Civil Society in Egypt
Towards a Strategic Vision
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Egyptian civil society has a long history that dates back for two centuries. However, in spite of the roles performed by its different organizations, whether NGOs, professional syndicates, and labor trade unions or others, the civil society in Egypt remains in need of a comprehensive strategic vision that makes it a principal partner in the process of building the new Egypt.

An Essential Introduction:

At first, it is important to emphasize a number of significant issues:

- Civil society has a long history in Egypt. It started with the establishment of the Greek Society in Alexandria in 1821, which was succeeded by the establishment of several cultural organizations such as the Organization of the Egypt Institution for Research in Egyptian Civilization in 1859, the Knowledge Society in 1868, and the Geographical Society in 1875. These were succeeded by the establishment of Islamic and Christian religious societies such as the Islamic Charity Organization in 1878 and the Coptic Charitable Efforts in 1881. The first labor trade union was established in 1900 and the first professional syndicate in 1876. Therefore, it can be said that intermediary organizations aimed at achieving general or class objectives, and come between the state, the market, and family through a voluntary relationship (i.e. NGOs, professional syndicates, and labor trade unions) have been present in Egypt for two centuries.

- Throughout history, Egyptian civil society has performed numerous roles. In the first liberal period extending from its establishment until 1952, fighting occupation and fighting poverty through charity work were priorities of syndicate and NGOs. Historically, established traditional formations were the most active, namely NGOs and labor trade unions and professional syndicates. The revival period started in the mid-seventies after a period of restrictions imposed on civil society in all its formations from 1952 up till the mid-seventies. This second period, which can be further divided into a number of sub-periods, was characterized by an expansion in civil society organizations as well as a shift in the quality of their roles. Roles also expanded; professional syndicates not only defended professional issues, but also became

involved in the political arena and its struggles. NGOs also witnessed an expansion in quantity and quality of their roles surpassing those of charity to include developmental, human rights and advocacy roles. Moreover, new formations of civil society appeared such as businessmen organizations and social and political movements. The few years preceding the January 25th, 2011 Revolution witnessed the appearance of numerous social and political movements as well as practicing new forms of pressure such as labor protests and peaceful demonstrations.

- In spite of the fact that civil society has developed in quality and quantity over an extended period of time, the legal philosophy governing civil society, which reflects their relationship with the State, has remained unchanged since the Nasserite period, despite the change in political systems, succession of republics, and a change in laws governing civil society. That philosophy was based on the State's continuous effort to control civil society and restrict its autonomy.

  Prosperity of civil society, in any community, is related to a convenient, supportive, and institutional legal system and environment, as well as a balanced and cooperative relationship between state institutions and civil society. This has never occurred in the history of Egyptian civil society. Although there have been phases that can be considered democratic breakthroughs, civil society remained within the confines of a sick and deformed relationship with the State. This has been reflected by an absence of supportive and fostering laws as well as an institutional environment that accepts civil society as a principal partner.

- Civil society organizations, despite their variety (charity, development, rights organizations, professional syndicates, labor trade unions, student unions and others) have remained disconnected. While the majority of civil society forms have continued to suffer from restrictive laws and an institutional environment that rejects their role, they have failed to realize that they are fighting the same battle and that their opponent in is the same, thus requiring the joining of forces in order to put pressure on it. Instead, each form fought its own battle, isolating itself from the other formations.

- Many of the ailments suffered by state institutions can also affect civil society especially in relation to democratic management. Therefore, the

paradoxes facing civil society are not restricted to its relationship with the state, but include many internal paradoxes as well.

Mistaken Ideas to be Avoided:

Limited Roles:

- To consider civil society as a homogenous entity assuming a unified stance against many issues or that it could adopt one strategic vision is misleading. Civil society emerged as channels for expressing the interests of society. Of course, it is expected to represent the interests of different groups and their opposing interests (for example businessmen associations and labor trade unions) adopting diverse visions towards different issues.

- Speaking of a strategic vision for the role of civil society does not necessarily mean all civil society organizations will commit themselves to this vision. What is more important is that this vision be adopted by civil society forms assuming modern values that depend on citizenship and human rights in their work.

Challenges faced by Civil Society and all its Formations:

There are numerous challenges and paradoxes that impede the action of civil society. These may be self imposed challenges, challenges related to the state, or challenges related to society at large and its prevalent general culture. It is difficult to differentiate between these groups of challenges. These different types of challenges are interlocked and interconnected. If there is an attempt at classification, the aim is only to discern the colors of the picture as clearly as possible. The fact that some formations of civil society have a number of challenges in common does not negate that each formation faces its own specific challenges related to its role. Of course, NGOs could have their own specific paradoxes and so on.

First: Challenges due to the Relationship with the State:

The paradox of the relationship with the state and its reflections on the role and effectiveness of civil society:

- Indeed there is a paradox in the legal frameworks that organize civil society, namely the narrowing of the public sphere and activity under the excuse of compromised national security. The relationship between the state and civil society is originally one of integration, inter-dependence,

and a distribution of roles and not a relationship of contradiction and enmity.

Civil society is nothing but one of the revelations of the modern state whose establishment depends on legalizing a system of rights regulating the practices of all parties and groups in society. Civil society also depends on the state in performing its basic economic, social, and educational roles through its set regulations. In fact, civil society was generated from the strength of the state and for preserving its equilibrium. Civil society did not develop in the west for the purpose of demolishing state authority; a strong state and civil society have developed parallel to one another. This is the ideal situation crystallized only through a long historical experience that demonstrated collaboration, rather than struggle, between the two parties.

The situation in Egypt is the exact opposite. The prevalent equation is one of struggle rather than cooperation. The Egyptian State seeks either to suppress civil society organizations adopting political stances against state policies or to tame other organizations and transform them into affiliations used to dominate and control society. In both cases, whether the State chooses to struggle with civil society or tame it, civil society remains absent as a principal partner in the process of social and political change.

Political and social change is undoubtedly a priority after Egypt has entered a completely new phase in its history after two revolutions within three years. In the first revolution, it ousted an authoritarian regime, a fascist one seeking to cloak itself with religious legitimacy, in the second. Despite of the price and sacrifices paid in the process, it remains the easiest phase in the history of social change and transformation, or what is called the phase of disintegrating the authoritarian regime. Accomplishing social and political change is both a long and accumulative process. Many actors are involved, most importantly the State and civil society. The question that poses itself is, "in light of its many paradoxes with the State, will Egyptian civil society be capable of contributing, as an actor and principal partner, in the process of social and political change and formation of the future, and if so, what are the requirements for assuming this role?" Researching the organic and functional relationship between the State and civil society answer these questions and poses a vision to correct the current relationship between both.

Civil society encompasses all the intermediary organizations that fill the space between the State and the individual/family. It refers to a number of voluntary and optional organizations actually present in most

contemporary societies, such as professional and labor syndicates, business unions, farmer associations, NGOs and other organizations. These intermediary organizations appeared to organize the relationship between the State and the individual, protect citizens from authoritarian oppression, and represent the interests of the citizen before the State, in addition to assisting the State avoid anarchy of unorganized political participation. The more civil society organization become important in protecting and representing citizens and their interests, the more civil society becomes important to the State. It protects the State from unorganized popular movements, which could turn violent threatening state stability and legitimacy. In fact, there is a (connected relationship) between the existence of a strong civil society that expresses and defends interests of citizens and the absence of popular movements and objections that function outside legal channels and resort to violence. Therefore, it becomes evident from this exposition that civil society is a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the state.

The development of the roles of civil society cannot be analyzed without first analyzing changes befallen the State. The didactic relationship between the State and civil society is historical and analyzing this relationship is key to understanding the role of civil society in social and political change.

Civil society plays numerous roles in social and political change represented in three major roles: balancing State power through accountability and monitoring; supporting State roles through partnership; and strengthening society through building democracy as follows:

1- Balancing State power through accountability and monitoring: The idea on which civil society was first based was protecting citizens against state oppression and violation of their rights. The objective of help exchange societies formed by English laborers during the industrial revolution in Britain was to protect workers from the violations practiced against them by their employer. Gradually, these societies developed into labor trade unions that entered into long struggles with both capitalism and the State in order to obtain rights of the laborers to maximum working hours and minimum wages, as well as other labor rights. Throughout history the role of civil society has developed in balancing State power and has surpassed the mere organization of people defending their rights, monitoring elections, exposing corruption, and monitoring the violations of human rights.

2- <u>Supporting State roles and policy-making through partnership:</u> Numerous literatures have dealt with civil society participation in the process of policy-making in which terms such as civic engagement, policy engagement, and methods of effective and efficient participation appeared.

The nature of the relationship between the State and civil society is one of the determinants civil society's ability to contribute to the process of policy making, for instance whether it is a crystallized relationship, based on trust and inter-dependence, between two parties or a developing relationship pulled to and fro by contradictory positive and negative approaches. Every one of these patterns of the relationship is expected to provide different roles for civil society in policy making. On one hand there is a relationship of successful and efficient partnership between the State and civil society in formulating public policies and implementing them, such as in the first case (inter-dependence). On the other hand, there is the role in which civil society is limited to implementing small scattered projects to help the poor and marginalized or to fill the gap left by the State after it retreated without performing any real role in policy-making. Most probably, and is the case in many third world countries, the economic situation faced by these countries force them to give some space to civil society, as well as the pressure exerted on them by international institutions in order to acknowledge the existence of civil society and confess its autonomy. What is required is the reformulation of the relationship between State and civil society on the basis of full partnership and legal frameworks that guarantees civil society its autonomy.

The sustainability of these experiments depends on a number of conditions, most importantly of which is setting a framework of partnership between state institutions and civil society which accurately defines the objective of the partnership and the basis on which it is built. In light of this framework, it is important to emphasize the importance of setting a number of institutional procedures regulated by law regarding setting public policies. It is a matter of fact that the importance of consensus emerges greatly at times when societies undergo radical changes ensuing struggle and dissent leading division among society. Therefore, some researchers have considered the ability of wide sectors of society to affect the policy-making process as one of the conditions for building national consensus.

Reaching an environment, suitable for partnership, a powerful State and civil society is needed, thus creating a balanced relationship. It is a relationship that prohibits the State from controlling civil society and dominating it. It also prevents civil society from imposing control on state authorities and employing them for achieving narrow personal interests. A powerful state is one that has the ability to organize society's motion enabling it to unleash its potential and maximize its abilities, while asserting values of sovereignty and rule of law. In fact, the power and strength of the State is determined by the degree of its democracy (acknowledgement of freedom to form civil society organizations, provision of human rights elements, capacity to formulate rules necessary for achieving stability and putting it into effect). A strong civil society is one that enjoys wide public legitimacy representing social formations in society and able to present new and alternative visions. It is a society in which the values of democracy and accepting and respecting the other prevail. It is able to use peaceful and democratic mechanisms to manage conflict as well as its ability to coordinate and cooperate whether within its own organizations or with government institutions. If this formula exists, namely a powerful state and a strong civil society, it will not be difficult to deal with any other challenges whether those of capacity building or creating mechanisms necessary for cooperation.

3- <u>The role of civil society in building democracy:</u> The mission of civil society is not limited to balancing State power or participating in policy-making. Rather it has to burden itself with another task, that of building democracy. Civil society, with all its different organizations, is one of the most important schools of democracy. The more the internal administration is democratic the more the values of democracy are rooted in the minds of the citizens. This role assumes even greater importance in societies that are experiencing a transformation process such as our Arab societies are. Transformation needs cultural change and cultivating democratic values. This is an essential job of civil society through the political and legal awareness programs it implements. Democracy is not a set of procedures, rather it is a comprehensive intellectual system that possesses procedural, cultural and value dimensions.

The ability of civil society to assume a clear and effective role in social and political change requires amending the 2012 constitution to guarantee the following:

1- The State is committed to applying international treaties and conventions ratified by the Egyptian government in supporting political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights.

2- The state is committed to ensuring the rights of all citizens in organizing and establishing their political, social, and union organizations. It may not obstruct the activities of these organizations in any direct or indirect way. These organizations are to be established by notification and work according to the principles of democracy, transparency, and respect for the law. It is to be enabled to set its by-laws and basis of its administration, perform its activities, and terminate them. The organizations are committed to announce the sources of their funding and the minutes of their meetings to the public.

3- Civil society organizations whose members exceed ten thousand have the right to present bills directly to the People's Assembly after obtaining the consent of thirty thousand citizens on these bills. Civil society organizations have the right to follow up and monitor legislative and local councils.

This is to be followed by issuing laws for NGOs and labor trade unions and other civil society organizations that observe the right of assembly and association and ensure the autonomy of these organizations and their accountability at the same time.

Paradoxes and Challenges Related to Civil Society Internally:
I will concentrate this pivotal point on NGOs, in particular, due to their role inducing social change, as paradoxes change from one form to another.

o   The relationship between developmental and cultural change. Most developmental endeavors by NGOs are material. They do not give much attention to inducing essential change in the intellectual structure governing developmental processes in Egypt forming the nature of the relationships among all concerned parties, governmental or non-governmental. This separation is asserted by results of the first Parliamentary and Presidential Elections post-January 25th Revolution. Upper Egypt, in which developmental efforts have been focused for half a century, remains the poorest and least aware. More dangerous is the fact that Upper Egypt was the voting bloc that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power.

o   There is a contradiction in economic liberalism while political totalitarianism continues. The logic of containment and domination has

lead to creating a contradiction between the present elitist situation of civil society and the grassroots needed for development of this society. There is also a contradiction between permitting charity activities and prohibiting rights activities. The result is the inability of civil society activities, or what is called the elite, from performing true mobilization of people or even to network amongst themselves to maximize their effect.

o   Rights organizations are unable to create real channels between them and the public. These organizations can address the international and political communities, but they face problems in activating their relationship with the public that does not interact with their activities. Rights activities have thus become limited to a few groups at the top of the civil middle class.

o   The paradox of continuity and sustainability. During recent years the paradox of continuity was posed in dialogue regarding NGOs and funding. The question is: are NGOs capable of continuity and achieving material autonomy after the funded projects expire?

o   Some internal challenges faced by NGOs are ambiguity of the objectives and their multiplicity in their missions, weak democratic practices inside the organizations, employees' weak technical capacities and the ensuing low level of trust of the public in civil society organizations, all of which restrict NGOs abilities to affect governmental policies. On another level, NGOs rarely evaluate and measure the overall impact of their work. When they do, evaluation results are rarely ever used in setting future strategies. This is not to mention the missing future vision because of financial difficulties that affect the ability of evaluating achievements. NGO capacities as guiding entities for government and the private sectors are still very limited.

o   The fourth challenge is concerned with establishing communication networks. Most coalitions and alliances among human rights organizations in Egypt are still unofficial. Preconditions for forming networks are still missing in most cases.

o   The paradox of activating the relationship among civil society organizations and emphasizing the necessity of establishing a comprehensive system concerned with interaction between the struggle of professional syndicates and labor trade unions, on the one hand, and human rights organizations and developmental organization on the other. The future of NGOs is connected to the future of other civil society organizations. In spite of that, the main feature is the absence of

coordination and networking among NGOs and the rest of civil society factions, thus weakening their roles.

All the above mentioned challenges must be the base for setting a strategic vision regarding the future of civil society in Egypt, in general, and NGOs in particular. There is a dire need for two essential matters that represent the necessary beginning: the first is reformulating the relationship between the State and civil society through changing the legal philosophy that governs this relationship and passing laws regulating different civil society formations and respecting the autonomy of these organizations allowing them to effectively contribute to developing society through a number of incentives. In return for this freedom, a clear system of transparency and accountability is to be applied. There is no freedom without accountability. This is to be accompanied by acknowledging the necessity of reaching institutional frameworks that guarantee civil society participation in the policy making process as well as monitoring state administration of society affairs.

The second and important issue is connected to building the capacities of civil society in order for it to be able to perform its roles whether in relation to state institutions or to society. This task requires a comprehensive capacity building strategy to be performed by specialized institutions and suitable budgets allocated. Another matter is related to reinforcing the capacities of different civil society organizations to change their work methodologies through integrating rights based thought in all its activities, thus increasing their strength, and help in building rights awareness for citizens.

Within this framework, methodologies and programs for building the capacities of civil society have to be adopted. These should surpass the mere training in technical and organizational skills to methods for civil society organizations to manage change in their communities. In fact, this issue is closely related to learning from other experiences in the same field, whether in countries that were able to change their communities to the better through their civil society organizations or engagement with the modern international developmental discourse and its offerings. For example, if we speak of the role of NGOs in development it is essential to emphasize the necessity of cooperation among these organizations and the local councils in developing a long term comprehensive strategy for development. In this respect NGOs have to abandon the confines of the project to a long term strategic vision. On another level the capacity building concept and methodology should be expanded to include, not only civil society organizations, but all parties in the local community, whether organized or unorganized, as well as traditional connections. As for partnership, the importance of information has to be stressed. Information and its types represent a fundamental pivot in developing any visions for the future. This

requires providing a thorough information foundation to build partnership among government institutions, civil society and citizens through drawing an acute map of all civil society organizations at the local level, whether they be local community development organizations or cooperatives or any others. Without the provision of this information foundation it is very difficult for citizens to practice accountability or any other mechanisms of good governance.

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