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EGYPT POLICY DIALOGUES

# DECENTRALIZATION AND GEOGRAPHICAL INEQUALITY IN EGYPT

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In partnership with



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# *Introduction*

Egypt's social policies suffer from serious challenges, especially at the spatial level. This is often referred to as the “geographical inequality” gap between the most privileged and less fortunate governorates, or the ones with limited resources. This is in addition to the disparity between different localities within the same governorate. These disparities are due to a highly centralized system of policy-making, resource management, and service distribution – which has been in place since 2014. The issues also include rising corruption rates, which often compromise any potential reforms. According to the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index issued by Transparency International, Egypt fell by 11 places and ranked 117 among 180 countries, with a score of 33 out of 100 points.<sup>1</sup>

Decentralization is considered a requirement that addresses geographical or spatial imbalances in the country, provided that the necessary standards for effective implementation are met. It is an important policy tool for achieving development and promoting democracy. It also helps citizens recognize whether the State is acting in their favor or in favor of monopolizing power and wealth. The effective and integrated implementation of decentralization contributes to increasing the efficiency of local utilities and public services, involving citizens in the management of their local affairs, training the administrative personnel required to implement the vision of local development and to ensure the optimal use of resources, while improving performance in local action. This directly leads to strengthening the quality of life and livelihoods at the local level, promoting a sense of national belonging, and increasing the level of trust between citizens and government.

## ***Research Question***

The January 2014 Constitutional Amendment provided for a gradual transition towards administrative, financial, and economic decentralization, as well as for bridging development gaps between districts and regions, provided that the gradual transition system is implemented within five years from the date of the Constitution's entry into force.<sup>2</sup> However, this remained mere ink on paper and was never truly implemented. Rather, the current executive authority disregarded the constitutional deadlines and delayed the issuance of the new Local Administration Law. As a result, no local elections have been held since the dissolution of the local people's councils in 2011. This indicated that the current executive authority prefers to maintain the current centralized state model, despite the fact that most localities across Upper and Lower Egypt are subject to geographical disparities and inequalities. The spatial dimension of inequality sheds the light on the gap between urban and rural areas, as well as between the country's different localities.<sup>3</sup>

A substantial amount of data is available concerning geographical inequality in Egypt. According to government sources on the results of the Household Income, Expenditure, and Consumption Survey for fiscal year 2017/2018, an extreme poverty rate in urban areas of Lower Egypt was 14.31%,<sup>4</sup> while reaching 27.29% in the Lower Egypt countryside. In the urban areas of Upper Egypt, the extreme poverty rates was 30.02%, and it reached 51.94% in the countryside of Upper Egypt. In the year 2019-2020, the extreme poverty rate recorded a slight decrease, as it reached approximately 22% in the Lower Egypt countryside and approximately 48% in the Upper Egypt countryside.<sup>5</sup>

This is due to poorly designed reforms and policy priorities that fail to properly reduce inequality in access to basic services such as health, education, and living conditions. Consequently, Egypt ranked 114 in the Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2020.<sup>6</sup> This shows the importance of taking decentralization into consideration in planning and policy-making to reduce poverty disparities, fight corruption, and improve services, as well as the need for the current governance structure to implement decentralization in a real and integrated manner.

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Hence, this paper poses a major question in this respect: How can decentralization help address geographical inequality in Egypt? Several secondary questions also arise, including:

1. What are the dimensions of the relationship between decentralization and the solution to geographical inequality?
2. What is the reality of inequality and corruption from a spatial dimension in Egypt?
3. Why has the establishment of the local system been obstructed since 2014?
4. How can decentralization be activated in Egypt? What are its parameters?

In light of these questions, the paper will attempt to explain the problem of decentralization and inequality since 2014. It also examines the alternative of activating decentralization to face these geographical disparities and imbalances in Egypt. The paper starts by introducing the dimensions of the relationship between decentralization and the solution to geographical inequality. It then presents an overview of the restrictions to decentralization in Egypt and the rampant corruption and geographical inequality, before clarifying the aspects and causes for failing to transition towards decentralization. The paper then concludes by promoting decentralized reforms.

### 1. Dimensions of the relationship between decentralization and geographical inequality

The geographical inequality gap – especially between rural and urban areas – is a global phenomenon, which leads to social disparities and class and regional imbalances.<sup>7</sup> This section offers a clarification of the concept of geographical inequality and its repercussions, which have led to an increase in social and economic deprivation. It also sheds light on the role of decentralization in addressing geographical inequality and disparities.

#### *Inequality and Deprivation*

Given that democracy can never thrive under a corrupt system whose sole purpose is to ensure its self-preservation and sustainability, the interests of the elite and privileged will

only increase, as they continue to acquire the most valuable share of resources that governments allocate in a way that creates a vicious cycle of corruption. The inequality and social policies that it sets forth, which serve the interests of those who wield the most influence in unequal societies, cause developmental efforts to be wastes, while preventing those in need from receiving their due benefits. This, in turn, exacerbates people's sense of deprivation.<sup>8</sup> As a result, pressure to redistribute resources and opportunities can only arise when people are able to claim their rights.<sup>9</sup>

Equality enhances social justice and addresses the failure of public policies to properly distribute income, opportunities, and resources. It does so by activating policies that reduce inequality and address the deprivation and disparity gap between rural and urban areas regarding poverty, social services, public facilities, and infrastructure. In line with the global interest in fighting spatial inequality, the United Nations calls for reducing inequalities and establishing sustainable cities and communities.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Transition towards Decentralization and Reduction of Inequality*

States often resort to decentralization as a subsystem to manage a certain region's issues, alleviate the burden of administration borne by the central authority, enhance the quality and accessibility of services, and quickly respond to everyday demands and needs such as health, education, etc. This local administration could be independent from the central government or part of the State's public administrative structure, to varying degrees, depending on the type and level of decentralization adopted in the State.

In other cases, the State may neglect its responsibilities by delegating them to local authorities that already suffer from a severe lack of resources. It should be noted, however, that the success of a local system depends mainly on its financial independence and its ability to procure local funding, as decentralization would fail otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, decentralization can play an important role in addressing inequality and disparity between regions and districts by remedying local development imbalances and increasing citizens' participation in managing their local affairs, all of which are demonstrated in the following graph:

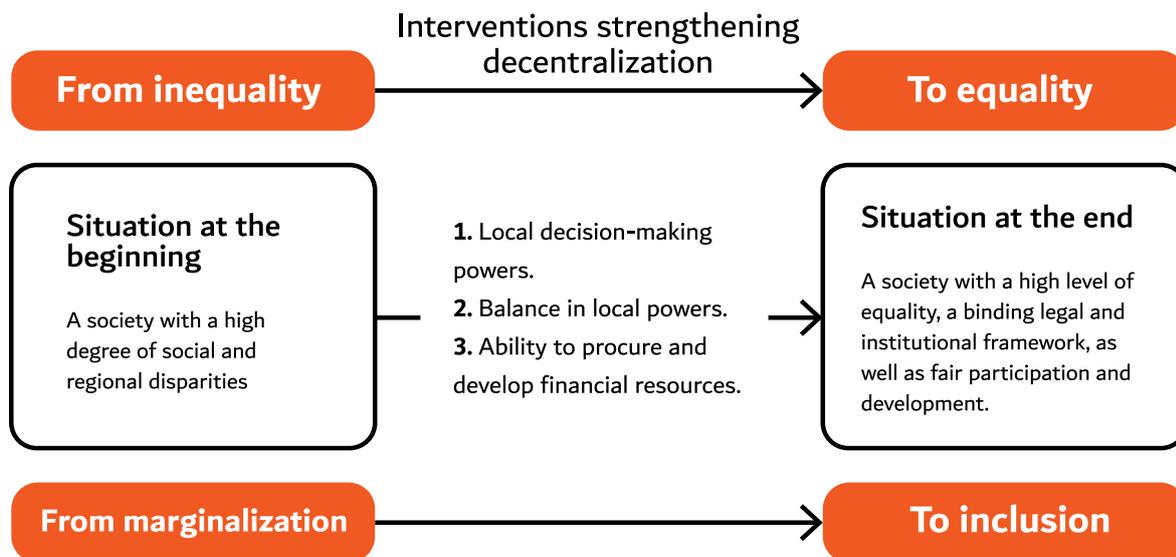
affairs, all of which are demonstrated in the following graph:

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The graph above shows that strengthening decentralization is a viable alternative offering the required organizational policies and interventions that ensure equality and address existing disparities and societal issues. Decentralization can lead to integration and empowerment, equal opportunities, the establishment of an enabling environment for geographical justice, and the reduction of deprivation or

exclusion of regions or segments of the population— all under an adequate legislative and institutional framework.

### Addressing Decentralization, Geographical Disparity, and Inequality (Model prepared by the researcher)



## 2. Egyptian decentralization remains limited amid corruption and geographical inequality

### *Prerogatives and Administrative Division of Localities*

At the decentralization level, Egypt considers the local administration system to be a part of the executive power or part of the administrative structure of the State's central government. At the constitutional level, local administrations in Egypt are subject to the State's public administration and are made up of administrative units that have their own legal

personalities.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that every locality has two councils, one of which is appointed and the other elected, they are all part of the State's central executive power. Decentralization is limited to local administrative, economic, and financial sectors; and its prerogatives are limited to the State's public policy and budget. At the structural level, the Ministry of Local Development is responsible for overseeing the establishment of an optimal framework to manage the affairs of both the government and the community and coordinate centralized and decentralized efforts by ensuring participation and the integration and complementarity of planning, management, and finance powers between the central government and governorates.<sup>13</sup>

The legislative and structural dimensions of the local administration's subordination to the central government show that even if decentralization is implemented, it is unlikely to threaten the State's unity or lead to its dissolution.<sup>14</sup>

Egypt includes 27 governorates, split across 7 economic regions, as follows:

- Cairo Region, which includes the governorates of Cairo, Giza, and Qalyubia.

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- Alexandria Region, which includes the governorates of Alexandria, Beheira, and Matrouh.
- Delta Region, which includes the governorates of Damietta, Dakahlia, Kafr El-Sheikh, Gharbia, and Menoufia.
- Canal Region, which includes the governorates of Port Said, Suez, Sharqia, Ismailia, North Sinai, and South Sinai.
- North Upper Egypt Region, which includes the governorates of Beni Suef, Fayoum, and Minya.
- South Upper Egypt Region, which includes the governorates of Sohag, Qena, Luxor, Aswan, and the Red Sea.
- Central Upper Egypt Region, which includes the governorates of Assiut and New Valley.

Meanwhile, administrative subdivisions include 189 centers, 224 cities, 86 neighborhoods, 1,323 villages, 3,376 sub-villages, and 80,029 Ezbet and Kafr. Moreover, there are about 70 villages that do not fall within the scope of local units.<sup>15</sup>

This administrative division demonstrates the multiple levels of local units (governorate, center, city, village, and neighborhood). Cities and neighborhoods include Sheyakhat (neighborhood subdivisions) and departments, while villages include Kafr, Nuju', and Ezbet. These units vary in size. For example, there are governorates with an area of 240,000 km<sup>2</sup> and others with an area of only 3,000 km<sup>2</sup>, which complicates the provision of services and management of the development process. The inclusion of villages in urban clusters and the change in land use from agricultural space to urban space led to a decrease in agricultural lands in most Egyptian governorates.<sup>16</sup>

The central administration of the governorate and the executive councils at the governorate's lower levels are entirely subject to the authorities of administrative decentralization. While the budgets of service directorates in governorates are included in the local administration's budget, local units do not have any authority in this regard. There are twelve service directorates: Agriculture; education; health; veterinary medicine; youth and sports; supplies; social solidarity; housing and construction; roads and transportation; workforce; organization and administration; and property taxation.<sup>17</sup>

The financial authorities in governorates handle expenditure on five local development programs, which are: Electricity (programs and projects for expanding and strengthening the governorate's electricity networks); transportation (local and internal road-paving projects and the construction of bridges, tunnels, and ferries); utilities and environmental protection (water networks, sanitation, and canals and drains coverage); security (fire department and traffic); and the service sector (health services and women and child development).<sup>18</sup>

Governors are appointed by the President of the Republic, while the Secretary-General and local officials are appointed by the Minister of Local Development.<sup>19</sup>

### **General Budget and Geographical Distribution of Government Investments**

By examining the geographical distribution of government investments across regions and governorates in the State's general budget from 2014/2015 to 2021/2022, we find that: Investments (Chapter Six) in the fiscal year 2014/2015 budget were estimated at EGP 67.2 billion. The budget does not distribute these investments fairly across the population and geographically across economic regions: While the share of Greater Cairo reached EGP 19.088 billion, Alexandria's share was EGP 7.338 billion, Delta's share was EGP 7.39 billion, Suez Canal's share was EGP 10.651 billion, and the share of southern Upper Egypt was EGP 7.603 billion. Finally, central and northern Upper Egypt received the lowest share, with EGP 4.119 billion and 3.360 billion, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

In the 2015/2016 budget, total investment was EGP 98.9 billion for urban and infrastructure projects designed for localities. The Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities had the biggest share of investments, receiving just over half of the urban sector budget, followed by the Ministry of Electricity and Renewable Energy, with nearly a quarter of the budget. The governorates' administrative councils, along with the Ministry of Local Development, accounted for less than 4% of the urban and infrastructure sector. This sheds light on the clear geographical inequalities prevalent in public spending, given that most of the investments in this sector are allocated to national projects or to new cities.<sup>21</sup>

The government has expressed its willingness to provide financial assistance for the sectors affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which has had a direct impact on citizens' lives, in the fiscal year 2020/2021 budget. However, the governorates' share was only 10% of the government's total expenditure.<sup>22</sup> The Greater Cairo governorate's share was EGP 4.4 billion, while the Alexandria governorate was allocated EGP 2.5 billion, and the Delta governorate EGP 2.3 billion. Meanwhile, the Suez Canal governorate was allocated EGP 2.8 billion, and the southern Upper Egypt governorate EGP 4.5 billion. The central and northern Upper Egypt governorates once again received the lowest shares, with EGP 1.1 billion and EGP 1.7 billion, respectively.<sup>23</sup>

The 2021/2022 budget shows that the State accords significant attention and directs massive investment towards

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the housing and utilities item, as well as the transportation and roads item, within the framework of the national road project and the further establishment of modern cities – particularly the new administrative capital – all of which come at the expense of improving public services and raising the citizens' standard of living.<sup>24</sup>

The analysis of government expenditure and investment allocation sheds light on several imbalances and disparities in the investments directed towards local sectors such as: housing, drinking water, sanitation plants, local electricity networks, local roads and means of transportation, urban development, health, and education.

### ***Corruption and Failure to Reduce Inequality***

There was almost no change recorded in Egypt's ranking in the Human Development Index, as it placed 115th out of 189 countries from 2014 to 2017.<sup>25</sup> In 2018, it ranked 116th in the Human Development Index, considering the Deprivation Coefficient and the Coefficient of Human Inequality. Although Egypt scored 0.700 points in the Human Development Index, when we actually calculate the losses resulting from the severity of deprivation, we realize that Egypt's HDI score is only 0.492 points when considering the Coefficient of Human Inequality.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, Egypt's ranking in the Commitment to Reducing Inequality in Public Services, Taxes, and Decent Work Index during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 highlights the severity of the disparities and the repercussions of the inequality gap and unequal opportunities between the privileged and non-privileged. Egypt ranked 6th regionally and 114th globally, not to mention that it ranked 117th globally in the Public Services Index.<sup>27</sup>

Local corruption further exacerbates geographical inequality and the crises resulting therefrom. It may also impede any ongoing reforms, despite the adoption of central anti-corruption policies based on Egypt's adherence to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, the 2014 National Anti-Corruption Strategy, the expansion of the powers of the Administrative Control Authority. This comes at the expense of other oversight agencies, and the presence of a control and inspection body at the Ministry of Local Development. Despite all of this, local corruption can take many forms, including: Administrative violations in the central administrative council and the governorates; embezzlement; appropriation of government property; the disbursement of incentives and rewards from local service and development funds; the illicit misuse of funds; and the acceptance of payments or illegal gifts (bribes) in exchange for granting building and demolition permits; commercial activity licenses; securing tenders;

and issuing direct orders. A report by the Administrative Prosecution Authority confirmed that it initiated 150,136 corruption cases in 2014, 166,633 cases in 2015, and about 145,430 cases in 2016.<sup>28</sup>

The rampant corruption may be due to the inefficient anti-corruption policies and procedures adopted or the spread of impunity. The exacerbation of corruption, social disparities, and unequal opportunities all create a sense of deprivation in individuals and families, given the fact that they are excluded from the opportunities, public services, and priorities of the local community development policy.

## **3. Manifestations and causes of decentralization failure in Egypt**

Many local administration units have historically faced problems, especially in terms of their elected councils, either due to their failure to practice their role or to the central executive authority's control over the local decision-making process. By reviewing some of these practices since 2013, we shed light on the manifestations of the local system's failure, in an attempt to understand the reasons behind this failure.

### ***Manifestations of the failure of decentralization***

The gradual shift towards decentralization has been delayed and then disregarded altogether during the two consecutive presidential terms since the promulgation of the amended Constitution in January 2014.<sup>29</sup> The Sherif Ismail government program (2016-2018) included a commitment to support decentralization, fight corruption, and hold local elections,<sup>30</sup> but the government did not deliver on its promises. Meanwhile, Mostafa Madbouly's government plan of action (2018-2022) did not make any reference at all to the gradual shift towards decentralization.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, the general budget for the fiscal year 2018/2019 included allocations for developing and enhancing the efficiency of local councils in the governorates of Giza, Red Sea, Damietta, Alexandria and Aswan, and attendance allowances for elected members,<sup>32</sup> even though local elections did not take place.

On the other hand, the Upper Egypt Development Authority is structurally considered a public economic body and is predominantly centralized in terms of its composition,

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work, and headquarters. A special budget similar to that of other public economic bodies is also allocated to it. Although the Authority was established in compliance with the constitutional requirement of the State to support the people living in border and disadvantaged areas in Upper Egypt, Sinai, Matrouh, and Nuba through revenues and development projects, the executive authority has used this as a pretext for more centralization.<sup>33</sup> In other words, this Authority has become a tool for centralization used by the regime to impede decentralization, disregarding the economic regions established by Law No. 43 of 1979, which are yet to be activated.<sup>34</sup>

The State's perception of State-society relations is based on urban development and the removal of entire residential neighborhoods.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the State follows an irregular timetable to remove governorate violations, and it shows resolution and determination in this sense with the assistance of security forces.<sup>36</sup> This is due to the fact that the current system gives priority to the housing, utilities, and infrastructure sectors and focuses on new city projects and national roads. These receive the largest share of government spending and investment, funded mostly through external debt.

The Constitution confirmed the governor's legal role as the central executive authority's representative and entrusted them with the pivotal function of ensuring the implementation of public policies in the governorate. They have the right to object to local council decisions in case they violate public order and State laws or undermine public interest.<sup>37</sup> That is perhaps why some suggest that the heads of local units, rather than governors, will be accountable to local councils.

Finally, the violation of constitutional requirements for allocating independent budgets to local units and the funding of these units from multiple sources is due to the fact that the new Local Administration Law has not yet been promulgated.

### ***Reasons for the failure of decentralization***

The 25 January 2011 revolution and the decision to dissolve the local people's councils led some people to believe that changing the situation of localities in Egypt could be possible. However, the situation did not go as planned due to the transitional periods that the country went through, the Military Council's reluctance to form local councils, the rapid change of political leadership, and the slow adoption of a new Constitution. In the first half of 2013, an attempt was made to activate the draft executive regulations of Legislative Decree No. 116 of 2011 in order to form the "Provisional People's Councils." The Ministry of Local Development in Hisham Qandil's government began calling for partisan dialogue

on this topic on 30 May 2013, but the response was almost non-existent. These efforts did not lead to the temporary reactivation of local councils until a new local administration system is put in place.

Despite the fact that both Parliament and the government stress the importance of making concerted efforts to promote the local administration in order to activate its role in the development process, the shift towards decentralization in Egypt has not yet been undertaken or completed. This is due to the lack of the necessary mechanisms and conditions to achieve decentralization, the slow implementation of constitutional requirements, the absence of a gradual transformation plan, and the absence of partisan and societal demands, with the exception of promises whose sole purpose is to ensure political representation and local elections.

Therefore, the gradual transition towards decentralization under the current system was first delayed and then completely disregarded. The failure of decentralization is a sign of the political system's reliance on the centralization of the State and the current form of governance. In fact, the current political system wishes to maintain the current situation of local administration, as a superficial and impotent policy alternative. It resorts to solutions and options that strengthen centralization and views the local administration merely as an extension or branch of the executive authority in governorates. This dynamic began soon after the January 25 revolution of 2011.

## **4. Reforming Decentralization**

Geographical inequality leads to many problems, which cannot be resolved by simply adding articles to the Constitution. Political, administrative, and economic solutions are needed in order to ensure fair access to public services and enhance the quality of life.

Any attempt to reduce geographical inequality requires local reform and a real shift in the current local administration system, even if this shift is gradual. By stymieing all efforts to promote decentralization and maintaining the control of the central power, the current system has only caused severe deprivation by exposing a large segment of citizens to extreme poverty, thus deepening social and spatial inequality. Moreover, resorting to centralized solutions and policies to local problems in an atmosphere of corruption will not solve the matter. Therefore, decentralization reforms have become crucial.

This requires that the State strengthens the local administration system based on the following pillars:

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- Clearly specifying local decision-making authorities by ensuring balanced relations between (1) centralized and decentralized authorities, (2) elected local councils' and executive councils, and (3) higher and lower decentralized units.
- Determining local competencies and prerogatives based on legislative frameworks.
- Enable localities to secure and develop resources and separate between centralized and decentralized funding structures.

This can only be possible if there is political will, and through the development of the Local Administration Law, while ensuring legislative integration with other laws related to local action, and the development of a favorable political culture that encourages local participation and social accountability.

Reforming the local system requires promoting civil society's role in community participation. It also requires the geographical secretariats of political parties to qualify and train local personnel, closely communicate with governors and heads of center, village and neighborhood councils, and represent citizens and express their interests and problems at the local level. The narrowing of the public sphere affects local action and restricts local participation to a limited number of civil society organizations – or rather specific organizations within each governorate – and undermines political parties' ability to attract citizens based on their programs and ideas.

**In conclusion**, we can only benefit from the advantages of decentralization when we strengthen the basic units and structures of local administration and enable them to fulfil their roles. This does not require a complete revamping of the local system as much as finding a clear and feasible model for the relationship between the central authority and local units in the Egyptian context, as well as striking a balance between the local administration's competencies and responsibilities in achieving local development and addressing the problem of disparity between local communities.

Therefore, the paper suggests some **recommendations** for official and non-official actors in the political system, who would benefit from launching the decentralization reform process and activating it in order to address disparity and inequality and effectively implement the below alternatives:

- Given that there are disparities between local units, the executive authority should implement asymmetric decentralization. Central financial transfers should also take into consideration each local unit's needs and circumstances in terms of service provision and resource distribution according to geographical area, population, poverty levels, and rates of development.
- Local governance is considered an effective area of action that gives local administrative units opportunities to

receive financial resources. It also gives them the chance to transform these entities into competitive economic units that reinvigorate the local economy. It also makes these units one of the State's main partners in development initiatives, reviving local investments, and resolving social problems. The government can cooperate with local units and civil society to help in the mobilization of resources, promote traditional crafts, and support cooperative societies, in addition to reviving and activating the role of economic regions and regional planning bodies in providing more investment opportunities within their geographical scope in line with the State's investment plan.

- It is essential that the Ministry of Local Development and the governorates take into consideration that local corruption in some local administrations, such as engineering and procurement departments, calls for an urgent intervention, by developing electronic systems to simplify procedures and transactions and to improve the quality of services provided.
- The executive authority should take into consideration that by simply changing the name of "local people's councils" to "local councils" is not sufficient to effect institutional and structural change. The more important step is to develop and activate their functions by holding local elections.
- Political parties and electoral alliances must be aware that any attempt to once again subvert the upcoming local council elections by simply adding new names based on partisan considerations or socio-economic benefits without a fair electoral system and free competition, would constitute a step backwards, leading to inefficient local councils.
- Parliament should maintain citizens' beneficiary committees in the new Local Administration Law and preserve their role in participating in the management and facilitation of local projects and services. Governorates' local councils should also establish these committees when elected for more social accountability. In fact, Articles 41-44 of the executive regulations of the Local Administration Law No. 43 of 1979 included provisions on these committees' establishment and tasks, but they were not activated in advance.

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### About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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### About Women for Justice Foundation

Women for Justice Foundation is a Canadian non-profit organization, aiming at developing and implementing activities that enhance women's participation, boost community development and promote rights, social justice, peace and dialogue through advocacy, networking and researching.



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