



Sustainable Civil Society...Towards Effective Local Governance

During the first edition of the Afkar conclave, participants discussed the following six major topics with respect to Tunisian civil society:

1. Major Actors and Roles
2. Legal Framework
3. Current Threats and Future Dangers
4. If and How Civil Society Can Work with Political Parties or Entities
5. Promoting Transparency and Internalizing Democratic Structures
6. The Role of Civil Society in the Constitutionally Mandated Decentralization Process

The conclave concluded with the following points of consensus and calls for action, which were then presented to the media:

On the Role of Civil Society: Remaining an Independent Source of Pressure

The conclave expressed unanimous support of the critical need for a strong civil society in the country if Tunisia is to succeed in a democratic transition. When defining the role of civil society, a consensus view among various actors is that civil society sees itself as an independent force to protect the rights and interests of the public, and also as a means for applying pressure on the government.

This role for civil society should not change, and can be maintained only through the proper conduct, such as retaining independence, avoiding partisan activity, and internalizing transparent and democratic structures detailed below.

The Afkar Conclave gathers a critical mass of empowered stakeholders around a defined problem to develop solutions and make commitments within their spheres of influence.

The first edition of Afkar, hosted on April 4, 2015, gathered 50 key stakeholders from government, civic, and international organizations to discuss government-civil society relations in Tunisia.



On Civil Society's Relationship with Government and Political Entities: Neutrality is Key

The conclave affirmed that civil society should not have a political interest, and must maintain its neutrality if it is to preserve its ability to advocate on behalf of the public. While civil society organizations themselves must ask all members to adhere to this neutrality, it is also critical that CSO's asks all others to respect their neutrality and refrain from exploiting civil society activities is that this is partisan neutrality, but not neutrality when it comes to taking positions on issues for political purposes. Government and political entities must be prudent when using forms of civil society in political activities, lest they risk jeopardizing the neutrality of CSO's in general. A critical distinction is that this is partisan neutrality, but not neutrality when it comes to taking positions on issues of public affairs.

Civil society wants to ensure that the relation with the government and outside parties is conducted with respect, transparency, and a sense of civic responsibility. As such, the conclave expressed an urgent need to have great CSO participation in the financial management of public institutions and associations.

Among the over 50 participants who took part in the discussions included representatives from:

The House of People's Representatives, Officials from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Development, Investment, and International Cooperation; OpenGov, Corac, the Tunisian Institute for Democracy and Development, Oufiya, the National Democratic Institute, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Padil, UTIL, Faculté des Sciences Juridiques, and Cawtar



On the Legal Structure for Civil Society: The Surest Way to Protect Freedom

The conclave agreed that the legal framework around civil society organizations is a critical means of guaranteeing a free and ever-evolving civil society. The protections guaranteed in this framework is one of the major gains since the revolution, and can be maintained through vigilance and continued improvements in the strengthen of the legal system.

This system, however, would benefit from modifications to protect both the activities of registered civil society organizations, but also their access to funding. The issue of access to sustainable sources of funding is one that the conclave discussed in the context of multiple topics.



On Threats to Civil Society: Terrorism a Major Threat

Among many potential threats, the conclave expressed a particular concern about the impact that terrorism - and specifically government efforts to combat terrorism - could have on the future of civil society.

Broad gains in freedom of expression and assembly were the major successes of the revolution. But in the wake of recent terrorist activities, the conclave discussed how anti-terrorism programs could consequently hurt the activities of associations.

The conclave affirmed that civil society must continue to work to build a truly democratic society to minimize the appeal of terrorism, and to oppose violence in all forms.

Other threats addressed by the conclave included institutionalizing a structure that represents civil society within the government. The conclave came to a consensus opposing such a structure, as this could lead to a marginalization of minority voices in civil society and diminish its overall capacity to act as an external force.

Civil society also would welcome more opportunities for public financing, conducted in the greatest transparency possible. This can help ensure the long-term sustainability and professionalization of CSO's, who currently are almost entirely reliant on foreign sources of funding.

The conference featured panelists from a variety of government, civic, and international organizations. These included prominent personalities such as:

- Mondher Bousnina, President of Government's Office

- Rafik Halouani, Mourakiboun

- Chafik Sarsar, Instance Supérieure Indépendante des Election

- Salsabil Klibi and Chawki Gueddass, Association Tunisienne de Droit Constitutionnel

- Amine Ghali, Kawakibi Center

- Mokhtar Hammami, Ministry of the Interior



On Promoting Transparency and a Democratic Culture: Essential to Include Youth, Women, & Marginalized Communities

While the conclave celebrated the achievements of civil society on a national level and in the capital, the group agreed on the critical need for much greater CSO involvement in places that suffer from marginalization, far from media coverage or the attention of public administration.

CALL TO THE GOVERNMENT: Better representation of youth, women, and marginalized groups in decision-making regarding the management of public affairs.

On the future role of civil society, the conclave agreed that CSO's must take a greater role in helping to build democracy at the local level, through participation and local projects.

On the Process of Decentralization: Major Work Ahead

The conclave applauded the 2014 constitution for setting in motion a process emphasizing decentralization of decision-making and in public finances. All parties agreed that major work lies ahead, and that all must make greater efforts to ensure this process can be meaningful and successful.

With respect to the upcoming municipal elections, the conclave discussed the duty of government and CSO's to commit to ensuring local elections are carried out and monitored in the same exemplary fashion as the 2014 elections.

In light of the experience of the 2014 Parliamentary and Presidential elections, the conclave agreed on the need to improve the electoral system, particularly in adapting the voting system for the local level, and improving registration efforts to ensure high participation in the next election