

Women and Local Governance in Egypt

Reform of local governance in Egypt in order to increase women's participation

Women's roles in local councils cannot be established without activating the role of local councils themselves and determining their level of performance. It is also necessary to modernize and strengthen the system so that there is an equal representation of men and women and that women are encouraged to run for local councils. The initial reforms of the local governance system include the following:

- Establishing the principles of diversifying and organizing local councils.
- Avoiding stereotyping and taking into consideration the needs of the local community in terms of their independence and ability to manage their own affairs.
- Instituting a particular legal or organizational situation for the capital city.
- Reformatting the levels of the local system by eliminating some and creating others and by abolishing the center and district levels that maintain an administrative, executive or service nature.
- Developing local unity practices that take into consideration the economic state of the region and accordingly include harmonious groups of provinces. The local governance system should not limit itself to its role of coordinating the general economy.
- Clarifying and stabilizing a decentralized legislative policy so that local councils are better able to fulfill their designated roles.

Whenever the performance of local councils improves and their effectiveness increases, the state's performance should be validated and as a result of this performance, citizens' satisfaction should increase. In fact, the restructuring of local units stands as the first major obstacle to the general policies that must be instituted in order to increase the legitimacy of local governance.

Creating short, medium and long term change

The aforementioned proposals may be achieved through a combination of several processes. The first process should take place in the short-term in accordance with the constitutional and political status-quo. It should emphasize separation of duties of the president and

political parties. The party affiliation of senior local leaders (i.e. members of the Executive Boards) should be banned and the neutrality of executive structures in local elections must be ensured. These changes will increase efficiency and control over local elections.

The second process, to take place in the medium-term and with the constitutional and political status quo in mind, should include the expansion of the system of cities with a special status to be applied in other major cities. The geographical borders of provinces should be redrawn to provide them with prospects for urban development and diversification of resources. This will also reduce the number of provinces. Furthermore, the establishment of a connection between the privatization policy and the rationalization of government's spending. In addition, the policy of empowering local councils to manage their own resources is necessary. It is important to note that reforming local councils should not result in increasing the financial burden of citizens. Finally, the resolution of the problematic relationship between the "old" local councils and the "new" urban communities should be mitigated.

The third long-term phase of this project requires amendments of local administrative legislation and of the institution of a number of laws relating to decentralization. This process focuses on amending the local law of administration and includes: the simplification of community structures in the province, city and village, the abolition of centre and district units, the creation of a balance between the presidential and supervisory relations in localities, the granting of economic, financial and accounting authority to local councils and the lowering of the age of candidacy for local elections from 25 to 21 in order to create a more qualified pool of leaders and to increase the participation of women and youth in local governance. Additionally, existing laws relating to two local development planning institutions, the Supreme Council for local administration (Board of Governors) and the regional planning committees which were established in economic regions, should be upheld. Both institutions depend on central planning through the regional planning committee stemming from the Ministry of Planning. It is proposed, in this respect, to develop the activities of the regional planning committees in order for them to develop into expert planning units rather than continuing to collect data. It is also proposed that executives are placed in these regions to acquire an understanding of economic realities in the region.

Specific challenges facing Egyptian women

The problems of local governance participation faced by Egyptian women today undoubtedly reflect the opportunities available to women in local administrations. The success of women from conservative rural areas in the 2000 National Assembly elections is attributed to the weak competitive environment in these areas compared to that of women in urban areas. It is also important to note the absence of candidates from the governing political party and the generally low levels of women representatives in local councils.

The challenges inhibiting the participation of Egyptian women in local governance are diverse, yet inter-related. These obstacles include cultural factors such as the prevalent and deeply-engrained traditional culture which abhors women's undertaking of leadership roles and their involvement in political activities. The weak support of women's candidacy by political parties, demonstrated by the fact that women members in these parties are rarely given strategic political roles and are only represented in the parties' women's committees, presents another obstacle. In addition, parties have no political activities that aim to raise the public awareness and support for the political role of women. This significantly contributes to the poor electoral candidacy of women.

Procedural complexities facing women also exist and relate to problems with obtaining voting cards, which cannot be accessed without identity cards and which should be obtained from policed stations where many women do not feel comfortable. Violence and threats against the participation of women in elections as candidates and voters is another serious issue that must be addressed.

These problems result in a variety of challenges to women's leadership in local governance. Furthermore, in many cases, political parties lack confidence in women's ability to compete in local elections. Votes are often bought among illiterate women and the masculine culture which favors the election of men is a serious obstacle as well. Religious discourse on elections and families discourage many women from voting. The absence of support from civil society for women's candidacy in national or local elections and conflicts among women's associations sometimes creates more opportunities for men rather than women. The media's promotion of traditional images of women and the fact

that many women lack confidence in themselves to run for election are other sizeable challenges which must be addressed. Widespread poverty among women and the increased influence of financial resources on election campaigns exist as economic challenges to women's participation in local governance.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for improving the participation of Egyptian women in local governance. They should be implemented in conjunction with the aforementioned reform recommendations relating to the local governance system and structure itself. They include:

- Designation of seats in National and Shura (consultation) councils for women.
- Introduction of the quota system in political parties
- Media objectivity and neutrality in national electoral campaign coverage.
- Raise political awareness and encourage citizens to vote.
- Public debate on election campaigns and agendas to be covered by the media.
- Production of gender sensitive electoral tables.
- Political party support for women's candidacy.
- Implementation of the quota system in local elections.
- Television and radio programs for women leaders and candidates in local councils.
- Analytical media coverage of women's roles as candidates and voters.
- Enhancement of women's communication skills in order for them to be able to participate in public and media debates.
- Legalization of a ceiling on the budget of electoral campaigns and the illegalization of vote purchasing
- Donors to support training programs on women's leadership.
- Civic education and technical support including the establishment of election advisory offices for women candidates to help them compete in electoral campaigns .
- Establishment of women's association that focus on the eradication of illiteracy among women.
- Training provided by political parties to their women cadre so that they may compete effectively in election campaigns.
- NGOs to focus on raising the political awareness of voters.