Report on WG5: Governance, Democracy and Reform in the Middle East

[This Report was prepared by the Rapporteur as his summary of the working group discussions, and does not necessarily reflect the views of all working group participants.]

Overview

Governance, democracy and reforms have a long background in the Middle East as this region served as the emerging hub of sophisticated governance systems, advanced ways of life, human rights and democracy to human civilizations. Yet despite the historical background, due to the existing cultural, religious and societal characteristics of Middle Eastern countries on the one hand and the continued interests of foreign powers which in turn brought about the complexities of the nature of power and politics in the region on the other, the process of reform and democratization have been delayed or often failed.

Throughout the past one hundred years the processes of democratization and reform have had ups and down in the region but never stopped as people of the region have always expressed their will and interests in advancing democracy and reforms. The issue of advancing democratization in the Middle East is a political, more than a cultural, religious or economic issue. At present, the Middle East region is undergoing a transition, with diverse national identities experiencing their own national ways of transformation according to their specific political, cultural and economic features. Because of its rich history, the region has the potential for advanced democratic activities and reform.

Generally speaking, in Group Five two basic assumptions were discussed on the internal and external factors which restricted the democratization process and reform in the Middle East:

Internal constraints
On the issue of domestic constraints, democratization, reforms and good governance are processes which require some initial prerequisites. Governments’ accountability and responsiveness in providing an open political atmosphere, transparency, diversity in the power structure, the rotation of power, dealing with corruption, enhancing powerful middle-class and market-economy, establishing confidence-building among various political-cultural spectrums, building civil society and political institutions, human rights and women rights, culture of tolerance and equality, social and economic justice, etc., and generally the simultaneous application of political and economic developments are among the prerequisites of democratization process. In this sense, lack or weakness of the abovementioned characteristics delayed attempts toward democratization in the past several years. Chief among them are government’s irresponsibility in providing an appropriate atmosphere and the necessary grounds for holding comprehensive and fair elections.

External Factor

At the same time, because of continued foreign interests, the occurrence of wars and political crisis in the Middle East, efforts toward the democratization process in the region have been delayed or often failed during the past years. Accordingly, war in Iraq, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip empowered extremist activities, extended violent movements, provided the grounds for a new kind of conflict economy and most notably extended distrust among nations and states that contradict advancing democratic movements. The presence of foreign occupation forces is at best justifying violent activities in the region. As history demonstrates, no nation in the region accepted any foreign involvement in its internal affairs in the long-run. As the result of conducting war, preserving security and stability has become the first priority of the regional communities. Undoubtedly, democratization and reform require a peaceful atmosphere based on mutual trust within the political-cultural spectrum, elites and masses, and governments and nations. Yet the lack of them is no excuse for not working towards political reform and respect of human rights.

Causes of Delay or Failure

- Although democracy has global features and values, the presence of diverse identities and their different demands and expectations from the democratization process requires applying specific approaches of advancing democracy in the Middle East.
- The existence of wars and crises and the subsequent grounds of mutual distrust have had harmful effects on the democratization process and reforms in the region.
- Establishing security and stability are the most prominent elements of democratization and reform in the region. The democratization process requires a peaceful and calm atmosphere.
- Given the traditional and religious nature of Middle Eastern communities, achieving democratization requires preserving a balance between demands and expectations of the traditional and modern segments of the communities.
- Imposed, immature, and directed democratization can lead to frustration; it also gives justification for a power structure detrimental to nascent democracies. The result has been disappointment, frustration, and indifference in taking part future elections.
• Democratization requires simultaneous attention to political reforms and economic development. The lack of a powerful middle class and a market economy will delay the process of democratization.

• Emphasizing human security issues in the region will help advance democracy and reform in the region. Accordingly, paying due attention to the demands and requirements of the masses is of great importance in this process.

• In the Arab world there are different models of democratization which must operate according to the cultural, societal, geographical and economic characteristics of each society.

• The role of the streets and winning the vote of the masses has a significant effect on the democratization process. This has been demonstrated in Lebanon, Palestine and the new Iraq.

• Democratization and reforms will only occur in an environment where powerful political structures and institutions, coexist with NGOs, and the private sectors.

• In many countries of the region the role of religion and ideology is increasing. The existence of conservative and fundamental foundations is considered one the main obstacles of democratization and reform. In case they do not get involved in the democratic process according to the agreed upon rules of criteria.

• On the issue of the new Iraq, although the process of democratic activities is moving slowly, given the past suppressing legacy of the Baathist regime, occurrence of new political developments accompanied by several elections is a milestone in Iraq’s process of transformation.

Future Steps

• The promotion of democracy at the mass level in order to increase culture of tolerance, flexibility, reformation, and human development should have priority as it will balance different layers of societies and increase common interests among new generations.

• On the global scale, advancing democratic movements in the region requires the international community to support NGOs, the Middle-Class, private sectors and most importantly, integrating the region’s economy into the world system.

• There should be a convergence between different regional and global perceptions of transformation and reforms; this requires establishing communication networks that illustrate diverse perspectives to empower the concept of collective interest.

• The role of the young generation and women in advancing democratic activities should be encouraged. Accordingly, plans to educate youngsters to create new conceptions of democratic cultures should be promoted in the region.

• Future discussions of elections and other political transformation processes should include representatives of most, if not all partners, concerned for more constructive debate and outcome.

• The Middle East civil society activists should adopt a more positive approach towards identifying the outlines of the model they think is in conformity with their culture yet not contradictory with the international basis of democracy.