

Workshop Report

Building Bridges II: Engaging Civil Society from OIC Countries and other Muslim Communities with the Multilateral Sphere

**Held at the International Civil Society Forum for Democracy
October 29 to November 1, 2006
Doha, Qatar**

Context:

This workshop was the second to be held as part of the Forum International de Montréal (FIM) project: “Building Bridges: Engaging Civil Society from OIC Countries and other Muslim Communities with the Multilateral Sphere”. It was a follow-up to the first workshop held in January 2006 in Kuala Lumpur. This first workshop resulted in the identification of two foci for moving the FIM project forward, namely: to lobby for NGO accreditation within the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and to increase the influence of civil society from OIC countries in the UN and to begin by using the opportunity provided by the New or Restored Democracies (NRD) process to advance that agenda. Thus this second workshop, “Building Bridges II”, was held at The 6th International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD) held in Doha, Qatar from October 29 to November 1, 2006. It was a side event to the International Civil Society Forum for Democracy (ICSFD), the civil society aspect of the larger ICNRD conference¹.

The original FIM workshop was designed as a four hour working session, including an opening panel presentation of the project and its objectives as well as overviews of the OIC and the UN accreditation process. This was to be followed by breakout group work and final synthesis. This format finally proved impossible given unavailability of suitable facilities, particularly simultaneous translation. Working with Action Aid and Bridge Initiative, the organizers of what was to be the other major side event: “Governance and Cultural Perceptions within the Framework of Democratic Changes in the World”, FIM collaborated to combine complimentary agendas (from the global to the specific) into one workshop. This was held in a suitable facility allowing for simultaneous translation into English, Arabic, French, and Spanish. The FIM session was held for 1.5 hours.

¹ This conference was described as a “tripartite” meeting of government, parliamentarian, and civil society actors.

Workshop Process

In the two days preceding the workshop the FIM team (Nigel Martin, Heather MacKenzie, and Hassan Hussein) announced the workshop at the conferences and its purpose and distributed an information flyer (Appendix 1) inviting interested attendees to the side event. The Kuala Lumpur workshop report was made available to those interested in learning about the January 2006 lead up workshop to this event.

Hassan Hussein of Ottawa, Canada moderated the workshop. Opening remarks were made by Nigel Martin of Forum International de Montréal (FIM) and Ziad Abdul Samad of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND). There were thirty-three participants, the majority from OIC Countries. Countries represented included: Jordan, Lithuania, Bahrain, Egypt, France, Great Britain, Brazil, Lebanon, Nigeria, Qatar, Iraq, Canada, Nigeria, and Sudan.

Partly due to the reduction in available time, discussion focused on the first objective, attaining accreditation with the OIC. There was strong support for this project as participants affirmed its relevance and expressed interest on behalf of themselves and their CSO's. It was seen as a "welcomed project, [that] will help in shaping the work of other civil society organizations in countries with secular constitutions" and that "should be further extended to reach a wider layer of stakeholders and CSO's in the OIC countries." Evaluation results also indicated a strong interest in the second objective, increasing OIC civil society influence on the UN (Appendix 2).

New suggestions for furthering the project included:

- identifying OIC governments that attended the Doha conference and lobbying them in their home countries
- improving understanding of the OIC within FIM, including its' rules and policies and how these countries interact with other countries
- defining the type of NGO's from Muslim countries that would be identified to work with
- engaging not only Muslims from OIC countries but including all civil society groups from these countries.

Some issues of concern expressed were the challenges facing CS organizations within Islamic societies, in particular from Islamist (fundamentalists), and from unfriendly governments. There was also a concern that the focus should be on the issue of human rights in the context of Islamic sharia laws especially in countries with diverse non Muslim communities. The need to include the conditions of women in Muslim countries and in particular to involve women in the decision making process within these countries was stressed.

Following the workshop, FIM's president met with two of its donors who attended the workshop. There was an agreement to hold a small, follow-up meeting of invitees in Jordan in early January. This meeting will allot specific responsibilities and tasks to committed organizations and individuals. A thorough analysis of the OIC will be prepared in advance.

Workshop Announcement

Building Bridges II: Engaging Civil Society from OIC Countries and other Muslim Communities with the Multilateral Sphere

Date: November 1, 2006

Time: 10:00 – 1:00

Workshop Location: Sheraton Hotel Conference Centre, Al-Rayan Hall

Background to Building Bridges II

The Montréal International Forum's (FIM) organizational mission is to strengthen civil society's capacity to influence the multilateral system, and to do so mainly using a Southern perspective. This workshop is part of a multi-year project entitled: "Engaging Civil Society from OIC Countries and other Muslim Communities with the Multilateral Sphere". It follows a three-day workshop recently convened by FIM in January 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Here participants decided to:

- a) lobby for NGO accreditation within the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)
- b) increase the influence of civil society from OIC countries in the UN and use the opportunity provided by the New or Restored Democracies (NRD) process to advance that agenda.

This workshop, part of the International Civil Society Forum on Democracy (ICSFD) 2006 programme at the Sixth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD) in Doha, Qatar, is the next step in this process.

Workshop Objectives

- 1. To solicit ideas on how to attain NGO accreditation within the OIC in the next five years**

The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) is an inter-governmental organization grouping fifty-seven Muslim countries. In spite of its complex history and nature as well as its diverse composition (OIC members include secular countries, and monarchical and religion-based regimes), it is *the only pan-Muslim multilateral body* and therefore it remains the most representative organization for Muslim countries.

By creating a mechanism that will allow for NGO accreditation within the OIC, *Civil Society from Muslim countries will be strengthened*. Civil Society representatives from Muslim countries will

contribute to the multiple challenges (peace, human rights, development etc.) facing Muslim countries.

In addition, with the creation of a mechanism for NGO accreditation, there will be an increased dialogue between civil society and the OIC. This will not only empower civil society from Muslim countries by providing them with an international and official platform but also, with this new mechanism, the OIC will become more open and aware of the social needs of Muslim countries and peoples.

In the effort to attain accreditation for NGOs within OIC, this project also takes into account Muslim communities living outside OIC Muslim countries. The inclusion of the views of these minority groups in debates and discussions with the OIC and in this project was stressed as crucial during Kuala Lumpur workshop.

2. To increase the influence of civil society from OIC countries in the UN using the opportunity provided by the New or Restored Democracies process.

The International Conference of New or Restored democracies (ICNRD) allow civil society to interact with the United Nations. The United Nations is the only multilateral organization whose state membership approaches universality and whose agenda encompasses all areas of human activity in every region of the world. The NRD is undoubtedly the democratization process with the closest UN links. M. Erkki Tuomioja, of the Helsinki Process points out that: “Inasmuch as the upgrading of the issue of democracy in the multilateral system is concerned, the most important result of the Conferences of New or Restored Democracies has been the interaction with the United Nations.”²

For instance, as one can read on the first page of the ICNRD’s website³, “the ICNRD is an intergovernmental process that enjoys high support from the United Nations expressed in a number of UN General Assembly Resolutions and through practical assistance provided by the UN agencies and UN system organisations in the preparation and conduct of the Conferences since 1994.” In addition, the conferences’ process has resulted in annual reports by the UN Secretary-General on democratization. There are also debates around the crucial role that the UN should play to ensure the sustainability of democratic governance.

Democracy is the central theme of the New or Restored Democracies process. Perhaps today more than ever before, Muslim countries and societies are concerned with the challenges that democratization brings with it at all levels. Moreover, with the rapid advent of globalization, the traditional notion of democracy is being must commit to its constant evolution.

The International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD) is the oldest governmental movement for furthering democracy. Thus, for FIM, the ICNRD process provides a forum for dialogue on the themes of democracy and democratization between representatives of a majority of the world’s governments, parliamentarians and civil society participants. This process forcefully challenges, as a governance value, states, international organizations and civil society

The NRD process provides civil society with opportunities to challenge representatives from governments, multilateral organizations and parliaments. It is clear and important that the

² Tapio Kanninen and Katarina Sehm Patomäki editors. “Building Democracy from Manila to Doha: the Evolution of the Movement of New or Restored Democracies”, September 2005. Helsinki Process Publication Series – Foreword by Erkki Tuomioja, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Finland, Page 29.

³ Source: <http://www.icnrd5-mongolia.mn>.

interaction between civil society from the Muslim world at large, the UN and other multilateral organizations, governments and parliaments must be strengthened. The NRD movement provides a space to challenge states, parliaments and multilateral organizations on the advancement of democracy worldwide. It allows for peer review and peer pressure on the rhetoric of governments and public representatives pursuing democracy.

Another reason the NRD process is important for civil society in the Muslim world is that the New or Restored Democracies movement has evolved since the first conference of 1988 into a global multistakeholder event and process through the participation of three key sectors: civil society, governments and parliaments. The conference brings together more than 100 countries from around the world and is in continuous progress. Its major value is that it now opens the door for interaction and discussions between civil society, governmental and parliamentary representatives. In 2006, the International Civil Society Forum as well as the Parliamentarians' Forum will be integral components of the ICNRD of Qatar.

As pointed out by the International Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum for Democracy, which was created in 2003 and follows up the 2003 ICSFD and prepares the 2006 International Civil Society Forum for Democracy (ICSFD), this tripartite structure "will create a welcome precedent that will subsequently be of importance in CS relations with other intergovernmental organizations, notably the United Nations, which has always given the ICNRD very full moral and to some extent financial backing".⁴

The fact that ICNRD6 is taking place in Doha, Qatar is pertinent. In 2006, for the first time the conference will be held in a Muslim country and in one of the member states of the OIC. Previous conferences took place in Manila, the Philippines (1988), in Managua, Nicaragua (1994), in Bucharest, Romania (1997), in Cotonou, Benin (2000) and in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (2003).

The presence of an expected 200 civil society actors and an equal number of governmental representatives and parliamentarians, with an expected large proportion of people being from the Middle East and Asia, will facilitate larger scale of involvement of Muslim-related civil society than has been the case to date.

We hope that you will join us at our workshop and provide your ideas on both of these important objectives.

Previously suggested strategic actions for discussion

1. Attaining NGO accreditation within the OIC in the next five years

1. Identify and/or assign strategic activities to interested organizations;
2. Develop a list serve of interested organizations;
3. Meet with the Malaysian authorities as current Chair of the OIC;
4. Meet with the next OIC Chair;
5. Identify, contact and engage in action key contact persons/or organizations from within civil society and other sectors and organize workshops to discuss the NGO accreditation within the OIC;
6. Identify and develop contacts with representatives from like-minded governments in the OIC;
7. Identify viable entry points to the OIC Secretariat;

⁴ Source: General Message from the ICSFD International Steering Committee, April 15, 2006.

8. Produce an analytical document on the OIC structure and functioning.

2. Increasing the influence of civil society from OIC countries in the UN using the opportunity provided by the New or Restored Democracies process.

1. Contribute actively to the programmes of the ICSFD-2006 and the 6th ICNRD (Doha) in areas related to strengthening civil society participation in UN affairs, especially opportunities and mechanisms for civil society from OIC countries;
2. Strengthen networking with like-minded governments and parliamentarians engaged in the 6th ICNRD and open to expanding civil society participation;
3. Develop case studies and prepare recommendations on how to increase the participation of civil society from Muslim countries at the UN and the multilateral level in general and share the results;
4. Ensure an ongoing civil society OIC presence in the NRD process in order to advance on Muslim civil society agenda.