



معهد مواطن للديمقراطية وحقوق الإنسان
Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights

Concept Note
Muwatin 28th Annual Conference

“Societal Change Actors: Shrinking Spaces and Resilience Strategies”

To be held on Friday and Saturday, 14-15 October 2022

The conference will be held both at Birzeit University and online

Muwatin’s 28th Annual conference addresses the issue of shrinking spaces for societal change actors. It also discusses resilience strategies and attempts both at the Palestinian level in particular and on a regional and global level in general. The conference aims to analyse and frame theoretical concepts related to the spaces for societal change actors, and the societal change actions within the public sphere by shedding light on spaces and frameworks of societal work in Palestine and beyond, the mechanisms for enhancing resilience strategies, and reviewing this through practical issues and case studies.

In light of the prevalence of capitalist and neoliberal policies, the tightening of control by international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF over countries, these institutions’ lending policies, the escalation of populist discourse mechanisms and means of oppression and economic exploitation, and thus the narrowing the spaces for societal change actors, there is a need to stand seriously in front of the reality of change actors in society, those seeking radical changes, and to consider strategies of resilience for institutions, individuals, groups, organized and unorganized social movements; all in seeking to bring about change in the society.

On a global level, the COVID 19 pandemic and its consequences had a major impact on the shrinking civic spaces; either through the imposition of regulations and emergency laws, which were partially utilized to increase oppressive acts and exploitations, or through the spike in the use of technology for control and surveillance that create a state of fear and terror, or even on the personal level, where these occurrences reinforced individuals' reluctance to interact with others in public spaces and encouraged a tendency to isolate or be in small groups.

Although there is a rise in individualism and depoliticization, we also notice the emergence of several attempts at purposeful collective organization and social actions in social and political movements, unions, and human rights organizations, especially in the fields of rights of foreigners, refugees, and displaced people. At the same time, the repression of the state has increased, in several dimensions, such as direct suppression by security forces, or the approach to imposing new laws that restrict the work of civil society, social movements, political parties and the media. This policy of fear and suppression amounts to banning certain bodies and classifying them as terrorists or anti-Semitic, in addition to the phenomenon of islamophobia and xenophobia adopted by various right-wing populist parties in several European countries, which constitute a direct threat to minorities and foreigners. In some Latin American countries, there is a rise of leftist social and political organized movements that aim to protect the land and natural

resources, environment, indigenous rights, farmers, women, refugees and displaced people, and political prisoners. Yet there is also an increase in suppression by the security forces, especially in the light of the expansion of the dominance and hegemony of international and transnational organizations and extractive companies aiming to exploit natural resources, plus the resulting conflicts between indigenous populations, the governments and oil and mining companies. In addition, America continues to attempt to control several Latin American countries, besiege them economically, politically and even militarily, and link the interests of local forces, especially the ruling elites, to maintaining the status quo.

In the Arab world, it is apparent that historical accumulating problems have come to the surface more clearly after the Arab revolts of 2011. Attempts have been made to restructure the Arab world with a reactionary leadership in coordination with allied imperial powers and counterrevolutionary forces, the manifestation of repression, the demonization of liberation movements, bloodsheds, and the suppression of any change attempt. In addition, people are exhausted with the search for a livelihood and safety in light of the high rates of poverty and difficult living conditions, making them less inclined to become members of the public sphere, to participate in civic activities and to engage in political and social initiatives.

Within the Palestinian context, we notice a loss of vision, fragmentation, division, and disintegration in collective action. In addition, we see a loss of national, social, and political visions, and severe restrictions imposed by the Palestinian Authority, including restricting freedoms, arrests, banning of certain institutions, monitoring their work, and closing them. For years, the situation has been characterized by an attempt by local and international policies to bind the people with chains, along with the ongoing colonial situation, and the mechanisms used by the Israeli occupation to suppress the Palestinian resistance, thwart any initiative or attempt of collective action, and constantly seek to stigmatize Palestinian organizations and bodies as terrorists.

While the conference is not meant to provide answers and magic solutions, it does intend to contribute to the discussion of various issues, concepts, and questions. Thus, we see the legitimacy and necessity of questioning each of the following:

Is social and political organization still possible in the light of the lending policies of the international financial institutions and the impact on the individual level and the level of countries that have been burdened by debt? In light of the global and local neoliberal policies, is change still feasible? Does the role of societal change actors come within conform to the reproduction and generalization of the thoughts and values of the dominant class? Is it possible for societal change actors to be neutral and independent? Are states working to create institutions and bodies in an attempt to reformulate the role of change actors within the permissible limits that do not constitute a challenge to the state itself or affect the essence of their existence? What are the limits for societal change actors in the light of the control over the public sphere from the private sector? Are change actors in confrontation, not only with the authority and the ruling elites, but also with capital, private, and transnational corporations as well? Have the spaces of change been formulated in a framework of reform and community service roles? Do the fragmentation of social issues and the creation of sectorial bodies contribute to the fragmentation and weakening of civil society and social movements? What is the impact of the normalization of some Arab countries with Israel on societal change actors and social and political movements?

Rubrics

Muwatin's 28th Annual Conference will discuss these issues, focusing on the spaces for societal change actors and societal change within the public sphere. These will be discussed under four main rubrics:

Rubric 1: Theoretical framework and discussion of several concepts.

Including workspaces, social change, individual and collective work, the public sphere, the State of Exception during the Pandemic and the impact of Covid-19 on the shrinking civil space, and the state of fluidity and lack of clarity that we suffer from in Arab societies, especially regarding the separation and boundaries between power, society, states, governments, and social and political movements, in addition to the abuse of power and the justification of authoritarian repression and suppression of freedoms under the pretext of "protecting state sovereignty" and the principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of states".

Rubric 2: Societal change actors in Palestine, between the restrictions from the authority, the private sector, the occupation, and foreign donors. This rubric addresses the Palestinian case specifically, and the restrictions that societal change actors face; those working in civil society organizations, students, youth, social, or political movements, political parties, worker unions, cooperatives, and all forms of change initiatives.

Rubric 3: Shrinking spaces for societal change actors regionally and globally, and understanding Palestine in this framework. This rubric discusses the threats, suppressions, arrests, and assassination attempts against societal change actors, such as human rights defenders and activists in the social and political movements and workers in civil society organizations. Maybe this picture is clearer in places outside Palestine, either the Arab world or non-Arab countries; in Africa, Latin America, and certain countries in Asia. This rubric also seeks to contribute to understanding the impact of the control of international and transnational institutions on certain countries, thus taming them and restricting the limits and possibilities of their independence, in addition to neoliberal policies and the rise of populist governments at the same time, and its link to the collective action spaces of change actors.

Rubric 4: resilience strategies for societal change actors. This rubric aims to shed light on the resilience tools for societal change actors, enhance resilience strategies, and look into organization methods and the possibility of finding alternatives such as alternative media, funds, organized collective work and solidarity between different movements and social and political individuals.