

through NGOs and specialist foundations, but with the increase in official funding for democracy promotion, USAID is becoming increasingly involved in such initiatives. This has given rise to concern that too many US organizations are active in this field, that there is insufficient evidence of the impact of democracy assistance programs, and that programs are poorly conceived, because they fail to take into account the complexities of the democratization process (Robinson 1995:5).

These views were supported on the theoretical level by much writing on the emerging of 'new social movements'. For example, Melucci underlines, "The normal situation of today's movements is a network of small groups submerged in everyday life which require a personal involvement in experiencing and practising cultural innovation" (Melucci 1985: 800). The emphasis on cultural and symbolic aspects of social movements offers, according to Keane, some interesting and valuable insights into the micro-politics of daily life. It also shifts focus from the state as the terrain of class struggle to power as "exercised along a multiplicity of sites of domination and resistance", hence "bringing into public view the oppression embedded in every day life and thus challenging the deep-rooted codes of social interaction within civil society" (Keane 1988: 12). It is also argued that the notion that in the 'Third World' as opposed to the 'advanced' countries, struggles take place between two clearly demarcated camps, i.e. the ruling class and the people, obscures the multiplicity of antagonisms and identities existing in any country 'Third World' or not (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 166). Such struggles over resources and identities are fought along lines of class, religion, and gender. The 'people' does not represent a homogenous entity, nor does 'domination', since it is not only exerted by the state but also by elements of 'civil society' that are economically and socially powerful. Among social elements that resist state domination and capitalist exploitation in Arab societies such as Egypt are urban marginals, for instance peasants, Islamists, moderate Muslims, secular-oriented women and men, feminists, Copts and many other groups that do not represent 'pure' or exclusive categories but tend to shift and intersect (Al-Ali 1998: 45).

The emphasis on cultural innovation and struggle for identity by theorists of 'new social movements' has been criticized for neglecting the struggle for survival and over distribution of resources that is so central to social movements; and because assertions of identity are also about economic gains. While traditional Marxist approaches tended to be economically deterministic, the 'new social movement' theorists seem to ignore the material bases for discontent and mobilization (Al-Ali 1998:45). The view of social movements as antithetical to domination,

as broadly democratic and progressive, has been challenged by the argument that a focus on identity is problematic, in that it might result in a 'voluntarist politics' that call for strategies that "work around, but do not challenge, state power" (Mooer and Sears 1992: 67, quoted in Al-Ali 1998: 45).

L. A. Kaufmann is even more sceptical about the progressive nature of 'new social movements', emphasizing that identity politics frequently degenerate into 'anti-politics' which mirrors the ideology of the capitalist market place through emphasis on life-style and lack of collective organization (Kaufmann 1990: 78; quoted in Al-Ali 1998: 45). In other words, 'new social movements' may have a de-politicizing effect in that their foci and praxis may not actually challenge prevailing power structures, leaving forms of domination relatively intact.

With these criticisms of 'social movement' theory in mind it is worth noting that in the Arab world there is conflation between social movements and NGOs. The notion that NGOs are the voice of the oppressed and marginalized became dominant, and led to a rapid spread of NGOs throughout the Arab world.

The spread of NGOs is a worldwide phenomenon in the 'North' as in the 'South'. The number of development NGOs registered in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries of the industrialized 'North' has grown from 1,600 in 1980 to 2,970 in 1993; over the same period the total spending of these NGOs has risen from US\$2.8 billion to US\$5.7 billion at current prices (OECD 1994). The 176 international NGOs of 1909 had blossomed by 1993 into 28,900. Similar figures have been reported in most countries in the 'South' where political conditions have been favourable, with a particularly rapid increase between 1990 and 1995. In the Arab world, it is estimated that NGOs numbered more than 70,000 by the mid-'90s (Bishara 1996). In Palestine the number had reached 926 by 2000, most of which were established after the Oslo agreement (Shalabi 2001: 111). This growing number of NGOs coincided with a weakening of the ideological political parties, and a growing retreat of states from service provision and social entitlements due to structural adjustment policies imposed on most Third World countries by the World Bank and the IMF (Omvedt 1994:35).

#### From Structural Adjustment to 'Good Governance'

The World Bank first pointed to the importance of 'good governance' in economic development in its 1989 study, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*. The Bank's concerns about governance arose from one

major source: the failure of its structural adjustment programs, which it attributed to the insufficiency of private investments, and to 'poor governance'. After some groping, the Bank settled on the following definition of 'governance': "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (World Bank 1992: 1).

While it is not the purpose of this paper to enter into the full details of the 'good governance' debate, one can quickly summarize the most important points made by critics of this new policy:

- The extension of the Bank's scope of interest to include governance raises the issue of sovereignty. The Bank and other aid donors are intruding ever more deeply into areas that have traditionally remained the sole responsibility of national governments. The Bank's focus on governance is thus part of a much broader trend in which the concept of sovereignty appears to be rapidly changing.

- It is not clear in Bank discussions and documents what sorts of political problems are critical to the success of Bank lending and which are not. Experience in Africa and elsewhere demonstrates that absence of accountability and transparency do not automatically lead to corruption and the absence of the rule of law. South Korean development in the past has been led by authoritarian regimes, lacking both in transparency and accountability to their people and not without a measure of corruption. However these problems of governance did not impede rapid economic growth. Thus we cannot be so certain of the relationship between political systems and governance theory, or political systems and development.

- The US government equates 'good governance' with democracy, and sees it as an end in itself, and not as a means to promoting economic growth. The plight of Iraq and to a certain extent of Palestine are installed under the rubric of 'imposing democracy' and removing corrupt or despotic regimes. It is clear from these instances that political interest directs US foreign aid under the 'good governance' banner.

- The US Administration has continued to provide aid to non-democratic regimes, like those of Ghana and Columbia as long as they continue to implement structural adjustment programs (Lancaster 1995:14).

- Too much aid, poorly timed, can undermine the incentives for governments to liberalize, particularly where internal pressures based on economic discontent are the prime force promoting political reform.

- Too much aid to finance new or civil institutions - for example legislatures, political parties, or NGOs - can undermine the independence of these institutions, and weaken their incentive to create the grass-roots support needed to sustain them, and ensure their sensitivity to those they are supposed to represent.

Keeping this international trend in mind, one can clearly predict the coming aggressive wave to 'democratize' the region, already spelled out by the American Administration by its build-up of forces to bring about 'regime change' in Iraq. According to a recent news item, the current US administration views the many ills in the Arab society as due to the lack of democracy, and the inferior status of Arab women. According to Elizabeth Cheney (the US vice president's daughter, who runs the Arab Reform Program at the State Department), the administration aims to nurture the fledgling program as part of its broader ambitions for opening up the region. US officials have said that a focus on democracy-building projects and a re-direction of aid money to grass-roots efforts can accomplish two things. One is to build the desire and ability to reform authoritarian governments, great and small. The other is to soften the image of the United States on the Arab street.

As part of the US Middle East Partnership Initiative (a \$25 million program to promote democracy in the Middle East announced by President Bush last summer), a complete review of assistance programs in the region is being undertaken, according to Reuters (16 November, 2002). An unnamed US State Department official told the news agency that one of the development agency's objectives is to increase the portion of assistance that supports the promotion of democracy and the rule of law. The source added that this included a range of activities intended to strengthen 'civil society' and responsible debate in Egypt.

The US's obsession with democracy in the region arouses scepticism that it is real, or that measures to implement it will ever be taken. Mustapha Kamel Al Sayyid, director of the Center for Developing Countries Studies at Cairo University, says it would not be in the US's interests to promote true democracy in Egypt, since the only viable alternative to the present government is the Islamist opposition - a group known for its dislike of American policy. "If the result of democratization is that Islamists gain more voice in politics, then no doubt the US government won't in practice do much in the way of the real promotion of democracy." (*Cairo Times*, Nov 21, 2002 circulated by 'News from Democracy Egypt').

With this scepticism in mind, the debate on the role of 'civil society' in the process of democratization, defend-

ing human rights and women's rights is seen in the Arab region with a growing distrust. This discourse adds fuel to an already burning debate in the Arab world on the role envisioned for Arab NGOs, and in particular women's NGOs, in the process of development, democratization and social change. ('Only for Women', 24/6/02, [www.al-jazeera.com](http://www.al-jazeera.com))

### Faltering Development, External Pressures, and NGOs

In most African countries and Arab countries, the response of private sectors to economic reforms has been insignificant. Economic growth (if it has occurred at all) has been buoyed up by an increase of existing capacities and foreign aid. Structural adjustment policies have led many 'progressive' Arab countries to an almost complete withdrawal of the state from investment in the public sector and public services. This in turn has led to a severe deterioration of social and economic rights, translated in rising rates of unemployment and declining social welfare support from the state, affecting mainly youth and women (CAWTAR 2001: 15-17). This deterioration has had a strong impact on women's status, indicated by an increase in women's illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and political marginalization, according to the *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The region has the largest proportion of young people in the world - 38% of Arabs are under 14 - and the report calculates that its population will top 400 million in 20 years' time. One in five Arabs still lives on less than \$2 a day. And, over the past 20 years, growth in income per head, at an annual rate of 0.5%, was lower than anywhere else in the world except for sub-Saharan Africa. At this rate, says the report, it will take the average Arab 140 years to double his/her income. Stagnant growth, together with rapid population rise, means vanishing jobs. Around 12 million people, or 15% of the labour force, are already unemployed, and on present trends the number could rise to 25 million by 2010.

From the mid-'70s, with visible crisis as most Arab states failed to achieve a sustainable level of development, or to absorb the increasing number of young people seeking employment, most adopted 'structural adjustment' policies. This retreat came amid major international changes that resulted from the collapse of the 'socialist/ communist bloc', formerly the main ally of Arab nationalist 'progressive' states such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, while the Israeli threat and unresolved issue of Palestine persisted, and the Iranian revolution put an end to the regime of the Shah, bringing an Islamist religious leadership to power.

While the Arab states were shaken by economic and social crisis during the 1980s, most Arab leaders successfully skirted the challenge of economic reform by using what Brumberg calls 'survival strategies', ie. a minimal response to pressures for economic and political change without engaging in the risky game of power sharing. This limited response to economic crisis was neither a reflection of a cultural proclivity for authoritarianism nor a manifestation of civil society's 'resurgence'. Instead, it mirrored the enduring legacies of 'populist authoritarianism', and the strategies that elites used to re-impose their hegemony without undertaking major economic or political reforms ( Brumberg 1995: 230).

These 'survival strategies' are no longer working, and pressures are mounting to effectuate change. Intensifying the role of NGOs is seen by states and international agencies as the panacea. Scholars also have argued that NGOs may be less constrained in terms of their legal mandates and political considerations, hence better prepared to engage in the mobilization and organization of marginalized groups, and to establish new instruments and channels through which these groups can strengthen their participation in the economic and political sphere. Borner, Brunetti and Weder (1993, quoted in Robinson 1995) have called this an 'entitlement and empowerment' of marginalized groups. By 'entitlement' they mean: i) better access to the formal economic system, including property rights (eg. legal title to land and houses); ii) access to credit, enabling them to appropriate the returns of their investment; iii) access to the legal system; and iv) reducing bureaucratic hurdles in registering their businesses. 'Empowerment' means improving participation in the political system. Empowerment may start with organizing neighbourhood groups in the informal sector. Intermediary institutions may then provide the link through which articulation at the grassroots level affects decision-making at the local, provincial and state level (Nunnenkamp 1995:14-15). In this perspective, NGOs are viewed as better able to empower the people and enhance popular participation, since they are (or should be) more local, democratic, accountable, transparent and accessible than the state apparatus.

Thus many donor countries and UN agencies have turned to supporting NGOs, including women's NGOs. Here we must differentiate between different forms of women's organizations. Some provide services for a limited needy constituency, some are focusing on information production and research, while others advocate democracy and women's rights. The focus of this paper is on the latter category since they are the target both for funding and accusations of being part of the move to promote 'civil society', associated by many in the Arab world with World Bank and United States policies. The funding of

women's advocacy NGOs has renewed old questions, such as why is the West funding us? Why is the West interested in women in our area? One of the most vocal accusations against women's organizations is that they implement a Western agenda, which means that they are less nationalist and less 'authentic'. This is an old and fruitless debate which does not help in building alliances, or in examining the visions and programs of any group of activists in an objective way.

### Women's Movements between East and West

Attacks on Arab women's NGOs usually involve the old dichotomy of West versus East: a West seen by fundamentalist groups as a power that desires to impose its cultural values: individual freedom, materialism and secularism; or by Arab nationalists and leftists as colonial and corrupting, buying the loyalties of the new political, social or economic elite ('Only for Women' 24/6/02, [www.al-jazeera.com](http://www.al-jazeera.com)), returning to the foreground what Leila Ahmed calls 'colonial feminism' (Ahmed 1994:175-179). Others set the proliferation of NGOs in a context of ongoing expansion of neo-liberalism, and the formation of a 'globalized elite' (Hanafi and Tabar 2002:32-36), and as "mitigating class conflict, diluting class identities and culture, blurring the class borders and blunting class struggle within nations and between them" (Qassoum 2002: 44-56). A quick overview of the history of the Arab women's movements from the last century will shed light on new trends in these movements.

The East/West binary is an old one that has been articulated by some Arab feminists who believed that what the colonists sought was to undermine the local culture through 'colonial feminism' (Ahmed 1994:175-179). Like Lazreg, Ahmed is particularly disturbed by the resemblance she perceives between colonial discourse around Arab women and the discourse of some contemporary Western feminists, who "devalue local cultures by presuming that there is only one path for emancipating women - adopting Western models" (quoted in Abu-Lughod 1996:14).

Badran rejects such formulations, arguing that "attempts to discredit or to legitimize feminism on cultural grounds ... are political projects". For her, the origins of feminism cannot be found in any culturally 'pure' location: "External elements - external to class, region, country - are appropriated and woven into the fabric of the 'indigenous' or local. Egypt, for example, has historically appropriated and absorbed 'alien elements' into a highly vital indigenous culture" (Badran 1995:24-25). She implies that Egyptian feminism is part of such an indigenous (fluid and always in process) culture, underlining how women

such as Hoda Sharawi and Ceza Nabarawi were more nationalist and uncompromising regarding British colonialism than men of their class. She also shows how, in spite of meeting with European feminists, and developing their ideas in relationship to European feminist organizations, Egyptian feminists were politically independent, expressing criticism of European support for Zionism. Further, their deepest concern was for the conditions of Egyptian and Arab women. Thus Egyptian feminists were very much part of, and concerned with, their own societies and cannot be dismissed as Western (hence somehow inauthentic) agents (Badran 1995:13-15, 22-25).

In the same vein, Lila Abu-Lughod warns that "we all write in contexts, and when we come to write the history of 'the woman question' in the Middle East, we find ourselves caught: between the contemporary Egyptian or Iranian or Turkish context where Islamists denounce things Western, a label they, like many nationalist men before them, attach to feminism, and a Euroamerican context where the presumption is that only Western women could really be feminist. How to get beyond this?" Abu-Lughod further notes that "such notions of separate cultures have themselves been produced by the colonial encounter. This leads to different possibilities for analysing the politics of East and West in the debates about women, ones that do not take the form of narratives of cultural domination versus resistance, cultural loyalty versus betrayal, or cultural loss versus preservation. It also opens up the possibility of exploring, in all their specificities, the actual cultural dynamics of the colonial encounter and its aftermath" (Abu-Lughod 1998:16).

Based on her empirical study of secular Egyptian women's organizations, Al-Ali underlines, "Egyptian women activists, as varied as they might have been in their ideological inclinations, were active agents in their specific cultural, social and political contexts". She adds, "It never fails to astonish me how women activists continue to be discredited on the basis of their class affiliation and links to European culture and education, while male political activists, especially communists, do not seem to be exposed to the same degree of scrutiny concerning their class or educational background" (Al-Ali 1998:121).

What can be concluded is that, in order to avoid falling into these cultural dichotomies, it is important to study - preferably empirically - the context in which organizations are working, what are their strategies, their structure, their links to other social and political groups, to external agencies and to the state.

Based on empirical studies conducted on women NGOs