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Middle East and North Africa Programme: Egypt Dialogue Workshop Summary

Priorities in the Egyptian Delta

March 2012

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document summarizes discussions that took place at a workshop in March 2012 in Mansoura, the largest city in the Egyptian Delta. Bringing together a group of activists, political party representatives, business people and academics, the discussion centred on what Egypt's political transition means for the Delta. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule

The following were identified as priority areas of concern in Mansoura and the Egyptian Delta:

Decentralization and the new parliament

- There is a high distrust of the new parliament's motives and capacity to deliver for the majority of Egyptians, as well as frustration with Egypt's strongly centralized model of government.
- There is a strong desire for local councils to have more powers, but the more general distrust of authority meant that participants saw citizen oversight and monitoring of local councils as a high priority

Local development and socio-economic rights

- Participants saw economic and development issues in their governorate as a top priority, including how to make best use of their land resources to raise everyone's income and standard of living.
- One of the biggest obstacles to local economic growth was said to be the poor transportation routes to the city. Corruption and uneven distribution of resources were also key concerns, as well as the amount of red tape involved when trying to set up new projects or businesses.
- Questions were raised about who has the capacity and political will to deliver on social justice and socio-economic rights in the Delta, and what kind of programmes would lead to more equitable redistribution of services and resources.

Raising political awareness and political participation

- There is a need to raise awareness among the Delta population about political participation, rights and methods for achieving change.
- The high turnout and involvement in the recent elections in Mansoura were seen as extremely positive, and participants believed that the city could provide opportunities to pioneer new forms of outreach and engagement.

INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes discussions that took place at a workshop in Mansoura in March 2012. Bringing together a group of activists, political party representatives, business people and academics, the discussion centred on what Egypt's political transition means for the Delta.

In the opening session, participants were asked to partner with someone they did not already know and agree on one change that they would like to see in Egypt in the next five years. A wide variety of proposals for both macro-level and more specific changes were put forward, including: democracy; full rights for all Egyptian citizens; free education; more leading specialist universities; changes within the education system that support both scientific research and greater creativity; more development projects, including ports and integrated agricultural and industrial zones; a reformed judicial system; social justice; and greater political and social awareness at the grassroots level.

These ideas formed the backdrop for the remainder of the workshop, which explored priorities for Mansoura and the Delta in greater detail, including looking at the local economy, decentralization, socio-economic rights and increasing political participation.

Mansoura is the capital of the agricultural governorate of Dakahlia in the Egyptian Delta, located on the Damietta branch of the Nile. Often spoken of as Egypt's 'third city' after Cairo and Alexandria, Mansoura is home to a large university and a world-leading urology medical centre. The governorate had one of the highest voting turnouts in the recent parliamentary elections, in which the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party won the highest number of votes in the party-list and individual candidacy seats in all the voting districts, while the Salafi Al-Nour Party came second in the party-list vote. The Revolution Continues Alliance and the liberal Al-Wafd Party took third and fourth places in the district party-list votes.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

PRIORITIES IN THE DELTA

The first session looked at priorities in the Egyptian Delta. What are the immediate political, economic and social issues that need to be tackled? How can changes be implemented? What do Mansoura and the Delta have to offer the new Egypt?

Local economy and transport

Much of the first part of the discussion focused on economic issues in the Delta, and ways to improve the living standards of the population. For the majority of the Delta population, it was said that access to food and basic family income were likely to remain the priority concerns, over and above more overtly political issues.

One participant suggested that the main economic problem in Mansoura is the fact that it is a 'consuming' city, with no factories or companies to rival those in Cairo, and many Mansoura citizens are actually resident in Cairo or abroad, returning only for holidays. New investment, industry and administrative infrastructure are required to boost the economy and create jobs in the area. While Mansoura could look to Cairo for assistance in these areas, participants argued there is capital within Mansoura that could be invested, and that relatives working abroad could also invest back at home.

One of the biggest obstacles to local economic growth was said to be the poor transportation routes to the city. The highway from Cairo is in extremely poor condition and the trains are often overcrowded. One participant also suggested building a river taxi to Damietta, a port city at the mouth of the Nile, and making better use of the port in the town of Gamasa.

Land and natural resources

Land issues need to be addressed in both the city and the governorate. The governorate of Dakahlia was said to have insufficient land for agriculture, and it was suggested that the government should give people land in the desert in order to increase their incomes (it is unclear how this would work in practice given limited water resources, but desalination was also mentioned as a way to increase water available for irrigation). Participants also said that in the city more high-rise buildings should replace the slum areas, providing better housing and living standards for the poorest citizens. Others saw the need to

industrialize agricultural areas. Local farmers, for example, lack the ability to distribute their crops effectively and tend to sell their products for extremely low prices.

Some participants are working on addressing some of the issues affecting agriculture – such as the Manzala Lake issue (an engineered wetland affected by poor water quality and releasing polluted waters into the Mediterranean) and problems around irrigation and pesticides – by putting forward new proposals to Dakahlia's members of parliament. However, a number of participants suggested that these problems should be solved locally, rather than waiting for central government action.

It was also noted that Dakahlia and Egypt are not short of natural resources but many are underutilized. One participant suggested that greater investment could go into solar energy, including for projects to desalinate seawater for use in agricultural areas and cities in the desert.

It was emphasized that it is important to consider who is controlling and disbursing resources: many of the current problems were said to lie with leaders who are seen to have their own interests at heart rather than those of their constituents. Those who had money under the previous regime are still considered to be in control of the markets. Furthermore, anyone wanting to start a project encounters a lot of red tape and people have to resort to corrupt measures such as bribery to get their projects off the ground.

Decentralization and human resources

The importance of strengthening local government was emphasized, as was the need for awareness-raising campaigns to educate the population about the role of local government and councils. The current over-centralized government systems are inhibiting the local economy: the fact that paperwork still has to be routed through Cairo was a major concern for the group. There was strong support for the idea of greater decentralization, with each governorate having greater independence and able to take more important financial decisions.

Mansoura has a lot of human resources, especially among the youth. There are plenty of people with mid- to high-level skills, as well as many who are involved in political parties and civil society organizations. The highly engaged youth could be more effectively

mobilized, especially through participation in the coming local elections and helping to build a unified local council.

Local councils play a very important role in terms of local development projects and institutional solutions, and a strong local council in Mansoura could help the city play a more important national role as well. While participants generally said they were positive towards the idea of newly elected local councils, it was also pointed out that there would be a need to monitor them, as with the parliament.

However, one participant argued that the idea of Mansoura doing things entirely alone was not realistic, and emphasized the need to work closely with other parts of the country: the high targets that people expected could only be achieved by working with the country's leadership.

New social contracts

The Delta, like the rest of Egypt, has emerged 'politically handicapped' from 60 years of damage at the hands of autocratic regimes, and there is a need to rebuild trust.

One participant suggested that the way forward would be to find points of convergence between the various political entities, such as around corruption, to bring people to the table and start a new national project. It was important to compete and to differ, the participant argued, but not to be enemies: most people were in fact unconcerned by broad ideological differences between, say, social justice and the free market or Islamism and secularism when it came to day-to-day decision-making.

Other participants also argued for a new social contract based on four pillars: citizens, civil society, government and the private sector. They believed that civil society organizations should be undertaking research on the needs of the people and investment opportunities to present to the private sector, while the private sector could invest more in cultural opportunities, such as building a new Culture Wheel in Mansoura. (The Culture Wheel is a successful social enterprise in Cairo which organizes cultural activities for young people and provides them with space to socialize and work on projects; the venue has a cheap café and free wifi along with event spaces, holding regular concerts and speaker events).

Raising political awareness

Raising political awareness in the Delta was one of the most discussed topics at the workshop, and probably accorded the highest priority by the majority of participants. The level of awareness in the agricultural governorate of Dakahlia was generally considered to be relatively low, although participants were divided on this topic. However the high turnout and involvement in the recent elections in Mansoura were seen as extremely positive, and participants believed that the city could provide opportunities to pioneer new forms of outreach and engagement.

Various ideas were put forward for involving a wider constituency in politics. These included concentrating first on satisfying the basic food and housing needs of families, to allow them more time to think about politics; and creating an independent, non-biased media and information body. Following up the strong parliamentary election campaigns with organized outreach by the same groups on voting rights and political participation was also advocated.

Participants drew attention to awareness-raising efforts already happening in Mansoura. These included the establishment of seven trade unions that were beginning to educate workers such as fishermen and farmers about democratic participation (a recent trade union-led project visited upwards of 30 villages and held workshops about the constitution, participation and the law); public murals; local medical campaigns; and a plethora of cultural activities including those organized by Books and Beans, a local bookshop and art studio which provides cultural and creative activities for young people. One non-Muslim Brotherhood participant also suggested that the Brotherhood provided a good example of using grassroots connections to raise awareness and talk about rights and politics while at the same time providing services.

The 'silent majority' was understood to be of critical importance in both local and national politics. 'The next parliament and president will be chosen by those who are silent,' said one participant. 'Those who can reach this silent majority will be able to govern Egypt and win the presidency.'

DELIVERING ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

The second session of the workshop addressed specific issues relating to social and economic rights. With one of the key slogans of the revolution being the call for 'bread, freedom and social justice' the topic of rights and services was a key question for many of the workshop's participants. Nevertheless the conversation was also marked by distrust of the new parliament's motives and capacity to deliver for the majority of Egyptians, as well as frustration with Egypt's strongly centralized model of government.

Social justice and economic models

The meaning of social justice was debated. The understanding of social justice varied from more equitable redistribution of services and economic issues such as the minimum wage to the rights of the 'martyrs of the revolution'.

Participants were divided over how social justice related to common economic models, with some participants believing that 'people before profit' was not possible under a capitalist system, some rejecting the idea that capitalism was at odds with social justice and workers' rights, and others arguing for a new form of 'decent' capitalism.

Developing programmes and policies

Questions were then raised about who has the capacity and political will to deliver on social justice. How can politicians or citizens develop programmes or policies that meet high expectations? What is the timeframe and what is realistic?

Much scepticism was expressed on the role of the new parliament to deliver a programme of social justice in Mansoura. Some participants said that the local election candidates were chosen on merely on the basis of their personalities or ideological affiliation, and as such have not felt the need to adopt particular policy platforms. Many said that for the political parties the idea of social justice was used as an electoral tool rather than as a genuine goal and that very little had been achieved in the first two months of the new parliament.

There was a degree of consensus around the idea that social justice should now be the main aim, and that political authorities and citizens should work together to try to achieve specific goals. Again, the idea of

decentralization was mentioned – decentralized capital would help towards better redistribution of wealth and services, and local financing of projects would mean that the projects would be better suited to local needs.

A minority of participants expressed a desire to build stronger links with the national parliament and to learn how to work with the new parliamentarians as well as apply pressure on priority issues for the Delta. On a national level, the constitution provides a framework for embedding notions of social justice in Egypt, and it was argued that parliament needed to set specific targets and timeframes, and be held accountable to such promises. This topic, however, fiercely divided participants and others were clear that the parliament is too close to the ruling military council to work with and represented a counter revolutionary force.

It was also argued that the role of trade unions should not be neglected: they have the capacity to connect with the grassroots and inform people of their rights, but also to use their knowledge and skills to help put forward legislation to parliament.

Policy ideas for delivering on social and economic rights

Workshop participants were divided into six sub-groups to discuss specific topics: agriculture and food, education, health, jobs and wages, local government and decentralization, and women. (See Appendix A for a full list of policy suggestions from participants.)

Many suggestions centered on the need to increase equality of access to services, such as women's access to education or universal healthcare, whether through improved legislation, improved enforcement of legislation or new government mechanisms. Other suggestions focused on the need to increase transparency in various sectors, such as ways to ensure access to healthcare is not manipulated, or ways to oversee local and national government decision-making.

Again, decentralization featured heavily in discussions, with suggestions that governorates build local specialist centres to lead on certain areas and provide quality control, in proposals for governorates to specialize in particular products or trades and the decentralization of ministries (for example, moving the ministry of agriculture to Dakahlia and the ministry of tourism to Sharm El Sheikh).

Government ministries were considered generally to be the key players to involve in each suggested action. However, the role of the private sector was also noted, particularly in relation to funding local enterprises, providing training and scholarships and in some cases leading the way in promoting social-welfare schemes by donating profits. Civil society was seen as providing a broad-based monitoring or supervisory role for new initiatives, and one participant suggested that popular supervision could be encouraged along the lines of the Singapore model, in which someone who takes a photo of someone else dropping litter in the street will earn part of the fine.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The final session of the workshop focused on the redistribution of power and decision-making in the new Egypt. How can the number of people involved in making political and economic decisions be increased?

Decision-making in Mansoura

The participants were asked to consider who makes decisions in Mansoura. If there is a hole in the road, for example, who decides how and when it gets fixed? If a new curriculum for schools is needed, who is involved?

For the hole in the road, there was a general consensus that the issue would be taken to the local council rather than the local member of parliament. However, there was not a lot of faith in the local council's ability to fix the hole or to take a decision. One participant said that 'no one would take a decision and the hole remains'. If the local resident was lucky, a 'sleeping policeman' would be put down to stop accidents.

There was criticism of both local and central government's ability to make decisions. The example of a the recent crisis in butane cylinders was mentioned as an issue so big that it had been discussed in parliament,³ yet the situation had in fact worsened. Lack of political will 'to do what needs to be done' was given as the main reason behind decisions not being made, alongside the absence of a separation of powers. The government was seen as operating 'back to front' in that it executed its own will rather than the will of the people.

The role and influence of popular movements and lobby groups were also discussed. In Europe, it was argued, popular movements made governments and influenced laws, whereas in Egypt it is the other way around: popular groups are made by governments and need permission to exist. The constitution needed to allow decentralized politics and decision-making.

However, it was noted that this is not always the case: movements such as Kefaya (a grassroots opposition coalition founded in 2004) were unlicensed but able to campaign effectively for change. The

³ See: <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/battles-over-scarce-butane-gas-cylinders-continue-egypt>

mass mobilization of people under El Baradei's presidential campaign, the prominent April 6 youth movement and new trade unions in Mansoura, as well as a number of successful petitions and student campaigns, were also cited as examples of popular movements having an impact on political life.

One participant noted that in the past people would gather in a village to discuss their problems with the mayor, and traces of this culture could still be found in the Delta.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was considered to be taking all the national decisions. It was described by one participant as 'the guardian to solve every problem small or large'. Various ways of removing the SCAF from power were discussed – including having a president who would gradually withdraw power from the ruling council, and parliament forming a new cabinet. However, scepticism remained over whether a true withdrawal from power could or would be achieved.

Road blocks and strikes were cited as ways in which the people could bring issues to the attention of the SCAF, but not necessarily solve problems. SCAF's crackdowns on citizens' right to protest was also raised.

Citizenship and empowerment

The question is, within this given structure, how to encourage the silent majority or a greater share of the population to take part in decision-making. For example, how can a bus driver influence the decisions of the MP who represents him?

People – including the MPs themselves – need to better understand the respective roles of MPs, governors and local councils. Currently, if people have problems they do not know whom to approach. It was agreed that this can only improve if they are aware of their rights and know where to go to solve their problems. The importance of educating people and building awareness was regarded as paramount. One participant gave the example of healthcare: 'If you are sick do you go to the best cleric or the best doctor? You go to the best doctor' and argued that this logic should be applied across the political spectrum.

Citizens needed enough awareness and ability, and a sense of responsibility and agency within their local environment. It was stated that while most people complained about corruption and bribery, they did not see themselves as having a role in curtailing it. As one participant argued: 'We have to tell them very simply that "you are the decision-maker and you can make changes". Everything is in their hands. They can make corruption and bribery and they can also prevent it.'

Improving local representation

Dakahlia's impact in decision-making can only be strengthened by increasing the impact of its representatives.

The local councils are seen as cosmetic, without power to monitor, supervise or take decisions, and consequently the governorate has problems in all aspects of life – refuse collection, housing, water. It was argued that the solution lies with the people, ensuring better linkages between the street and the executive authority. Civil society organizations could play a large role in helping improve these links, as well as in educating both society at large and government representatives, whether at local or national level.

Participants agreed that new blood was also needed in the local branches of government, to help develop a new kind of thinking, and that skills and expertise should be drawn from the new trade unions and youth organizations.

Local project models

A few local projects focused on political participation and empowerment were mentioned.

Under the previous regime, a project was set up in which a group of volunteers talked to families in poorer areas about economic issues, culture and the arts, and undertook surveys to discover where the greatest needs were. Families were then given loans and helped by a supervisor to monitor spending, savings and priority areas such as education. The families only paid back the loan once their situation had improved.

A schools project for combating drug addiction was coordinated with a local government office in Mansoura. The project involved awareness

campaigns and awareness lectures in schools. It was initially developed by a specialist team but handed to the children to continue the campaigns themselves. Another schools project mentioned involved giving children and teachers a say in the local curriculum, through a questionnaire to be taken to the ministry of education. This project has already attracted some interest from investors.

Also frequently mentioned was the Books and Beans bookshop and arts venue as a good model for cultural development and awareness and an open space for discussion groups, and the Mansoura 'Kazeboon' campaign, which was particularly active. ('Kazeboon', meaning 'liars', is a national campaign involving outdoor impromptu film screenings aiming to raise awareness about the reality of military rule since the revolution).

Action points

In the final session of the workshop, participants were asked to identify concrete actions that they could undertake:

- **Creating a local dialogue process.** A regular open meeting involving all interested parties/citizens, beginning by finding broad points of agreement.
- Holding meetings between people who live in the same area to **discuss solutions for the local neighbourhood.**
- Applying **pressure to parliament** to improve citizens' rights and create a more fully participatory political environment.
- **Launching a single-issue campaign** that everyone can agree on, such as controlling the price of agricultural supplies or releasing all persons convicted in military trials.
- **Talking to the local community** and starting working groups on various issues.
- Joining forces to work on new **independent media outlets**, such as the Kazeboon campaign.
- Working on **awareness-raising projects** together, such as the project to have local people paint their ideas for the

constitution on large canvases to be displayed around the city.

ABOUT THE EGYPT DIALOGUE PROJECT

Egypt is at a critical stage of its post-revolutionary evolution, when it is important that debate continues on a range of issues of concern to a variety of Egyptian constituencies. A series of workshops convened in Egypt by the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House is addressing elections, moving from military to civilian rule, political alliances, UK and Western policy, the economy and the role of the media. A core aim of this project is to increase political inclusion by drawing previously peripheral or suppressed voices into national and international policy dialogues.

www.chathamhouse.org/egypt

ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA PROGRAMME

The Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events that seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also publish a range of reports, books and papers.

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APPENDIX A

The participants were divided into six sub-groups to discuss specific topics: agriculture and food; education; health; jobs and wages; local government and decentralization; and women. Each group was asked to suggest two concrete policy ideas that could or should be enacted within two years, and the people or organizations that would be involved to make it happen:

Agriculture and food

- Increase the area of agricultural land, either by expanding farming into the desert and areas where there is underground water, or reclaim lands from the government.
- Rationalize agricultural policy around the three core problems – scarcity of water, fertilizers and marketing – and divide Egypt into specialized agricultural sectors. Each governorate would become known for a product or a crop, making it easier for both companies and the government to allocate time and resources effectively.

Would need to involve: ministries of agriculture, water, irrigation, environment.

Education

The first priority would be to tackle illiteracy.

- The government should deprive people of benefits if their children stop attending school.
- There should be a national project to improve reading and writing skills, supported by local specialized centres.

Would need to involve: large private enterprises such as the Ghoneim centre in Mansoura to provide training and scholarships and a model for good practice in education; central government funding and strategy would be combined with implementation and quality control by local government and local centres.

Health

Every citizen has the right to comprehensive healthcare in government hospitals, and the priority should be finding a mechanism to apply this. Funds could be raised through a fixed-rate investor tax.

- Equip hospitals to take large numbers of patients but also have the highest-quality patient care, including prioritizing governorates that do not have the requisite number of hospitals.
- Create a system within the medical units to differentiate between public and private and specialist to eliminate any manipulation of the system.
- Put preventative actions into effect (paying LE1 in preventative medicine would save LE10 worth of treatment).

Would involve: ministries of health, interior and environment; parliament; citizens.

Jobs and wages

- Create a new federation of trade unions that covers all professions, providing both job opportunities for new graduates and training.
- Push the Muslim Brotherhood to introduce a standard minimum wage.

Would need to involve: foreign and Egyptian investors.

Local government and decentralization

- Give non-government organizations a supervisory and monitoring role over local governments to prevent corruption and theft.
- Give local governments a supervisory role over all the implementation and local executive authorities of different government institutions.

Would need to involve: civil society and different political entities

Women

- Improve society's understanding of women's right to education and ensure that all children have birth certificates so that they are not invisible to the authorities. [registered with the government authorities?]
- Start a fund to pay a wage to women who are performing a role at home, possibly an amount of money per child, and start

cooperatives and societies for vocational training that are synchronized with women's working times.

Would need to involve: Al Azhar University; committee of women in parliament; civil society organizations.