



Press Release, 9th December 2019

Anti-corruption Strategies: What Can MENA Activists Learn from Experiences in Other Countries?

→ Arab Reform Initiative



An Iraqi woman carries a candle and placard reading in Arabic "Corruption is killing us" during a gathering near the Tigris river in Baghdad, to honour the victims of the overloaded ferry that sank a day earlier in Mosul, March 2019. © EPA



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Paris, 9 December 2019 – On the occasion of International Anti-Corruption Day, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) issued a new comparative study presenting examples of how four countries from the global south have fought systemic corruption and what strategies civil society organizations used to raise public awareness, change attitudes and hold public and private figures to account.

The study, titled Models for Successful MENA Anti-corruption Strategies, presents anti-corruption success stories from Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Singapore, and puts forward elements that could be used to inform the fight against corruption in the Middle East and North Africa. It is released as new waves of protests are sweeping Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria demanding an end to endemic political and economic corrupt practices.

“The recent protests from Algiers to Beirut to Baghdad have made it clear that the region’s population is fed up with corruption and will no longer tolerate it,” said Nadim Houry, Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative. **“Now begins the complicated task of uprooting endemic corruption that has infiltrated most public and private institutions, and this is where the experience from these other countries can be helpful.”**

The case studies illustrate a few key components for successful anti-corruption strategies. First, political will is vital for success and such will is dependent on sustained public pressure. Second, “jolts” are often needed to disrupt deeply entrenched positions of power, attitudes, and practices. These “jolts” come in the form of sudden events that stimulate a critical mass of citizen discontent, while decreasing government power and increasing citizen agency. Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria appear to be experiencing such jolts. Third, a successful strategy for utilizing and collaborating with traditional and social media sources is vital to developing environments favourable to change. Fourth, top-down state-led strategies, such as anti-corruption authorities, can succeed in environments where corruption is widespread and entrenched but to do so, they need to possess high levels of autonomy and resources.

While some positive steps have been taken to address corruption in MENA, such as the anti-corruption laws and institutions in Morocco and Tunisia, MENA’s score in the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index remains very low with an average of 39



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points out of 100 (behind the Americas and Asia Pacific which have each an average score of 44). According to the same report, Iraq was ranked 168 out of the 180 least corrupt countries. While an [Arab Barometer 2018](#) survey found that 90% of Tunisians believe their government is corrupt and 96% of Lebanese believe corruption to be endemic.

Often activists and journalists seeking to expose entrenched corrupt practices face a wall of resistance and often do so at a risk to their lives and careers. While a number of countries in MENA (Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco and Lebanon) have adopted access to [information laws](#), these have often been limited in scope, not adequately implemented, and when enacted, journalists or those seeking government disclosure of information face administrative hurdles, repeated referrals to other public authorities or flat denials without any proper redress, as illustrated in a recent report on [Lebanon](#) by Gherbal Initiative, a local group.

With the eroding space for civil society in MENA, investigating and exposing corruption will need concerted efforts by local, regional and international stakeholders with space to exchange successful tactics across countries in the region. While bottom-up efforts to fight corruption are essential, the experience of the other countries examined in the report, show that successful anti-corruption efforts ultimately need an independent judiciary. For instance, a fundamental element in Singapore's overall success story has been its Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, whose high level of autonomy, protected in law, allows it to treat cases impartially, increasing its credibility. In Brazil, sustained public pressure succeeded in squashing a bill that would have weakened the power of federal prosecutors to investigate corruption and led to the introduction of an online transparency portal that provides information on all public bid requests, the financial transactions of all government projects, and the salaries of civil servants.

“The recent popular calls to stamp out corruption represent a historic opportunity to begin the serious efforts to fight corruption. But for any anti-corruption fight to succeed, it will need sustained political will, good institutional backing and a strong independent civil society and media,” said Houry.





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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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