

Middle East and North Africa

Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

By Sa'eda al-Kilani

Introduction

Corruption, sustained by skewed standards of living and a lack of transparent governance across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), is a major hindrance to the region's economic development. From Yemen, with a per capita income of around US \$300 a year, to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with a per capita income of around US \$18,000, all countries are confronted by nepotism, favouritism and profiteering.¹

Strong networks of leading entrepreneurs and state officials blur the distinction between public and private sectors. In large state bureaucracies, petty corruption among civil servants is widespread, often linked to traditions of *wasta* – the use of connections for personal gain. The state has traditionally dominated the political landscape. In the Gulf, where states are cushioned by oil income or other rents, regimes maintain a large degree of immunity from popular demands for change. But a closed and autocratic flavour to public life is also the norm in other countries in the region.

Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia were in the vanguard of economic reform programmes in the 1980s, but the years leading up to 2000–01 have seen more widespread talk of change. Discussion of political and economic reform is now more common, partly as a result of public disenchantment, but mostly due to rulers' recognition that without addressing reform their countries are in danger of being marginalised in the world economy.

Most regimes remain resistant to dialogue on politically sensitive governance-related issues, however. Information on corruption is notoriously hard to find and research by both local and foreign analysts is hesitant. Attacks on local academics, the media or civil society groups that become too active are frequent. But the rhetoric of change is sweeping the region, accompanied by the emergence of electronic media that foster increased transparency. Governments' control of information and the pace of change is growing less sure.

News review

In January 2001, as part of an anti-corruption campaign launched by new Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian People's Assembly lifted immunity from three ruling-party members accused of stealing public assets.² The government also revealed that US \$52 million had been embezzled from public funds since the beginning of 2000. A number of high-ranking government officials and employees were charged with corruption as a result, including former prime minister Mahmoud el-Zoubi, who committed suicide in May 2000.³

In February 2001, Morocco's parliament set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the apparent diversion of more than US \$1 billion of state funds over the course of a decade through state bank *Crédit Immobilier et Hotelier*.⁴ This was the first time it had taken such a step, and the move attracted a great deal of attention. The case was seen as a test of the government's willingness to confront members of the traditional political establishment, the *makhzen*, but none of the key subjects of the investigation were taken to court. Meanwhile, several cases related to embezzlement and corruption are pending before the Special Court of Justice, including one against employees at the *Caisse Nationale de Crédit Agricole*.

Captain Mustapha Adib, who blew the whistle on corruption in the Moroccan army in 1999 and has been in prison ever since, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment by a military court in February 2000. In October 2000, following an overturned appeal, he was given a reduced sentence of two and a half years and suspended from the army. Adib was awarded the Transparency International Integrity Award 2000 for courage in fighting corruption, and his case has been adopted in Morocco and by international human rights organisations.⁵

In May 2000, an Egyptian court convicted four MPs of involvement in a multi-million dollar scandal, sentencing them to 15 years' hard labour. This was the first case against sitting politicians ever prosecuted to the point of imprisonment and, since parliament is perceived as very corrupt, ordinary Egyptians welcomed it. But in a development that illustrated the difficulty of implementing sentences in politically sensitive cases, the High Court ordered the four men's release on bail and set a date for a re-trial.⁶

In May 2001, the Egyptian political scientist Saad el-Din Ibrahim was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment on charges that included embezzlement and receiving unauthorised funds from foreign donors. Twenty-seven of his colleagues were also sent to prison. Ibrahim was working on a project to monitor electoral fraud.⁷ While championed by activists as the victim of a corrupt political system, his case was complicated by independent voices casting doubt about his integrity.⁸

Reports of corruption by senior members of the Palestinian Authority (PA) continued to be prominent in 2000–01. In June 2000, after repeated expressions

of concern from donors, the PA for the first time published a report with details of its investments and payrolls, announcing it was taking steps towards reform.⁹ Despite this welcome development, the PA showed little tolerance of corruption-related accusations. In July 2000, Abdel Sattar Qassem, a political scientist at Nablus al-Najah University, was released following months of imprisonment for his involvement with an anti-corruption manifesto assembled by intellectuals and legislators in 1999.¹⁰ In January 2001, one of the most influential members of the PA inner circle, Hisham Mekki, head of Palestinian Satellite TV, was assassinated. A Palestinian splinter group claimed responsibility for the killing, saying it was punishment for his corruption.¹¹

Compared to other countries in the region, Israel has strong institutions and well-established democratic practices, but corruption scandals dominated the year. Former prime minister Ehud Barak and the One Israel party were investigated for campaign funding irregularities, as were the leaderships of the Likud Party, the Centre Party, the United Torah Judaism Party and the Yisrael Beiteinu Party. Former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, together with his wife, was charged with fraud, bribery, breach of trust and obstruction of justice.¹² The charges were dropped in September 2000 for lack of evidence. Meanwhile, publisher Ofer Nimrodi was put on trial for allegedly contracting a murder and then bribing senior police officers and other officials to cover it up.¹³

In Iran, the moderate President Mohammed Khatami dismissed the Commander of Security and Chief of Intelligence who was subsequently convicted of corruption. Conservatives meanwhile used their control over state institutions such as the judiciary and the secret services to silence the supporters of greater political freedom. Twenty-five pro-reform independent newspapers and magazines were closed in 2000.¹⁴ But the re-election of Khatami in a landslide victory in June 2001 renewed hopes for political liberalisation, although there are widespread doubts about Khatami's ability to deliver lasting change.

In the UAE, an anti-corruption commission was established after the arrest in early 2001 of the chief of Dubai's customs on corruption charges, a significant development given the country's prominence as a trading centre. In a subsequent campaign, police exposed a network of corruption at Dubai Airport.¹⁵

In June 2000, the Lebanese government signed an agreement with the United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention in support of a national strategy to fight corruption. The US \$300,000 project will take place over three years.¹⁶ A UN-commissioned report released in January 2001 estimated that the Lebanese state squanders over US \$1.5 billion per year through pervasive corruption.¹⁷

In Yemen, a cabinet reshuffle in March 2001 by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which included the sacking of the Prime Minister, is thought to have been

motivated by the need to give momentum to the country's economic reform programme. Popular perceptions of high corruption levels within the cabinet were also a factor. In May, the owner and editor-in-chief of the weekly *Al Shoumou* was sentenced to six months in prison for 'defamation' after the newspaper incriminated a government minister in a corruption case.¹⁸

In Jordan, as part of an anti-corruption campaign led by King Abdullah II, the government of Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb took measures in 2001 to limit the privileges accorded to former senior officials. In a case that gripped the country for months, the judiciary released a former consul who had been prosecuted on 86 charges including corruption and forgery.¹⁹ Meanwhile, a parliamentarian alleged that then-premier Abdul Raouf Rawabdeh had received a 15 million dinar bribe (around US \$21 million) in exchange for authorisation to construct a tourist village on the airport road in Amman. An investigating commission found Rawabdeh innocent.²⁰

From April 2001, rioting in the Berber-speaking region of Kabylia that subsequently spread to other parts of Algeria, led to the death of scores of demonstrators when security forces opened fire. The large-scale civil action, which denounced the authorities for corruption, among other things, involved millions of Algerians.²¹

The year saw continued repression of the media in Algeria. Since the Arabic-language daily *Al Rai* was founded in 1998, publishing manager Ahmed Benaoum has been prosecuted 70 times for libel. An article implicating a senator in a corruption case landed Benaoum with a two-month prison sentence.²² Following an appeal, the Supreme Court ruled in April 2001 that this sentence would be upheld, although confusingly Benaoum was also informed he had received a presidential pardon. Meanwhile a proposed Penal Code amendment bill included provisions for prison sentences and fines for press offences. Algeria's Minister of Justice defended the bill in parliament saying the Algerian press currently has 'too much freedom'.²³

News from Iraq and Libya, which suffer from international sanctions and crippling economic embargoes, is particularly hard to obtain, though corruption levels are known to be high in both countries. In May 2001 the Associated Press news agency reported a story based on official sources that President Saddam Hussein had expelled 100 top officials from the ruling Ba'ath party on charges of corruption and incompetence, but no further details were available.²⁴

Civil protest in Algeria

Over the course of 2001, between six and seven million Algerians – out of a population of 30 million – took to the streets, demonstrating in the Kabylia region, in metropolitan Algiers and throughout the country. Their slogans included denunciations of government corruption and white-collar crime.

The present-day political context in Algeria is characterised by a total lack of democracy and frequent violations of civil liberties. The press, which is supposed to be independent, nevertheless maintains links with the government. Corruption undermines the capacity of all basic institutions and is enhanced by the total impunity of its perpetrators. It has its roots in the colonial system and subsequent military rule of Algeria. There is now a pressing need to evaluate its scale, understand its mechanisms, and discover the tools to contain it.

Corrupt networks play an excessive role in social, economic and political decision-making. The concentration of power and income from energy sales, as well as vast reliance on borrowing, has fuelled grand corruption at the juncture of a private economy and a state held hostage by a particular class. The recent phase of transition in industry from public monopoly to 'private monopolies' has meanwhile failed to lead to increased transparency. The doubling of Algeria's income from gas and oil exports between 1999 and 2000 served to whet the already voracious appetites of the political and financial elites, who expect to receive the lion's share of this new wealth.

President Bouteflika has frequently been questioned by foreign journalists about corruption since his accession to power in April 1999, and has often changed his tune. The gap

between his statements and reality is marked. On 2 June 2001, the Council of Ministers announced that: 'The Head of State has recalled that the fight against corruption is one of the main means for building the rule of law, and it is integrated in the presidential agenda as a priority action.' But the President's manifesto makes no mention of this. Algerians have waited in vain for any concrete measures. Frustration is mounting.

Civil society faces challenges when seeking to organise. At the initiative of journalists, managers of public enterprises, members of liberal professions and NGO activists, the Algerian Association Against Corruption was created in December 1999. However, the group only recently gained recognition from the Minister of Home Affairs. The private sector, though growing in importance, has not yet played a significant role. Apart from an effort in 2000 to see the country's public procurement code modified, the Employers' Association's only lobbying campaign sought fiscal amnesty so as to facilitate access to ever-growing markets.

In the recent popular demonstrations, the denunciation of corruption was written large on the demonstrators' placards. Events in Kabylia and elsewhere testify to the outrage of Algerian citizens. As a result of this mobilisation, political parties, trade unions, professional associations and civil society groups have all adopted corruption as a key issue.

The costs of corruption weigh heavily on the country. The coming months will reveal whether the recent civil mobilisation in Kabylia and elsewhere is sufficiently widespread for change to be achieved.

Djillali Hadjadj

New leaders, new prospects?

The ambitious plans of some of the region's new leaders, and the anti-corruption mantle they have assumed on coming to power, indicate that the language of transparency has become part of the trappings of legitimacy. From Syria to Morocco, the pledge to fight corruption is now a key part of a wider reformist shift in political rhetoric. But though leaders have in some cases taken steps to back their rhetoric with action, their commitment is ultimately uncertain.

The year saw the prosecution and conviction of a number of high-profile figures in corruption cases, as in Syria, and numerous junior officials in other MENA countries. But high-profile figures, including those close to decision-making circles who are known to be corrupt, tended to retain their immunity. Critics argue that the rhetoric of corruption is mostly used as a means of ousting political rivals.

Since coming to power in February 1999, Jordan's King Abdullah II has emphasised the anti-corruption theme. In February 2000, he paid a secret visit to the state-run Bashir Hospital and later demanded an investigation into corruption-related practices there. After several similar visits to government departments, mostly in disguise, the King announced the formation of a special government committee to fight corruption, though it was purely top-level and included

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no representatives from civil society.²⁵ Jordan also embarked on an 'e-government' project, designed to increase openness and reduce *wasta*. In addition, the files of certain public companies suspected of corruption were referred to the Prosecutor General.²⁶ But attempts in 2000 to revive Jordan's Illegitimate Profit Making Law, which is seen as a useful tool for fighting corruption, were rejected by parliament for the fourth time. At the time of going to press, no clear-cut strategy to fight corruption has been outlined in Jordan and the cases that are exposed remain highly selective.

Soon after coming to power in July 1999, King Mohammad VI of Morocco dismissed Driss Basri, his father's long-serving interior minister and a pillar of the *makhzen* system, who was widely seen as a key obstacle in the fight against corruption. The public welcomed this important symbolic move. Prime Minister Abdul Rahman Youssoufi had already declared fighting corruption part of the government's programme when he took office in 1998. The Minister of Public Affairs also announced in 2000 that the government had elaborated an anti-corruption programme aimed at improving the business environment.²⁷

The Moroccan authorities investigated 129 judges and documented a total of 10,202 cases of petty corruption between 1998 and 2000. Also accused were 433 prison wardens and 423 lawyers.²⁸ The former administrative and financial direc-

tor of the official news agency was arrested for mismanagement and allegedly stealing US \$ 1.9 million.²⁹ And parliament set up the first fact-finding commission to investigate corruption at state bank *Crédit Immobilier et Hotelier*. But although civil society groups were very active in pushing for the commission, its meetings were closed to the press.

Meanwhile, there is little sign that the anti-corruption programme will be implemented, and institutional obstacles to fighting corruption remain high. The Special Court of Justice authorised to investigate corruption cases can only act on instructions from the Minister of Justice who, in turn, depends on the King. The cases that have been heard in the past few years have had no impact on actual levels of corruption, say activists. Politically sensitive, high-level cases are not addressed. In the light of these piecemeal efforts, concerns are widespread that the new king 'remains a prisoner of an authoritarian system in crisis'.³⁰

Syria's leader Bashar al-Assad began his campaign against official corruption before he assumed power. His protest against the status quo was well publicised, raising expectations that he might tackle political as well as economic reform when he became President.³¹ But doubts have been aired about his commitment: pressing ahead with anti-corruption measures will implicate close members of his family and an inner political circle. Al-Assad spearheaded a two-year anti-corruption campaign that has so far led to the imprisonment of just two ministers, but he is fond of grandiose rhetoric on the issue: 'There is no escape from bringing the careless, the corrupt and the evildoers to justice,' he said.³²

Diplomats quoted in a report by news agency Reuters anticipated an easing of al-Assad's commitment to anti-corruption, which has now cleared out some of the political old guard.³³ Exiled opposition groups also criticised his campaign, claiming its real objective was 'to get rid of al-Assad's enemies'.³⁴ Another group insisted that 'such a programme requires a public national strategy that can only be prepared and carried out in a democratic atmosphere'.³⁵

The new Lebanese government of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has been under pressure to tackle corruption since coming to power in October 2000. In addition to the former government's signing of an anti-corruption plan with the UN Centre for International Crime Prevention in July 2000, the first months of 2001 witnessed the announcement of the furthest-reaching economic and administrative reforms ever attempted in post-war Lebanon. Although the measures taken so far are merely a beginning, observers welcome the developments as a sign of the government's commitment to change.³⁶

Citizens of Qatar, where Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani overthrew his father in a bloodless coup in June 1995, witnessed more far-reaching reforms in 2000–01 than any of the other Gulf states. A new satellite channel, *Al-Jazeera* (the

Island), is the first Arabic station to broadcast programmes on sensitive political issues, although coverage of Qatar itself remains cautious. Reports on corruption, mismanagement and nepotism in the region are now regularly broadcast in Arabic to millions of spectators, revealing far more to them than their domestic, state-owned TV services.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, governments introduced important legislation that may have consequences for the strengthening of national integrity systems. The progressive new ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad Bin Issa al-Khalifa, who succeeded his father in March 1999, introduced a national charter in 2001 that promised wide-ranging reforms including an elected parliament, a constitutional monarchy and an independent judiciary. Bahrainis gave it their wholesale approval in a two-day referendum, and *Mithaq* (charter) has become a popular name for newborn babies.³⁷ According to Jasim Ajami, a university professor in Bahrain, the atmosphere is now more conducive to the development of an anti-corruption agency than at any other time.³⁸ The government authorised the establishment of the Bahraini Society for Human Rights in February 2001.

Even in Saudi Arabia the government has tentatively embarked on a reform programme, though civil liberties remain severely curtailed. In late 2000, a Family Council to oversee reform was established under the chairmanship of Crown Prince Emir Abdullah Ben Abdel Aziz and his deputy, Prince Sultan Ben Abdel Aziz. The step surprised observers both inside and outside the kingdom.³⁹

Enough new faces have come to power recently, all using anti-corruption rhetoric to help them on the national or international stages, that a major trend can be said to have emerged. However, a former US ambassador cautioned:

‘It would be a mistake to overestimate what the new generation can do immediately. Their ideas will take time to implement and they need help to avoid the rending of their political and social fabric if they are to undertake reform. Nor should we forget that these young men are the products of their fathers and their societies. They may be less forthcoming than we would like to think or hope.’⁴⁰

Globalisation and anti-corruption efforts

New anti-corruption campaigns and reform plans in the MENA region are to a large extent motivated by efforts to raise foreign investment. Governments traditionally played a dominant role in managing the region’s economies, but MENA countries experienced severe economic stagnation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Debt servicing alone reached 14 per cent of regional export earnings,⁴¹ and the region’s share of world trade contracted to an estimated 3.4 per cent.⁴²

'Reform, or risk losing the confidence of foreign investors and international markets,' said a recent report.⁴³ Even traditionally rich Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia have been pushed to seek foreign involvement to help exploit their oil and gas reserves.⁴⁴ This widespread urge to attract foreign investment has had positive implications for increasing transparency and fighting corruption.

In a study carried out by an investment corporation in Jordan, 73 per cent of respondents said that lack of transparency was a primary obstacle facing inward investors.⁴⁵ The new king embarked on the Aqaba free trade zone project, an ambitious scheme to turn the Red Sea port into a duty-free economic zone, and a special committee to fight corruption was formed at the same time.⁴⁶ Jordan is also working with the World Bank on a series of initiatives to reduce the size of its bureaucracy, which at present acts both as a drain on the budget and as a source of corruption.⁴⁷ Syria's reforms are mainly targeted at enticing back an estimated US \$50 billion held in foreign banks by the wealthy diaspora.⁴⁸ And Morocco is keen to clean up corruption and improve transparency in its import and export customs procedures. The Lebanese government has embarked on reforms to try to contain a national debt of US \$23 billion (140 per cent of GDP), and reform what the Associated Press called a 'political system based on religious loyalties and political nepotism that has drained the treasury over the years'.⁴⁹ A UN report on corruption found that over 43 per cent of companies in Lebanon 'always or very frequently' pay bribes, and another 40 per cent 'sometimes' do.⁵⁰

Amid all these initiatives, the experience of countries that were among the earliest to push for economic reform in the region sounds a warning note. Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia embarked on liberalisation programmes in the mid-1980s, and some observers are sceptical of the results. They argue that privatisation and increased foreign investment did not dismantle the cronyism at the heart of their economies. Rather, they strengthened the rule of elites, which proved to be extremely resistant to economic reforms. 'Despite a recent legacy of legal changes, stock market booms, and free trade agreements, reforms have been selective and the room for governments to wiggle out of or around them has been substantial,' wrote one analyst. Privatisation of key strategic resources was largely avoided until very recently. The analyst added: 'In most of North Africa ... privatised assets have often been sold below market value to small groups of investors, increasing their oligarchic control of the market.'⁵¹ Privatisation has also been associated with the rise of informal markets, often involving the connivance of public officials.

It remains to be seen whether the region's new leaders have the commitment to match with action the prominence now being given to transparency and openness. It is also questionable whether economic reform will be accompanied by the

more open political culture needed if corruption is to be checked. In the recent past, economic reform through structural adjustment and privatisation programmes has led to increased political repression. In Egypt and Algeria, for instance, structural adjustment triggered rioting and state violence.

Changes in the world economy, including falling energy prices, globalised trade and the increasing poverty of the region, are among the factors compelling leaders to attract foreign investment. The demand for investment in turn motivates a fight against corruption. But whether or not international anti-corruption strategies that challenge the existing networks of financial control by elites can be institutionalised is moot. Certainly these processes will not be as straightforward as the rhetoric of the new wave of leaders seems to imply.

Civil society voices

Governments dominate the dynamic of political liberalisation that underpins the fight against corruption. Even the regimes that seem most determined to introduce reforms will find it difficult to abandon control, while years of repression and suspicion of intellectuals have left civil society weakly organised and vulnerable to penetration by the security services in many instances.⁵²

Observers welcome the rise of civil society groups in the region. The number of NGOs increased in the 1990s, particularly in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian territories and Yemen.⁵³ However, many 'civil' associations have strong links to governments and are unable to fulfil the crucial criterion of independence that is needed if they are to hold governments to account. This is true in Tunisia, where two thirds of all associations emanate from the civil service; in Morocco, where philanthropic associations are traditionally formed by people close to the palace; and in Jordan, where civil society organisations are often run by members of the royal family.⁵⁴ In Egypt, an association can only qualify as an NGO if it fulfils restrictive government registration criteria. Egypt's relevant law (no. 153 of 1999), despite being briefly overturned in June 2000, has been emulated in the Palestinian territories and Yemen. In 1996, the Tunisian government identified the NGO sector as a major national security concern and responded with a network of rival 'government' NGOs.⁵⁵

Independent civil society groups are subject to attack by governments and reactionary forces in society alike. Emergency laws are still in place in Algeria, Egypt and Syria, and civil society groups in these countries had a particularly difficult task during 2000–01, which saw high levels of repression, violence and intimidation. Business associations in the region are also weak and unable to promote a transparency agenda. According to a recent report, protest 'remains a risky

strategy for North African businessmen. Those who seek to challenge the state apparatus face potential sanctions.⁵⁶

Most countries continue to suffer from wide-ranging restrictions on freedom of speech and the press. This has grave implications for transparency. In its 2000 annual report, the NGO Freedom House categorised 14 out of 17 Arab countries as ‘not free’ – the highest proportion of any region in the world. Only Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco were rated ‘partly free’.⁵⁷ In Algeria, broadcasting is under total state control, but the Arab diaspora press plays a major role in challenging the authorities’ propaganda machines.

Compared to the situation a decade ago, however, improvements are visible, with independent activists, writers and human rights advocates becoming ever more vocal. Anti-corruption associations were almost non-existent until recently. Transparency International chapters exist, or are in formation, in Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen, and there are prospects for chapters in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, the Palestinian territories and the UAE. Transparency Maroc, the TI chapter in Morocco, is a shining example of how civil society groups can have an impact in the most difficult of circumstances. Despite initial problems gaining official recognition, the group, which works as the focal point of a coalition of

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50 domestic organisations, has been active in raising awareness in schools and among public officials, and in lobbying to establish a designated independent anticorruption agency. When the latter failed to materialise, Transparency Maroc founded a National Observatory of Corruption in June 2001, in order to collect independent data on the issue.

The internet plays a crucial role, reaching universities, schools and homes and making it harder for the strictest of regimes to control information. A street in Irbid, Jordan, dubbed ‘Internet Road’, recently entered the *Guinness Book of World Records* for hosting the most internet cafes in the world (201).⁵⁸ The UAE has the highest proportion of internet users in the Arab world.⁵⁹ In North Africa, Morocco has the largest internet market. Even Baghdad, under extreme international sanctions, hosts five internet centres and a fast growing level of internet usage.⁶⁰ The internet enables activists on corruption and other issues to share information and network. However, web activities remain subject to severe censorship and monitoring, and the region as a whole still has the lowest penetration of any in the world.⁶¹ The fight against corruption was given a particular boost by the emergence of satellite technology in the late 1990s. It is now possible for viewers in the Arab world to participate in debates on issues that were previously

taboo and, with *Al-Jazeera*, to receive independent news on the region, which state-owned terrestrial stations regularly censor or distort.

The increasing transparency stimulated by these technological innovations and the determined efforts of anti-corruption and other civil society activists is beginning to provide an opportunity for citizens' dialogue on corruption. While the anti-corruption drive to date has taken its major dynamic from leaders concerned by the prospect of economic marginalisation in the global economy, civil society is now forcing its way into the debate.

Conclusion

New faces with new visions came to power in the MENA region in 2000–01, bringing with them promises of political and economic liberalisation in varying degrees. Leaders in some countries, even in the Gulf, are competing to amend legislation, introduce reform plans and launch anti-corruption campaigns – though none are pursuing comprehensive strategies for reform. With the Family Council overseeing reform in Saudi Arabia, elections in Kuwait and Qatar, and reforms in Bahrain and the UAE, the landscape for improved governance is very different from that of ten years ago.

The region is gradually changing to keep up with developments in the world economy. Fear of marginalisation is pushing countries forward, and the other dynamics associated with globalisation, such as improved communications, are having a favourable impact on transparency initiatives.

But change brings new opportunities for corruption as well. Despite the rhetoric of economic modernisation and anti-corruption drives, the experience of countries that had a head start with economic reform, combined with signs of national opposition to change, give cause for concern about the prospects for reducing corruption.

Like leaders the world over, the region's rulers have mastered the language of reform and pay lip service to the need to fight corruption. But they are no less determined to maintain control of the pace of change. The rhetoric against corruption will be spurious if it is not accompanied by clear-cut strategies that address the real nature of corrupt practices. Though under heavy pressure and subject to physical attack, the small but growing body of civil society and independent activists are using the rhetoric and new climate to pressure leaders into fulfilling their promises by turning their gestures into action and laws. Civil society must be allowed to develop if reform is to be meaningful. With NGOs and activists restricted or subverted in many countries, programmes and activities that aim to facilitate their free expression and activity are a priority.

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