2- Foundations of the Public sphere

a) The social contract

The culture of the social contract is the substitute for “group feeling” (Ibn Khaldun) where the contract is the law by which all free parties abide, in accordance with the universal legal rule stating that “a contract is the law for both parties”, contrarily to the law of the majority or the strongest, i.e. that of controlling power (coup d’état, armed groups, intimidation...), and where national constitutions are part of this social agreement.

The Contract and Individual Freedom

According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, “a man's freedom consists in his being able to do whatever he wills, but that he should not, by any human power, be forced to do what is against his will.” Hence, the essence of social contract can be summarized as follows: “each individual shall be treated as an integral part of the whole”; individuals find themselves obliged to concede their natural freedom, to agree with other parts of the society and to substitute this natural freedom with civil freedom. The objective of the social contract is to preserve the contracting parties’ life and protect their rights from any oppression. Rousseau considers that “when not evidently acknowledged by the people, any law shall be null and void”. The law is the expression of the general will; otherwise it would be a law of slavery and oppression. The General Will – for Rousseau – is straight and only serves common interest and common good. Therefore, the general will is what pushes an individual to conceded some of his/her natural rights to preserve a greater part of these rights within a civil society; it is thus the result of an agreement between members of the society.

b) Common interest and common good

Actions led in the public sphere stem from the culture of Common Good that is different from the private interests systems that characterized the systems of the old Sultanate (where everything was owned by the Sultan). The concept of Common Good has also an organizational dimension as it is related to the elaboration and implementation of policies serving common interest within the Nation-State. In order to understand common interest and common good, it is necessary to differentiate between the individual idea of “charity” and the civil and social idea of common interest and common good, as well as between the individual and group interest and the common interest including all without any racial, gender or religious discrimination.

Best Practice
Citizen Report Card

Citizen report cards are one of the forms of social participation that were encouraged by the World Bank but came out of independent initiatives by a network of organizations that believed in the citizen experience in the Bangalore province of India, as well as in the importance to raise the people’s voice louder than that of politicians or experts. Many assessments have shown that public services in some countries where such participatory methods were adopted witnessed a radical improvement since 1994.

Best Practice
Citizenship Cafe in Tunisia

As a result of dialogues that took place on the margin of the World Social Forum held in Tunisia in 2013, many civil society organizations called for the adoption of a participatory and social approach as a solution for the elaboration of health and educational policies through social dialogues. In this context, the alliance of civil society associations and independent experts organized open dialogues, discussions and social national conferences including reform-oriented workshops. This experience, based on the “citizen café” mechanism, was the first of its kind in the Arab world, and it has started to produce positive results in reforms and policy elaboration.
c) Public affairs

Powers in the Arab world got used to low participation, and in some cases to the absence of any participation from the people; hence, interfering in public affairs became an exclusive right in the hands of the State, making any attempt to break this trend seem as a violation of the culture and traditions that deserves the harshest sanctions, without any denunciation by the people who see politics are the governors’ “private affairs”. The Arab citizen is unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, aware of the enormous risks implied by talking about public affairs in a manner that does not appeal to the State, and this has resulted in a growing feeling of indifference as well as in negative citizenship.