions whose mandate is to promote democracy should use this window of opportunity to support the few who are working seriously for change.

Each country needs to make its own choices and craft its own democratic institutions according to its particular cultural, political and historical circumstances. Each country needs sufficient space and time to develop its own reform agenda and democratization strategy. For a successful engagement in support of democratization, international actors need to develop credibility by establishing collaboration based on genuine dialogue and long term commitment.