Bureaucracy and Development in the Arab World

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Introduction

IN THE WAKE OF WORLD WAR II, Arab leaders were euphoric at winning independence for their countries from colonial powers. However, their euphoria was dampened by the challenge of nation-building. Although Arab leaders were concerned primarily about staying in power, they also spent significant amounts of time, energy, and money to promote socio-economic and political development in their countries. They expanded educational opportunities for their citizens (Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban 1986:1), they attempted to develop industry, commerce, and urban growth (Stephens 1976); and in a number of cases, they struggled to foster the services sector in their economies. In the oil-producing countries of the Arab world, the political leadership continues to consider comprehensive development as its major challenge and diversification of the economy as one of its major goals (Kubursi 1984).

In their efforts to move their countries forward, Arab leaders fully realized the extent to which bureaucracy was central to their development endeavors. Thus Arab leaders declared the 1980s as ‘‘the decade of Arab administrative development’’ (Zoubi 1982:7). Bureaucracies in the Arab world, as in all societies, were called upon to maintain law and order, execute decisions of the political leadership, and carry out the day-to-day functions of the state (Al Nimir and Palmer 1982:93); as well, they were called upon to be involved in socio-economic and political development. In the 1950s and 1960s, the bureaucracy in the Arab world represented, to many leaders an orderly alternative to social and cultural revolutionary chaos; its potential role in development was acknowledged and political leaders were admonished to involve it in national comprehensive planning, in a rapidly growing system of primary and secondary education, in extensive industrialization programs, and in urban growth and construction (Ayubi 1986:89). In most instances, there were no other agencies capable of carrying out the responsibilities of development and of responding adequately to citizens’ new demands. The private sector was mainly concerned with profit making in a politically stable environment. Most Arab countries did not provide political stability and security and therefore the private sector preferred investing in Western countries where political stability prevailed and profits were secure (Al Nimir and Palmer 1982:93).
Thus, a common belief prevailed in the Arab world that if the bureaucracy could not manage to provide an adequate level of services, the political leadership would find it difficult to cope with the increasing demands of citizens; it was also commonly held that, should the bureaucracy not be able to play an effective role in development, political and socio-economic problems of staggering magnitudes were likely to ensue and threaten to dislocate the very fabric of society (Al-Hegelan and Palmer 1985:48).

Unfortunately, Arab countries were to find soon that the bureaucracy was ill-equipped to carry out the daunting task of development; its membership and even in some cases its top echelons did not have the necessary educational level, training and skills to enable them to carry out their responsibilities with competence, efficiency, and effectiveness. In order to respond to this shortcoming, Arab leaders felt that administrative development must accompany if not precede development administration. Accordingly, they proceeded to adopt wholesale Western technology and methods to modernize their bureaucracies. They invited experts from the United States, Europe, Japan, the Soviet Union, China, and other Eastern block countries to give them advice on how best to achieve administrative development. Furthermore, students and public servants were sent abroad on handsome scholarships to train in the best schools. They were expected to return home, use their newly-acquired skills, and implement the best and latest technology to improve the calibre and quality of the public service in their own countries (Ayubi 1986:89).

By the 1970s, Arab leaders began to realize that neither had their efforts to develop the administrative quality and capacity of their bureaucracy been successful, nor had their aspirations to achieve political and socio-economic development been satisfied. The bureaucracy was unable to reform itself and consequently could not improve its service to the public. In fact, “the bureaucracy has become an instrument of domination and the bureaucrats have turned into a new exploitative class” (Ayubi 1986: 97).

On the whole, Arab bureaucracies have not been able to contribute significantly to finding solutions to problems of development and thus the standards of living and the amenities of life are still low for the majority of Arab citizens. Poverty still persists with the basic needs for water, food, shelter, education, and health still far from satisfied. The adoption of Western technology and the repeated attempts at industrialization have failed to create enough jobs for an ever-growing labour force.

Reasons and Proposed Solutions for the Failure of Arab bureaucracies in Development

What are the reasons for this poor record of development administration in the Arab world? El-Fathali and Chackerian (1983) and Palmer and Nakib (1978) have provided a series of reasons which may explain the failure of Arab bureaucracies to meet the challenges of development. Remedies have been