State Capacity and Governance Reforms in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

This article considers the definition of governance according to the World Bank and measures governance through six indicators: political stability and absence of violence, voice and accountability, regulatory quality, government effectiveness, control of corruption, and rule of law. Governance, whether good or bad, is a form of institutional arrangement to enact, implement, and assess policies to serve stated objectives. It is not necessarily all benign objectives, which is why good governance is distinct from bad governance. This article asserts that good governance is a critical concept as it benefits societies from the perspective of accountability, effective resource management, productivity growth, and increases in the general welfare of citizens. Good governance also enhances inclusiveness in politics and builds trust within government institutions, which would lead to state stability and its capability of holding development strategies.

The article is divided to sections, one discusses state capacity, another provides an overview of the concept of governance, a section gives examples of governance reforms and how they have evolved in some MENA countries, and one that provides concluding remarks.

The article concludes that state capacity is the ability of the government to effectively implement policies and deliver public services. It includes elements such as human capital, institutional structures, financial resources, and technological infrastructure. Without sufficient state capacity, it can be difficult for governments to implement effective governance reforms. Therefore, building state capacity is a crucial step towards achieving good governance and sustainable development. State capacity is necessary to implement governance reform because states need human capital and working technology to drive reform.

Keywords: Good Governance, State Capacity, Human Capital, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Graham et al. (2003) define governance as the interactions among structures, processes, and traditions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders exert influence. According to Graham et al., governance is about power, relationships, and accountability: who has influence, who decides, and how decision-makers are held accountable. Good governance is a process led by actors, and it is different from the government as a set of institutions that are separated from the citizens and seek their own interests. As Kherigi (2017) rightly stated, “Across the Arab world, there is a feeling that the governance model in the region must change, and that more inclusive governance is desperately needed to address the needs and realities of a vast swathe of excluded and marginalized social groups.” (p. 5)

Limited infrastructure, poor public services, and highly concentrated political decision-making in the center limit the capacity for civic participation and locally rooted and efficient policies in the regions (Houdret, 2019). In a comparative study on the Arab world, governance systems were centralized, with only 5 percent of GDP allocated to local governments, while OECD and Latin American countries allocated 20 percent and 23 percent, respectively (Harb and Atallah, 2015). The Arab Spring has triggered waves of reforms, particularly governance reform, which has become an agenda for the youth and those calling for reform. However, before discussing the reforms and their types, whether political, economic, or social, it's important to note that there is no specific definition for governance. According to Houdret (2019), low political participation, regional inequalities, abuse of centralized power, as well as the resulting deficits in public institutions' efficiency and accountability, were major drivers of the Arab Spring. Reforming governance is a central theme post-Arab Spring.

However, in this article, we will consider the definition of governance according to the World Bank, which defined it as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (The World Bank, 1994). According to the World Bank (2013), governance can also be measured through six indicators: political stability and absence of violence, voice and accountability, regulatory quality, government effectiveness, control of corruption, and rule of law. Governance, whether good or bad, is a form of institutional arrangement to enact, implement, and assess policies to serve stated objectives. It is not necessarily all benign objectives, which is why good governance is distinct from bad governance.

Good governance is a critical concept as it benefits societies from the perspective of accountability, effective resource management, productivity growth, and increases in the general welfare of citizens. Good governance also enhances inclusiveness in politics and builds trust within government institutions, which would lead to state stability and its capability of holding development strategies (UNESCWA, 2015).

In an earlier study, Ali (2018) argued that about one-third of MENA countries are either fragile or failed states. Furthermore, he created a taxonomy of the state's effective governance capacity, arguing that a state moves along the state transition curve, resulting in governance capacity variations over time (Ali, 2018). It begins as a fragile state, consolidating to become a vibrant state, eventually only to embark on a downward trajectory through phases of rigidity, decaying, and fragility before becoming a failed state (Ali, 2018). In this study, we will determine the factors that are driving movement along the state transition curve, which we might say is governance quality. Deeper governance capacity is determined by state capacity in terms of human, financial, and infrastructure capacity. Any government reforms to be successful, state capacity is relevant.

As long as state capacity is limited or deformed, it overshadows any serious reform efforts. A lack of human capital capacity has an impact on public policy quality, while an infrastructure deficit curtails any serious economic reform. A lack of state capacity has placed limits on all reform efforts to a varying degree, which has reflected on governance. Therefore, the deficiencies of governance in the Arab region are severe. Although each Arab country has its own unique socio-economic reality, and the region is characterized by its diversity, there are similarities regarding their governance challenges. These include: the top echelon of elites controlling the political and economic environment, external revenues shaping the country's economy (such as natural resources like oil and remittances), economic opportunities being based on connections rather than competition, centralized states being shaped by the public sector in addition to the weakness of the private sector, and security states being characterized by an extensive coercive apparatus (UNESCWA, 2014).

Most of the reforms that were initiated are associated with neo-liberal economic reforms that significantly downsized the public sector and stripped the states of assets for private entities.

Governments have decided to spend less on social programs and correct social and economic inequality. This situation is typical of a general economic ailment throughout the Arab world outside of the oil-rich Gulf: static systems by which the state protects shrinking groups of insiders while exposing outsiders to the brute forces of the market, thereby encouraging inequality and undermining economic dynamism, productivity, and growth (Hertog, 2023). Countries as diverse as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco share this lopsided approach to capitalism (Hertog, 2023).

The governance reform has increased the authority of the private sector and deregulation to increase the margin of profit and eroded the social contract. For the countries outside the GCC, there are no true social contracts between the states and their citizens. A survey conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace showed that only 4 out of 93 participants expressed their satisfaction with their governments (Cammack & Muasher, 2016).

The governance problems among Arab countries are concentrated in democratic transition and/or ethnic conflict as happened in Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Syria. In these cases, it is difficult to have one standard that fits all when it comes to governance when there is a challenge to the authority of government in MENA. There are different levels of state capacity and governance performance. Governance can be used as a specific term to describe changes in the nature and role of the state following the public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, a shift from a hierarchical bureaucracy towards a greater use of markets, quasi-markets, and networks, especially in the delivery of public services (Bevir, 2009).

Moreover, government inefficiency results in poor provision of public services and reduces the accessibility to the benefits of consequent human development. This can lead to political unrest and instability (Brixi, Lust, & Woolcock, 2015). The lack of democratic transition and increased political instability are due to the unaccountability of highly centralized governments and the non-participation within the political systems (Khatib, 2013).

Most of these governance challenges are drivers of the 2011 Arab uprisings (Dalacoura, 2012). Despite the demands of these movements for good governance, the government has not met the expectations of their citizens. In addition, this has left most Arab countries politically unstable (Hinnebusch, 2015). It is obvious that Arab countries need innovative strategies to tackle their governance challenges. Any reform must stem from internal needs and priorities, not through the Washington consensus that prioritizes debt repayment and then works out a plan to reduce government spending in vital sectors and deprives the government from resources to deliver basic services. This article is divided as follows: Section 2 discusses state capacity. Section 3 provides an overview of the concept of governance. Section 4 gives examples of governance reforms and how they have evolved in some MENA countries. Section 5 provides concluding remarks.

State Capacity

State capacity, which is the ability of a state to implement and enforce policies, needs an ecosystem that includes technological, human, infrastructure, financial, public policy, and administration capacities to absorb any changes, including government reforms. Deficiencies in human and infrastructure capacities will be the biggest challenge for any government reform. The government should invest in human capital, infrastructure, public policy, and administration capacities to have a well-trained labor force, a competent bureaucracy, and basic infrastructure such as internet connectivity and road links to domestic markets, and the ability to enforce contracts. In a previous study by Ali (2018), the state transition curve can be displayed as an inverted U-shape, where the X-axis represents the timeline and the Y-axis represents the state's effective capacity.

Ali argued that Morocco and Saudi Arabia are rigid states because public policy and administration are resistant to reform, while Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE are vibrant states with a consolidated state that has well-functioning administrative, judicial, security, and political institutions with checks and balances. However, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Iran are decaying states, due to the stagnating bureaucracy and a lack of policy innovation. Finally, failed states are Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen.

Following the normal trajectory, a state begins as a fragile state with a low effective governance capacity, then increases its effective governance capacity until it reaches its full capacity to become a vibrant state (Ali, 2018). Figure 8.1 shows human capital capacity in vibrant countries in MENA. Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait are showing steady increases in primary, secondary, and tertiary education completion rates. Also, the pupil-teacher ratio is in steady decline, which is indicative of an improvement in the quality of education. These countries are the bright spots in the region. These countries have built human capacity for decades, and the state has the capacity to steer economic, social, and cultural reforms that can facilitate a governance reform.

Figure 1: Human Capital Capacity in Vibrant Countries in MEAN (1971-2019)

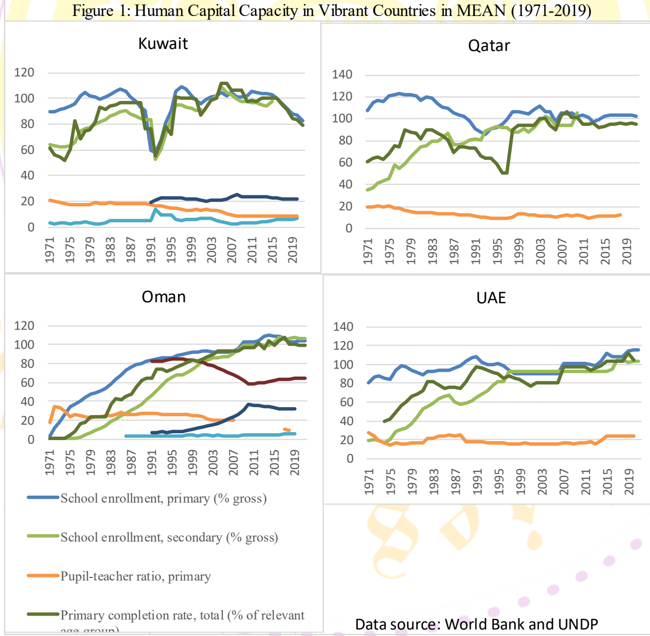
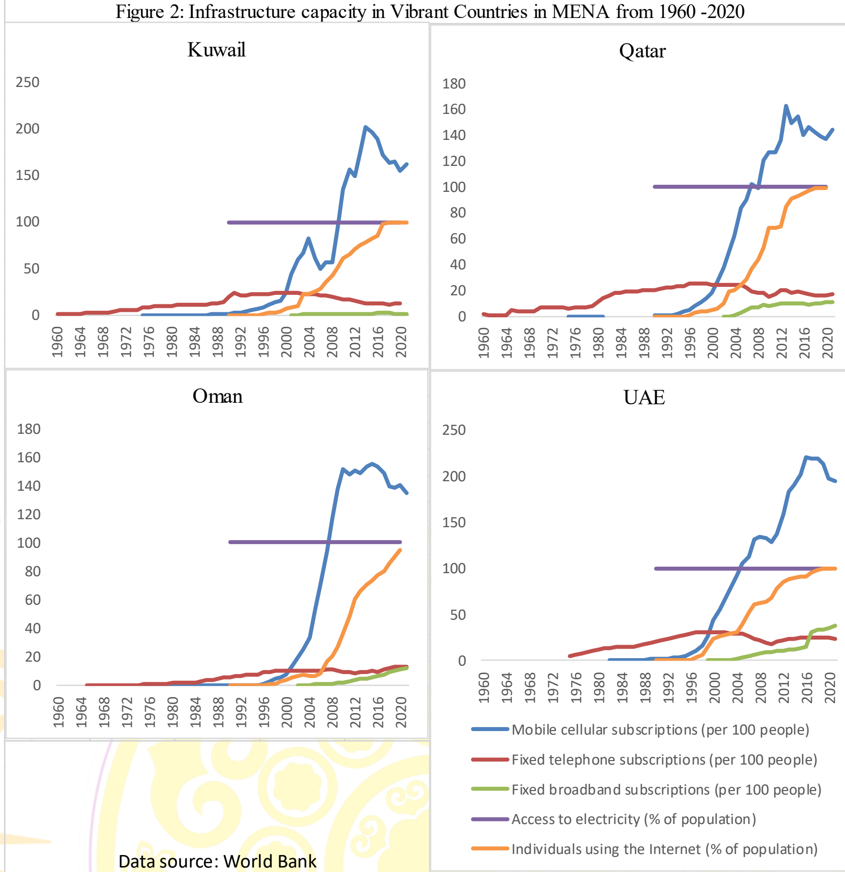


Figure 8.2 shows the infrastructure capacity for vibrant states in MENA. All four countries have shown 100% access to electricity and internet. Since 2000, fixed broadband and cellular phone subscriptions have grown steadily. These countries have the capacity to initiate and effectively implement reforms, as well as manage knowledge effectively. For example, in Qatar, all government services are conducted through Metrash2, which has significantly improved government services.

Figure 2: Infrastructure capacity in Vibrant Countries in MENA from 1960 -2020



Overview of the Concept of Governance

The World Bank defines governance as the way a state uses its power to manage its social and economic resources. UNDP also illustrates governance as the exercise of administrative, political, and economic authority to control national affairs. Sedarmayanti (2012) explains that governance is based on three elements: administrative governance, which includes the system of policy implementation processes; economic governance, which includes the decision-making process to provide equity and alleviate poverty; and political governance, which is the decision-making process for policy formulation.

The word "good" in good governance has two meanings: first, values that support people's wishes and desires and values that can improve people's ability to achieve developmental goals and social justice; and second, the functional aspect of efficient governance to achieve developmental goals (Setyadiharja et al., 2017). The World Bank (1994) restricts the definition of good governance to a reliable judicial system, efficient public services, and accountable government by its people. The European community (2003) defines good governance as imposing measures to alleviate corruption, creating an environment for better market performance, democratic decision-making, managing developmental policies, rule of law, government transparency, and respect for human rights. UNDP (2006) also defines good governance as the consensus among government, citizens, and the private sector for governance within a country. The OECD and the World Bank synthesize the concept of good governance with the efficient implementation of developmental policies in line with efficient market performance, democracy, and the creation of reliable political and legal systems for the growth of entrepreneurial activities.

However, there are some criticisms regarding the concept of good governance. Syakrani and Syariani (2009) introduce the first criticism regarding good governance, as they explain that the concept is still obscure because the word "good" is a normative value associated with the dominant political order. They raise this criticism due to the argument regarding the developed countries that carry the hidden agenda of capitalism, especially to those who are sponsored by the World Bank and the IMF. Dwipayana and Eko raise a question: "Who is good governance for?" It is neoliberal thinking that does not care about the people but only about the market. Then, Syakrani and Syahriani (2009) also illustrate that there is another perspective that suggests that the alignment of government entities with the private sector could negatively affect the state authorities to efficiently control private actions, such as global corporations within developing countries. It must be cautioned that the concept of good governance is not used as a cunning strategy by developed countries to dominate the developing countries' economy or colonize them (Syakrani & Syahriani, 2009).

The second criticism, raised by Putra (2009), is that the concept of good governance is an ideology that paves the way for the expansion of neoliberalism to enter the awareness space of nation-states all over the world. This is similar to the command troops that pave the way for the regular forces to colonize a place. Good governance is like a unit that opposes other concepts, such as anti-liberalism and anti-neoliberalism, for the awareness of what is good for managing a nation-state. Therefore, the concept itself holds a hidden power of the language. According to Putra (2009), it is obvious that the concept of good governance must be followed, especially by developing countries, and if not, the country would be considered an impartial state. This means that the concept positions itself as an ideological value for countries. Accordingly, in the next two sections, the article will show the governance reforms in some of the Arab countries and how these reforms are related to the concept of good governance.

Governance Reforms in Some MENA Countries

MENA countries have witnessed waves of reforms to address issues such as deregulation of bureaucratic systems, sales of state-owned enterprises, empowerment of private enterprises, significant reduction of civil service, and reduction in government-provided services. In this decade, three countries - Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia - introduced major governance reforms, some of which were driven by government debt burden, and in some cases, were dictated by the IMF and World Bank to reduce debt burden and correct fiscal imbalances. In the short term, GCC countries with a flow of oil rent were under no pressure to accept the formula from the international lender to reform governance. Most GCC reforms were designed to find alternatives for oil rent by investing in the knowledge economy and reducing government spending. All countries in the region recognize the need to adopt good governance practices such as transparency, rule of law, and some degree of transparency. There is a growing, vibrant civil society across the MENA, spearheaded by the youth and NGOs. There is interaction between the government and local or global actors to reform government processes and outcomes. Good governance is a process and outcome. In this section, we can select relatively larger countries like Egypt and Morocco from North Africa and Saudi Arabia from the GCC countries with excellent human capital and vibrant civil society to discuss governance reform and draw some lessons as well as showing the evolution of their governance reforms toward economic development.

Egypt

During the period of the first Gulf War, the Egyptian economy was ridden by debt and heavy regulations and negative economic growth. In 1990, Egypt's international debt was roughly 50 billion US dollars, and its debt/GNP ratio was nearly 150%, which was considerably the highest in the world (Richards, 1991). Unskilled workers' real wages fell in four years by 40%; in addition, civil servants took only half of their 1973 salaries (Richards, 1991). The unemployment rates had doubled during the decade. The quality of educational services, health, and transportation had declined to the minimal levels. These circumstances opened the door for the government to seek ways to deregulate heavily regulated industries and allow the private sector and NGOs to be actively operated. Also, in 2004 the government introduced banking reform, which resulted in economic growth. The political system gave some freedom and farcical elections and some competition among political parties from the left and right. Egypt is the case of an autocratic state that international funding agencies were a factor in advancing some elements of governance reform.

Even though this process strengthened more who were connected to the state apparatus, the process also led the Islamist opposition (Muslim Brotherhood) to resent these forms of corruption. The Egyptian regime used the strategic rent to start the process of economic reforms. Since 2013, the government introduced administrative and public economic governance reform to strengthen government effectiveness and capacities for implementing the Administrative Reform Plan (ARP). A new civil service law replaced the arcane one that was ratified in 1978. A

According to (OECD, 2019), Egypt has initiated a program to conduct functional reviews for selected government ministries and agencies in order to: 1) assess, develop, and redefine the roles, missions, and tasks of the different entities at the two different levels of administration; 2) establish the appropriate role for the government in each sector by identifying redundant functions and duplication between and within institutions. These are meaningful reforms in general terms; Egypt is redefining the government's role from an executor to a policy maker and inspector, assigning a larger role to the private sector for execution. Most of the administrative reforms were designed to reduce corruption by creating mechanisms to increase accountability and transparency. Moreover, the government created an E-Government portal to provide.

Morocco

Morocco has implemented several important administration reforms, including the creation of a National Committee for the Reform of Public Administration in 1981, the adoption of the "Charter of Good Governance" in 1999, and the first national debate on administrative reform in 2002 (Elhiliali, 2022). Institutional quality is an important factor in economic development, as a country's standards practices can affect its economic performance. Institutions play a key role in growth, particularly in aspects such as property rights protection, regulation structure, and judicial independence (El Khattab et al., 2019; North, 1994).

In 1971, regions were introduced into Morocco's political system as a means of political control that empowered local elites (Garci et al., 2015). Constitutional reforms were introduced in 1992, which created a Constitutional Council and parliamentary investigation committee, followed by a 1997 regional law that established 16 regions with weaker legislative powers. The aim was to create a centralized state to ease political pressure and preserve territorial integrity (Good, 2011). In 2010, King Mohammed VI created the Consultative Commission on Regionalism (CCR) to lay the foundation for a decentralization plan (Garci et al., 2015). These ad hoc institutions were implemented top-down to create the image that the king was leading the reform, but in each cycle, a new elite emerged at the expense of rural and traditional elites.

During the Arab Spring, students called for democracy and limits on the monarchy's power. The new constitutional change granted executive powers to a prime minister and advanced regionalization, while the king maintained control over the military, judiciary, and religious authorities and institutions. Decentralization created an opportunity for more participative governance, but there was a tendency to re-centralize rather than decentralize (Bouabid et al., 2015; Houdret, 2019). One motivation for implementing the decentralization reform was to propose a solution to the longstanding conflict over the Western Sahara territories, allowing local inhabitants to benefit from a new status of autonomy, their own locally elected representatives, and financial means administered at the regional level for regional development priorities (Houdret, 2019). It also created an opportunity for civil society to flourish.

Administrative reform is crucial in achieving development in all forms, whether economic, social, or cultural (Elhilalli, 2022). However, despite many attempts, achieving this goal remains elusive, prompting the country's authorities to stress the need to adopt a new development model. Although Morocco successfully implemented economic reforms reflecting the policies of the Washington Consensus, the country achieved little in terms of growth and employment creation. A report conducted in March 2006 by researchers from the World Bank and Moroccan and US universities showed that Morocco achieved macroeconomic stability with partial implementation of structural reforms, but growth was not efficient enough to eradicate poverty and tackle unemployment problems. Despite the boom in the 1970s, the country's expansion was partially financed by international borrowing (Morrison, 1991). In the late 1990s, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Privatization selected 112 state entities, including 75 companies and 37 hotels, to be privatized (Saloman Brothers, 1992).

Morocco received political advantages that enabled it to implement much of the Washington Consensus program. Both Hassan II and Mohammed VI significantly led the country and bolstered technocrats by providing them with longevity in their posts. The king's program was supported by both businessmen and agrarian elites (Mansouri et al., 2004). To ensure their support, policy changes were implemented to benefit them. Morocco tied itself to the IMF and the local elites while the King is portrayed as vehicle for reform using top down approach with Adhoc structures that are operating in parallel with formal structures.

Saudi Arabia

The 2014 collapse in oil prices forced the Saudi government to confront the challenge of diversifying its economy away from oil and to start imposing fiscal restraint (Thompson and Quilliam, 2022). Moreover, the economics of the rentier social contract, exacerbated by increased fiscal pressures as a result of oil price fluctuations, have impacted the Saudi government's plans to tackle employment opportunities and affordable housing (Thompson and Quilliam, 2022).

The modernization of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and detailed in his Vision 2030 plan addresses multiple national and regional challenges (Bassiouni, 2022). He has engaged in mega-projects to redesign the country's societal, urban, territorial, and tourist landscape, such as AlUla, Qiddiya, and the Umluj Red Sea Project, which are financially backed by the sovereign fund he chairs, the Public Investment Fund (PIF) (Bassiouni, 2022). Neom will be powered by cutting-edge technologies such as human-machine fusion, artificial intelligence, and robotics.

The country has engaged in changing the school curriculum, reflecting the kingdom's entry into the transformation of the Wahhabi state. However, the system remains autocratic, interested only in neoliberal economic reforms. The government is keen on economic reform and privatization, including changes in corporate laws and governance. The repression of independent civil society and critical voices decreases the chances that reform efforts will be successful (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The development of Saudi Arabia as a state controlling the political economy will be illustrated in this section. The state controlled 65% of the country's GDP with the government dominance in shaping the formal economy (Ayoubi, 1985). The oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s was the reason for the significance of the state's economic performance. The civil service increased from 13,000 to 232,000 in 1962 and 1981, respectively, which was the reason for an additional 81,000 part-time or non-classified employees (Ayoubi, 1985). There were sweeping welfare policies implemented to support the legitimacy of the regime and to disseminate the wealth of oil among familial networks. Indeed, subsidies created significant economic distortions and induced complicated difficulties for development in the future. For example, the government subsidized farmers 5 to 6 times over the international wheat prices in the beginning of the 1980s, while also subsidizing inputs in parallel (Wilson & Graham, 1994).

The effective rate of protection might have been 1,500% at the end of the 1980s (Wilson & Graham, 1994). The loans of the government to farmers increased from 5 million US dollars to more than 1 billion US dollars in 1971 and 1983, respectively. In addition, the government disbursed around 20 billion US dollars in agriculture as subsidies (Richards & Waterbury, 2008). This rentier economy with rising levels of government loans, rising levels of subsidies, and higher unemployment among the youth, with stress on the fiscal side of the government budget, makes economic and social reforms essential to avoid social and political implosion. The 2030 vision has transformed the rentier nature of state–society relations to adopt neoliberal policies that will change the nature of the social contract. According to the Economist (2016), these changes raised the expectations of having a developmental state that meets the expectations of the youth to have a government with greater accountability and participation in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, State capacity refers to the ability of the government to effectively implement policies and deliver public services. It includes elements such as human capital, institutional structures, financial resources, and technological infrastructure. Without sufficient state capacity, it can be difficult for governments to implement effective governance reforms. For instance, if a government lacks the necessary technology or skilled personnel to implement digital public services, it may struggle to deliver services efficiently and effectively. Therefore, building state capacity is a crucial step towards achieving good governance and sustainable development. The state capacity is necessary to implement governance reform because states need human capital and working technology to drive reform.

The concept of good governance is more concerned about the process value and considers three actors within the state, which are the private sector, the government and civil society. Though civil society could be local or international NGOs. Good governance is also more concerned about the universality of its ideology which obliges the state by the process, however in the context of MEAN there is a need for innovation to implement policy and public administration within autocratic environment. Most Arab countries suffers similar governance problems with varying degree on resources constraint and lack of accountability. There is also a failure in the economic governance to meet people's expectations because only a few elites control the economy of the state who are the main reason for the delay of the state's economic development.

Both Morocco and Saudi Arabia have implemented various economic and political reforms to address their respective challenges. In Morocco, administrative reform has been a key focus, with decentralization being a significant development in recent years. However, the persistence of centralized structures and modes of governance remains a challenge, along with the repression of independent civil society and critical voices.

In Saudi Arabia, the collapse in oil prices forced the government to diversify its economy away from oil and to impose fiscal restraint. Vision 2030 has been launched to address multiple national and regional challenges, with mega-projects being initiated to redesign the country's societal, urban, territorial, and tourist landscape. However, the autocratic nature of the system and the repression of independent civil society and critical voices may impede successful reform efforts. Both countries face significant challenges in terms of economic and social development, but their commitment to reform and progress remains strong.

About the Author

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