

Local governance and social accountability reforms in the wake of the Arab Spring

Call for Papers for a panel at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Conference 2017, to be held from 18-21 November 2017 in Washington D.C.

Panel organizers:

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and

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Please submit paper abstracts of 300 - 400 words by Friday 10 February 2017 to bergh@iss.nl.

Each paper abstract must relate to the panel theme and be academically strong. Paper abstracts should be scholarly, with a strong, focused statement of thesis or significance, clear goals and methodology, well-organized research data, specified sources, and convincing, coherent conclusions. These are the criteria by which the program committee will conduct its review.

Panel description

In recent years, various social movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Morocco, Israel and elsewhere began challenging existing regimes of rule, focusing their public accusations on political elites as well as the institutions of the state. Underpinning and propelling different forms of collective action was a wide discontent regarding an uneven distribution of civic, political and social rights of citizenship between different groups and classes of the state. While there is now quite a substantial body of literature on the underlying causes of the various revolutions and protests, and valuable studies are emerging on the main actors and their practices, the responses from the states and donors in the area of strengthening social accountability at the local level remain under researched.

These responses include the creation of new “participatory” institutions (e.g. participatory urban planning systems, municipal service centers, and consultative committees for gender equity and equal opportunities in Morocco and Tunisia), increased decentralization to municipal levels, and the establishment or strengthening of Economic and Social Councils and Ombudsman offices. Similarly, international donors have scaled up their work on social accountability initiatives, including community score cards in the education field in Egypt and Morocco, health (Egypt), and water (Yemen). Various participatory and gender-responsive budgeting initiatives are also underway.

However, it is not well known to what extent social movements and individual citizens are willing to engage with these new state and donor initiatives, and what are the outcomes of such engagements in terms of local accountability, state legitimacy, and citizenship. A related question is whether local actors hold notions and understandings of accountability that differ from Western ones, especially in terms of religious actors and their notions of ‘moral accountability’. The panel organizers are looking for papers addressing (some of) these questions, preferably through the use of empirical case study materials, from scholars working on any country in the MENA region. Collectively, the panel also aims to make a methodological contribution in terms of exploring how the impact of these new social accountability initiatives can be evaluated.