

DEVELOPMENTS IN FREEDOM AND GOOD GOVERNANCE AS REFLECTED IN INTERNATIONAL DATABASES

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This section is based on freedom and good governance indicators as accessed through international databases.¹² The authors recognise the disadvantages of relying on such international sources, yet are obliged to turn to them for lack of better alternatives from the region on this crucial dimension of human development. It is to be hoped that such Arabic alternatives will develop in the future, possibly inspired by this series of Arab Human Development Reports.

LEVEL OF CIVIL AND POLITICAL LIBERTIES (1990-2000)

The first AHDR (2002) measured freedom by using values of the indicator developed by Freedom House, which at that time stopped at 1998. At the time of writing this report, the indicator was available only up to 2000/2001 (Freedom House, 2002). It should be noted that freedom scores, as developed by Freedom

House, are far from perfect measures and may reflect certain biases inherent in their source. Yet they constitute the only database currently available for measuring essential freedoms over time.

Figure 5 shows that while the general trend saw freedom rise worldwide, in most Arab countries it fell, with an apparent decline during the early 1990s. Arab countries, on average, continued to evince the lowest levels of freedom among the world regions compared.

In fact, according to this indicator, five Arab countries were among the ten least free countries in the world during 2000/2001.

INDICATORS OF VOICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

International databases also provide indicators of voice and accountability (Kaufmann et al., 2002), which are among the essential requirements of good governance and which the first AHDR used to illuminate its case. Figure 6 illustrates that, despite a slight improvement in Arab countries between the two years considered, when it comes to voice and accountability, the Arab region still ranks lowest in the world.

PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION IN BUSINESS TRANSACTIONS

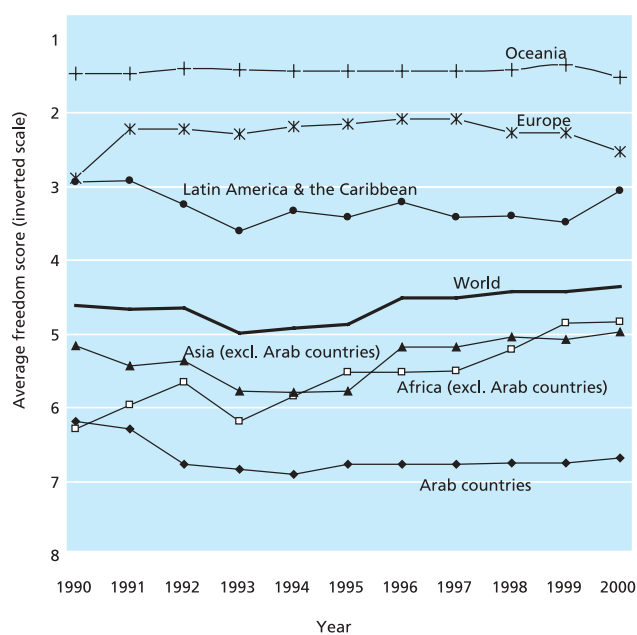
Figure 7 presents the latest evaluations of perceptions of corruption in business transactions worldwide according to Transparency International (2002). The lowest values of this indicator are the worst (i.e., the most corrupt).

The figure does not indicate a noticeable improvement in the position of Arab countries in comparison to other world regions evaluated between the years 1998 and 2002. However, the position of one country, Egypt, improved slightly.

EVENTS INFLUENCING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN ARAB COUNTRIES

This section documents important events influencing Arab human development on the

Figure 5
Freedom scores, weighted by population size:
the Arab region and other world regions, 1990-2000 (average values)



¹²Specifically, the 'Freedom Score' published by the US-based "Freedom House". For technical and practical reasons, the first Report made use of this indicator, despite some important reservations. These reasons include a long time series and a detailed database on various political and civil freedoms. In the absence of other comparable sources, the score is maintained here.

national level and examines their effects, both positive and negative. It focuses on two areas: widening freedoms and establishing good governance, and the empowerment of women. (Improvements in the field of knowledge acquisition, while also crucial, require a longer time horizon for assessment).

Probably the most far-reaching change that could have significantly improved prospects for human development in most Arab countries -- had it been adopted and launched effectively -- is the wide-ranging reform initiative declared by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah at the beginning of 2003. The initiative covers the following dimensions:

"Self-reform and the development of political participation as two basic spring-boards for building Arab capabilities and making available all the conditions conducive to comprehensive Arab revitalisation; the strengthening of Arab co-operation and joint Arab capabilities; attaining the requirements for positive involvement in the arena of world competition; and the achievement of sustainable development." (Documents of the Arab Summit, March 2003, Al-Ahram, Cairo, in Arabic).

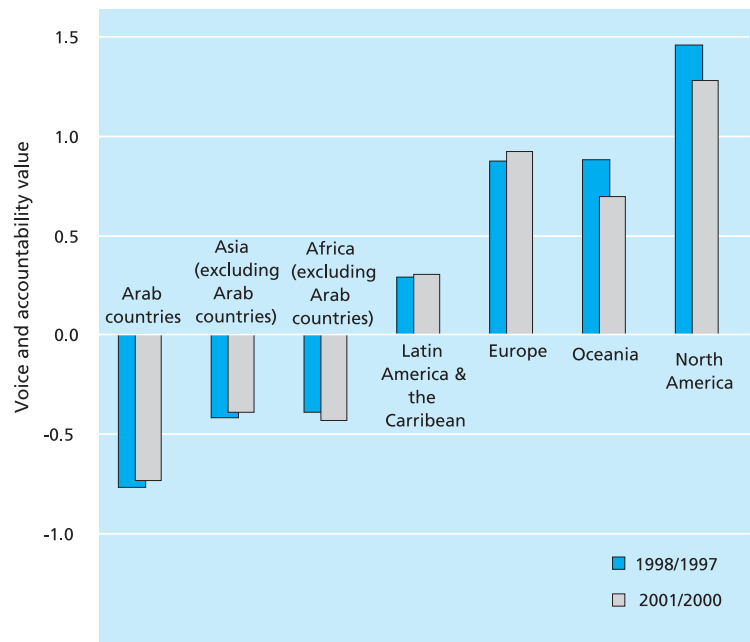
This initiative was to be presented to the Arab Summit during its March 2003 ordinary session in Bahrain. However, an urgent summit (held in Sharm El-Sheikh) took place before the Bahrain meeting and its communiqué lacked any reference to this initiative. Evidently the extraordinary circumstances under which the Sharm El-Sheikh summit was held, namely the looming invasion of Iraq, resulted in an agreement to postpone this initiative, at least for the time. As a result, the initiative was deferred to the next ordinary Summit, to be held in Tunisia.

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF FREEDOM AND ESTABLISHING GOOD GOVERNANCE

While underlining the generally low rating of Arab countries on freedoms and the virtual absence of good governance, the first AHDR (2002) celebrated positive improvements in these key areas in two Arab countries: Morocco and Bahrain.

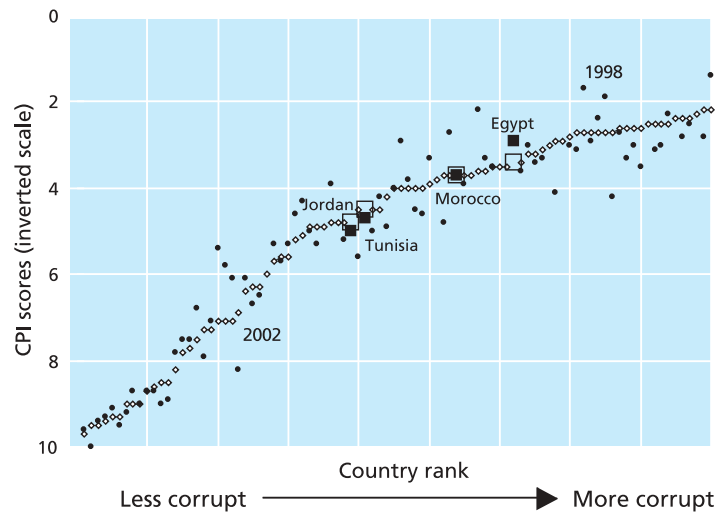
Encouraging developments in Bahrain

Figure 6
**Voice and accountability:
the Arab region and other world regions**



1997/98-2000/2001 (average values)

Figure 7
Perceptions of corruption, Transparency International: position of Arab countries in the sample, 1998 and 2000



seem to have continued. The State Security Act, a statute and symbol of coercion in the country, was repealed. It was also announced that the country will guarantee the freedom to form non-governmental scientific, cultural

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and professional societies as well labour unions, and that strikes are a legitimate means of defending the rights of workers. Moreover, the establishment of "political societies" was permitted. The scope of freedom of speech was widened with the assistance of the judiciary. The Prince of Bahrain declared that the country had been transformed into a constitutional monarchy. The first legislative elections in more than 20 years were held, despite boycotts by some political movements. The government resigned after the announcement of the election results, and the legislative council, comprising elected and appointed members, held its first session on 24 December 2002. Less encouraging was the issuance of a decree (47 of 2002) allowing the confiscation or banning of any publication considered to hold the official religion in contempt, or criticising the king or the policies of the government. (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

In Morocco legislative elections, judged to have been honest, were held. They were notable for a quota reserved for women on national lists, which contributed to a large number of women winning seats. The government changed afterwards.

Positive developments in the field of freedom and good governance included the issuance by the Sudanese President of a decree permitting opposition parties to engage in political activity, provided that they keep to peaceful approaches.

In a development that protects the rights of the Berber minorities in Algeria, the "Amazig" language was classified as a national language and will be taught in the educational curriculum.

Djibouti permitted the establishment of opposition parties and political pluralism. A number of opposition newspapers were allowed in Syria and Tunis while Egypt and Syria moved to authorise private (non-governmental) broadcasting stations to operate.

Parliamentary elections were also held in Yemen in April 2003 – the third such elections since unification in 1990. About 1400 candidates competed in 301 electoral constituencies under relatively peaceful conditions and with a 70% voter turn-out. At the

end of the month, results were declared in 280 constituencies. One woman won.

A number of detainees in Syria, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Morocco were released and several Government officials in Libya and Egypt were tried and convicted upon charges of corruption and profiteering.

Qatar held a referendum in April 2003 on a permanent constitution that allows for a consultative council composed of 45 members, two-thirds of whom are elected, with the right to question ministers and expel them with a two-thirds majority. This preliminary constitution did not allow the establishment of political parties. The Prince preserved the authority to appoint the prime minister and cabinet.

Yet in most Arab countries the march of freedom continued to encounter obstacles.

In one Arab country the deaths of detainees as a result of suspected torture persisted; 11 cases in total were recorded during 2001, all of whom had been detained for public law offences (The Arab Organisation for Human Rights, in Arabic, 2002). The extraction of confessions under torture and the trial of opposition members affiliated with Islamic movements before exceptional courts were also documented occurrences (ibid). The harassment of Islamic activists accelerated with the aim of restricting their participation in legislative elections. In addition, demonstrations were suppressed (including those protesting economic decisions made by the government).

In another Arab country, laws and procedures curtailing freedom, notably press freedom and Internet access, were enacted. A law stipulating the addition of further firm restrictions on freedom of assembly was issued; and the arrest of activists against normalisation of relations with Israel continued. Legislative elections were postponed. However, towards the end of 2002 promises were made to conduct elections in the spring of 2003, to allocate a quota for women in the legislative council and to "raise the ceiling" of freedom for the media and unions.

In a third Arab country, the prince made a statement prohibiting the existence of political parties.

In yet another country, the President of the Republic reduced the mandate of members of parliament, and the level of participation in elections (May 2002) decreased to less than 20%. In two provinces with minority constituents, it fell to just 2%. Freedom of speech and expression remained under severe restriction, while a presidential statement characterised those criticising their country's policies as "traitors" punishable under the law. The persecution of human rights activists persisted and reportedly more than 1,000 political prisoners went on a hunger strike to demand their release (Arab Organisation for Human Rights, in Arabic, 2002). The Constitution was amended to allow the current President to remain in office for a fourth term: (the former Constitution stipulated only three terms).

The Al-Jazeera satellite channel was subjected to a number of injunctions restraining its activities in several Arab countries on a variety of claims.

Emergency laws were extended in a number of Arab countries, in one instance for three consecutive years. Moreover, the trial of civilians before military tribunals and exceptional State Security Courts persisted in six Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine).

Some Arab countries opted to impose constraints on popular expressions of support for the Palestinian resistance by harassing its activists, and even confronted popular demonstrations with violence. Security forces' suppression of demonstrations against the occupation of Palestine in an Arab country caused the killing of one university student and the serious wounding of ten others.

The issue of freedom in Arab countries has become a casualty of the overspill from the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. The conflict between popular sentiments and official positions has led to security forces responding with force, tear-gas bombs and rubber bullets to quell popular demonstrations against the war on Iraq in more than one Arab country. Five men were killed in two Arab countries; two members of a people's assembly were arrested in a third country despite their parliamentary immunity.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society organisations in many Arab countries suffered more legal and practical constraints.

In one Arab country, a law on NGOs was passed which was widely regarded as restricting their activities. It came after the Supreme Constitutional Court had ruled the previous law unconstitutional, for formal reasons.

In another country, an association for citizen rights was closed by an order from the Minister of the Interior, after it allegedly committed financial and administrative violations. A number of activists in professional unions were arrested, apparently for being involved in resisting normalisation with Israel.

In a third country, the President of the Association for Human Rights and some human rights activists were tried under the charges of introducing and distributing publications without permission, as well as spreading false news abroad.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The cause of women's empowerment, and that of freedom in general, was dealt a strong blow when the elected legislative council in an Arab country rejected a government proposal aimed at allowing women to exercise their political rights. Moreover, the constitutional court in this country refused two challenges filed by two women activists demanding political rights for women.

In Bahrain, women won the right to vote and to stand for election to municipal and legislative assemblies. This important constitutional victory, however, was dampened by the failure of women candidates in both elections – seemingly for reasons of a societal nature.

On a more positive note, in a historical precedent resulting from the allocation of quotas for women on national lists, Morocco's recently elected Parliament convened with thirty-three women members, the largest number ever.

Other affirmative action for women included Djibouti's decision to allocate quotas for women in legislative councils (a minimum 10% share for both men and women in party electoral lists was established) and similar

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steps in Jordan allocating a minimum of six seats for women.

More broadly, the ruler of the United Arab Emirates affirmed the right of women to engage in political activity. In Qatar, a woman won, for the first time, a seat in a local council and, at the beginning of 2003, a woman was appointed minister of education. The Kuwaiti government adopted a draft law allowing women to join the security forces. In the Sultanate of Oman, women were allowed to drive taxis and to carry passengers of both sexes. In Yemen a woman was appointed as a State Minister for Human Rights and one woman entered

Parliament in a 2003 election. And in a sudden development early in 2003, Egypt joined other Arab countries in allowing women to serve on the Judiciary by appointing a female attorney-at-law as the first woman judge on the Supreme Constitutional Court and appointing two women as commissioners before that court.

The political emancipation of Arab women called for in the first AHDR evidently still has a long way to go; yet the new progress made in this period is evidence of a greater receptivity to women's empowerment at the executive levels of governments and state institutions.

Evidently, the core challenges to human development in Arab countries, as epitomised in the "three deficits" identified by the first AHDR, are still critically pertinent. Arguably, those challenges are even graver than before, especially with respect to freedom. World and regional developments unfavourable to Arab human development have exacerbated these negative trends.

The second part of this report aims to make a continuing contribution to Arab human development through a detailed study of one of the three cardinal deficits – knowledge. This study culminates in a strategic vision for building the knowledge society in Arab countries.