



MEDDC

Middle East
Democracy Center

Making the Case for Democracy and Human Rights

Democracy Matters Initiative Private Dialogue

November 2024

The Democracy Matters Initiative (DMI) at the Middle East Democracy Center advances a bold vision for why democracy matters in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. DMI's work is directed by an Advisory Group composed of eight esteemed democracy experts from the MENA region who drive activities on three core themes: 1) making the case for democracy and human rights, 2) pushing back against anti-democratic actors, and 3) developing strategies of communication and mobilization. For each theme, the Initiative produces a private dialogue, a public event, and publications.

On September 6, 2024, DMI hosted its private dialogue for its first theme, "Making the Case for Democracy and Human Rights," to discuss reinforcing democratic narratives and mechanisms to foster pro-democracy networks. Key experts from diverse backgrounds provided insights into the complex dynamics between democracy, power, religious, and economic structures in the MENA region.

The event was Chatham House rule, in which participants were free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, was revealed. The anonymized notes below summarize key findings from the dialogue.

Key Themes and Discussion

1. Religious Actors and Democracy

The conversation delved into the diverse views of religious actors on democracy. It highlighted that some religious establishments support authoritarian regimes for pragmatic reasons, such as maintaining control over religious spaces, while others oppose democracy due to ideological differences or perceptions of democracy as a western imposition.

Diverse Perspectives Among Religious Actors

It was highlighted that religious actors are not monolithic; they have varied perspectives toward democracy based on their doctrinal beliefs and institutional affiliations. This diversity is critical to understanding their support or opposition to democratic reforms.

Support for Authoritarianism

Some religious institutions support authoritarian regimes for pragmatic reasons—mainly to maintain influence over religious spaces (against their competitors in the religious domain) and retain the backing of autocratic rulers. This symbiotic relationship allows them to dominate religious discourse and suppress competing religious groups or ideologies.

Ideological Opposition to Democracy

A significant ideological rift exists within religious communities regarding democracy. Certain groups view democratic values—particularly those associated with liberal democracy—as antithetical to their religious teachings. They argue that democracy promotes moral relativism and individualism, which they see as incompatible with their religious doctrines.

Perception of Democracy as a Western Imposition

There is a widespread belief among some religious actors that democracy is a foreign construct imposed by Western powers, which does not align with the historical and cultural realities of the Middle East. This perception is further compounded by the belief that Western nations exploit democratic principles to interfere in regional politics to advance their own interests.

Strategies for Engagement

The discussions pointed to the need for nuanced engagement strategies with religious actors to promote democratic values. This includes differentiating between various religious groups and understanding their unique concerns and motivations. The goal would be to foster a dialogue that reconciles democratic principles with religious beliefs, emphasizing the benefits of democracy for religious freedom and societal welfare.

Potential for Democratic Support

Despite challenges, there is potential to gain support for democracy from religious actors who can be convinced of its compatibility with religious values. This involves advocating for a model of democracy that respects religious practices and traditions while promoting universal principles of human rights and governance. This could also mean setting religious establishments, narratives and actors free of the authoritarian control and oversight which is an essential precondition for having healthier patterns of religiosity.

2. Economic and Political Elites

Speakers discussed the challenges of convincing economic elites that democracy is beneficial, noting past missed opportunities for political liberalization. The discussion pointed out the strong cohesion among elites and ideological barriers that hinder democratic reforms.

The following insightful points were raised about the relationship between these groups and the prospects for democratization in the region.

Challenges with Economic Elites

The dialogue highlighted that economic elites in the region often have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, where they benefit from close ties to authoritarian regimes. These relationships provide them with economic advantages that might be jeopardized by the uncertainties of democratic transitions.

Role of Political Elites

Political elites were discussed as both potential obstacles and facilitators of democratic change. On one hand, they possess the capability to influence political reforms; on the other, their entrenched power and control over state resources can lead them to resist changes that would dilute their authority and control.

Elite Cohesion and Ideological Barriers

A significant point made during the discussion was the strong cohesion among elites and their shared ideological barriers against democracy. This cohesion is reinforced by mutual benefits derived from economic policies, state contracts, and the suppression of political dissent, all of which are threatened by democratic governance.

Economic Arguments Against Democracy

It was noted that governments often use economic arguments to dissuade the public from supporting democracy. They claim that the current autocratic systems provide stability and economic benefits, suggesting that a transition to democracy could lead to economic instability and reduced living standards.

Potential for Democratic Incentivization

Despite the resistance, there is potential to incentivize democratic reforms by aligning them with the economic interests of the elites. This could involve demonstrating that long-term stability and international integration, which could improve under a democratic regime, ultimately distribute the wealth and could lead to societal harmony that benefits economic elites in the long term as part of the society.

Leveraging International Influence

The international dimension was also discussed, particularly the influence Western countries and multinational corporations wield over local elites. There's a possibility to use this influence to push for democratic reforms, however, considering the stances adopted by the international partners of the authoritarian regimes and Israel, this influence cannot be relied upon to be exerted, or even to be accepted by the pro democracy actors in the region. country at war and cannot remain without leadership. For this reason, the divisions that existed before the war have only deepened with this war.

3. Democratic Processes and Human Rights

One of the participants emphasized the need to relate democracy to tangible values like stability, security, and sustainable development. He criticized human rights defenders who avoid engaging with democracy, urging a more integrated approach where democracy is seen as a crucial tool for human rights.

Integration of Democracy and Human Rights

The dialogue emphasized that democracy should not be viewed as merely a political system but as an essential framework for enhancing human rights. The conversation criticized human rights defenders who avoid political engagements, arguing that without democracy, efforts to promote human rights are likely to be less effective or sustainable.

Democratic Values as Tools for Human Rights

A key point raised was that democratic values are vital tools for promoting and protecting human rights. These values include the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and participation, which are all critical for establishing a society where human rights are respected and promoted.

Role of Political Reforms

It was highlighted that ongoing political reforms are crucial for the advancement of human rights. Democratic processes like fair elections, freedom of expression, and judicial independence not only empower citizens but also create an environment where human rights can flourish.

Challenges in Advocacy

The challenges faced by human rights defenders in the region were discussed, particularly the reluctance to engage with political issues for fear of politicizing their work. The speaker urged these defenders to embrace democratic advocacy as integral to their mission, suggesting that protecting human rights inherently involves challenging political structures that perpetuate rights abuses.

Human Rights and Security

The conversation also touched on the interdependence of human rights and security. It was argued that true security cannot be achieved through oppressive regimes but through democratic governance that respects and upholds human rights, thus ensuring both stability and dignity for all citizens.

Impact of Authoritarianism on Human Rights

Participants noted how authoritarian regimes undermine human rights, often justifying their actions under the guise of maintaining stability or combating extremism. These justifications were critiqued as fundamentally flawed since such regimes often perpetuate insecurity and conflict, which further erodes human rights.

Pragmatic Approach to Democratic Values

There was a call for a pragmatic approach to promoting democratic values, emphasizing the need to demonstrate how these values lead to tangible benefits in terms of better governance and improved human rights outcomes. This pragmatic approach would involve showcasing successful examples of democratic transitions leading to human rights improvements.

4. Role of the United States and Western Powers

The dialogue touched on the problematic role of Western powers in the MENA region, particularly the United States, which is seen as obstructing democratic progress despite pro-democracy rhetoric. This point was stressed with the need to challenge the Western narrative that the Arab world is not ready for democracy.

Contradictory Actions of Western Powers

The dialogue underscored the contradictory nature of Western policies in the MENA region. While publicly advocating for democracy and human rights, the United States and other Western countries frequently support autocratic regimes that serve their strategic interests. This hypocrisy undermines the credibility of Western calls for democracy and fuels resentment and skepticism among local populations.

Impact of Foreign Policy on Local Perceptions

Participants discussed how the foreign policies of the United States and European countries affect local perceptions of democracy. The selective support for democratic movements, often based on geopolitical interests rather than democratic principles, was highlighted as a significant issue that complicates the promotion of genuine democratic reforms.

Dependency on Autocratic Allies

A critical point raised was the dependency of Western powers on autocratic allies in the region for security cooperation, economic interests, and regional stability. This relationship that prioritizes security over democracy often leads to a tolerance for human rights abuses and a lack of genuine support for democratic movements, as destabilizing these regimes could have adverse strategic consequences for Western interests.

Democracy as a Tool for Influence

The discussion also touched on how democracy promotion has sometimes been used as a tool to extend Western influence in the region. This approach has led to accusations of neocolonialism and has made local populations wary of democracy initiatives, which they often view as a facade for achieving Western political and economic objectives.

Need for Consistent Democratic Support

There was a consensus on the need for Western countries to adopt a more consistent and principled approach to supporting democracy. This includes respecting the outcomes of democratic processes even when they lead to governments that might not align perfectly with Western interests.

Reassessing Western Strategies

The role of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental assistance programs in promoting democracy was discussed. Participants emphasized the need for these programs to be sensitive to local contexts and to work in genuine partnership with local civil society organizations, rather than imposing Western models of democracy.

Myth Dispelling

An important aspect of the discussion was dispelling the myth that the Arab world is not ready for democracy. Participants argued that this narrative is often used by Western powers to justify continued support for autocrats. Highlighting the existence of vibrant democratic movements and civil society in the region challenges this narrative and can help shift Western policies.

5. Inclusion of Gender and Marginalized Groups

A participant raised a crucial point about the missing gender perspective in our discussions. It was emphasized that women and other marginalized groups, including persecuted individuals and vulnerable communities, must be central to democratic reform efforts. Women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are instrumental in advancing democratic movements. Despite their significant involvement in advocacy efforts, their contributions are often overlooked due to systemic gender discrimination and socioeconomic barriers.

Leadership of Young Women and Feminist Activists

Young women and feminist activists in the region are increasingly leading the charge for inclusive governance. To support and amplify their efforts, it is essential that democratic reform prioritize inclusive policymaking, support grassroots mobilization, and ensure the protection of women's rights through legal and accountability reforms.

Economic Empowerment and Access to Resources

Economic empowerment and access to resources are critical to enabling women to participate fully in democratic processes. Ensuring women have equal opportunities to economic resources and protection from gender-based violence is crucial for their active engagement in political life.

Legal and Accountability Reforms to Protect Women's Rights

Strengthening legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms to protect women's rights is essential. These reforms should aim to eliminate gender-based violence and discrimination, ensuring women's safety and equality in public and private spheres.

Recognition of Women as Leaders of Change

True democratic reform must shift the perception of women and marginalized communities from being seen merely as victims or passive participants to recognizing them as leaders of change. This shift requires a concerted effort to integrate their perspectives into the core of policymaking and democratic governance structures.

6. Country-Specific Challenges and Solutions

Participants were encouraged to provide country-focused solutions and share expert insights on thematic and regional challenges. The discussions also covered the need for international solidarity and support for grassroots movements, emphasizing that real democratic change must originate from local efforts rather than external forces.

The discussion provided detailed insights into the unique political, social, and

economic hurdles faced by different countries in the MENA region, along with proposed strategies to address these challenges:

Bahrain

The discussion included the facade of democracy in Bahrain, where seemingly democratic institutions like elected councils lack real power. One Bahraini participant advocated for international standards to be applied in evaluating Bahrain's democratic processes and suggested engaging the international community to pressure the Bahraini government towards genuine reforms.

Egypt

Participants discussed the challenging political landscape in Egypt, where the government has tightened control over political and civic life. Suggestions included bolstering grassroots movements and enhancing the capabilities of civil society organizations to withstand repressive measures by the state. The need for international attention to Egypt's human rights record was also emphasized.

Lebanon

The complex sectarian and political dynamics in Lebanon were highlighted as major impediments to democratic governance. Solutions focused on reforming electoral laws to ensure more transparent and representative elections and reducing foreign and sectarian influence in politics.

Saudi Arabia

The discussion touched on the challenges of advocating for democracy in a highly authoritarian context like Saudi Arabia. Participants stressed the importance of supporting internal reform movements and using international platforms to apply pressure on the Saudi government to undertake democratic reforms.

Tunisia

Tunisia was mentioned as a country that had seen some success in its democratic transition but is facing backsliding. Solutions proposed included supporting independent media, strengthening civil society, and encouraging economic reforms to support democratic stability.

Regional Strategies

The need for a regional approach to democracy was emphasized, suggesting that countries within the MENA region could benefit from shared experiences and support. This might include regional forums on democracy, shared learning initiatives, and cooperative efforts to address transnational challenges like corruption and terrorism that undermine democratic governance.

Engaging Diaspora Communities

The role of diaspora communities in supporting democracy was acknowledged as crucial. It was suggested that these communities could play a more active role in advocacy and in providing support to grassroots movements within their countries of origin.

Utilizing International Leverage

The importance of leveraging international relationships and global institutions to advocate for democratic reforms was a recurring theme. This includes utilizing platforms like the United Nations for resolutions, human rights advocacy, and applying pressure through international human rights mechanisms.

7. Future Direction and Policy Recommendations

The session concluded with calls for continued dialogue and the formulation of policy recommendations that incorporate the diverse perspectives shared. The emphasis was on creating actionable strategies that address the specific political, social, and economic realities of the MENA region.

The discussion culminated in a comprehensive set of strategies aimed at promoting sustainable democracy and human rights in the MENA region.

Strengthening Local Governance and Institutions

Participants emphasized the importance of building robust local governance structures that can enforce the rule of law and ensure transparency and accountability. Recommendations included training for local officials, support for institutional reforms, and the creation of mechanisms that allow for greater public participation in governance.

Supporting Civil Society and Media

Strengthening civil society organizations and ensuring a free press were identified as critical for nurturing a democratic culture. Policy recommendations included providing financial support, training, and international platforms to civil society groups and journalists to help them resist governmental pressures and continue their work in promoting democracy and human rights.

Promoting Inclusive Political Processes

Ensuring that all groups, including minorities and women, have a voice in the political process was highlighted as essential. Recommendations focused on electoral reforms, quota systems to ensure diverse representation, and education campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of inclusive governance.

Economic Reforms to Support Democracy

The link between economic stability and democratic health was discussed extensively. Recommended policies included promoting economic reforms that enhance job creation, reduce corruption, and ensure equitable distribution of resources, thereby providing a stable foundation for democratic practices.

Regional Cooperation and Dialogue

Encouraging regional dialogue on democracy was seen as a way to share best practices and foster cooperative efforts across borders. Policy recommendations included establishing regional forums and partnerships focused on democratic governance and human rights initiatives.

Engaging International Actors Responsibly

The need for a principled engagement by international actors was underscored. Recommendations called for international policies that consistently support democratic values and human rights, avoiding selective engagement based on strategic interests. This includes reevaluating relationships with autocratic regimes and using diplomatic leverage to encourage democratic reforms.

Leveraging Technology and Social Media

The potential of technology and social media to promote democracy and human rights was recognized. Policies to protect digital rights, combat misinformation, and support digital literacy campaigns were recommended to empower citizens and enhance democratic engagement.

Addressing Security Concerns in a Democratic Framework

Security issues often serve as a pretext for authoritarian measures. Recommendations included developing security sector reforms that respect human rights, transparency in security operations, and oversight mechanisms that include civil society participation.

International Legal and Human Rights Frameworks

Utilizing international legal and human rights frameworks to support democracy was advised. This includes supporting countries in adhering to international treaties, using international legal avenues to hold violators accountable, and enhancing the capabilities of international human rights bodies.

Sustainability and Long-term Commitment

Finally, ensuring a long-term commitment to democracy was emphasized as essential for the sustainability of democratic reforms. This includes ongoing support for democratic institutions, long-term education initiatives about democratic values, and continued international support and monitoring to ensure these values take root.