

Beyond Anti-Gender & Anti-Rights: Rebranding States and Engineering Citizens in the SWANA region

Executive Summary

Across the states of the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, governments are investing heavily in rebranding initiatives to ensure continuity of their regimes. These strategies aim to project an outward image of progress and modernity, to attract foreign investment and trade while deflecting scrutiny of states' human rights abuses. The same logic that produces the international brand is used to engineer citizens at home, where states construct notions of the ideal citizen in order to entrench hierarchies of gender, sexuality, class, and race.

The report maps state branding initiatives employed by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. Through the use of disinformation, social media and public relations firms, states manipulate and control public discourse, quash dissent, and manage their reputation following crises. The report reveals how top-down and highly publicized women's empowerment reforms are used to signal a break from states' past conservative images, while all the while repressing feminist dissent. Investment in culture, sports, and technology is used to project an image of modernity, while concealing the oppression and exploitation that arise from it. Through humanitarianism and aid, states are able to project an impression of benevolence while they continue to fuel conflict and regional instability. In pursuit of this new image, foreign policy becomes a crucial instrument for building soft power and moral capital. Engagement in multilateral spaces allows states to consolidate an international image of progress, deploying the language of empowerment and contemporary themes such as sports and disability inclusion.

Turning to Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan, the report examines how regimes use citizen engineering as a tool for authoritarian control at home, particularly in contexts where their legitimacy remains fragile due to spiralling economic crises or prolonged war. It examines how popular narratives and policies on population control attempt to dictate who should reproduce and who should not, at the expense of the reproductive rights of the most marginalized. States stoke demographic panic narratives and enforce broad concepts such as "morality" and "family values" through legislation and social norms, in order to criminalize behaviours and identities that fail to adhere to patriarchal gender roles and class hierarchies. Embedded throughout these technologies is the exclusion of women considered "lower class," LGBTQI+ people, Black people, and migrants and refugees, who are made scapegoats for failures of governance.

A close examination reveals how state technologies aimed at accumulating soft power abroad and entrenching social control at home mutually reinforce each other. State branding and citizen engineering are two faces of contemporary authoritarian governance, within which gender and sexuality are instrumentalized to serve economic growth, demographic goals, regime stability, or international legitimacy. Tools and strategies employed in both technologies are rooted in colonial structures and sustained through global economic systems that reward image management, profit from repression, and fuel authoritarian regimes through debt, austerity, and migration pacts.

These findings matter now, at a time when repression and violence against activists and marginalized communities risk becoming normalized and colonial narratives continue to obscure the global and geopolitical systems that enable these violations. The report offers an analytic framework that nuances concepts of "anti-rights" and "anti-gender", and offers insight into the complexities and contradictions present in authoritarianism today.