

Periodical Profile

Culture of Human Rights in Egypt

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First: Definition of the culture of human rights

Generally, culture is the cluster of beliefs, language, customs, traditions, arts, lifestyles as well as symbolic and tangible products owned by a nation. In other words, it is the opposite side of social relations that constitute the core of life aspects including economic, political, family, professional and parental and education systems. All these relations exist within a certain framework incorporates the nations' actions and also its physical and symbolic products.

Whatever the external embodiment of culture, they are in the final analysis mental schemes, etched in the minds of individuals and groups as well. With the recognition of the existence of cultural generalities shared by all peoples, these mental schemes transmit over time to create groups' own distinguishing identity and character. This perception remains a general understanding of the word 'culture' which is sometimes understood in a very special sense that extends to philosophical ideas and cultural outcomes of an artistic nature such as poetry, theater, music and visual arts.

We can realize the definition of the culture of human rights as moral standards, and accordingly they are inherently a cultural components. These rights acquire this trait by the fact that they set standards for humanitarian entitlement; namely any rights that must be granted to individuals in any community. Therefore, these rights pave the way before the principle of the general humanitarian justice, which assume that they are general and must be available to human beings in any place and time, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, religious or regional affiliations. Subsequently, they constitute a global culture and assume the existence of a common denominator among all human beings concerning the rights they shall be entitled to. These rights range from general rights related to freedoms (freedom of opinion and expression) and protection (from abuse, torture, slavery and physical liquidation) to special rights relating to the rights to education, housing and social security.

In the light of this understanding, the human rights culture can be defined as the awareness of the aforementioned rights, along with the awareness of the



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perceptions, ideas, beliefs and practices associated with them. In the context of this definition, human beings can be categorized according to their level of awareness of human rights principles and their perceptions of and approaches to the concept of human rights as well. In any case, we never expect full compatibility between the practice of the culture of human rights and the theory of human rights as ideal humanitarian and moral principles. In general, it can be said that the more the society leapfrog up the development ladder and the higher the education and morals of its members, the more the culture of human rights develops in this society.

Second: The Development of Human Rights Awareness

Humanity has sought to affirm the basic principles of human rights. This pursuit has been confirmed by the promulgation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 affirming that human beings are born free. It was an important document in the history of mankind; that was later supported by other documents, including the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (issued in 1966), the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (issued in 1976), and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (adopted by the World Conference on Human rights in 1993).

It is clear that the global keenness on human rights issues in these documents has broadened the concept of rights; they have become interrelated not only with equality and public freedoms, but also with social, economic, cultural and civil rights. The awareness here has made human rights the umbrella that must cover all aspects of economic and social life. Moreover, this awareness has contributed to the growth of human rights to include the cultural rights as well, where the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO has elaborated some of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular Article 27 thereof, which provides for the right of individuals and groups to enjoy and preserve their cultural heritage and to transmit it through generations. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, issued in 2001, states that cultural rights are an integral part of human rights, with giving special attention to the cultural rights of women, minorities and indigenous peoples. Cultural rights stand for the right of people to knowledge, understanding, enjoyment and preservation of cultural heritage. They are also referred to the right of individuals to effectively contribute to develop this heritage and to participate in cultural policy-making, with taking into consideration the right to education and the right to access to information as pillars of all other cultural human rights. This cultural understanding offers an integrated vision of human rights that combines all aspects of life, and assumes that the cultural awareness is derived from the understanding of the cultural rights of humans and accordingly leads to the awareness of further rights. This awareness also creates a bond between humans and their culture enabling



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them to protect their cultural heritage, practice their right to cultural and intellectual freedom and subsequently to achieve intellectual independence.

This broad understanding of human rights has led to a growing awareness of the culture of human rights in local, regional and international discourse. The spread of this awareness and its incarnation in rhetoric and realistic methods has led to the focus of global and regional organizations on monitoring human rights as one of their major tasks. These organizations have been able to establish a global awareness of the human rights culture, which has had a significant impact on the behavior of States and governments.

In addition, the expansion of the culture of human rights worldwide has led to the emergence of social and cultural movements working to confronting all the challenges that endanger the life of human beings. In this context, we can refer to some movements such as those that are hostile to globalization, or against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, or those who seek to protect the environment, or call for peace, as movements that ultimately aim at the protection of human rights.

Third: Culture of Human Rights in Egypt

To what extent has the culture of human rights spread in Egypt? What are the factors that shape this culture? How are their ideal patterns differ from their real incarnations? In this Study, we are trying to examine the awareness of human rights culture at three levels; the official level (the government), the civil level (civil society), and finally, the realistic level (the public) as follows:

1-The Culture of Human Rights at the Official Level

The Egyptian traditional society did not know what is so called “human rights” in the contemporary sense, but there were undoubtedly forms of cooperation, solidarity and justice, which will be revealed later. There is no doubt that awareness of rights was actually existed in the society, however, this awareness did not appear or reveal in the public sphere. It was rather an ember awareness that had been reflected at the level of individuals and their aspiration to justice and decent living. The cry of Orabi in Abdeen Square before the Khedive can be considered the first overt manifestation of this awareness. Orabi said: “We have been created, by God, free. God has not created us a heritage or a real estate. I swear to God, who has no god but him, we will not be inherited or enslaved anymore”. The Khedive replied: "All these requests are not yours. I inherited this country from my father and grandparents and you are only slaves of our charities”. The speech of 'Orabi' and the response of the Khedive reflect two opposing positions. While Orabi demanded equality and denied the enslavement of citizens, the Khedive rejected their freedom and regarded human beings slaves only for the subsidies provided by the holders of power. In the former historic event, awareness creates human rights and freedoms, while the authority resists. Out of the conflict between the two perspec-



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tives, forms of awareness of human rights emerged and were later embodied in constitutional and legislative texts that granted the people certain rights. This awareness has grown and developed until recognized by the State itself who became the sponsor and protector of these rights.

The people gained the right to representation through elected councils, which began in 1883 by the establishment of the Council of Shura and the general assembly. After the promulgation of the Constitution of 1923, the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors have been founded. Although the names differ in the consequent constitutions, the parliamentary representation has remained and expanded achieving its independence as a legislative authority that monitors the performance of the executive authority. The people have also acquired their right to education following the demand of Taha Hussein who says “education as water and air” that has been realized after the July 1952 revolution and the great expansion of the access to education.

At the social level, many human rights gains have been made in the fields of health, social security and social protection. The awareness of human rights at the official level has been developed considerably, and the conflict between the people and authorities is no longer existed. States become themselves the sponsor and the defenders of human rights, not only caring for the expansion of freedoms and rights as well as the right to education, health and security, but also taking care of vulnerable groups such as women, children and people with special needs, along with constant cooperation with international organizations in the support of human rights, and the ratification of international treaties and covenants that defend them.

2– The Culture for Human Rights at the Level of Civil Society

Civil society, represented in civil society organizations, trade unions and political parties, was not concerned with human rights problems. Some civil society organizations, however, tended to defend certain rights, such as protecting the poor or providing cultural or health care directly. Although, we can derive some signs of the defense of human rights in the ideologies and the intellectual frameworks governed some civil society institutions, especially trade unions, and socialist-oriented parties that advocated justice and equality of rights and duties or advocated the rights of certain groups such as workers or peasants.

With the growing human rights discourse at the global level, and the increasing intellectual and ideological flows of globalization, accompanied by the financial and logistic support of international organizations dealing with human rights issues, civil society in Egypt has become very active in the field of human rights.

Civil society organizations have accessed the field of awareness of human rights and thus spread the culture of these rights from a general assumption



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that the civil society is the intermediary between the society on one hand and the State on the other. It prevents the State from dominating society and prevents society from turning into chaos. This means that civil society enjoys high degree of independence in its conduct and decisions and therefore, can defend the rights of individuals. This has been met by the consent of the Egyptian society, coupled by the encouragement of international organizations and the globalized discourse on human rights. This has resulted in further involvement of Egyptian civil society organizations in human rights issues. In 1990, number of trade unions in Egypt reached 24, and number of NGOs reached 16,000. In 2000, number of human rights organizations has been expanded to 30, compared to just one organization working the field of human rights in the 1980s.

These organizations - especially human rights organizations- have worked in programs to raise the awareness of the culture of human rights, to disseminate this culture and to defend the rights of the most vulnerable groups, especially women. This has been done through holding various activities, including the publication of books and periodicals, the organization of conferences and workshops and the establishment of social networks with local, regional and international organizations in order to obtain logistic and financial support.

Many of these organizations have succeeded in spreading the culture of human rights, drawing attention to the most important human rights issues, and protecting vulnerable groups. On the contrary, some organizations have dressed up politically, and their work has been confined to obtain funding. They have leaked information that may harm national security and conducted research on behalf of foreign parties without considering the consequences.

3-The Culture of Human Rights in Daily Life

It is difficult to talk about the culture of human rights in everyday life, because the concept of human rights is considered a new one that is not expected to reach everyday life easily. However, primitive images of the concept have been emerged in people's habits, traditions, lifestyles, and cultural schemes. These images can be sought in some of the cultural characteristics that distinguish the people and revealed in ancient and modern history:

- A. Rights to justice and equality: justice is one of the main pillars of the Egyptian culture. It was expressed in the poems of peasants in the ancient Pharaonic era, and later expressed by Ahmed Orabi in his famous words in front of the Khedive. On other level, contemporary researches have confirmed that the Egyptian man becomes outraged at the spread of injustice and the theft of rights and is very much in favor of the rule of justice and equality.
- B. Respect for property rights: Although the law regulates property rights, the public culture of Egyptian people meets these rights with extreme respect,



prevents anyone from infringing on the property of others and strictly regulates the sale and purchase process.

- C. Respect for the rights of expression and representation: This can be evident in the established methods of resolving conflicts in daily life. There are special councils for this purpose. Individuals in these councils are allowed to express their views freely and to choose their representatives.
- D. Respect for the rights of neighborhood: Egyptian families live within the same buildings in cooperation and integration; along with the existence of forms of tangible and moral exchange, which contribute to create social and cultural capital to strengthening ties within the neighborhood.
- E. Protection of the rights of the vulnerable groups: The prevailing culture among Egyptians reflects images of protection of vulnerable, such as children, the sick people, the elderly, women and the poor. The strong serve the weak, the young respect the older, the sick have the right to be visited and taken care of.

There is no doubt that the environment that raises these five considerations becomes an incubator for the culture of human rights. It is an environment capable of integrating the human rights culture in its modern sense and interacting with it positively.