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Summary

This paper examines how advocacy, a highly political concept became a depoliticised technocratic buzzword for many donors, international and local NGOs. The focus of the paper is on the top-down introduction of advocacy in the Egyptian context in the 1990s as part of the bid to promote democratisation in the Arab world. It argues that in authoritarian contexts, participatory advocacy is inimical to the inhibitive policy environment and the nature of the political culture in place.

The paper relies on a series of case studies involving donor-state-civil society interfaces in supporting advocacy. It draws in particular on the largest funding scheme to promote advocacy in the country, a USAID initiative involving a consortium of partners. It tracks the transformations that took place in order to convert advocacy into a 'government-friendly' form of engagement and reflects on the inherent tensions for donors backing a politicised form of development that clashes with their foreign policy.

The paper argues that often advocacy NGOs are disembedded from the wider context due to a focus on the policy influence arena where they are expected to elicit change. Insufficient incentives to mobilise a constituency as well as a politically restrictive environment means that sometimes advocacy oriented initiatives or organisations ignore prompts from citizen groups engaged in contentious politics. Many advocacy NGOs engage in an elite way that impacts negatively on policies and on downward accountability towards a weak or non-existent constituency. This not only has implications for their positionality in their contexts but also on the nature of policy demands made as well.

Keywords: advocacy; authoritarianism; democratisation; Egypt; citizen participation; civil society.

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Acknowledgements

Acronyms

ADF	America's Development Foundation
CEDPA	Center for Development and Population Activities
MEPI	Middle East Partnership Initiative
NCW	National Council for Women
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SSI	State Security Investigations
PIE	Prime Implementing Entity
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Advocacy is in vogue in many development circles today. Advocacy like other concepts diffusing mainstream development has become a buzzword, its meaning re-invented and its purpose redefined by donors, international and local NGOs alike. Donors' interest in funding advocacy seems to have increased in contexts of supporting good governance and democratisation programmes. This paper examines the US government's support for introducing advocacy among Egyptian NGOs as part of the wider programme of democracy promotion via strengthening civil society. It sheds light on the tensions in donor support for a politicised form of development that clashes with their foreign policy. Support for advocacy was highly elusive when it was subject to the many ebbs and flows in US foreign policy direction. The paper argues that more participatory oriented forms of advocacy are incompatible with authoritarian contexts where political openings are far and few. US-supported advocacy was top-down, partly because of the inhibitive policy environment and partly because of the nature of the political culture in which the ideas are being diffused. The outcome was a support for NGO engagement in advocacy that was depoliticised and made compatible with different agendas: donors who want to support government-friendly advocacy while appearing to strengthen civil society's efforts in political reforms and recipients of donor funding who wish to dip into the pool of advocacy funding without risking political suicide. In the end, donor-funded advocacy was about distributing vitamin pills to anaemic women and developing a successful strategy for marketing mushrooms. Yet the impact of donor supported top down advocacy was not only that it failed to contest authoritarian rule but that it actually entrenched existing power hierarchies. Engaging in an elitist policy process further strengthened the push to make advocacy led by professional experts with strong political connections. Donors' evaluation of advocacy in terms of attempts to influence policy further exacerbated the tendency for some NGOs to engage in campaigns without the participation of those affected by the issue campaigned for, or without a constituency altogether. In this context, donor policy represented a further disincentive to advocacy NGOs to engage in more participatory forms of social action.

The first part of the paper discusses the inherent conceptual tensions in the people-based frameworks of advocacy and its more professionalised usage in development circles. The section that follows discusses the regional and Egyptian context in which advocacy was exported as well as its susceptibility to the shifts in the US administration's foreign policy. It describes ways in which neither the political culture nor the policy environment were conducive towards overcoming the elitist, depoliticised nature of advocacy. In section three, a case study of the

largest funding scheme to promote advocacy in Egypt is analysed, shedding light on how the original version of the programme was watered down voluntarily, transforming it into a completely different initiative with a very different focus. The outcome, it is argued is funding a fuzzy, lukewarm government friendly kind of advocacy that still failed to win the approval of all sections of the government. Yet it is not only donors who have re-invented people's advocacy, in section four, international and local organisations' dilution and depoliticisation of the term is discussed at length. In section five, the paper argues that advocacy NGOs are disembedded from the wider context and fail to respond to social and political signals from citizen groups that are engaged in contentious politics. Further, it describes ways in which the elitist nature of many advocacy NGOs' engagements has negatively impacted on their choice of policy demand as well as on downward accountability towards a weak or non-existent constituency – a dilemma, that in this context, was only made more acute by donor policies.

The paper draws on an analysis of a series of advocacy campaigns pursued in Egypt since the late 1990s for which the author was personally involved or through the close engagement of informants. The main case study, of the USAID funded NGO Service Center draws on a variety of sources. The main source of information were senior officers working in the Center with whom the author had close association and ties. Interviews with USAID officers, who wished to remain anonymous, provided some critical background information and context, which were then complemented with a mid-term evaluation report on the initiative undertaken for USAID. The paper also draws on an analysis of the political and social dynamics influencing state-civil society relations in Egypt, in particular in the past decade.

1 Professionalising people's advocacy

The use of the word advocacy in the realm of social activism dates back to the late 1980s, but gained momentum in the 1990s when social movements and more radical NGOs sought to directly contest policies, laws, practices and policymaking processes. 'Participatory', 'citizenship', 'people's' advocacy came to the fore. Participatory Advocacy, 'extends the boundaries of public decision-making by engaging civil society groups in policy debates. It is founded on the belief that democratic governance is the task of citizens as well as governments. This type of advocacy aims to expand public space and citizenship' (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002: 28). Advocacy, according to Miller is defined with citizens at its core 'Citizen-centered advocacy is an organized political process that involves the coordinated efforts of civil society to change policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality and exclusion (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002: 28). Public advocacy is similar but the core difference is in its focus on marginalised groups, rather than citizens in general: 'public advocacy is a set of deliberate actions designed to influence public policies or public attitudes in order to empower the marginalized' (Samuel 2007: 616). Despite the nuanced differences between them, the above framings have much in common; first, the centrality of

participation (that people should define the issue or cause for advocacy and they should directly be engaged in the process of seeking change); second, the political nature of contestation, which involved challenging, on one level or another, power relations; third, they were all in some way associated with the quest for social justice and social movements; fourth, they described very context specific experiences and forms of people-state engagements (Clark *et al.* 2002; Cohen *et al.* 2001: 35).

By the late 1990s, advocacy became a buzzword among donors, international and local NGOs (Cornwall 2007: 476). Advocacy, like other buzzwords, is 'densely populated with ideological projects and positions' (Cornwall 2007: 478). The twin ideological projects which characterised the period in which advocacy became popular was good governance and the promotion of democratisation in the South. Advocacy (in a different form) was compatible with both, because in both paradigms, civil society was construed to play a key role in keeping a check on the government, holding it accountable and monitoring its performance. Advocacy was also in theory political, at a time when there was a shift towards recognising the political face of development. As Coates and David point out there was increased shift to advocacy as NGOs and many donors came to 'recognize that several decades of aid projects, even those using improved methodologies for intervention, are neither addressing the determinants of poverty nor alleviating its symptoms on a sufficient scale' (2002: 530). Since policy reform is a very broad arena of engagement, advocacy did not have to be antithetical to neoliberal policies, to the contrary, advocacy could be used as an instrument to endorse more open-market reforms in the South by private sector supporters (see for example the Middle East Partnership Initiative in the next section).

The transformation of advocacy into a buzzword by donors meant that the word still conjured positive connotations of activism, without necessarily retaining its participatory basis or its politically radical nature. In contexts where NGOs are elitist, advocacy could be a set of activities (principally organising campaigns) involving NGO advocates seeking policy change on behalf of a constituency, and in some cases, without a constituency altogether. By focusing on the extent of which advocacy was successful in changing policy, it was possible for donors and NGOs alike to justify its transformation into an activity best performed by experts (especially if it involved seeking legislative change, in which case lawyers and activists with a background in human rights frameworks would be considered those best positioned to engage in advocacy).

The professionalisation of advocacy was also important in appropriating a universal quality to it. Advocacy, in its earlier conceptualisations, was very much about how activists responded to historical and political conjectures in people-state relations. By professionalising advocacy, it is then possible to develop a set of blueprints describing the technical steps involved in doing advocacy. By disengaging with the political nuances and contexts in which advocacy is practiced, advocacy as adopted by donors, becomes very much like other buzzwords which reflect 'the one-size-fits-all development recipes stripped of any engagement with context or culture, politics, power or difference' (Cornwall 2007: 1058). The outcome is that advocacy rather than being an element reflecting a particular approach to eliciting change was hijacked and trivialised into 'quick-fix tools for scaling up impacts' (Samuel undated).

Professionalising and universalising advocacy was also accompanied by its depoliticisation. The idea that advocacy is about contesting the power of institutions and hierarchies posed a dilemma. On the one hand, advocacy provided an excellent opportunity to practically bring politics back into development, on the other, exporting a model which involved strengthening NGOs able to contest authoritarian governments with which donors had geostrategic partnerships. These tensions were particularly well exemplified in the case of US promotion of democratisation in the Middle East, where advocacy promotion was not necessarily always compatible with foreign policy goals. As shown in the next section, the US administration was always cautious, even at the apex of its funding for advocacy in Egypt, to provide unilateral support for NGOs contesting the government. Since 'buzzwords shelter multiple agendas, providing room for maneuver and contestation' (Cornwall 2007: 474), it was possible to continue to claim to be supporting advocacy while transforming its content into something less political, less radical and more professional – certainly, more government-friendly. The transformation of the meaning of advocacy meant that: 'it is being widely and broadly used to signify a sweep of practices ranging from public relations, market research and report writing to lobbying, public interest litigations and civil disobedience ...' (Samuel undated). Engagement in politically contentious activity also proved problematic for international and local NGOs working in politically repressive environments. Many worked in contexts where they were neither afforded the freedom to build constituencies, engage in community mobilisation, nor openly contest government policies. Yet advocacy was where the funding was being directed, and consequently, it was also conveniently appropriated as a buzzword 'appropriated by urban and international elites and increasingly professionalized' (Cornwall 2007: 476).

2 The regional and Egyptian context: advocacy from above

Support for civil society in the Middle East by donors has always been subject to the ebb and flow of foreign policy. Here, some of the highs and lows of civil society support at different phases of the US administration in the past decade are highlighted with a view to exposing the wider political framework within which funding for advocacy and civil society is mediated.

Advocacy was first exported to Egypt via USAID in the late 1990s as part of their promotion of good governance and democracy. First introduced under the Clinton administration, funding for civil society engagement in democracy promotion via advocacy and other interventions was strengthened under the Bush administration through increased allocation of funding for civil society, channeled through USAID. In 2002, the Bush administration launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative, located within the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the US Department of State. MEPI signaled the US government's commitment to endorse economic liberalisation and democratisation through direct engagement: half the projects were run directly by civil society. MEPI had several aims: giving people a voice in their future, supporting quality education, developing economic opportunity

(through the market), empowering women and increasing opportunities for youth. Under giving people a voice in their future, MEPI set out 'developing civil society and reform advocacy to create public conversation, allowing democratic voices to be heard in the political process' as one of its four key areas.[1] The launch of MEPI meant that that funds available for 'advocacy' were greatly increased and channels for their dissemination diversified. Egyptian NGOs were no longer confined to seeking funds through USAID, more funds were now administered by the US embassy in Cairo and by the regional office in Tunisia.

Yet the US government's support for advocacy or any other initiative involving civil society was always unpredictable, shaped predominantly by US foreign policy concerns. Towards the end of the Bush administration, there was yet another swing in US policy against civil society promotion. In Egypt, 'After pushing fairly assertively (and with some success) for reform in Egypt in 2003–2005, the United States dropped the issue just as suddenly in 2006 because its priorities shifted from transformational back to traditional diplomacy to contain regional crises' (Dunne *et al.* 2007: 1). While funding for civil society promotion of democratisation continued, there was strong evidence that the Bush administration's political commitment towards pressing the Egyptian government for improved human rights profile waned.

In 2009, with the Obama government elected into office, there are few indicators that the pendulum has swung back in favour of strengthening local groups and organisations' efforts to elicit political and social reform. In fact, the impression in Cairo is that the Obama administration seemed to have abandoned democracy promotion via civil society strengthening in the Middle East altogether.[2] For 2009, funding for democracy promotion in Egypt was slashed from $50 million to $20 million and much of the cut in funding targeted civil society organisations, in particular human rights groups for whom funding was dropped by about 70 per cent. The State Department conceded to the Egyptian government's demands not to use economic aid to support civil society organisations it did not approve of. Further, Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee inserted $260 million in fresh security assistance for Egypt into a supplemental appropriations bill, along with $50 million for border security. No conditions were attached.[3] The move certainly placates the Mubarak regime, however, other critics of external funding of civil society organisations certainly welcome the move.

The idea of internally promoting democracy via external funding has had its fair share of criticisms in terms of it being a channel for lining the pockets of so-called activists with minimal internal legitimacy and of supporting American right-wing democracy organisations that again, have no grounding in national contexts where they thrive. Nevertheless, a slash in funding also meant reduced funding for organisations engaged in such activities as human rights monitoring and election monitoring for whom donor funding was critical for their survival. Yet the

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1   The other three were improving elections, strengthening free media, promoting the rule of law.

2   Dunne, *Washington Post,* 17 August 2009.

3   *Washington Post,* 7 May 2009, editorial, 'No Questions Asked', p11.

inconsistency of US support for democracy, either politically or through funding has obliterated the potential for any genuine strengthening non-governmental organisations' activism against authoritarian rule. The message that the US and other donors have consistently sent out is that they are not prepared to undermine strategic partnerships with governments in the bid to see through civil society strengthening (Ottaway 2003; Hawthorne 2004; Carothers and Ottaway 2000, 2005).

It is in this highly volatile context that funding advocacy in Egypt must be understood – an instrument tied to foreign policy rather than a means through which civil society can contest government. This paper examines US funding for advocacy at a political moment in which promoting democracy was high on the foreign policy agenda. Advocacy was introduced from above, in a top-down manner that never quite managed to find an indigenous grounding with potential for widespread diffusion.

2.1 Top-down indigenous advocacy?

Participatory forms of advocacy cannot genuinely take root in authoritarian regimes. People's advocacy or more participatory forms of advocacy are premised on initiatives taking place in liberal democratic regimes or in countries undergoing transitions to democracy. A number of assumptions or prerequisites are associated with the democratic or democratising contexts. First, a political culture supportive (or at least not completely repressive) of NGOs playing an oppositional role *vis-à-vis* the government. Second, the policy process is relatively open to citizen engagement. In most authoritarian regimes, the weakness of both these elements inhibits indigenous-inspired forms of participatory advocacy.

The prevalence of liberal democracy or a country undergoing a shift towards democratisation is fundamental, since it assumes a minimal level of political freedom is allowed. This seems to characterise the case studies documenting a process of active citizen engagement with advocacy featuring in the literature. John Samuel's description of people's advocacy in India is marked by the presence of a liberal democracy (undated). Valerie Miller's description of advocacy initiatives in the Philippines, she notes, was only possible in the context of a transition to formal democracy in the eighties which created a political opening for NGO activism (Miller 1994: 2). Blair concludes that the fact that Indonesia lagged behind the Philippines by 15 years, has created an environment in the latter that is more conducive to advocacy activities (Blair 2004: 84). The country case studies of engaged advocacy in South Asia, Central America, East Africa, Southeast Asia and North America explored by Clark *et al.* occur in contexts of relatively democratic or democratising countries (2002). Successful advocacy campaigns in Mexico, Chile, India, Turkey, Morocco and Brazil explored in another initiative also occurred 'in countries that have undergone a process of democratization, offering new opportunities for organized engagement by civil society actors' (Gaventa 2008).

In authoritarian regimes, there may be political moments offering an opportunity for engagement in more participatory forms of advocacy, yet because they are

momentary, often reflecting temporary government responsiveness to international pressure, they are usually not sustained. In authoritarian contexts, the minimal level of freedom required to mobilise citizens or establish constituencies is often severely curbed. Even if the shackles to these freedoms were removed, the controls imposed by authoritarian regimes are so deep seated that it may take time before a political culture more accommodating of civil society's role in oppositional policies, policymaking processes and entrenched power bases develops.

2.2 Political culture

The way in which advocacy is practiced is intrinsically connected to the political culture and political processes that characterise the system of governance in a particular country context. In India for example, there was a historical development in the nature of government and the nature of citizen-government engagement, which allowed for transformation of grassroots social action to one that is amplified and channeled to the national level (Samuel undated). Yet in Egypt, advocacy was introduced in a context of welfare pluralism but not genuine political pluralism, thus the potential for service-providing NGOs to engage in transformative social action was severely inhibited. In the 1990s advocacy was imposed top-down upon civil society organisations most of whom were as far removed as possible from politicised forms of social action.[4] Fifty years of authoritarian rule inhibiting political activism in Egypt has meant that the majority of the 20,000 existing CSOs firmly believe that their activities should be apolitical. A significant proportion of the organisations working on a grassroots level believe that their role is poverty alleviation through collection and disbursement of charity. The minority of organisations engaged in human rights and other more politically oriented activities work under the control and surveillance of the government. The historical rupture with its liberal past in the period up to the 1940s has meant that the prospects of reviving old forms of civil society engagement are virtually impossible (organisations were co-opted or liquidated in the 1950s).

Forms of activism which can be described today as advocacy date as far back as the nineteenth century when Egypt experienced the emergence and development of local organisations in the late 1800s. NGOs lobbied for changes of policies on regulation of civil life, challenged gender laws and policies, and called for reform of the political system. There was no distinction in the work of associations between political and non-political activism. Individuals working in charities could be distributing food and blankets to the poor at one point, and at another, have their halls open to a meeting for the nationalist (for example the nineteenth century renowned religious reformist and nationalist leader Muhammed Abdu, who established one of the first Egyptian NGOs, the Islamic Charitable Association which extended assistance to the poor).[5] There was no contradiction in engaging in service delivery and participating in the political life of the nation, all through the

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4   With the obvious exception of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement with a wide network of
     social service provision that historically has not been consistently removed from politics.

same organisation and via the same individuals. The depoliticisation of civil society organisations and the inhibition of political space for civil society activism occurred in the 1950s. The Nasserite government in Egypt and other nationalist governments that came to power in the Middle East instated a set of inhibitive restrictions on civil society as a whole. In Egypt for example, political parties were abolished, the civil system of Endowments nationalised, censorship imposed on the press, and severe restrictions placed on the religious institutions and NGOs. The functions of supporting the marginalised and poor were transferred to the newly established centralised government. Civil society organisations were closed, co-opted and/or depoliticised in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

When in the 1970s, the centralised state model was replaced with a minimalist one, and the government of Sadat embarked on an economic liberalisation plan, commonly known as the Infitah. Since adopting economic liberalisation, the Egyptian government has embraced welfare pluralism, but not political pluralism. Welfare pluralism replaced the state welfare model institutionalised at the time of Nasser, and thus, opened up the space for the non-profit and private sector involvement. Yet in the light of the absence of political freedom, those providing welfare could only do so on the pre-set apolitical terms.

In response to the opening for NGO provision of services, there was a renewed interest on the part of donors in supporting civil society, in particular the promotion of development NGOs. The model promoted by foreign donors in the 1970s–1990s was more or less of depoliticised development. There was much focus on instilling the principles of grassroots development which is responsive and attuned to people's needs and priorities. A new brand of civil society organisations began to emerge, NGDOs (non-governmental development organisations), that was instrumental in presenting a different model of work with the poor in rural and urban areas. These organisations were mostly foreign-funded and some grew to become intermediary organisations supporting local grassroots associations as well. Like charities and other forms of non-governmental organisations working in Egypt, they could claim that they were not engaged in politics but in helping the marginalised and poor. Moreover, in the 1980s another type of association emerged which was openly political: human rights organisations. While human rights activists professed engagement in support of human rights in a non-partisan framework, the fact that they felt comfortable in engaging in an area that was evidently political may be explained by their backgrounds: many (although not all) were leftist activists for whom activism through political parties was blocked due to government restrictions. Human rights organisations, although established, directed and managed by local citizens, also relied on foreign funding. It can be argued that local human rights organisations were long engaged in advocacy since the 1990s. They used some of the conventional tools of advocacy such as campaigning, lobbying, joining international coalitions and networks and seeking to work with the press although donors spoke about supporting human rights rather than advocacy. Human rights

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5   See for example the *Complete Works of Muhammed Abdu,* Dar el Shoruk publ. Cairo, (2006) (in Arabic).

organisations who had registered as non-profit civil companies rather than as non-governmental organisations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs because of the infeasibility of engaging in work that is considered political, and consequently prohibited for NGOs.

The spirit of depoliticisation of NGO activism that began in the 1950s was institutionalised through multiple channels: a highly restrictive NGO Law, the surveillance of the state security investigations apparatus, and a highly inhibitive Ministry of Social Solidarity (previously named Ministry of Social Affairs) responsible for overseeing all aspects of NGO work. The current NGO Law like that introduced in the 1960s, prohibits activities considered of a political nature. Law 84 of 2000 empowers the Ministry of Social Solidarity to liquidate an NGO at will (Article 42). It also allows the government to co-opt human rights organisations by penalising NGOs not registered with the Ministry – the penalty is a maximum of six months in prison and/or a payment of LE 2000). HRS organisations, who were most likely to be affected by the existing law, criticised the fact that permission must be obtained from the Minister of Social Solidarity before receiving any foreign funds (Article 17). According to the NGO Law, the Ministry retains the right to liquidate an NGO at will if it commits 'a grave violation against the law, public order or public morality'. This allows the ministry to broadly interpret an act that contravenes public order or public morality to prohibit associations from addressing taboo or controversial subjects.

Clark *et al.* suggest that advocacy is most effective when undertaken through coalitions, networks and when linked with social movements. Advocacy for policy change is often disconnected from longer-term efforts of social and economic transformation because 'efforts to influence policies should be more closely connected to social change movements' (2002: 7). Yet Law 84 also prohibits NGOs from joining or participating in international or regional networks without prior permission. Social change movements also have their own context-specific particularities. The only movement with a populist base is the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious movement with political party goals. Kefaya (Enough) is a political movement aimed at putting an end to Mubarak's presidency and the inheritance of power to his son, Gamal Mubarak. While various groups have emerged in the past five years with various political and social reform agendas (freedom of the press, making streets for Egyptians safe, fighting religious sectarianism), none of them could claim to have a broad following to allow it to claim to be a 'social change movement'.

2.3 Visible and invisible policy engagements

Much of the literature on advocacy acknowledges the possibilities of confrontational as well as more soft, subtle, informal means of eliciting change in policy and practice. Yet the assumption underlying strategies of engagement are that they occur in relatively open space. In many authoritarian contexts, the space possible for engaging in policy contestation is not only influenced by the formal channels of influence (parliament, press etc.) but also by 'invisible' actors who play a crucial role in the overall governance of the country as well as the day-to-day practices of NGOs and other civil society organisations. In Egypt, the State

Security Investigations (SSI) Apparatus, the domestic intelligence agency affiliated to the Ministry of Interior, plays an intense yet unpredictable role in governing civil society. The SSI determines the very existence of NGOs, having the authority (unwritten) to prevent the establishment of an NGO, order its closure, determine the kind of activities it is allowed to engage in, and who it can associate with. While officially, these are matters to be regulated by the Ministry of Social Solidarity in its application of the NGO Law, in effect it is the SSI who exercises this power. For example, the New Woman Foundation was an NGO that was active in feminist advocacy since the 1980s. Previously known as the New Woman Center and registered as a non-profit civil company, it was forced to apply for registration in accordance with Law 84. It received a letter from the then Ministry of Social Affairs stating that its application was rejected on security grounds, without giving any explanation of what these were. The New Woman Foundation took the matter to court, and won the case. However in the interim period, it was closed for many months and its status was in limbo, forcing a rupture in its communication with its stakeholders. Moreover, the court decision was not implemented immediately by the executive body.

While the NGO Law stipulates that court arbitration can be sought when an NGO is denied registration or unduly closed, other situations and incidences do not give the NGO the space or right to do so, denying them any opportunity to contest the state security apparatus. For example, NGOs holding public seminars, meetings or any kind of public event must give prior notification and obtain permission from the state security apparatus. While this is not inscribed in the NGO law, it has become common practice through the government's haphazard application of the Emergency Law. There are multiple ways in which the state security apparatus can prevent advocacy activities from taking place. Here, only one is mentioned, namely, the 'regulation' of public outreach events. In some cases, it is the premises upon which an event is taking place. For example, with respect to one association which was established by pro-secularist activists, some of its members wished to hold a one day conference to raise awareness among the public (and the media) about the need for the reform of institutional policies and internal governance of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt (The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the oldest churches following the Eastern Christian traditions in the world and represents the largest denominational Christian minority in Egypt and one of the largest in the Middle East). The state security apparatus refused to allow the organisers to hold the event in a large hall, and they were forced to find a less appropriate venue, thereby influencing their potential for outreach.

Since the state security apparatus acts as a 'shadow' system of governance, it becomes almost impossible to contest their power. When dealing with a government, there are some visible institutions and individuals and some kind of rough guide to the division of powers and where the policies are made and taken. However, when engaging with the state security apparatus, no such knowledge of their structure, their personnel or the decision-making process exists. In effect, it means that NGOs are dealing with an invisible structure that is only accountable to the President personally and whose real scope of power cannot be deciphered or predicted. The scope of state security apparatus involvement in NGOs' activities varies depending on the political moment, the actors, the cause and the likely ripples it may have in the wider context. There is no checklist for ways of

dealing with the state security apparatus or of predicting how they will respond. Other than the national variance, there are all of the above factors (and many more unknown ones) that come into play. While this has not intimidated citizens into abandoning all forms of political contestation nonetheless, the state security's willingness to use the most ruthless of tactics to thwart dissidence as well as more subtle forms of surveillance has often gone beyond expectations and predictions.

Since the state is not a monolithic entity, donors who fund advocacy in Egypt must liaise with different parties in securing support for their work, and as will be shown in the section below, liaising with one government body does not ensure the cooperation of all others.

3 Funding government-friendly advocacy

This section describes the largest ever funding initiative dedicated to promoting advocacy among NGOs in Egypt to this date, it shows how the implementers of the programme willingly and voluntarily reworked what advocacy means, the mechanisms for funding, and the selection of beneficiaries in order to mollify the Ministry of Social Affairs, despite a political agreement signed by the Egyptian government conceding its consensus to the initiative. This is significant in that the implementing agency was not given signals from USAID that bilateral relations are at stake and there was a need to negotiate the terms of its engagement with the authorities, rather, it took the initiative of reworking the programme in order to minimise the potential for any possible conflict to emerge.

The funding of Egypt's (and possibly the entire Middle East's to this date) largest advocacy initiative by USAID shows how all actors involved– donors, implementers, recipients – purport commitment to advocacy, while re-inventing its meaning to something that is in line with their own political agendas. In 1999, the Egyptian government via the Ministry of International Cooperation signed an agreement with USAID for the establishment of the NGO Service Center. The NGO Service Centre was implemented through a Prime Implementing Entity (PIE) comprising Save the Children USA (as the Prime Contractor), America's Development Foundation (ADF) and Infonex (all three American organisations). The funding allocated for the six year project was initially set at $35 million but was later extended to reach almost $40 million ($39,085.576) (Midterm Evaluation, 14 August 2003, 1). The funding for the NGO Service Center was pooled from the USAID's Governance and Democracy Program. The Centre's objective was changed from 'increased civil society organization participation in public decision making' (*ibid.* 21). Significantly, only briefly after its inauguration, its mission was changed to 'capacity of civil society organizations improved to participate in development'. Another important change was that civil society organisations targeted/ allowed to participate were reduced to NGOs. The replacement of the term civil society organisations with non-governmental organisations represented a narrowing of the kind of organisations that could collaborate. According to Egyptian law, non-governmental organisations are those

that are registered with the Ministry of Social Solidarity. Hence the change meant the exclusion of human rights organisations that were registered as civil companies. The change also meant in effect that other types of CSOs such as mosques, churches, trade unions and youth centres (all subject to different government authorities other than the Ministry of Social Solidarity) were excluded. It is ironic that a multi-million dollar centre is established to promote advocacy while excluding all those who have engaged in advocacy locally or whose very mandate is to do so.

With respect to the change in the objective of the NGO Service Centre – namely, from increased public decision making to development, it meant in effect once again a depoliticisation of the nature of the work. It meant a reformulation of the whole ethos of the Centre – from one that will equip NGOs to play a new role in Egyptian public life, namely, advocacy, which involves concerted effort to change the policymaking arena to one which involves their participation in development, which in the Egyptian context had inferences of any community-based initiative that meets people's needs and is sustainable. Business could go on as usual without any contestation of government decisions, policies, laws, since this is how much of development was conventionally practiced.

The change in the NGO Service Centre's objective meant that they were no longer fulfilling the USAID Strategic Objective no 3 which entails 'Increased Citizen Participation in Public Decision-Making'. This is important, because the NGO Service Centre was supposed to be the only USAID initiative on the ground that would be addressing this objective. The NGO Service Centre was expected under the new objective to fulfill instead strategic objective 21: 'Egyptian Initiatives in Governance and Participation Strengthened'. The mid-term evaluation of the Centre suggested that such a change in the strategic objective of the Centre was intended to bring the democracy and governance objectives 'more in harmony with Egyptian political reality' (USAID Mid-term evaluation of the NGO Service Center 2003: 21). They did not see this change as suggesting a radical departure from the original objective of the Centre, and argued that 'the intent of SO3 and its respective IR3, participation in decision-making, would be perceived by the Egyptian government as an overly intrusive role for a donor to play' (*ibid.* 21).

As clearly stated by the USAID evaluation, the significant alteration in the objective of the NGO Service Centre occurred in order to avoid the possibility of antagonising the government. The funding of the NGO Service Centre was symptomatic of the wider problem of donor funding politics in the Middle East: pouring in significant funds under appealing labels such as advocacy and citizen participation, while diluting its practical content of any potential to engage in contentious politics, thereby giving the semblance of democracy promotion, without risking its implications for foreign policy relations. Under the auspices of the NGO Service Centre, hundreds of workshops on the merits of advocacy, the difference between advocacy and development and the methods and tools of doing advocacy were held. Manuals were produced, and appropriate literature published. Yet since the focus was on providing tools rather than contesting policy, the impact on NGO activism very much reflected that. According to USAID's own evaluation, the NGO engagement with advocacy can hardly be associated with policy change. When one chairwoman of an NGO based in Alexandria was asked

about her organisation's involvement in advocacy, she 'touted her organization's impressive achievements in the field of advocacy by pointing to their success in marketing mushrooms, which was one of the NGO's projects' (USAID Mid-term evaluation of the NGO Service Center 2003: 15). Although this change of focus for the Center was identified earlier on in the mid-term evaluation, it continued to characterise its future.

The very organisational hierarchy of the NGO Service Centre made it logistically impossible for this donor-funded agency to support NGOs genuinely interested in advocacy. When the NGO Service Centre was established, two committees were established with the aim of assisting the Centre's activity. The first committee was the NGO Advisory Board comprised of 10 representatives of Egyptian NGOs and which meets regularly with the Centre to monitor its activities. More importantly, is the second committee, the steering committee, chaired by the Minister of Social Affairs and comprised of other governmental officials, two NGO officials, and a member of USAID. According to a former senior employee who worked for the NGO Service Centre, the Minister of Social Affairs had the final say on who is given funding and who not. According to the source, the Minister exercised this power in preventing certain NGOs from being given grants, despite having been approved by the NGO Service Centre and having met their rigorous criteria for eligibility etc. No higher level interventions on the part of USAID were made to limit the Ministry's control over the NGO Service Centre, possibly for political reasons. Despite going to great lengths to appease the government, this was not quite enough to win over all the different actors that play a role in the governance of the country. One former senior officer at the NGO Service Center recalled that at the same time that the Minister was in close engagement with them, the security office at the Ministry (read: State Security Investigations apparatus unit at the Ministry) had sent a letter to all NGOs warning them not to collaborate with the NGO Service Center since it is a suspicious body. The NGO Service Center was then forced to take several measures to affirm its legality before the NGO community. This raises questions as to whether even if a donor voluntarily engages in government-friendly advocacy, will they still be able to influence the political space and its demarcations?

4 Getting the funds and getting by: depoliticising, diluting, and deflecting advocacy

Since advocacy has become popular in funding circles, (in Egypt, popular with USAID, the US State Department under the MEPI initiative as well as by other donors such as the EU), international and local non-governmental organisations working under authoritarian regimes must find means of tapping into these funds without incurring the wrath of the ruling regime. One way for them to do that is to engage with advocacy as a buzzword, by transforming its meaning and essence into something more palatable in the prevalent environment. One of the most common strategies adopted by some development organisations is to use the

word advocacy (fashionable, required by donors) as a buzzword to signify something else. For example, one of the two initiatives that MEPI (Middle East Partnership Initiative) supported in Egypt under the rubric of 'Empowering Women's Organisations' was a programme implemented by Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) (an American NGO working in the area of gender and population activities) in conjunction with the National Council for Women to provide training for women's organisations in four governorates. According to CEDPA, the project aims to 'create and strengthen the capacity of the networks to determine priority issues, develop action agendas, and *advocate* for policy changes that favor women and girls, enhance the capacity of the NCW to organize and manage *advocacy* trainings (for future networks and monitor the activities of these networks' [italics mine] (CEDPA 2005).

There are some key points here of significance. First, the notion that this is a grassroots initiative is deceptive. It is very difficult to make it a grassroots initiative when the central agent for transformation identified in the project is the National Council for Women, which was established by the will of the President and is headed by the First Lady. It also raises questions as to the extent to which there is a genuine mobilisation of women's activists through the hierarchical nature of the framework where members of the NCW are likely to yield power over representatives of local NGOs because of the close association between NCW leaders and the ruling National Democratic Party. Second, by virtue of the central role that the National Council for Women is to play, by default it excluded women's NGOs and other CSO actors that openly contest the government – or are engaged in adversarial politics. It is unclear how NGOs were selected, and to what extent were they participating on an equal par with CEDPA and the NCW branches.

The dilution of the political meaning of advocacy can be inferred from CEDPA's account of their achievements. These include: appealing to the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health to provide medical personnel to conduct blood tests since anaemia rates are high in Fayoum, and soliciting pharmaceutical companies to donate iron folate supplementation for some months, and the purchase of medical equipment for anaemia screening. Also on the list are: promoting change in community values *vis-à-vis* women's political participation in Minya, and helping women acquire voter cards prior to the presidential elections. Other initiatives on the list of achievements include: soliciting the semi-governmental Social Fund for Development to make a grant to be used for microcredit extension to poor women in Fayoum and in Aswan, and generating funds for the production of a newsletter.

While some of the activities are relevant to women's well-being such as fighting anaemia, it is evident that none of the activities involved any change of policy. Sending personnel for a one-off testing of anaemia is not changing the government's policies on health (i.e. cost, availability, outreach). Similarly, having a pharmaceutical company make a hand-out of anaemia related medicine does not alter the company's pricing policies *vis-à-vis* medication. It is more akin to a charitable hand-out. Getting the Social Fund for Development to make a grant to fund microcredit programmes and getting the funds to issue a newsletter are all achievements that are best classified as successful fundraising activities. In this sense, advocacy has become stripped of its political essence.

Equally problematic, are activities that on the surface may appear directly relevant to advocacy because they involve changing behaviours and attitudes, such as change of community attitudes towards women's political participation, but which when analysed in their own political context, tell a very different story. The promotion of women's political participation prior to the presidential elections of 2005 must be assessed in the light of the Egyptian government's desperation to have a high voter turnout in order to render to the international audience the semblance that the requisites for a democratic election are present, and hence the results entailing the re-election of Mubarak are based on the will of the people. Instead of engaging in changing policies that are detrimental to the rights of the marginalised, they are actively supporting deepening the authoritarian regime's semblance of legitimate rule.

5 Disembedded advocacy

One of the recurring themes in the literature on people's advocacy is the tensions in adopting the expertise needed to engage in policy processes without losing the ties of representation and participation of the constituency (Samuel 2002; Miller 1994; Covey 1994). In authoritarian contexts in which donors introduced advocacy from above, many of the NGOs receiving funds to engage in advocacy are often lacking a strong constituency on whose behalf they are making policy demands. In some cases, a constituency is lacking altogether. The power relations between NGOs and the communities in which they thrive speak of hierarchies of all sorts (class, education, gender, religion etc). When the role of community members is limited to being beneficiaries of NGO services, it becomes particularly problematic to assume that they will become the leaders of an advocacy campaign. In such contexts, development organisations wishing to engage in advocacy may find it easier to evade the responsibility of having people-led advocacy or constituency building and contend instead with having evidence-based advocacy. In the latter, NGOs document the voice of the stakeholders and gather data about the issues around which they are mobilising, as use it as evidence to validate the policy change which they are advocating. Since the policy process itself is elitist in many authoritarian contexts, allowing only a closed circle of policymakers and their entourage any influence, participatory advocacy may not be seen as necessary for successfully influencing policy.

The elitist nature of some NGOs also raises questions as to the extent to which they are truly embedded in the socio-political context in which they work. The absence of advocacy NGOs from any pivotal role in the workers' strikes described below shows how, sustained by external funding, they can afford to survive without engaging in the day-to-day struggles where advocacy was needed. Moreover, the kind of advocacy funded by donors serves to perpetuate this further, by evaluating NGOs based on the measures they took to influence policy, rather than how participatory the process was.

In spite of the high level of political repression, there have also been political openings (albeit contained) which have been seized by different actors, unsupported by these advocacy NGOs. Public protests against the American

invasion of Iraq or against the Israeli bombing of Gaza saw thousands of citizens taking to the street. While these were not protests against the government but against a foreign power and hence were not seen as threatening to the regime's political stability, other protests took place recently that were directly against the government. Between 2006–2008, Egypt witnessed some of the largest sustained protests ever in the past 50 or 60 years. Many of these protests were initiated and led by women, whose participation and defiance 'shamed' the men into becoming involved. It was women workers in Mahalla who started the strike in December 2006 and who played a central role in mobilising and sustaining it – this was the mother of all strikes that catalysed a series of strikes that crept across the whole country like matches on fire. Women held sit-ins and 'slept over in the factory despite facing criticism for doing so'.

Hundreds of thousands of workers have taken part in one form of protest or sit-in or another, across whole industrial towns (manufacturing and textiles) as well as across different occupations (civil servants, railway workers, etc). The extent to which they posed a threat to the government is open to deliberation. On the one hand, the thousands of citizens out on the street or occupying factories and other state-owned premises often brought whole areas to a standstill and there was always the fear that their overt display of dissidence would trigger other forms of public action against the government and eventually turn into violence. On the other hand, these citizens were not openly contesting Mubarak's regime or its foundation or the projected inheritance by his son of the presidency, they were protesting for bread and butter issues. Once agreements with the concerned authorities were arrived at, workers went back to their daily routine.

Yet if these acts of political dissidence were to be analysed through the advocacy lens, they are likely to be seen as relatively successful models of good campaigning. They were not all sporadic but highly organised, the level of mobilisation was so strong that conventional norms of appropriate gender roles and behaviour were completely disregarded. For example, in December 2006 when bonuses promised by the government to textile workers in one of the country's largest textile towns, Mahala el Kubra, were not delivered, according to one account,

> Some 3,000 women garment workers stormed into the main spinning and weaving sheds and demanded that their male colleagues stop work. 'Where are the men? Here are the women!' they chanted. Then 10,000 workers gathered in the factory courtyard and once again women were at the forefront. Strike leader Muhammad Attar later recalled, 'The women almost tore apart every representative from management who came to negotiate.'[6]

Strikes, demonstrations, protests were initiated by different worker groups, from those working in housing taxation to the postal services, to industrial manu-facturing and the list goes on. These events took place across the country, sometimes sporadically, sometimes organised, taking place after warnings of

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6   *Socialist Review,* January 2008, 'Women were Braver than a Hundred Men', Ann Alexander and Farah Kubaissy.

action were not conceded to. In almost all cases of massive strikes, protracted sit-ins in factories and protests, most of the approaches that advocacy experts would claim their own were used. These include well-identified claims guiding campaigns, massive mobilisation of a strong constituency as well as highly effective communications with the press. Other advocacy strategies and tools were also used at length. There is evidence to suggest that the massive protests and strikes led to the government inviting representatives to the negotiating table in order to arrive at deals that would involve addressing the labourers' demands in return for an end to the contentious political opposition. In most cases too, the protests and strikes ended once deals were reached and were only re-ignited when authorities did not deliver on promised policies.[7]

However, while the workers were uncompromising in their critique of government corruption, decadence and lack of accountability, what was being demanded was not an overthrow of the political system or a change of government, rather, the delivery of bonuses and salaries owed and which had been frozen for a long time. Very much like the wildcat strikes in factories in China, demonstrations in Egypt did not achieve wide-sweeping policy change, nor did they necessarily carry through visions of political and social reform. Yet like their Chinese counterparts, they achieved very concrete micro-level policy changes (in bonuses, salaries etc.) which had a direct impact and bearing on their constituency.[8]

Significantly, advocacy NGOs, including feminist advocacy NGOs, were missing from the scene of mobilisation and support for some of the largest advocacy campaigns to have attracted such numbers in half a century. True, the fact that advocacy organisations were not visibly involved does not make a case against supporting or funding development organisations' engagement in advocacy or that of human rights organisations. Yet there are some sobering lessons that provide opportunities for reflection here: to what extent are women NGOs working on feminist issues in touch with the needs/conditions of the women who led these movements? Are they advocating for issues that are enough to mobilise them into action? To what extent is there a need for engagement in economic issues – the bread and butter issues? The experience provides an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which NGOs allow emerging grassroots agendas to shape their own, as well as the extent to which donors have supported advocacy activities that run parallel to, rather than in support of, social groups mobilisation for economic justice.

Counter-arguments would point to the politically repressive environment in which they work, as well as the difficulty in mobilising people around issues not touching on their religious identity. On the political repression argument, advocacy NGOs or

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7   Certainly there was a blatant defiance of the state security apparatus, which requires that citizens apply for permission to hold protests and demonstrations and receive approval from them (which is hardly ever given). Consequently, the state security apparatus did arrest some men and women, however, it would have been very difficult for them to arrest hundreds of thousands *en masse*.

8   For an excellent account of the wildcat strikes in China, see *China Labour Bulletin,* 'Going it Alone, China's Workers' Movement 2007–2008' www.clb.org.hk/en/files/share/File/research_reports/ workers_movement_07-08.pdf (accessed 18 August).

other NGOs who claim to work for social justice could not have been shielded from political repression as were some of the protesting labourers. They did not have the power of numbers. It is noteworthy that the only NGO to have played a supportive role in the workers' struggle, the Centre for Trade Union Services, was almost immediately closed down afterwards. The Centre for Trade Union Services, which provides workers with knowledge about their rights, legal aid and documentation, was registered as a non-profit civil company because the state security apparatus had rejected its application for registration as a non-governmental organisation with the Ministry of Social Solidarity. The Ministry of Social Solidarity closed down the Centre for over a year, accusing it of inciting the demonstrations of December 2006 and of being involved in inciting workers to participate in public protest. While a court ruled that the closure was in violation of citizens' right to freedom of association and ordered its re-opening, it was almost a year after the closure that it eventually was able to open up again. Hence political repression in a context in which NGOs are not organised in large coalitions can be a sufficient deterrent for advocacy organisations.

With respect to mobilisational power, religious forces (Muslim and Christian) are able to mobilise people *en masse*. It is in churches that priests have been able to mobilise followers to protest and voice demands against religious discriminatory practices against them as a religious minority. It is also in the mosques that imams as well as political activists have been able to mobilise worshippers into public action for issues associated with defending the faith, and support for Muslims in other contexts. In recognition of their political mobilisational powers, the government has put forward a new law to prohibit public demonstrations in places of worship (mosques and churches). So in that sense advocacy organisations neither have the religious legitimacy nor work on religious issues that are likely to strengthen their mobilisational powers *vis-à-vis* the wider populace.

On the other hand, there is still a strong case to be made about the disconnect between NGOs and their ability to engage with bread and butter issues affecting their immediate and wider communities. Some NGOs also show an aversion to engaging in participatory forms of social action. Advocacy – stripped of its people essence – can only serve to entrench NGO elitist practices further: why engage in participatory forms of engagement when influencing the policy arena requires professional experts with the right kind of social and political capital? Where is the incentive to think about downward accountability to a constituency? Donor evaluations assess the kind of attempts made to influence policy, not who is behind them.

6 Advocating forwards?

Advocacy need not be adversarial, however, it needs to be political. In authoritarian regimes where any real political contestation of the ruling regime is not tolerated, the political cost of such engagement for NGOs or other civil society organisations could well be their very existence. NGOs have been for many decades influenced by government policy of depoliticisation. When advocacy is

exported by donors whose long term commitment to supporting civil society's engagement in democratisation is in question, the signals given to both authoritarian governments and local activists is not one to be taken very seriously. For 50 years, the government endorsed a political culture in which NGOs' principle role is framed to be apolitical service delivery. The expectation that the thousands of NGOs would suddenly complement their charitable and development activities with policy reform initiatives may be problematic. Moreover, when advocacy is considered one of the ways of donor's strengthening of civil society, and the latter is subject to the direction of the foreign policy pendulum, it is difficult to gain much long term credibility. The case study of USAID funding of the NGO Service Center in Egypt attests to the problems of supporting an essentially political initiative, without having the political commitment to do so.

Authoritarian contexts are sometimes characterised by the prevalence of a state security apparatus that acts as a parallel state, whose policymaking process, personnel and rules are shrouded in secrecy. It is difficult for advocacy campaign organisers to plan, design, and devise strategies against the state security apparatus when it acts as 'an invisible power'. Yet donors funding civil society are more likely to engage governments on the level of formal policies and institutions rather than on the level of the state security apparatus.

Equally, many recipients of donor funding have also engaged with advocacy as a buzzword. Instead of challenging the status quo, claimed 'advocacy' has served to entrench existing political and social inequalities – MEPI's funding of supporting women's political participation at a time when the ruling regime wanted to give the impression that citizens were participating in the electoral process is a case in point.

This is not to suggest that NGOs cannot play a contentious role, only that it is often associated with government responsiveness to international incentives to reform. In the case of Turkey, the Turkish government and people's desire to qualify for membership in the EU, provided the political opportunity for feminist activists to step up their campaign (Ilkaracan 2007). In other contexts such as that of Egypt, there is no parallel international 'carrot' which makes the position of the government and the people more malleable to give precedence to universal human rights arguments over ones premised on preservation of culture and tradition. However, no authoritarian regime is completely immune from international influence all the time under all circumstances. The Egyptian government will be susceptible to international influence at political moments where its external image is especially important (i.e. at the wake of international conferences and deliberation of aid packages). On the other hand, this will momentarily open political space for activists but the activists' legitimacy will quickly be put to question if they are seen in the eyes of the public as strictly pawns in the hands of Western players. This is especially since neither aid packages nor an international image are factors that necessarily make the public more amenable to international influence. The dilemma of 'working on both sides of the equation',[9] namely how international efforts can press the government for more political space for civil society, while strengthening local activists' ability to engage in its own campaigns against the government and its internal opponents, is very relevant here.[10]

Yet advocacy is not only about strengthening civil society's engagement with the government, but also about activists-people relations. In participatory advocacy, in theory, there is no disconnect between the people affected by the issue on which a campaign is being launched. The export of advocacy by donors to contexts with deeply entrenched power hierarchies, and where the focus was on pressing for policy reform meant that people were no longer central to the process of campaigning. A constituency was best consulted, at worst, non-existent altogether. The impact was an elitist advocacy whose benefits can only be shared by an exclusive few or a policy demand that has no legitimacy in the eyes of those on whom it is launching the campaign. A series of factors have perpetuated the constituency crisis in advocacy. First, donor policies that evaluate advocacy based on impact on policy change, rather than process as well. Second, the policy-making process which requires elitist connections and networks in order to have access to key influential figures. Third, the nature of power hierarchies characterising citizen-practitioner relations in the development arena and especially among human rights organisations. Political repression inhibited opportunities for building a constituency although its impact varies from one type of CSO to another.

The need to contest and reform policies is as pertinent today as it was almost a hundred years ago when Egyptian civil society organisations engaged in it without calling it advocacy. The challenge is how to find channels and avenues for preventing its depoliticisation, its transformation into a set of tools, while simultaneously acknowledging that backdoor lobbying and negotiation may sometimes be more appropriate than public naming and shaming of officials and other adversarial tactics. In Egypt, for the time being, the political moment of pursing any political, participatory form of advocacy has yet to emerge.

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9   A concept borrowed from Gaventa (2004).

10   Although of course this is more problematic in reality because foreign donors will choose which causes merit support, and which are not seen as worthy of support because the actors or the ideology do not conform to what they perceive as pro-democracy or progressive.

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