

The January 25th Uprisings: Through or in Spite of Civil Society?

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Abstract Did the January 25th revolution emanate from civil society? Not if the conventional Western understanding of the term is used, and certainly not if its programmatic association with established organisations is assumed. This article explores the highly complex relationship between the arena we call civil society and the forms of activism we witnessed prior to, during and after the uprisings of January 25th. The article first argues that traditional civic associations did not catalyse the kind of agency that manifested itself in the January 25th uprisings. It suggests that pre-revolutionary associational life in Egypt reflects the presence of a civic rather than a civil society, which manifests itself in the values that the organisations and their leaders uphold. The second argument is that when state restrictions on political space were temporarily relaxed in 2005, those that assumed a civil role were groups and movements that did not organise through the conventional mainstream civic associations that we have come to identify as ‘civil society’. Finally, the article argues that the core group to have instigated the uprisings – the youth – had turned to a virtual participatory arena, precisely because their opportunities for exercising their agency fully were blocked in mainstream civil or civic associations.

1 Introduction

The uprisings that led to the ousting of President Mubarak have left many organisations in a state of confusion over how they should respond to the new political setting, which is highly politicised. Many organisations now realise they need to engage differently. Development organisations realise that they can no longer pursue an apolitical approach to development. Charity organisations previously aligned to the ruling regime need to rethink the terms of their engagement in society, while many associations are now thinking: how do we engage the youth? This article traces some of the historical and political developments influencing the nature and kind of society that we had prior to and after the revolution and how it impacted on the values espoused by leaders and their organisations working in these arenas. It explores how organisations engage politically, and its implications for strengthening civil values in society. It argues that as long as we ignore the core civic associations that represent the majority of organisations on the ground, we will always be working on the fringes.

2 A nascent civil society

Since their establishment in the nineteenth century, Egypt associations have assumed multiple roles in society; for example, contributing to political education and shaping Egypt’s political culture, while some functioned as lobby and interest groups and movements for social advancement, and many acted as the prime agents of raising social awareness and expanding the parameters of democratic space. However, the emergence of such associations and the evolution of organisational life suggest that it was not a cumulative process: state intervention ruptured this process at several junctures, preventing the construction of a deep-rooted civil society capable of supporting and developing a strong society, containing state power, and promoting a civil value system. In contemporary Egypt, the severe political restrictions imposed by a series of authoritarian governments on civil freedoms were compounded by the poor organisational and institutional capacities of most civil society groups and the dominance of a traditional culture. Such factors have all served to turn these organisations and the roles they play into civic rather than civil organisations.

The agenda and activities of civic organisations are strongly tied to traditional components of Egyptian agricultural and tribal society, as well as its modern components.

Civil society is based on social and cultural diversity and is grounded in organisations, leagues, and unofficial coalitions committed to social, cultural, political and economic change through the dissemination of civic values, human rights, civic responsibility and active citizenship (CIDA 2011). Civic society, on the other hand, is largely based on ethnic, racial, and traditional affiliations, which is clear in developing countries where civic organisations often emerge to serve members of a particular tribe or family, or a specific ethnic group. Indeed, it may be said that civic society and its role is an expression of the development of the society in which it operates. Egyptian society possesses a more active civic, rather than civil society in the Western sense of a society that strives to disseminate civic values.

The long history of civic action and its evolution over time helps shed light on why advocacy and rights-based groups were stronger in nineteenth century Egypt than today. The relationship between the state and civil society has been greatly affected by levels of interventionism in relation to both values and roles (Abd el Wahab 2000: 4–9). Moreover, there are other factors that ultimately act as constraints and obstacles impeding the agency of civil society organisations – its constituent organisations and the elite who run them, as well as the surrounding environment and how conducive it is to activism.

Egyptian civic action is distinguished from other areas in the region by its long history, the positive role it played in resisting colonialism and promoting enlightenment, the organisational and functional role it played as part of state policy in the 1950s and 1960s (General Federation of Associations and Private Institutions 1983) and the role it played as the state turned toward political pluralism and economic liberalisation in the 1970s. Currently, many organisations are still nascent but lack autonomy, which is reflected in a lack of financial self-sufficiency, members' non-committal payment of association dues, weak administrative and financial structures, a lack of dedicated employees or qualified volunteers, and minimal rotation of power at the board level.

3 Scoping of civic associations and its asymmetries

Civil society in Egypt evinces two levels of social participation: the small, micro-level, represented by civic associations, and the medium level, which takes the form of professional syndicates and trade unions. The social and economic importance of civic associations is visibly quantitative: a little more than 30,000 of a total of 45,000 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and qualitatively in terms of visibility. In terms of quantity, second to civic associations are cooperatives (production, agricultural, housing, consumer, water), which number 13,162, then clubs and youth centres (5,410), and finally professional and labour unions and the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (46 syndicates in the federation).¹

Civic associations are also more active and visible than other types of organisational forms. Over the last ten years, the number of these associations has grown, as have their socioeconomic contributions, which may increase dependence on them in the near future.

There were 30,214 civic associations in 2010, up from 25,992 in 2009, 18,662 in 2004, and 13,239 in 1991.² It is estimated that in 2004, civic associations served nearly 30 million citizens, according to official statements. Some 3 million Egyptians are members of civic associations, compared to 5 million who are members of professional syndicates and 3.5 million who belong to labour unions (Qandil 2004). This indicates that the growth of civic associations, particularly development associations, was unaffected by the instability of the legislative framework governing civic action for nearly two years, from the issuance of Law 153/1999, which was declared unconstitutional in June 2000, to the issuance of Law 84/2002 which imposed repressive bureaucratic restrictions on non-governmental activity.

A number of asymmetries served to inhibit civic associations from playing a civil or developmental role:

First, the increase in the number of associations starting in the late 1980s is a reflection of the desire to fill the gaps left as the state retreated from some welfare roles, and the emergence of new areas of engagement such as advocacy, the

protection of the environment, income development, and women's and children's issues.

Second, the services offered by social development associations benefited all segments of society – to varying degrees. In a study on the role of civic organisations in combating poverty Dr 'Ali Layla noted that most social groups benefited from these services, either through empowerment or direct aid. In total, 54 per cent of activities were oriented to children, 38.2 per cent to women, 33.2 per cent to youth, 12.3 per cent to the elderly and 9.3 per cent to the disabled (Layla 2002). It is important to note that 'benefit' here refers to objects/recipients of intervention, rather than active subjects participating in the formulation, implementation or evaluation of the initiatives.

Third, the discrepancies in the geographic distribution of associations – with the governorates of Cairo, Giza and Alexandria hosting the largest number of groups, about 29 per cent – is matched by another disparity in the spheres of social action. Indeed, since the emergence of associations, they have focused largely on three areas: (1) social development; (2) cultural, academic and religious services; and (3) social aid. The sector of cultural, academic, and religious services is the largest single sector, accounting for 25.28 per cent of activities, followed by social aid with 21.28 per cent.

Fourth, a comparison of the geographic distribution of associations with the development ranking of governorates indicates no relationship between development status and a greater concentration of associations. This is manifested in the mismatch between associations and the needs of governorates.

Fifth, there is no direct correlation between size of membership and political weight. For example, there are some businessmen's associations that, despite their relatively small membership, have a disproportionately large economic, political, and social impact. The lawyers' syndicate is more active and influential in public life than the teachers' syndicate, although it has fewer members (Abdullah 1995).

By and large, NGOs have had a very limited impact on policy-making, partly due to the political environment, partly due to capacity

deficiencies and partly due to their failure to mobilise through coalition building.

The government welcomed and fostered charitable work as it met needs and strengthened social security and stability in spheres from which the state was retreating. Yet, the government was less encouraging about civic associations' advocacy and development roles (in planning and assessment), as these entailed a critical perspective aimed at policy reform (Abd el Wahab 2000: 5–6). This situation helps to explain partly why they were not prominent as actors in the January revolution.

4 Politicised civic rather than civil engagement

The critical factors in determining the nature of the political role of civil society and its contribution to the January revolution are the contextual restrictions or constraints on society. There are relevant legal and political considerations, namely the government's rejection of any quasi-political roles, even those based on advocacy. This is seen, for example, in its rejection of civil society election monitoring, the exclusion of civic organisations from policymaking circles and the refusal to accept civic organisations as a partner in development. This is embodied in numerous laws (e.g. the NGO law and the trade union law), the freezing of nearly one-quarter of the professional syndicates (eight syndicates), and the controversy over the role of the judges' clubs in political life (see Ali, this *IDS Bulletin*). Most civic associations have no wish to clash with the government and the values they uphold are non-confrontational, as they do not see themselves as having a role of contesting state power or holding it to account. It is thus evident that it is difficult to talk about a clear, influential political role for civic associations in general before or during the January revolution.

From 2005, when political space was relaxed, many parties and political forces, whether pro- or anti-regime also began to use civil society organisations, in particular civic associations, for their own political ends. The most prominent manifestations of this as seen in the 2005 and 2010 elections are outlined below.

Civic associations and some parts of civil society were successfully used to communicate with voters and highlight the candidate's role in

serving his district. This encouraged many independent and party candidates to establish civic associations and organisations linked to themselves or their families. They also sought to connect with the district and its residents by offering aid to charitable associations and social development associations.

The field report of the women's committees in the presidential elections (2005) and parliamentary elections (2005 and 2010), issued by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, revealed that during the elections, civic associations were used politically to support certain National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates. Their financial and material resources and transportation details were made available to these candidates in a flagrant violation of Article 11 of the NGO law. Association resources allocated for other purposes were used to mobilise women, particularly poor women, by exploiting their need to vote. Many poor women and female heads of households who benefit from state services were mobilised to vote, leading to a higher turnout of women, despite general low levels of voter participation. Women registered on the voter roles were given the red voting cards in the week running up to the vote. While this is a positive trend in principle, in this case, the service was limited solely to female members of the NDP (ECWR 2005).

The Muslim Brotherhood used civic associations during the elections. Several Muslim Brotherhood Candidates who won seats maintained links with the branches of civic associations in their electoral districts. Some gave speeches in their mosques, while others supervised or participated in their social or charitable activities, while still others played important roles in these associations' tithing committees (Al-Magid 2008). Through these associations, candidates connected with dozens of hospitals, clinics, orphanages, literacy programmes, training centres and social centres (see Siam, this *IDS Bulletin*).

It is very difficult to separate the overlapping roles of businessmen and their social responsibility from the manipulation of their charitable and social works for political (within parliament) and social gain.

These cases all indicate an increasing politicisation of civic organisations rather than a greater role in fostering civil values. This

negative instrumentalisation of charitable and social work is a way of meeting citizens and winning their votes; or using the capacities and resources of these associations – human resources, international grants and domestic donations – to promote a particular political trend, person or party.

What is argued here is that while political partisanship is undermining the growth of a civil culture, nevertheless organisations do need to have a role in the politics of the country by fostering the values of citizenship. This would mean assuming an indirect political role through youth education, promoting of a rights-based approach to learning and the promotion of participation. These programmes and activities must be based on the foundation of citizenship, without discrimination on political or other grounds.

5 The build up to the revolution through new civil actors rather than civic associations

A number of important political and social groups, such as the Judges Club, assumed prominence when political restrictions on activism were relaxed in 2005. Some civil movements demanded political and civil rights, such as *Kifaya* (Enough), April 6th, and a few professional syndicates. Their activism can be compared with the weak, disinterested performance of the vast majority of Egyptian civic society groups.

During the event itself and the aftermath, it is clear that syndicates and trade unionists played a prominent role in the uprising, followed by several other civil society groups, but in their individual, not organisational, capacity.

The revolution exposed a structural crisis in the relationship between the state and several civil society organisations, namely professional syndicates and labour unions. This crisis was evident in the syndicates' relationships with their bases and with the political regime. The Mubarak regime attempted to control and dominate the professional elite that sat at the top of the syndicate structure through various legal, political, security and professional means, creating a deep rift between the syndicate elite and their professional and labour bases. This stoked a perpetual conflict between the two parties, as a result of which syndicates lost their legitimacy to represent their bases, prompting

the emergence of dozens of independent, parallel professional organisations, such as Engineers Without Custodianship and the March 9th movement (Adli 2011: 135–44), which participated in the January 25th revolution.

Moreover, many professionals took part in the uprising as individuals and citizens, including doctors, artists, teachers and pharmacists, and their demands combined the political and the narrowly professional.

There were differences among the syndicate leadership. Most syndicate leaders supported the former regime and opposed the revolution or were silent about it, while the syndicate boards tended to support the revolution. This provoked a conflict within professional and labour unions that pitted the syndicate heads against the boards and members of the syndicates. This conflict was also bound up with numerous professional, parochial demands that syndicate heads had long been unable to resolve. The best example is the conflict between journalists and Makram Muhammad Ahmad, the head of the Journalists Syndicate and the board, and which eventually led to him stepping down from his position.

Independent or parallel professional organisations also had a strong presence. These organisations supported the revolution, the opposition, and the demand for the overthrow of the regime and its symbols. Demands were also made for union diversity, the dissolution of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, and the founding of a parallel federation. Several new trade syndicates were formed. Thus, union issues were prominent during the January 25th revolution and in subsequent developments. Rather than being forwarded as individual stances, they emerged through clear organisational forms, as trade unions allied with other civil society organisations to oust the regime and build a new system based on the rule of law and institutions. Particularly prominent was the stance of the university faculty clubs: some 1,000 professors organised a large march against the regime on 8 February demanding the ousting of Hani Hilal, then the minister of higher education. The participants included Dr Essam Sharaf, the Prime Minister residing over the transitional government. This highlighted the crisis of legitimacy that existed within most professional syndicates in Egypt (Adli 2011: 144).

5.1 Learning to become a citizen outside the civic/civil space

The January 25th revolution stirred many stagnant waters, and this was accomplished by a generation of politically conscious, educated Egyptian youth. The youth's preference to exercise their agency through a virtual space rather than that of civic association is partly driven by choice, partly by circumstance.

In addition to the age-biased leadership, they considered many of the civic associations as extension of the government. Joining professional syndicates in order to practice a profession or obtain certain services was not an effective tool of youth participation. Regarding the quality of youth representation in civic associations, there is very little youth participation in general assemblies and decision-making positions (e.g. administrative boards). The 45–65 age cohort dominates on both levels; there are only a very few youth members and most of these are in the 25–35 age cohort.

Moreover, young women participate even less in civic associations than young men. Some field studies (Qandil 2007) indicate that women's participation is linked to certain fields, including religious charitable work and some advocacy work, particularly in the sphere of women and children's rights. In contrast, young men are prevalent in scientific and technological organisations. It should be noted as well that advocacy associations and organisations boast higher rates of youth participation.

It is also important to note that some youth (and other segments of Egyptian society) see foreign funding for advocacy groups as a means to breach Egyptian national security and turn public opinion in support of foreign agendas, and they believe there are double standards for democracy and human rights norms. This perspective has been adopted by some revolutionary youth, and is supported by explicit accusations from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) against several associations that receive funds from abroad and also the beginning of official government investigations into this thorny issue. This is a continuation of the long-standing controversy in Egypt on foreign funding and its relationship with international agendas and interference in domestic affairs. It has cast a dark shadow over

the role of some civic associations, particularly advocacy groups and some youth movements and coalitions (Al-Akhbar 2011).

Religious civic associations (Islamic and Christian) adopt religious discourses as a means of attracting the youth through their religious component. The youth have participated in these associations in various ways, as targets of their services or as volunteers. However, civil and civic associations represented closed spaces for these youth, since they were primarily dominated by the older generation and no change of power.

In such a context, the youth sought to counter this through two main mechanisms: establish their own organisations and/or turn to virtual participation. For example, the increase in the number of associations (30,000 in 2010) over the past five years was accompanied by an increase in the number of youth associations (still small at 311). Of these, 60 per cent were established between 2003 and 2006. This indicates a growing desire and awareness among youth to establish and run their organisations far from the dominance of the older generation (Arab Network of Civic Organizations 2006).

In contrast, virtual participation enabled them to create parallel arenas of engagement: through social networks, joining initiatives and creating unorganised, unofficial groups as a means to participate in society and exercise civic responsibility.

6 Conclusion

In post-Mubarak Egypt, there is a very strong political society and a very weak civil society. The political configurations are such that political forces, groups and parties are vying for power, in particular in a context where all are preparing for the upcoming elections that will give shape to the new political landscape of Egypt. We saw manifestations of this already in the constitutional referendum of March 2011, whereby civic associations with a religious orientation, whether Muslim or Christian, sought to influence citizens' voting preferences. The instrumentalisation of civic associations will also be one of the principle ways in which individual candidates, who were formerly part of the Mubarak regime, will seek to reach out to citizens, given that they can no longer rely on the former ruling NDP to prop them up. It is likely that all political forces including religious,

liberal and leftist parties, the April 6th movement, and the March 9th movement, will use civic associations as bridges for outreach. In the process, they are likely to expand the scope of action and influence of civic organisations in the coming elections to the extent that they will play overtly political roles during elections.

The fact that many civic associations will become deeply entrenched in partisan political activism will undermine its ability to play a broader role in strengthening civic values in society. Consequently, it seems that civil society is not up to fulfilling its role as a prime agent for reform and change. For it to assume such a role requires that major civic associations (some 4,000 associations) play a greater role in setting the agenda. This requires collective action through building umbrella organisations that encompass smaller associations. It also requires the formation of coalitions and networks that disseminate a civic culture and values, both within and between institutions. The need for a reorganised civil society demands a greater degree of cooperation and linkage between civic organisations (represented by civic leagues, civic associations, etc.) and civil society groups.

This cooperation should integrate the vertical role played by civil society organisations (that focus on policy influence) with the horizontal role of civic associations. Without such integration, it is difficult to imagine an effective role for civic associations – where charitable and welfare activities still account for 75 per cent of their activities – in development, good governance, and democracy promotion in the near and long term.

In societies that have not completely modernised, such as Egypt, where the traditional and the modern still compete, it is preferable to rely on a link between civic and civil societies as the foundation for state–society relations and as a foundation on which to build a vision of the role of society and its responsibilities for issues of development and democracy. The civic concept will provide a more expansive framework to contain civil forces next to rural and traditional forces without inflaming sensitivities or stoking clashes between urban and rural forces and cultures, particularly given the 'ruralisation' of cities seen in many countries around the world, among them Egypt. The migration of rural

communities to cities has entailed the transfer of culture, beliefs, and forms of civic organisation such as traditional leagues. This requires a focus on culture and civic values, fostering a social and cultural environment conducive to democratic practice. Then translating it into a lived, daily reality and harnessing the momentum of some civil society groups, particularly the professional syndicates and labour unions. For example, parallel syndicates that emerged prior to the revolution (teachers, journalists, doctors, and engineers) have begun declaring themselves independent unions, and for the first time, there is a move to establish a farmers' syndicate.

The political manipulation of associations, the prevalence of a philosophy of charitable work geared to needs, and the eschewing of genuine empowerment for all segments of society are all a product of the political regime's desire to fill

the gaps left by its abandonment of social responsibilities, contain popular anger and preserve its legitimacy. The intertwining of economic and political influence has also helped to create an environment inhospitable to civil society. For example, some businessmen have been more prominent in founding civic organisations, funding them, or creating entities to receive funding to serve their own political ends.

We also need to build the institutional capacities of civil society organisations and this in turn requires the injection of new blood into these organisations. Just as the involvement of attorneys in advocacy organisations helped to develop and expand the sphere, the current moment requires the entry of youth cadres and new blood among the elite and activists who work in the civic and civil associations.

Notes

- 1 These numbers were collected by the author from several official sources.
- 2 The number of associations was taken from the Ministry of Social Affairs (1991) and the

data issued by the General Federation of Associations and Private Institutions.

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