



Arab Reform Initiative

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Against All Odds: Evolving Civil Mobilisation in Egypt under al-Sisi

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Paris, 23 January 2020 – On the occasion of the 9th anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) released today four research papers exploring different forms of civil and political mobilisation that developed and persisted in Egypt despite increasing repression since al-Sisi's power takeover in 2013.

“There is no denying the terrible impact of the brutal repression on Egypt's civil society. But local activists continue to look for ways to survive the repressive tactics and these papers present some examples of how mobilisation has evolved over the years,” said Nadim Houry, Arab Reform Initiative's Executive Director.

In his paper, “Challenging the Legal Ideology of the State: Cause Lawyering and Social Movements in Egypt”, lawyer and human rights activist Ahmed Ezzat examines how a group of Egyptian lawyers relying on “strategic litigation” have come to constitute a strong socio-professional group that has successfully challenged the state's policies. The paper analyses the contribution of “cause lawyers” to reshaping the public sphere, the challenges they face under al-Sisi and whether it still makes sense to go to court against the state over matters of rights and freedoms given the security grip on legal institutions and courts.

In her paper “Urban Rights and Local Politics in Egypt: A Case Study of the Maspero Triangle”, Egyptian academic and rights activist Dina Wahba focuses on the authorities' demolishing of the Maspero Triangle, a central neighbourhood at the heart of the 2011 uprising and once home to more than 4,000 families. She documents resistance strategies adopted by families of the Maspero Triangle after they learned the authorities will forcibly relocate them to other areas. The paper argues that the local mobilisation showed a remarkable diversification of strategies and a growing expertise and know-how on the repertoire of civic action and participatory politics.

Through his paper “Wikis as Catalysts for Change: Wiki Gender as an Example”, Egyptian information activist Ahmad Gharbeia examines how digital activism can provide a launchpad for other forms of direct activism and reform. By providing a first-hand insight on the Wiki gender project, a collaborative platform producing knowledge on gender, feminism and women-related issues in Arabic, Gharbeia gives a description of the merits and potential of local initiatives devoted to



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building shared knowledge in highly disruptive and authoritarian contexts. He argues that strategic research and knowledge creation and curation could provide a nexus around which activists can organise and negotiate demands for change.

The examples in these three papers demonstrate that new trends, purposes, and styles of action have been developing and emerging in Egypt to try to circumvent state repression and identify ways for a peaceful transformation of the relationship between citizens and the state.

The fourth paper examines the trajectories of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members who have been detained since 2013 and what these trajectories suggest for the future of the MB. In his paper, “Strong Organization, Weak Ideology: Muslim Brotherhood Trajectories in Egyptian Prisons since 2013”, Egyptian journalist and researcher Abdelrahman Ayyash interviewed detained and recently released MB members and found that the group’s ideological appeal has weakened and is increasingly challenged by Salafist and jihadist currents, but that the group has maintained its strong organisational capability, even inside prisons. A key question for the future of the MB, Ayyash argues, is how MB members will act and organise once outside prison, which will ultimately impact the cohesion and direction of the organisation.

The papers are published as part of ARI’s project Emerging Alternative Patterns for Mobilisation in Post-2013 Egypt and fall within the broader work of the organisation to understand the evolution of social and political movements in Egypt. The project gathered Egyptian researchers and activists to brainstorm about the transformations of the mobilisation processes and youth engagement under al-Sisi’s rule. In addition to the focus on the four published papers, the participants highlighted different forms of mobilisation and activism on the rise in Egypt that need to be attended to such as feminist mobilization, new art spaces, independent education initiatives, especially religious education. ARI aims to integrate their findings into a broader regional conversation between youth who are experimenting with alternative strategies in their different national contexts.

“The most important role these alternative forms of political activism are filling is that they allow youth political activists to maintain their engagement and networks, and pursue their political goals and values, despite the challenges of



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renewed authoritarianism, war, and protest fatigue,” said Nadim Houry. “These forms of activism may turn out to be the foundations of future political mobilization and contestation.”



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About the author



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The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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