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Other Topics

Outdated Elites, New Sense of Identity

Leaderless Revolutions and the Crisis of Arab Authorities

Simon Engelkes

Ten years after the onset of the "Arab Spring", cracks are appearing again in the autocratic façade of the Middle East and North Africa. However, the struggle to find an alternative to the ruling elite has failed due to the lack of organised political parties capable of translating anger on the streets into constructive political participation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left parts of the Middle East and North Africa in a state of limbo. Before its outbreak in spring 2020, more than one million people had taken to the streets again in Beirut, Algiers, Khartoum, and Baghdad to call for economic, political, and social change. Sweeping government restrictions to combat COVID-19 may have temporarily stymied the protests, but their underlying socioeconomic and political causes persist. It is now ten years since the start of a wave of mass protests opposing despotism and injustice that led to the overthrow of five longstanding rulers in the region. Three countries descended into civil war, one returned to dictatorship, and one achieved a transition to democracy – and the Arab world is still in turmoil.

The second wave of Arab uprisings, which began in Sudan in December 2018 and has since spread to Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, prolongs the dispute between the people and their political elites about what is required of a modern state. A lack of confidence prevails in public institutions, and particularly parliaments and political parties; this is often part of a pronounced rejection of any kind of organised interest representation. The leaderless protests – with no common strategies, hierarchies, or ideologies – increasingly focus their demands on specific governance issues, while their lack of structure hampers both their effectiveness and suppression. This article examines the reasons for the new wave of protests and looks at their demands. It considers the background to their lack of leadership and draws conclusions about the need for rapprochement between the people and their rulers.

A Second Wave of Protest

Triggers for the new wave of protests varied from country to country. In Sudan, a government decision to triple the price of bread brought eight months of protests and civil disobedience resulting in the overthrow of the country's ruler, Omar al-Bashir. Al-Bashir ruled the country as a dictatorship over a period of three decades. In Algeria, it was President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement that he would run for a fifth term in the next presidential elections that sparked the mass protest movement *Hirak*. Bouteflika, who was seriously ill and rarely seen in public, and the generals and businessmen who surrounded him (known as *le pouvoir* – the power) had a firm hold on the country's reins for 20 years. In Iraq, it was the demotion of General Abdel-Wahab Al-Saedi, a popular figure symbolising the fight against corruption and nepotism and a hero in the fight against so-called Islamic State, that drove people onto the streets in October 2019. Despite the victory over the terrorist organisation three years ago, Iraq is deeply divided and – as one of the world's most oil-rich countries – unable to provide for its people. In Lebanon, protests opposing a planned tax on voice calls via apps like WhatsApp sparked nationwide demonstrations. Mired in poverty and national bankruptcy, the Cedar State is in the throes of the worst crisis since the 15-year civil war that ended 30 years ago.

Well-Known Causes ...

These sparks were able to ignite a firestorm because there was already plenty of fuel in the form of the region's severe socioeconomic problems that had remained unresolved since 2011.

With the exception of Tunisia's transition to a democratic system, the protests of ten years ago came to an end either because they were violently suppressed by the regime and authoritarianism was restored; the people were co-opted with material incentives and appeased with the odd institutional adjustment; or, in some Arab countries, people looked at what was happening in Syria, Libya, and Yemen and were not prepared to risk their own country sliding into civil war. Yet, even though the demonstrators may have disappeared from the streets, the problems that brought them there still loom large.

A decade later, many countries in the region still suffer from inadequate basic public services, high unemployment, and poverty. In Lebanon, almost half of the population lives below the poverty line.[1] This is exacerbated by regional currency and economic crises, overdependence on (declining) revenues from oil exports and foreign development aid, a toxic politicisation of identity, and widespread corruption in the public sector. Particularly for young people, material deprivation, fear of the future, and a lack of confidence in the ability or will of their governments to solve these fundamental problems,

Poverty, unemployment, and barely any prospects: In many countries of the region, severe socioeconomic problems remained unresolved in the last decade. Source: © Zohra Bensemra, Reuters.

are leading to despair and protest. National and regional surveys reveal that corruption and bad governance are viewed as serious problems and the main reasons for protests. 97 per cent of young people in the Levant and North Africa believe at least some members of the political elite to be corrupt.[2]

... New Demands

The second wave of protests does not repeat the demands of 2011 but moves beyond them. With chants like "All of them means all of them" in Lebanon and "The system must go" in Algeria, demonstrators are not only calling for the removal of elite networks of politicians, businesspeople, and military officers who rule the country but rather a complete dismantling of the political structures and economic systems that sustain them.[3] It is not a case of moving a few political chess pieces but of changing the basic rules of the game. Despite protestors in Algeria and Sudan seeking opportunities to participate in the democratic process, the streets echo with far fewer calls for democracy. Nowadays, demands for political freedoms only tend to be heard on the fringes.[4] This is largely due to the realisation that, in the public perception, even more advanced electoral democracies such as Iraq and Lebanon – which both hold relatively free and fair elections – only serve to bolster the corrupt political elite.

It is particularly noteworthy that the recent protests have transcended sectarian and identitarian divides.

The call for *'aish, hurriya, 'adala ijtima'iya* – bread, freedom and social justice – still resounds today, yet the protesters are now more uncompromising in their demands for socioeconomic participation.[5] The desire for a new political system has been ignited by the everyday, socioeconomic realities of life, which seem to take precedence over immediate political objectives.

The protest movements are calling for far-reaching socioeconomic reform, improved public services, especially water, electricity, and health care, better job opportunities and prospects for the future, and more effective efforts to combat corruption.

One phenomenon undermining the cohesion necessary for effective reform and preserving anti-democratic rule is the sectarian model of social order.[6] In Iraq and Lebanon, despotic minority rule and civil war have led to the establishment of political and legal mechanisms of sectarian power-sharing that allocate the highest political offices to members of the Sunni, Shiite, Christian, or Kurdish communities. This institutionalised identitarian division of society fosters nepotism (*wasta*) and clientelism, while also cementing the impermeability of political structures and preventing the development of a citizen-oriented understanding of the state.[7]

It is, therefore, particularly noteworthy that the recent protests have transcended sectarian and identitarian divides.[8] At the height of the *Hirak* movement, the whole of Algeria, from its Berber regions to its predominantly Arab towns and cities echoed with the cry: "No Berbers, no Arabs, no race or religion! We are all Algerians!" This is the first time since independence in 1962 that there has been such a unity in the calls for change.[9] A similar phenomenon was observed in Sudan, where the regime initially wanted to place the blame for protests on the Fur ethnic group, resulting in the streets of the capital Khartoum resonating with cries of "We are all Darfur".[10] It was in Lebanon, a country riven by sectarianism for most of its history, where, in October 2019, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese from every denomination waved the Lebanese flag and cried: "We are all Lebanese. On the street we are not Shiites, Sunnis or Christians. We are citizens."[11] In Iraq, too, the demands of the demonstrators have taken on a national flavour and provide a basis for building a national identity.[12] United in their opposition to any distinctions based on ethnicity or religion, the protesters called for a common national identity – bound by their shared plight and destiny.

Structural Adjustments in Political Activism

However, protagonists of the second wave of protests have also adapted their approach. One lesson from 2011 is that violence affords regimes the opportunity to reframe political protests as civil war so that they can clamp down hard and stifle any hope of peaceful transition. Despite demonstrators in Sudan, Algeria, and Iraq having faced violence and repression from government forces and non-state militias, they remained true to their non-violent approach for the most part. This prevented the alienation of moderate supporters and attracted broad national and international support.[13]

Over the last few years, leaderless movements have been growing and thriving around the globe.

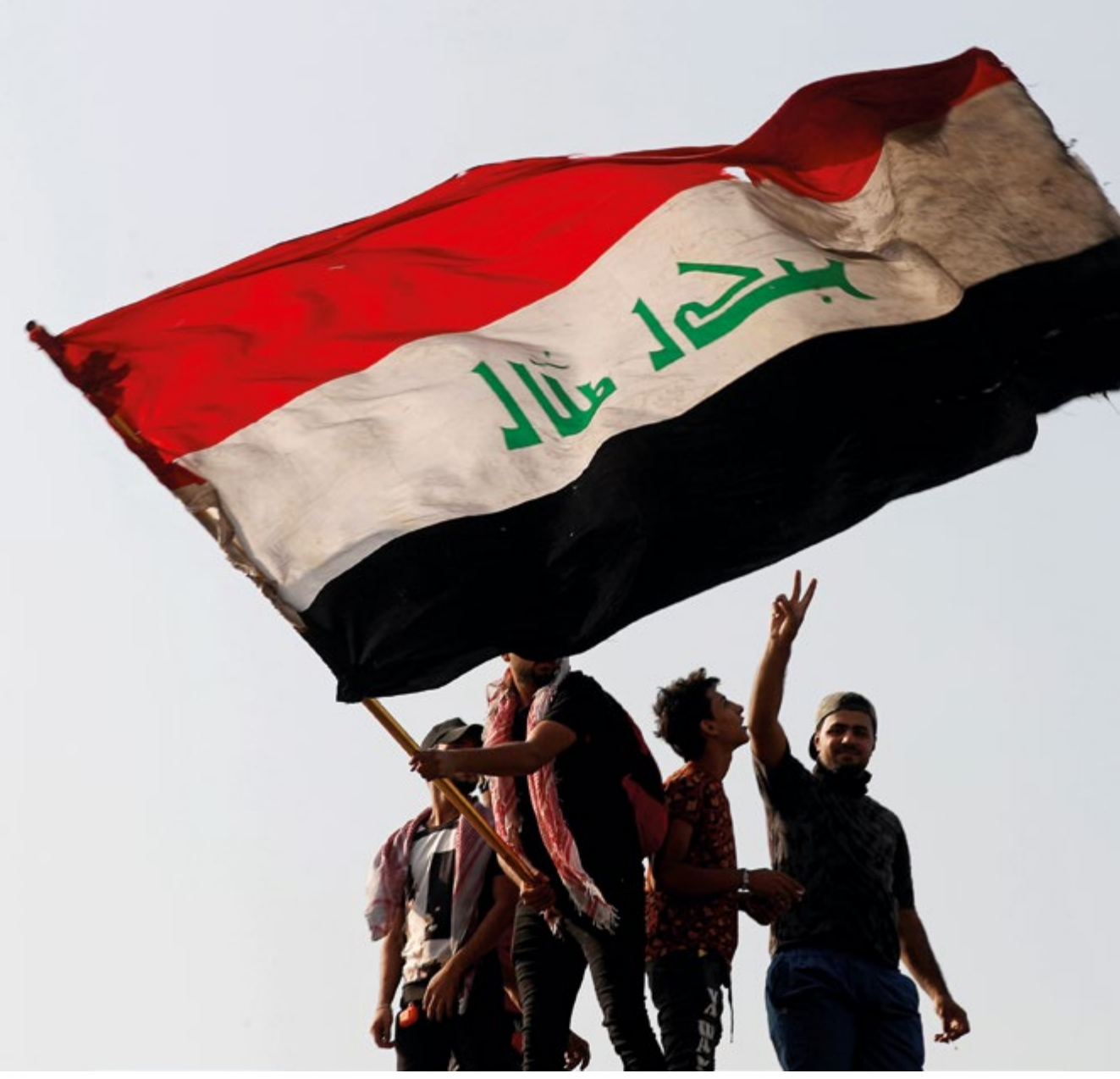
Experience has also shown that the fall of a ruler does not necessarily spell the demise of the political system. Hence, in Sudan and Algeria, protests continued even after the military coup against Omar al-Bashir and the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The same can be said for Iraq, where protests continued following the prime minister's resignation in November 2019 and the new government's promises of reform. More recently, curfews and assembly bans enacted by governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have taken the wind out of the sails of some of the protests. But even if the protests have become less visible, they have not disappeared and still flare up whenever restrictions are eased. "We fear hunger, not coronavirus", was how one Lebanese protester summarised it.[14]

What is particularly notable, however, is that the protest movements tend to be leaderless. At present, this is a phenomenon witnessed not only in the Middle East. These kinds of movements have been growing and thriving around the globe, from Hong Kong to Thailand and France to Chile in recent years. They reflect how, the world over, power is shifting from institutionalised actors to informal political movements and types of political activism. This global trend has tempted some commentators to proclaim the "age of leaderless revolution".[15] These movements are fuelled by crises, directed against the political establishment and they distance themselves from existing political parties.[16] Before we can understand their significance in the context of the Middle East and North Africa, we need to look at the region's political systems.

Competitive Authoritarianism and Political Clientelism

The Arab world's political model has long been described as "competitive authoritarianism", a system in which non-democratic regimes employ (sham) democratic methods to consolidate their power. Formal democratic institutions such as parliaments and parties have been and continue to be used as a way of legitimising political authority, despite the political elite routinely abusing public resources in elections, denying opposition forces media coverage, publicly harassing opponents, and manipulating election results.[17] Parliaments or comparable institutions now exist everywhere in the Middle East and North Africa, and members of parliament are, for the most part, mandated in direct elections. The influence on politics varies from country to country; however, in most of the region, the era of closed authoritarian regimes is now a thing of the past. In recent decades, the region has been dominated by one- or two-party systems that have severely restricted political competition. Today, pluralistic party systems are prevalent in most Arab countries. In Lebanon and Iraq, where a confusingly large number of parties is constantly forging new alliances with changing names, we can even refer to a "hyperpluralistic" system.

In democratic theory, political parties are often described as the most important political organisations in our modern world.[18] They serve to formulate policy programmes by articulating and aggregating citizens' interests and subsequently



United under one flag: The recent protests have transcended ethnic and sectarian divides, their demands have taken on a national flavour. Source: © Thaier Al-Sudani, Reuters.

mobilising voters behind an agenda. In this way, they create a relationship between government and citizens and, in addition to voting, enable their members to directly participate and demand accountability from their elected representatives.

In the Arab world, this connection is largely clientelistic, in other words, people vote for a party that they think will provide them with specific benefits. Political parties also tend to be poorly organised and ideologically vague in many countries across the region. They do not represent the interests of their citizens but are there for the personal benefit of their members. They often exhibit a personalistic nature, with weak internal democracy and limited influence on policymaking.[19] André Sleiman, Lebanon Country Representative at Democracy Reporting International, describes the parties in Lebanon as "gangs"

characterised by autocratic structures, focused on their own interests, and built on loyalty and obedience. "You cannot reform them."[20]

Crisis of Confidence in Arab Parties

This belief is shared by many in the region and particularly the younger generation. Hence, it is not surprising that confidence in public institutions and willingness to participate in politics are almost non-existent. In surveys, 61 per cent of respondents in the Arab world state that their views are not represented by any existing political group.[21] 71 per cent of Lebanese citizens distrust political parties and four out of five distrust parliament. In Iraq, only five per cent of the population have a positive attitude towards political parties.[22] This alienation from the political elite is reflected in the declining voter turnout. When, ten years ago, certain regimes ignored the demonstrators' demands, it was not unusual for protesters to turn to opposition leaders. But now all political leaders are viewed with distrust.[23]

By contrast, the informal protest movements represent large swathes of the population. In all four countries, the protest movements enjoy broad support. An overwhelming majority of Sudanese (81 per cent), Algerians (71 per cent), Lebanese (67 per cent), and Iraqis (82 per cent) back the demonstrators' demands; in Sudan, over one third of respondents said they had taken part in the protests.[24] Deep alienation between the predominantly young population and these countries' ruling elites is driving many people onto the streets. This reveals enormous political potential that has not yet been exploited. With the decline of the political parties, a key element of the political system – their role as intermediaries between the people and the rulers – is removed from the equation, leading to direct confrontation.

In the wake of radical political projects during the second half of the 20th century, including Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism and Baathism, the rise of Islamism, and, most recently, the "Arab Spring's" calls for democracy, we are now witnessing a politically activated but largely disoriented, almost post-ideological, generation growing up in the region. Governments consisting of political parties no longer offer a solution. This has led to a desire for technocrats to take the reins as they seem more capable of ensuring good governance. In a regional KAS poll, 40 per cent of Algerians and 55 per cent of Lebanese said elections should be abolished and technocrats given government responsibility.[25] A prototype in this respect is Sudan, where a three-year transition period led by a civilian technocrat government was agreed in the aftermath of the military coup that toppled dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Linked to this is the hope of an end to autocratic "divide and rule" strategies and the beginning of *administra et impera* (administer and rule). The 2011 efforts were hampered by political and ideological divisions, particularly between Islamists and secularists, which led to a strong focus on identity issues while more pressing matters such as socioeconomic improvements were put on the back burner. A technocratic interim solution may help to ease tensions over the medium term, yet it fails to solve the underlying problems and once again opens a vacuum of legitimacy.

Social movements are increasingly at the heart of society's processes of negotiation.

The post-war political projects of the Middle East – in pursuit of Arab unity, national independence, decolonisation, and socioeconomic transformation – were often led by charismatic leaders and their one-party systems. Today, however, the role and significance of political parties as "gatekeeper to the levers and trappings of power" is being called into question,[26] while social movements are increasingly at the heart of society's processes of negotiation. In this respect, they serve less as political actors than as watchdogs, self-avowed corrective agents, and warnings to the rulers. The ineffectiveness of political parties and the capricious

state suppression of public insurrection are changing the forms of political activism. Citizens are increasingly turning to informal mechanisms of protest and boycott.[27]

The Background to Lack of Leadership

Even prior to the developments of 2011, sociologist Asef Bayat saw social change in the Middle East as related to *nonmovements*; "collective actions of noncollective actors", which trigger change but are rarely guided by an ideology or recognisable leaderships and organisations.[28] According to Bayat, these non-structured protests, characteristic of authoritarian systems, may bring about change where organised movements fail. Lack of leadership promotes fast responses, high adaptability, and agility as well as the ability to adopt innovations in types of protest/tactics, which can spread horizontally more quickly. However, it also leads to a strategy vacuum and inefficient use of resources. Why is it that the recent wave of protests remained leaderless?

Leadership structures make it easier for state authorities to target, co-opt, arrest, or even execute individuals.

Diversification as an Organisational Challenge

Many of the recent protests had their origins in leaderless ad-hoc uprisings that subsequently grew into mass nationwide protests. While young people are the key driving forces behind the protests, they also attracted a broad range of citizens beyond the urban middle class and the strong participation of women was striking. The diversity of the protesters and the resulting differences in the scope of their demands have made it difficult to create a unified leadership. It is a classic chicken-and-egg situation: Disunity is symptomatic of lack of leadership, but disunity is also what makes it difficult for leaders to emerge in the first place. In Algeria, ideological differences led to the movement becoming fragmented. The diversity of the protest movements went from being a strength to a weakness.

The Iron Hand of the State

Another reason for the growth of largely leaderless movements is the way state authorities have responded to the protests. In (semi-)authoritarian contexts, state actors respond to opposition with a mixture of concessions, co-optation, and coercion. The violence perpetrated against protesters in Iraq and the arrests in Algeria certainly engendered support and, thus, mobilised more people to protest, whereas they also deterred potential leaders from taking on more responsibility. This is because leadership structures make it easier for state authorities to target and co-opt, arrest, or even execute individuals, which can rapidly result in the movement being fragmented or suppressed. On the other hand, leaderless protests, with their guerrilla-like structures, are more difficult to quash.[29]

Nevertheless, attempts to co-opt advocates of the protest movement have had some success. Several Iraqi protesters have left the movement to take up political roles. For most demonstrators, however, entering negotiations with the regime was tantamount to participating in the rigged system and, thus, deciding to become "part of the problem". By the same token, this made them wary of assuming a leadership role. The protests are directed against the perceived concentration of power, which is why many participants are critical of similar developments within their own ranks.[30]

The Unusual Suspects

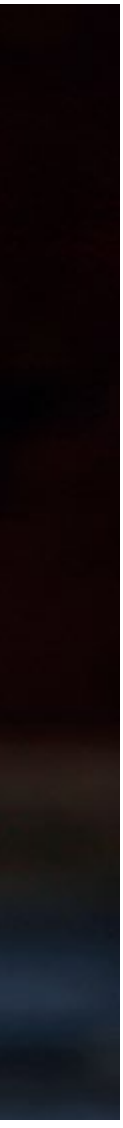
Like in 2011, the protagonists of the second wave of protests were not established civil society actors but rather the "unusual suspects"[31] – people with little previous political experience, who neither believed they needed an organisation nor possessed the expertise they needed to create one. They had no concrete political vision or clearly formulated strategic agenda for talks with the government for which they would have needed representatives. For instance, during

Without leaders for a better future: A Sudanese woman demonstrates in the capital Khartoum. Source: © Umit Bektas, Reuters.

the latest wave of protests in Lebanon – unlike during the waste protests of 2015, which were largely led by established civil society organisations – no leader figures or new, structured organisations emerged that were able to claim to be a contender on the political stage. It is true that some protesters united behind political movements that emerged in 2015, such as *Li Haqqi* (for my rights) or existing secular opposition parties that sought to form an anti-establishment alliance. Nevertheless, a diffuse and dispersed type of collective leadership emerged – as a "grassroots movement [largely] outside the control of political parties and emerging civil society structures".[32]

Technology Enables Leaderlessness

Here, as in 2011, social media played a significant role in this by enabling protesters to communicate in a decentralised manner. At least when it comes to organising protest actions, leaders



were made obsolete by difficult-to-monitor messaging services with end-to-end encryption such as Telegram, Twitter for disseminating calls to action, and Facebook groups for sharing slogans and protest calls. Most of the protests in Lebanon and Iraq were mobilised through small groups and social media.

Do We Need a New Structure?

However, this type of leaderless protest structure makes it difficult to achieve its goals. Scaling up these small groups of political "amateurs" requires skill, organisational experience, resources, and – above all – time. In addition, highly organised structures with a strategic agenda are needed to accomplish political results – as evidenced by the counterrevolutions and descent into civil war following 2011. The experiences of 2011, coupled with the political elite's will to survive, demonstrates the inability of these forms of protest to end the decades-old, deeply entrenched structures of political and economic rule, however. At that time, most governments were able to outmanoeuvre the social movements in their countries.

The demonstrators in the second wave of protests have made it clear that they will not fall silent until their problems are taken seriously. The protests are an indication of the system's lack of responsiveness to the needs of its people. How can the varied demands of citizens in a pre-political space be brought into the political debate and the anger of the street be translated into constructive political participation and the power to shape policy – and how can political parties participate in this dialogue?

Reforming Established Parties

Political parties that mobilise according to political beliefs and across sectarian lines, that promote a national identity and inspire confidence in their ability to govern – beginning at local level – may just stand a chance. They would have to propose reforms to the economic model and be constrained by party laws that formulate rules and conditions for the new formation and continued existence of political parties. They would have to develop a culture of responsibility through internal party reform processes and regain citizens' confidence in traditional participation mechanisms such as elections and candidacies. However, experts in the region see little chance of this happening within the established parties.

Independent civil society institutions are essential for drawing up political and socioeconomic solutions.

Iraqi analyst Sajad Jiyad believes it is possible for parties to retain the confidence of their base and their traditional voters; but thinks winning back the "disempowered masses" is highly unlikely. This would require a great deal of time and effort involving a range of measures, including transparency initiatives, internal restructuring, and changes to parliamentary activities. What's more, the current socioeconomic situation does not allow for a continuation of the clientelism model.[33] Lebanese expert André Sleiman also sees little prospect of reform by the established parties, given their lack of internal democracy, freedom of speech, and accountability. However, there is still a degree of confidence in political parties as an organisational element of the political structure.[34] In Algeria, formal political institutions and political parties have been completely discredited due to their ties with the old Bouteflika regime. Hence, Yahia Zoubir foresees their gradual slide towards irrelevance and believes a potential solution lies in dissolving all the parties and rebuilding them under stricter rules.[35]

Overcoming Lack of Political Leadership

The struggle to find an alternative to the ruling elite is undermined above all by the lack of alternative, credible political groupings with the ability to organise themselves effectively. As a result, the route out of the current crisis seems

possible only through the intrinsic development of organisations with policy platforms from within the ranks of the protesters. The work of international institutions on the ground could help to overcome this lack of political leadership.

Many countries in the region lack platforms where young people can come together to discuss political ideas and build organisational structures, and particularly for future leaders in civil society and the political sphere. There is a need for training facilities where young people can learn about the workings of political processes and the legal background to founding parties and associations, where they are motivated to become involved in their communities and given the scope to discuss concepts such as citizenship, transparency, and accountability. Employees of public institutions also need to gain a better understanding of basic government work, the mechanisms and principles of good governance, public order, and administration. This is where local actors such as town councils and their mayors have a particular role to play, as there is often more room for action at municipal level, and improved governance has a more tangible impact in this context.

International institutions can provide additional support in expanding the previously weak local think tank culture. Independent civil society institutions are essential for drawing up political and socioeconomic solutions. However, external support should invariably be adapted to the country's political possibilities and directed towards specific needs. Many countries are deeply critical of foreign interference. This is where Europe should enter an open exchange of experiences – also so as not to discredit the protest movements by interfering.

Developing a Modern Understanding of the State

Even ten years after the start of the "Arab Spring", it is not over and done with. It is a process, a shifting culture of protest and demands for accountability that can be observed in many countries of the region since 2010/11. It has become a reference point for Arab youth to continue pressing their demands. Overriding all of this is the renegotiation of a viable political settlement and the creation of a sustainable citizen-state relationship – one of the main motivations behind the protests ten years ago. The perception of this relationship has changed. In many countries in the region, even those that have not witnessed the recent outbreaks of protest, citizens are demanding that the government abide by its duty of care.

The authoritarian social contract of the old system, based on material rewards in the context of dysfunctional rentier economies, failed to deliver on the core components of good governance, and large swathes of the population now believe it has run its course. To mitigate some of the tensions currently brewing and to promote long-term stability, there is a need to come up with a citizen-centred, modern Arab state based on the rule of law, good governance, and social justice. To this end, demonstrations on the streets must be transformed into dialogue and channelled into the political process as participation. Many of the countries in the region are holding elections this year, including the parliamentary elections in Iraq in late 2021. This could afford an opportunity to achieve this goal.

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– translated from German –

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