POLITICS *WITHOUT* PARTIES?

Trends and Forms of Participation in the Southern Mediterranean Region

Edited by Thomas Volk

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INTRODUCTION

Amina Boussaa and Thomas Volk

Since the 2011 uprisings, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has significantly changed following the first outburst of mass popular protest in Tunisia and the resultant wave of revolutionary fervour. The new political landscape altered domestic politics, power balances, civic engagement, and the role of political parties. In fact, political parties have long struggled to gain momentum in the Arab world due to a number of inhibiting factors like the potent mix of repression and regime co-optation. The so-called Arab Spring sparked an unprecedented electoral advance of Islamist parties, particularly in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, which failed to remain in power. Their confidence-building measures were inadequate to break the cycle of mistrust and were unable to change the dynamics of their tumultuous dealings with the secular opposition. Political parties in the MENA region, in general, and in North Africa, in particular, have not triumphed the role of representing societies troubled by economic hardships.

More than a decade has passed since the upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring, yet the trust gap between MENA citizens and the existent political parties is still widening. The inexperience of parties in governance, their organization around personalities rather than a programmatic depth , and struggles to deliver on their promises stood against their development into vehicles of reform and democracy. North Africa's quest for political reforms stems from the citizens' yearning for dignity, could grant accountability and transparency, and, in turn, would lead the way toward more stability and prosperity. The democratic transitions coincided with enormous economic and security challenges which jeopardized people's trust in democracy and political parties. The outcome is a nostalgia which sometimes beckons for the old authoritarian order as a provider for peace and stability. This reality offers authoritarianism as a relevant hypothesis for the future of the region.

The clamour surrounding political parties in discussions of transitions in Arab countries is thus worth investigating. The future of political participation and the development of political parties in the MENA remain elusive. The religious-secular divide no longer attracts the polls that perceive ideology as a relic of the past. Thus, authoritarianism is being gradually presented as the new reality of the region, while popular protests remain the most effective driver for change. Amidst all these complexities, political parties are the broken thread between popular protest and lasting political reform in the MENA region. Protest street movements trigger change, yet they need parties and the normal channels of political process to achieve reforms.

This study represents a continuation of the 2020 KAS PoldiMed survey which was carried out in six MENA countries and conducted on trust in political institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. The survey results show that citizens in the countries surveyed have rather low trust in political institutions such as parliament or political parties (KAS Poldimed, 2021)[1]. Therefore, this study sheds light on how support for political parties has changed in selected countries in North Africa over the past decade. It also discusses the reasons why their popularity has declined and what new forms of participation might be possible.

By looking back at the last decade, the study provides a holistic approach to understanding the position of political parties, their connection to citizens, and the factors contributing

1 PoldiMED, K. (2021, February 25). Trust in political institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. Retrieved December 15, 2022, from https://www.kas.de/en/web/poldimed/single-title/-/content/trust-in-political-institutions-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa

to their waning image. Islamist parties and their performance in government since 2011 will be particularly tackled and how despite their different political trajectories, they witnessed the same fate of retreating from the political scene in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt.

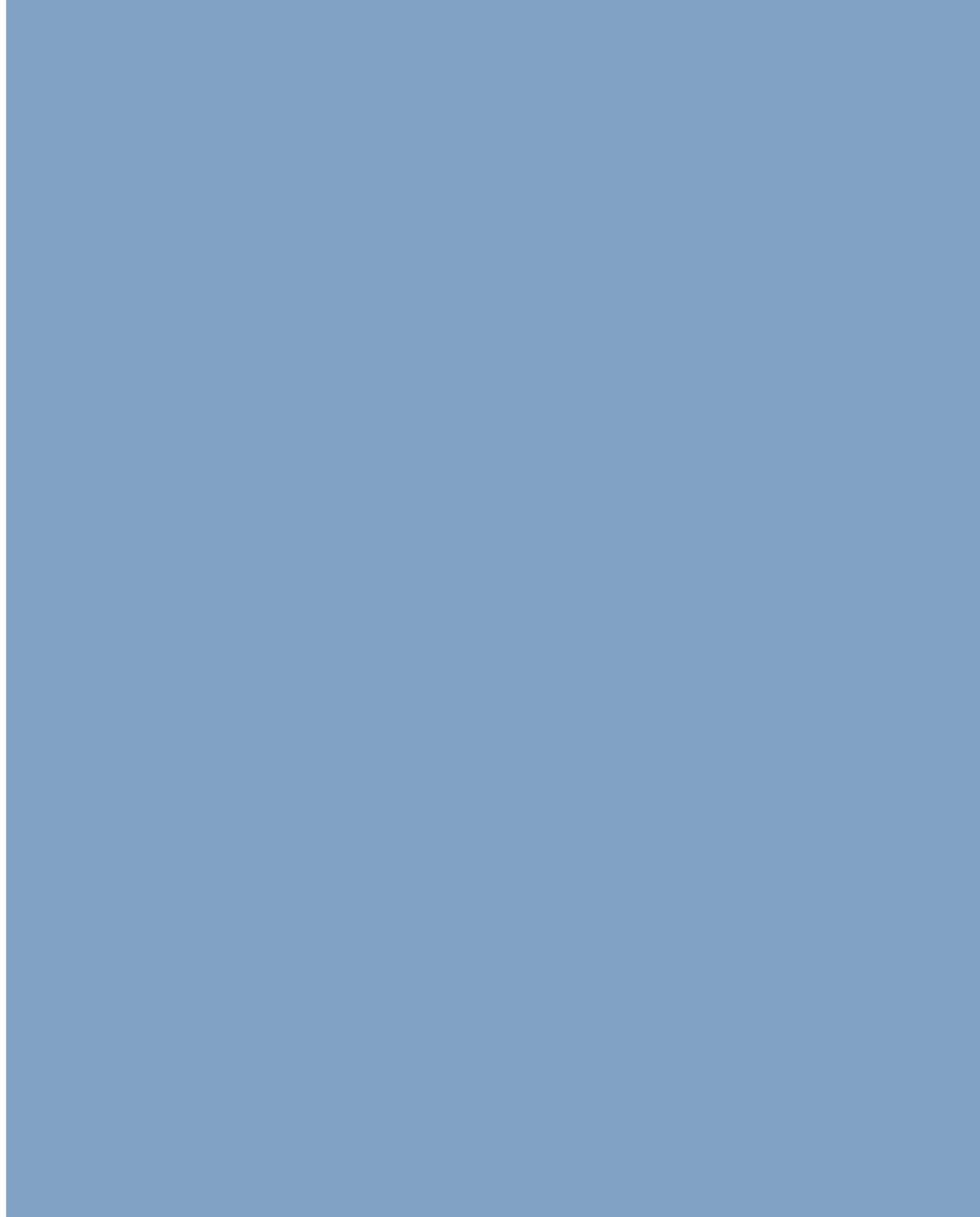
In the first chapter, Michael Robbins provides statistics, based on Arab Barometer surveys, concerning the relationship between citizens and political parties in the MENA region. He investigates the factors behind the negative image of parties from a citizens' standpoint. According to Robbins, the declining influence of political parties is attributed to three main factors. First, the parties in the region have a historical legacy and party structure that contributed to their negative perception during the Arab uprisings. Second, the religious-secular party competition divide which dominated the political scene, further intensified the trust gap between most citizens and political parties which failed to appeal to people's demands. Third, the decreasing trust in government institutions deepened the alienation between citizens and parties, since institutions represent the medium through which political parties operate and demonstrate their value.

In the second chapter, Adel Abdel Ghafar tackles the retreat of Islamist parties in North Africa by taking Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt as case studies. By analyzing their performance in government, the author highlights the factors that could hinder the Islamists' return to politics and the prospects for their re-entry into political power. The chapter argues that Islamists have lost momentum in the region. While they still retain some influence in Morocco and Tunisia and may come back to the scene, the author argues that they will be isolated and marginalized in Egypt for the decades to come.

In the third chapter, Yousef Cherif narrows down the analysis by zooming into the Tunisian case. For well over a decade, Tunisia was portrayed as a model of successful democratization in the region serving as a favourable ground for tracking and analysing the work of political parties. Yet, President Kais Saied's constitutional coup in 2021 reshuffled the deck and isolated political parties from the political scene, leaving the future open to multiple scenarios. In this vein, Cherif explains the evolution of the Tunisian political system from the post-colonial era until today. He unpacks the challenges facing political parties and their development which can be grouped into: institutional problems, ideological fragmentation, and the anti-democratic propaganda and sentiments. The author concludes with the prospects of the Tunisian political system.

The fourth and final chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of current trends and future prospects for policy and civic engagement in North Africa. Intissar Fakir draws attention to the waning ideological appeal, declining trust in state institutions and politicians, and severe economic vulnerability that characterize politics in MENA countries. According to Fakir, the outlook will be one of pragmatism rather than ideology, and governments will use the effort to pursue an apolitical agenda. Furthermore, as Fakir assumes, the pressure to stabilize the economy outweighs democratic aspirations. Hence, state institutions and participatory mechanisms will continue to generate the same disillusionment. The future of political engagement, particularly in the form of popular mobilization and protests, will continue to shape MENA societies, providing opportunities for more immediate action.

Amina Boussaa and Thomas Volk



POLITICAL PARTIES AND CITIZENS IN THE MENA REGION

Michael Robbins

Political Parties and Citizens in MENA Region

Michael Robbins

Despite the changes of the past decade, political parties across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remain extremely weak and ineffective. In 2021-2, Arab Barometer asked about the most effective way to influence a government decision at the national level (Arab Barometer, 2022). In none of the nine countries – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia – where the question was included did more than one-in-five list working through a political party. The belief that it is effective to work through political parties is highest in Mauritania (17%) and Libya (15%), but elsewhere at most about one-in-ten say that working through political parties is the most effective way to influence decisions at the level of the national government.

In comparison, in all 9 countries, citizens are more likely to say that protesting can influence events at the national level to a greater extent than working through a political party. Across the region, at least one-in-ten say that protesting is the most effective way to influence a decision of government. This perception is strongest in Iraq (29%), followed by Sudan (24%), Libya (23%) and Mauritania (20%). Combined, these results suggest that citizens see little value in political parties across MENA today.

What accounts for this weakness in political parties and their lack of connection with the population at large? To a large extent, this comes down to the famous question of "*why parties*" (Aldrich, 1995)? And next, how does this answer differ in MENA?

Broadly speaking, the answer to "*why parties*" has been answered while assuming a democratic political environment, in part because political parties usually go hand-in-hand with democracy itself (Stokes, 1999). Democratic governance is designed to aggregate the interests of the country's citizens through elections, meaning clear alternatives are necessary to fully function (Dahl, 1971). Parties can serve to bridge this gap by presenting a number of alternative programs which can be used to hold government leaders accountable during regular elections.

Parties do not just serve to aggregate interests, however. By means of competing for votes in elections, parties must work to effectively engage and mobilize voters if they hope to be successful in a competitive democratic environment (Campbell et al, 1960). Parties can thus be a vehicle by which elites socialize potential sympathizers and voters to win support for their legislative program (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989).

Thus, parties exist in democracies to serve as an intermediary between citizens and political elites in order to help democracy function by creating institutions that can hold elites accountable while also serving to increase awareness and engagement of citizens in the political process (Key, 1966). In most democracies, the party structure is crucial to the overall success of the democratic system.

Although it is difficult to imagine a successful democratic system without parties, more recently attention has been given to the fact that many parties operate in a system that is far from democratic (Golosov, 2013). Political parties are found in a variety of non-free environments, including monarchies, one-party states, competitive authoritarian regimes, and hybrid regimes. Only in rare cases, such as Qaddafi's Libya or an absolute monarchy such as Saudi Arabia, are parties completely absent from the political system regardless of whether or not it is democratic.

This reality leads to a secondary question of why do parties exist outside of democratic systems? If power is not regularly contested within elections, a key reason for political parties to exist no longer holds. Moreover, it is unclear how and why citizens would turn to such organizations to try to structure their interests, especially if they run counter to those of the regime. Instead, it would be more logical for citizens to find other means to forward their political interests that are more acceptable to the regime or to work directly within the regime itself.

While citizens may not gain much from parties in non-democratic contexts, political elites may stand to benefit from the existence of parties (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Parties can serve as a vehicle to mobilize the public and to link those who govern with the population. The regime and those who run it may thus have an interest in having a party system as a means to help the regime govern through three primary mechanisms. First, the party can be used to help disseminate the interests of elites to ordinary citizens, thus helping to socialize according to the interests of elites (Linz, 2000). Second, a party can help to distribute rents and other benefits to those in the population who are engaged with the party (Blaydes, 2010).

Third, under some conditions, the party may help regimes by providing a veneer of legitimacy to it in the eyes of the international community. If multiparty elections are routinely held and opposition parties allowed to win some seats, the regime elites can claim that they have the trappings of democracy despite actual power being constricted and the opposition having little chance to win the elections or meaningfully hold actual power even if they did.

Yet, none of these interests are likely to create a strong link between the population and the political party, at least under the conditions found in the MENA region. As economic conditions have deteriorated, the legitimacy for regimes to rule under the long-standing social contracts has weakened (World Bank, 2004). Parties are unlikely to be able to bridge such a gap. Moreover, buying off citizens through rent distribution can maintain loyalty, but is not a means to build a credible political party in the eyes of the public. Finally, those living in the country are unlikely to care about the outside perception of democracy when they are living daily the realities of the domestic political system.

In sum, the political conditions present in MENA through much of its history have created conditions whereby parties typically serve the interests of the political elites rather than the population (Hinnebusch et al, 2020). For the most part, political institutions in the region are not designed to foster the creation of robust parties, at least beyond being an extension of the ruling regime.

These political environments go a long way to answering the question of why political parties have such a weak connection with the population at large. This is further borne out by evidence from public opinion surveys carried out over the last 15 years that makes it clear that political parties have not effectively connected with citizens, at least with the partial exception of Islamist parties. Results from Arab Barometer and Konrad Adenauer Foundation PolDiMed surveys have clearly demonstrated low levels of confidence in political parties and shed light on the factors that have led to this general weakness of parties to win the confidence of the public (Arab Barometer, 2019; Konrad Adenauer Foundation PolDiMed, 2021).

This chapter examines the relationship of citizens to political parties from the time shortly before the Arab Uprisings of 2011 until today, with a particular focus on the factors for the poor perception of parties in the eyes of ordinary citizens. It argues that political party weakness across the region is due to three primary factors. First, due to the historical legacy of parties and the party structure in MENA, the region's citizens did not have a positive view of parties at the time of the Arab Uprisings. Second, the nature of the primary political divide across MENA over the last decade has revolved around the role of Islam in public life. This division has largely structured party competition around two poles that do not represent the central concern of most ordinary citizens which has not helped develop linkages between parties and most citizens. Third, insofar as parties had the ability to demonstrate their value through political institutions, they have failed to do so. As citizens have demanded solutions to the basic problems of their lives, confidence in parliament, a key institution where parties operate, has remained low and often declined. In short, parties have been unable to win over citizens by delivering results. Ultimately, these three factors are all interconnected and jointly are critical to understanding the general weakness of political parties across the MENA region. This chapter concludes with a section examining potential alternatives and ways that political parties or movements could become stronger with a particular focus on the role that civil society organizations can play in helping to (re)build trust in political parties.

Historical Legacies: Trust in Political Parties before the Arab Uprisings

Prior to the Arab Uprisings, levels of trust in political parties were relatively low. In the six societies surveyed by Arab Barometer in 2006-7, in only one did more than a third of citizens express confidence in political parties (Arab Barometer, 2007). The exception was Palestine where nearly half (45%) expressed confidence in parties. Notably, this survey occurred shortly after the 2006 parliamentary elections that were widely considered free and fair (Usher, 2006). These elections were dominated by two main parties which competed for support based largely on the question of how to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On one side, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Fatah proposed continuing its engagement with Israel as a means to a final settlement. On the other, HAMAS ran on a platform of rejection of negotiations in favor of active resistance toward Israel. The 2006 election presented Palestinians with a clear choice between these

two platforms, leading to high turnout of about 75% and a narrow victory in terms of vote share for HAMAS.

In effect, these two and other existing political parties in Palestine articulated clear policy positions, aggregated the views of various factions within society, mobilized supporters, and contested these views in a free and fair election (Shikaki, 2006). Moreover, at least half of the citizens who identified with one of the two main parties indicated they had confidence in political parties in general compared with about a third (32%) of those who did not support any party (Arab Barometer, 2007). This case clearly suggests that when parties are actively engaged in the political process and serving their roles, citizens respond with higher levels of confidence.

In the remaining five countries surveyed in 2006-7, parties were not serving a similar role to that in Palestine. Elsewhere, levels of trust were higher in Jordan at 29%, which had a history of elections with some meaningful party competition. Although elections were typically dominated by independents, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) was allowed to compete and present a meaningful party platform in the 1993 elections. Other parties were also allowed to compete and, despite winning few seats, there existed some form of party competition in previous elections (Schwedler, 1998).

Levels of trust were next highest in Lebanon at 21%. This country's ossified party system, developed to balance sectarian interests following the Taif Agreement of 1989, focuses more heavily on maintaining peace than providing citizens with a true set of distinct options (Saouli, 2019). Accordingly, citizens appear to have responded by placing lower levels of confidence in political parties that were set about maintaining balance as opposed to trying to win support on popular platforms to meaningfully improve conditions in the country.

In Algeria (18%) and Morocco (17%), trust in political parties was even lower. Although both formally had multiparty systems, parties were not designed to promote competition or share power (Willis 2002). In the case of Morocco, although a multiparty parliament had been established, real power remained with the King and the royal court. In effect, all legal parties were in effect pro-regime, offering limited choice of policy positions to voters (Daadaoui, 2010).

In Algeria, the National Liberation Front (FLN) came from the movement that successfully won independence from France and became the party of the regime. Following widespread protests, meaningful multiparty elections were held in 1991, in which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was set to win the first round of voting. When the scope of their victory was becoming clear, the armed forces called off the elections leading to a decade-long civil war. After the regime defeated the FIS, multiparty elections were once again held, but effectively all parties were pro-regime (Bouandel, 2003). Ultimately, despite differences in regime types, in both countries, the primary purpose of political parties was to further the interests of the political elites rather than those of citizens, which helps explain the low levels of trust in political parties.

The Arab Uprising – New Opportunities?

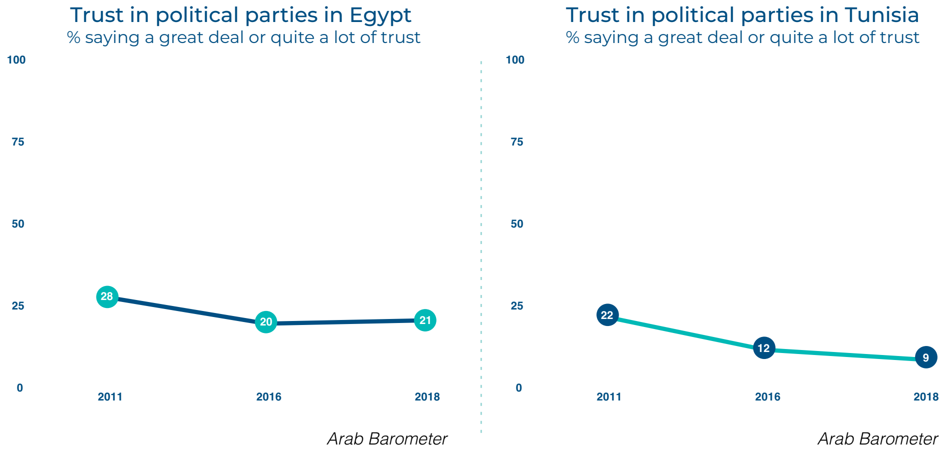
The Arab Uprisings of 2011 offered a new opportunity for strengthening the relationship between political parties and citizens across MENA, especially in the countries that experienced the greatest political openings. Yet, despite this opportunity, in no country did trust in parties increase dramatically after these events, including in Tunisia and Egypt. This reality underscores the challenges parties faced to become meaningful political actors due in large part to the historical legacies they inherited.

After their respective revolutions, citizens in Egypt and Tunisia were able to participate in multiparty elections under largely free and fair conditions. Nevertheless, levels of trust in parties remained low. This low level likely stems from the fact that citizens living in both countries had long lived under single party systems where the ruling party had been discredited. In Egypt, the National Democratic Party had dominated political life since 1978, without a clear line between the party and the regime (Blaydes 2010). The only alternative base of power was the Muslim Brotherhood, which was not formally a legal political party but still functioned as the primary political opposition. Through building up a strong social services network and fielding some candidates for elections as independents, it managed to gain a foothold in parliament although without the ability to seriously challenge the regime from within the system (Wickham, 2015).

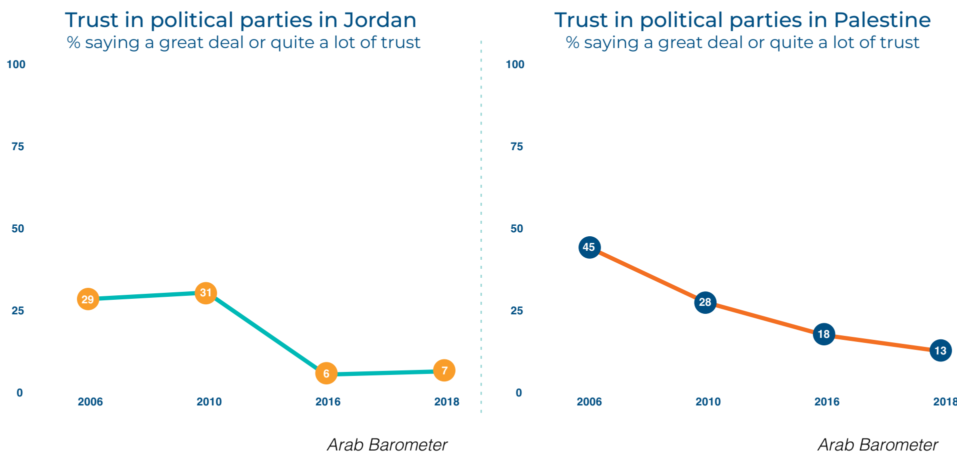
In Tunisia, the ruling party before the uprising was the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD). Like the Egyptian case, the only meaningful alternative to the RCD was the Islamist opposition, in this case represented by the Ennahda movement (Allani, 2009). Ennahda was formally banned and its leader was living in exile, but it was able to field some candidates as independents in some elections. Nevertheless, it too was unable to gain a serious foothold in the political system.

Despite being limited before 2011, both Islamist movements were well positioned for electoral success after the uprisings. These events had largely discredited the existing regimes and their associated ruling parties. Lacking other viable alternatives, these Islamist parties had the strongest networks and were the best organized factions in each country, which translated into early electoral success (Robbins, 2012; Brooke, 2019). Yet, as will be discussed in greater detail below, they also lacked broad support from the population at large. The primary issue in both revolutions was economic concerns. Few citizens placed the role of Islam in the political system as their primary concern and few believed that Islam was the solution to their basic economic challenges. As a result, these parties were largely unable to win over the hearts and minds of citizens.

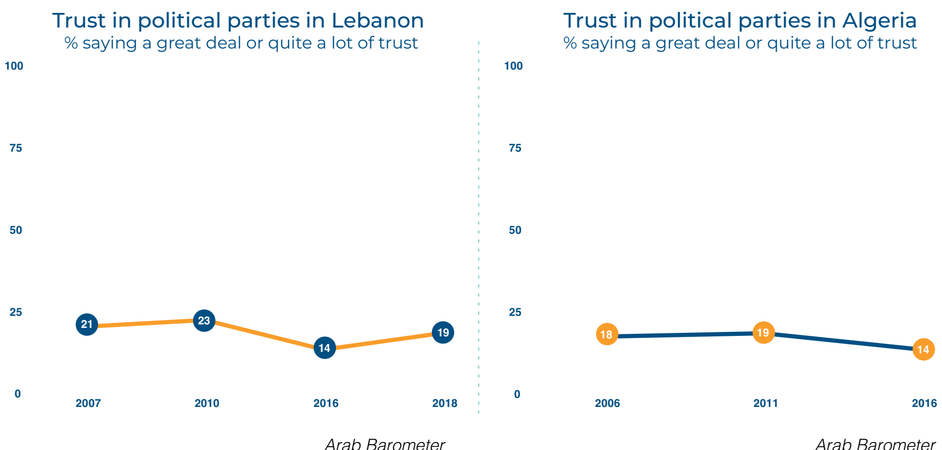
The low ratings of the existing political parties reflected in levels of trust in the period shortly after the time of the revolutions. In surveys conducted by Arab Barometer in 2011, fewer than three-in-ten said they had confidence in political parties in both countries (Arab Barometer, 2011). In Egypt, 28% said they had trust in parties compared with only 22% in Tunisia. Based on the historical legacy of weak parties and the lack of popular new parties, there was a significant credibility gap for political parties at the start of the transitional period.



Elsewhere, in countries that experienced fewer changes, parties were faring little better at the time of the Arab Uprisings. In Jordan, trust in political parties remained effectively unchanged (32%). Meanwhile, in all other cases surveyed fewer than three-in-ten expressed confidence in parties and the level declined in many. The drop was particularly steep in Palestine, where only 28% said they had a lot or some trust in parties, which represents a 17-point decline over just five years. This decline follows from the events in Palestine, with the Fatah-HAMAS conflict that led to the political divisions between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As the two main parties focused on their own political interests as opposed to the shared interests of Palestinian society, levels of trust fell sharply to levels found in other countries.



Across other countries in the region, very little changed in terms of trust in political parties. In Lebanon, levels remained unchanged from 2007 while, despite some minor reforms in Algeria, there were also no changes in levels of confidence in parties based on results from Arab Barometer.



As the period after the Arab Uprisings continued, little changed with the overall trend. By 2018-9, levels of support for parties had largely continued to decline. In multiple countries fewer than one-in-ten citizens said they trusted political parties to a large or medium extent, including Tunisia (9%), Jordan (7%), Iraq (6%), and Libya (4%). Elsewhere, at most about one-in-five citizens say they had trust in political parties, further highlighting the growing weakness of these political actors.

The period after 2018 presented renewed challenges for a number of countries in MENA. In 2018-9 alone, protests brought about as many changes in governments as had occurred during the 2011 Arab uprisings. Soon thereafter, the COVID-19 pandemic placed significant strain on governments coping with the health crisis, rising costs of living, and, often, significant shutdowns. Arab Barometer surveys do not cover levels of trust in political parties after the 2018-9, but additional evidence from surveys conducted by Konrad Adenauer Foundation PolDiMed (2021) across six countries – Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia – provide more recent evidence about how trust in parties have fared. The cases of Lebanon and Tunisia are particularly noteworthy, given that both experienced major upheavals during this time. In the case of Lebanon, this was the financial collapse of the country in fall 2019 while in Tunisia it was the increasingly authoritarian nature of Kais Saied, the president who came to power in October 2019, which culminated in what was effectively a coup in July 2021.

The KAS PolDiMed surveys paint a somewhat more favorable view of political parties than Arab Barometer surveys, perhaps in part because they provide respondents a 6-point

instead of a 4-point scale[1]. As such, the results should not be directly compared. However, both approaches ultimately demonstrate that there is a relatively low level of trust in political parties across countries.

In the cases of Lebanon and Tunisia, the findings from the KAS PolDiMed surveys demonstrate that citizens do not appear to have turned to political parties in large numbers as a means to address their grievances. In Lebanon, just over a quarter of citizens said they have trust in political parties, fully, a lot, or somewhat in 2020. In Tunisia, the percentage is the lowest of the six countries surveyed at only 18%.

In the case of Lebanon, the 2019 financial crisis and the Beirut port explosion in 2020 largely discredited the existing political system. Unlike many countries across the region, in Lebanon political parties play a central role in the political system and thus are strongly linked with these two disasters. The political stasis based on the complex sectarian arrangement has led many Lebanese to reject the system outright as a 2020 survey by Arab Barometer reveals. The results find that a majority (56%) said they wanted the existing system replaced by a civil or secular system compared with only 10% who want the system to remain unchanged.

It is perhaps unsurprising that reformist candidates who were not affiliated with any traditional sectarian party made significant gains in parliamentary election in Lebanon in 2022. Although a small bloc and not members of a formal party, this group offers the possibility of a new vision for political leaders in Lebanon. If they can realize positive change, they could emerge as a new political party or parties with a higher level of trust than the traditional ones in Lebanon.

In Tunisia, the continued low level of trust in political parties is likely a result of the 2019 election in which an independent outsider Kais Saied won a commanding victory without the benefit of an associated political party. His populist rhetoric and promise to address long-standing grievances like corruption and the country's weak economic performance appealed to a vast majority of voters. His campaign also sought to undermine the legitimacy of political parties, which he largely blamed for nearly a decade of poor outcomes for the country. His successful appeal to the country's electorate and discrediting of political parties has limited the potential appeal of these organizations. However, evidence suggests confidence in Saied is waning, which may present opportunities for new political parties to emerge.

Ideological Challenges

Over the last decade, the predominate political divide across the region has centered around the Secular-Islamist cleavage (Blaydes & Linzer, 2012; Wegner & Cavatorta, 2019). In large part, this is due to the success of Islamist parties in elections across a number of countries. However, evidence from Arab Barometer demonstrates that this success was due less to an endorsement of the ideology of Islamist parties as the electoral advantages they inherited in the post-2011 period.

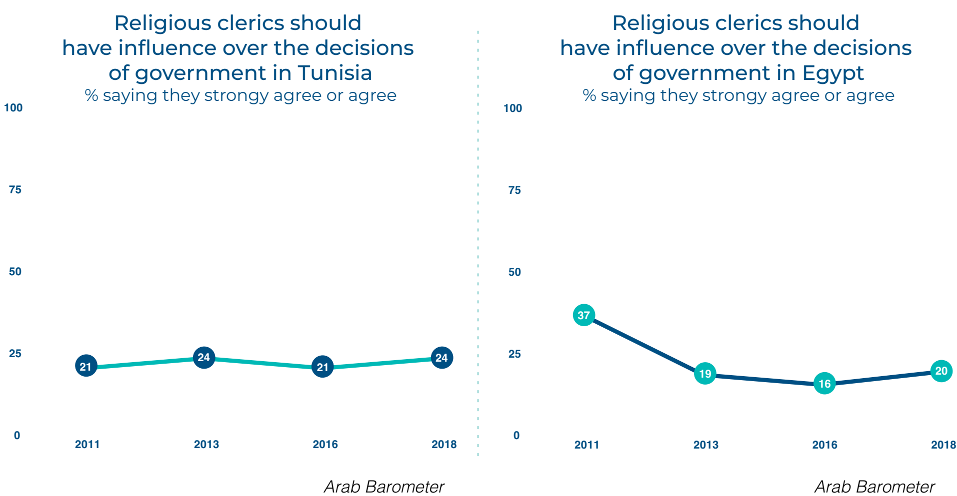
1 Arab Barometer surveys ask respondents whether they trust political parties "a great deal", "quite a lot", "not a lot" or "not at all". Konrad Adenauer PolDiMed surveys asks respondents if they "trust fully", "trust a lot", "trust somewhat", "distrust somewhat", "distrust a lot", or "distrust fully" political parties.

Given the limited political space that existed prior to 2011, Islamist actors could exploit the free spaces offered by religious institutions to a greater extent than political parties organized around alternative dimensions (Clark, 2003; Schwedler, 2006). As a result, Islamist parties were able to win initial elections in Egypt and Tunisia, while also finishing first in elections in Morocco (Robbins, 2012). Additionally, parties very strongly affiliated with specific sectarian identities dominated in Lebanon and Iraq while HAMAS continued to rule in Gaza. Islamist forces were also significant players to the conflicts in Libya and Yemen, presenting a clear image of a rise for political Islam across the MENA region.

Although these parties differed dramatically in their ideologies and stated objectives, all sought to increase the role for Islam in politics to some degree. In the case of Egypt, this included passing a new constitution with a significantly greater incorporation of the shari'a or Islamic jurisprudence. In Tunisia, Ennahda did not pursue such dramatic changes but did seek to increase the tolerance for Islam in public life (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013).

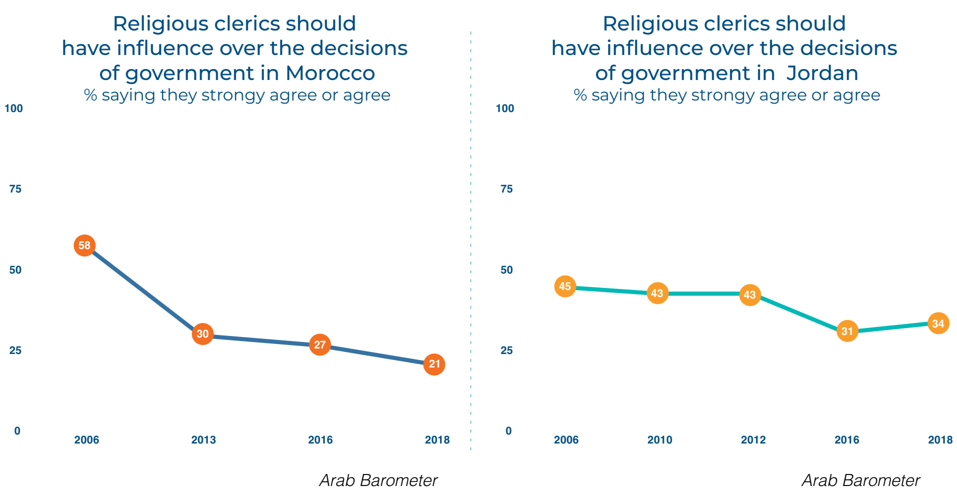
Yet, for the most part, these parties did not represent the public at large. Across nearly all countries in the region, minorities of citizens favored the Islamist agenda. In 2010-11, fewer than half said they wanted religious leaders to have a say over decisions of government in all but two countries surveyed by Arab Barometer. The exceptions are Yemen and Sudan, where barely half (55 and 52%, respectively) held this view, while in six of the countries surveyed four-in-ten or fewer wanted religious leaders to play this role.

In a number of cases, like Tunisia, the distance between electoral outcomes and the desires of the population at large is particularly stark. Despite Ennahda's continued success at the polls, in five surveys of Tunisians since 2011, never did more than a quarter agree that religious clerics should have influence over decisions of government. In effect, Ennahda won the election but did not win the hearts of Tunisians in support of some of its core values.



Similarly in Egypt, despite the Muslim Brotherhood's victory in parliamentary and presidential elections after the revolution, only 37% of citizens favored giving religious clerics a say over government decision in 2011. In the months before the 2013 military coup, this level had fallen by half to just 19%, a level which has more or less held steady since. In reality, the Muslim Brotherhood took power as the only credible alternative to the old regime, not as a party with a popular mandate.

In effect, in both countries the primary party to emerge from the respective revolutions did not represent the wishes of ordinary citizens. In Tunisia, secular leaders of various stripes formed an uneasy alliance with the primary aim of opposing Ennahda and its (moderate) Islamist agenda in the form of Nidaa Tounes. This new party was able to win the majority of votes on its anti-Islamist platform in the 2014 elections but struggled to govern effectively amidst a lack of unity on other issues (Lefèvre, 2015). The result was a set of weak governments struggling to address the vast challenges facing Tunisia. In Egypt, the military coup put an end to the government formed by the Muslim Brotherhood, albeit with relatively widespread support from the population for ending this unpopular experiment (Schwartz, 2013).



Results elsewhere in the region were relatively similar. In Morocco, where the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won the largest share of votes in elections in 2011 and 2016, support for political Islam fell dramatically. In 2007, 58% of Moroccans favored giving religious leaders a say over decisions of government compared with just 21% in 2018.

In Jordan, largely due to the electoral system (Yom, 2013), parties struggle to compete but the Islamic Action Front has finished each election it has competed in as the largest party in parliament. Still, support for political Islam fell during the same period from 45% in 2006 to 34% in 2018.

Yet, the debate over the role of Islam in politics has not been the central concern of most publics across the Middle East and North Africa. Over the last decade, economic concerns have predominated across most MENA countries (Arab Barometer, 2019). When asked about the greatest challenge facing their country, the majority of citizens express concern about economic conditions, corruption, or public services (and more recently COVID). In contrast, the role of religion in public life is not a central concern to most citizens despite the central role this question has played in structuring political competition across much of the MENA region.

Given their foundational basis, parties that take up the banner of Islam often struggle to provide clear policy solutions to many of the basic problems facing their society (Robbins, 2012). Many rose to power on the slogan "Islam is the solution", but Islamic jurisprudence has very little to guide efforts at job creation, limiting inflation, or undertaking economic reforms (Nomani & Rahnema, 1994; Utvik, 2006). Instead, Islamist parties have tended to focus on other social or cultural issues in their basic platforms over economic issues. As a result, citizens across the region do not associate Islamist parties with economic solutions (Robbins, 2012).

The general lack of focus by Islamist parties on economic issues logically created an opportunity for other parties to gain a foothold by promoting solutions to the issues that citizens cared about to a greater extent than the role of Islam in public life. Yet, as the most organized parties in most countries in the region, parties that took up the banner of Islam had an oversized influence on structuring party competition. In many instances, alternative parties that sought to counter the broader Islamist movement formed pragmatic alliances as a means simply to stop the advance of political Islam. In the case of Nidaa Tounes in Tunisia, for example, the new party brought together former political rivals to counter Ennahda (Boubekeur, 2018). The party was able to win the 2014 elections but failed to win support for a broader ideological platform.

The structuring of party competition primarily on a religious-secular divide over the last few decades has had a significant effect on confidence in political parties. Despite relatively low and generally decreasing support for Islamist parties, they often remain the most ideologically cohesive in their societies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these factors also are linked with greater trust in political parties. In 2018-9, those who were sympathetic to the Islamist call for a greater religion in public life were significantly more likely to trust political parties than those who were opposed to this ideology (Arab Barometer, 2019). In Lebanon, the gap was 15 points, followed by 14 points in Morocco, ten points in Egypt, five points in Jordan and Sudan, and three points in Palestine and Libya. Although levels of trust in parties was relatively low across the board, those who were more likely to support the platform of Islamist parties were also more likely to have confidence in political parties.

In effect, politics across MENA over the past decade plus have resulted in party competition that has not effectively represented the interests of most citizens. On the one hand, Islamist parties were the largest and most electorally competitive forces that emerged after 2011, but they did not enjoy wide societal support and were less focused on the key concerns of most citizens. On the other hand, the more secularly minded opposition

parties struggled to promote or win support for a broader platform that might connect to potential voters more closely. The ongoing tension over the secular-Islamist cleavage, which falls outside of the key daily life concerns of most citizens, made parties remain remote and appear out of touch. These conditions did not foster a greater connection between parties and potential supporters given that most parties failed to effectively appeal to the demands of citizens.

Political Performance

A third distinct but related challenge for building the necessary linkages with political parties relates to the performance of government institutions during this period. Despite the promise of better conditions following revolutions in some countries and political reforms in others, few across MENA have experienced improvements in their personal lives. These frustrations are reflected in the low and decreasing ratings of many political institutions in which political parties have operated. The failures of these institutions, which is a key forum where political parties are designed to demonstrate their value, has also hurt their standing with ordinary citizens.

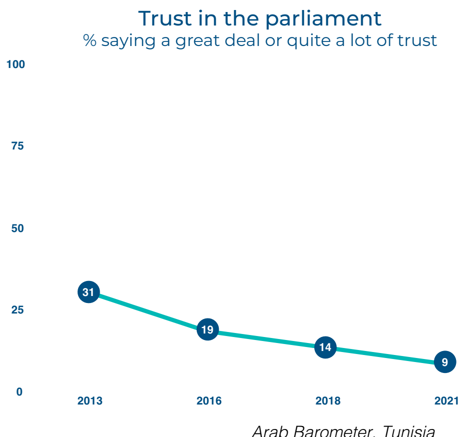
At the time of the Arab Uprisings, frustration with economic conditions had boiled over. When asked in 2011 about the reasons for the revolutions in their respective countries, a majority of Egyptians and Tunisians linked them with economic issues instead of political issues (Arab Barometer, 2011). Citizens in both countries were effectively demanding reforms to improve their economies from the protests as the top priority.

Following the protests, many countries underwent a process of political reforms. In Tunisia, this was more extensive including developing a process to rewrite the country's constitution through the election of a Constituent Assembly (Pickard, 2015). In Egypt, elections for existing political institutions were held under conditions that were less restrictive than in previous years. Candidates from the Muslim Brotherhood and other political currents were permitted to run in elections for the presidency and parliament.

Elsewhere, regimes responded with steps toward greater inclusion. In Morocco, the monarchy pushed forward constitutional reforms in 2011 that would require an elected prime minister and purport to devolve power from the Palace, among other changes, which on the face of it were changes designed to increase the linkages between ordinary citizens and their government (Madani et al., 2012). In Jordan, a process of constitutional reforms was initiated in addition to a new electoral law. One of the stated purposes of the electoral reforms was to create conditions that would strengthen the ability of parties to compete in elections and thereby to play a greater role in parliament (Salameh & Ananzah, 2015).

These changes could have served to increase the relative importance of political parties, which are designed to be a critical link between populations and governing institutions. Yet, results from Arab Barometer over the last decade demonstrate another reason for the increasing fragility of political parties across the region: despite these reforms, political institutions by and large failed to deliver results that improved the lives of ordinary citizens.

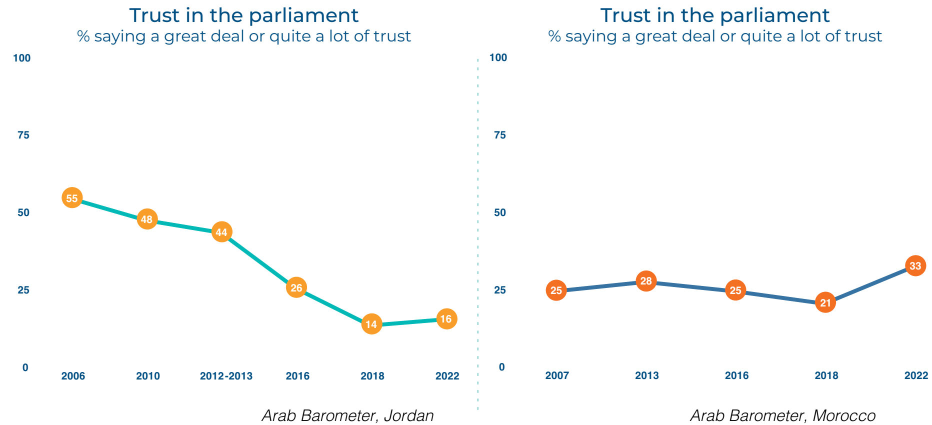
In the case of Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Uprisings, economic conditions have deteriorated since the Jasmine Revolution. For example, per capita income was more than 20% lower a decade after the revolution (Jamal & Robbins, 2022). Meaningful economic reform has stalled, meaning parliament and other elected institutions have not successfully addressed the challenges facing ordinary Tunisians. No elected party has been able to effectively break this logjam or find a solution to the long-standing economic malaise facing Tunisia. During the same period, confidence in parliament fell by 22 points.



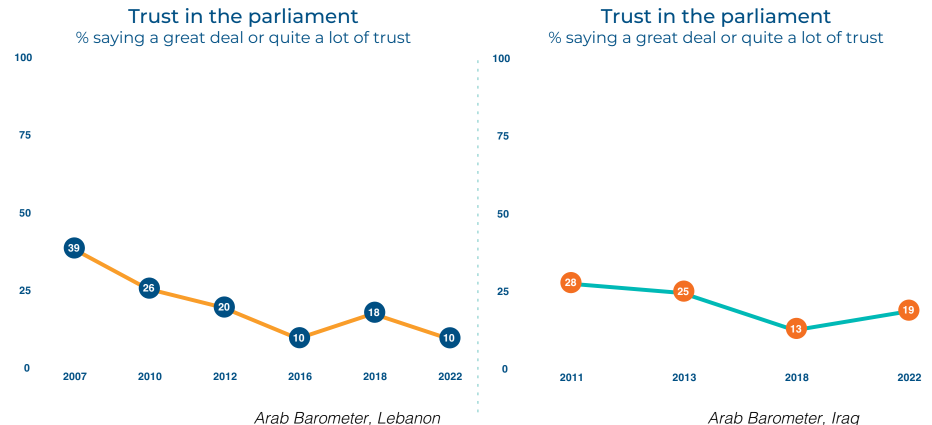
Arab Barometer, Tunisia

In Egypt, the short-lived democratic experiment also did not provide a clear boost for political institutions. The failure of parliament and the president to improve economic conditions or even develop a meaningful plan to do so suggested that these institutions were incapable and unresponsive to the needs and demands of ordinary citizens despite coming to power through competitive elections. By the time of the military coup, confidence in parliament was only 19%.

In Morocco and Jordan, institutions continued to struggle for legitimacy, due in large part to the limited power they exercised within the respective systems. In Jordan, confidence in parliament continued to fall during this period despite the constitutional reforms that took place in the country. Meanwhile, in Morocco, confidence in parliament remained low throughout this period suggesting the limited impact of the reforms. In neither case were political parties able to drive meaningful changes or work within the existing political institutions to develop solutions to the needs of ordinary citizens.



Elsewhere, elected institutions suffered from similar weaknesses. In Lebanon, unlike Jordan or Morocco, political parties play a major role in the political system. Yet, infighting between the parties is widely blamed for the complete collapse of the country's financial system. The Beirut port explosion also demonstrated the clear ineffectiveness of the existing political institutions to deal with known risks to the country's well-being.



Iraq has suffered from similar parliamentary disfunction. Although allowed to compete in meaningful elections, political parties seek parliamentary power in effect to distribute revenues from Iraq's oil resources rather than to address the deep challenges faced by the country (Dodge & Mansour, 2021). Its political parties have used parliament to serve their own narrow interests rather than a broad attempt to fix the country's deep problems.

In other countries, political institutions have also struggled to address ongoing challenges and weaknesses. In Libya, the newly designed political structure was unable to prevent the country's descent into civil war. Non-existent prior to the fall of the Gaddafi regime, political parties were unable to work together in parliament to solve the country's divisions resulting in armed factions fighting for control of the country in a civil war. In neighboring Algeria, although politically stable, non-FLN parties were unable to use parliament to hold the regime accountable despite a deterioration in economic and political conditions. Eventually, a broad-based movement challenged the regime in 2019, but notably, political parties were largely absent from these events indicating their broad marginalization from the political process (Volpi, 2020).

Ultimately, parliaments, the existing political institutions where parties are designed to play the most prominent role in representing citizens, have failed to deliver meaningful changes or reforms to help better the lives of citizens. In many instances political parties are not directly to blame as parliaments are not designed to have actual power. However, regardless of the strength of parliaments within the political system, across the board parties have not been able to demonstrate their value to citizens through these institutions. Throughout the region, levels of trust in parliament remain low, which tracks with the overall confidence that publics across MENA place in political parties. If parties are not able to use political bodies like the parliament to demonstrate their importance, then it follows that few citizens value them as ways to influence their political system.

Rebuilding Trust in Political Parties

Political parties across MENA are relatively weak as a result of their inherited political environments, ideological positions, and limited popular achievements since 2011. Reversing this trend would require significant effort and outreach with the public at large and demonstrating that political parties are working to improve the lives of ordinary citizens. Political parties must convince citizens of ***why*** they are needed in order to fulfill their intended function as a way of channeling the demands of citizens to those who are governing. Without such steps, their low levels of trust will likely endure in the years ahead.

Recent results from the 2020 Konrad Adenauer PolDiMed survey suggest that civil society organizations (CSOs) might represent an alternative that could help work to fill the gap resulting from the weakness of existing political parties. In five of the six countries surveyed across MENA – Morocco (76%), Algeria (65%), Tunisia (62%), Libya (60%), and Jordan (51%) – at least half said they trust civil society organizations fully, a lot, or somewhat. Only in Lebanon do fewer than half have confidence in CSOs (38%).

This greater confidence in civil society organizations is likely related to their overall performance in support of MENA publics. When Arab Barometer included a question in 2018-9 about the degree to which CSOs and the government did all they could to provide citizens with basic services, in 11 of the 12 countries surveyed citizens were more likely to point to CSOs. This better track record of working for the benefit of ordinary people in the country provides a clearer basis for legitimacy for these organizations compared with political parties.

In turn, given that political party performance has been relatively weak over the past decade, civil society organizations and their leaders are likely better placed to work to fill the role that parties are designed to play as an intermediary between the public and their governments. CSOs and their leaders might have the ability to form new political parties that are designed to break from those of the past and could represent a new future for political parties in the region. At the very least, they would be perhaps the best positioned, as the recent 2022 parliamentary election in Lebanon helped demonstrate when a number of civil society leaders were elected as part of the reformist list.

Conclusion

At the time of the Arab Uprisings of 2011, the inherited legacy of political parties was very weak across MENA. Where parties did exist, most of the established parties were those directly linked to the regime itself. Although many of these parties had some historical strength, either emerging from independence movements as in Algeria or through the mass party led by charismatic leader such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, by 2011 the legitimacy of these regime-backed parties had largely dissipated. In most countries, opposition parties had been sidelined since independence by either severe restrictions on their activities or an outright ban. Even when alternative parties were allowed to operate, for the most part these served as toothless entities that were in effect designed to be supportive of the regime itself.

The outcome was very low confidence in parties at the time of the Arab Uprisings. While ruling parties were discredited, most newly emergent parties had few linkages with society. Parties that did emerge in countries like Egypt and Tunisia lacked historical track records and were also poorly known. Ordinary citizens struggled to disentangle parties in such a complex political environment. In a rush to elections in both countries, new parties struggled to distinguish themselves or win significant support. Elsewhere, alternative parties were also largely unable to break through.

The key exception was Islamist parties, who had deep roots in society due to the ability to organize within the (relative) free space provided by existing religious institutions. Unlike other political parties, they had a greater ability to organize around mosques or religious charities that provided services to ordinary citizens and helped them win some hearts and minds and a greater degree of sympathy from society. It also provided them a natural means of organizing come election time through existing networks that other parties lacked.

A key limitation for Islamist parties, however, was the broad lack of support for their ideology across society. Minorities of citizens across MENA are in favor of some of the basic tenets of parties that take up the banner of Islam. More importantly, the vast majority want political leaders to focus on improving economic conditions, which is not a relative strength for Islamist parties.

The electoral as opposed to popular strength of Islamist parties greatly structured the political environment. Political elites sought to counter this rising movement, but often with weak alliances bringing together elements that had little in common other than opposing political Islam. Nidaa Tounes represents a key example, but similar processes have occurred in Morocco and Lebanon. Or, in the case of Egypt, many if not most citizens watched or even cheered during the military takeover preferring this to continued government by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The structuring of politics around the Islamist-secular question also hurt the ability of elected bodies, such as parliaments, to play a meaningful role in solving the challenges facing societies. In no country has this elected institution been successful in meaningfully improving the living standards of the population at large over the last decade. In some countries, parliament is not sufficiently empowered to have made such changes possible. However, regardless of the degree to which parliament can meaningfully influence political outcomes in a country, parliament or other elected offices has not provided a setting whereby political parties have been able demonstrate their effectiveness.

In effect, these three distinct but related challenges are strongly linked with not only weak political parties but also the lack of democratic development across MENA. Effective democracies need political parties to function while political parties are most effective under democracy. As the political opening that originated in 2011 has largely closed, the inability of parties to win the trust of citizens is a significant part of the story of the failure of democratic reforms to take root over the last decade.

If a future democratic opening were to come to MENA, it would be essential to work to strengthen political parties. With the decline of the Islamist movement, it is possible that the structuring of politics on the Islamist-secular access would be less central to society. However, political parties would still struggle based on their historical legacies and the weak political institutions that do exist. Civil society organizations and leaders might be better placed to fill this role given their greater legitimacy within society. Ultimately, building stronger linkages with the population should be an essential goal to help create the conditions under which democracy could one day thrive, but this will be a major challenge given the limited space many regimes across the region provide to political parties and civil society organizations.

Biography

Michael Robbins is the director and co-principal investigator of Arab Barometer. He has been a part of the project since its inception and serving as director since 2014. He has led or overseen more than 100 surveys in international contexts and is a leading expert in survey methods on ensuring data quality. His work on Arab public opinion, political Islam and political parties has been published in Comparative Political Studies, the Journal of Conflict Resolution, the Journal of Democracy and Foreign Affairs. He received the American Political Science Association Aaron Wildavsky Award for the Best Dissertation in the field of Religion and Politics.

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THE RETREAT OF ISLAMIST PARTIES IN NORTH AFRICA?

Case Studies from Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt

Adel Abdel Ghafar

The Retreat of Islamist Parties in North Africa? Case Studies from Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt

Adel Abdel Ghafar

Introduction

The Arab Uprisings provided a historic opportunity for Islamist parties in North Africa to move from opposition to government. In Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, they were able to win historic elections and assume positions of power and authority they had aspired to over decades. More than a decade later, socio-economic factors, increased levels of repression, combined with regional dynamics have for now effectively ended this post 2011 Islamist experiment in government. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed by the state, and a majority of its remaining members are in jail or exile. In Tunisia, building on a sense of disillusionment with Ennahda and challenging economic conditions, President Kais Saied led a constitutional coup that has marginalized the Islamists. In Morocco, after winning two elections and a decade in government, the Justice and Development Party PJD was defeated in 2021, seeing its number of seats in parliament collapse from 125 to just 12.

Are we witnessing a secular turn, or could Islamist parties gain renewed momentum? Where do Islamist parties retain influence and how can this be explained? Looking at the younger generation of Islamists, do they still have chances for political success & influence? To answer these questions and analyze the performance of Islamists in government since 2011, this chapter examines the PJD in Morocco, Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt.

Part one of the chapter analyzes the experience of Islamists in government, part two highlights the factors that may hinder their return to politics, and part three concludes with an outlook and the prospects of their return to political powers in each of the three countries. Overall, the chapter argues that while Islamists in the region have lost momentum, in Morocco and Tunisia, they still retain some influence and could make a comeback at a later stage, while in Egypt they are likely to be marginalized and excluded for decades to come.

Part One –Islamists in Power: Ambitions vs. Realities

The PJD in Morocco: Pragmatism in Action

Inspired by ongoing protests in the region, protests in Morocco erupted on the 20th of February 2011. Labelled as the "Palace's Islamists", the PJD initially opted not to join the protests, but when the King Mohammed VI, in response to public pressure implemented reforms, they were able to astutely make use of the political opening. As a pragmatic political party, the PJD understood that if it wanted to realize its electoral ambitions and build a stronger partnership with the Palace to be able to govern, it needed to keep a relative distance from the Feb 20th Movement and support the King's overall control over the reform process (Abdel Ghafar & Hess, 2018, p. 13). The PJD's pragmatism paid off, once the new constitution was approved by referendum in July 2011, they were in a prime position to reap the benefits of winning the November 2011 elections and forming a government for the first time in their history.

The key to the PJD's success has been its acceptance of the role of the King as a bedrock of Morocco's political foundations (Bouyahya, 2015; Boukhars, 2011; Zeghal, 2005). This is a critical differentiator between the PJD and other Islamist actors in the region and has broadly led Morocco to be more stable in the years since the Arab Uprisings. Striking a balance between the movement's independent political aspirations and the Palace led to the PJD's sustained and successful performance in Moroccan politics. The Palace capitalized on the popularity of the PJD and gravitated towards making an ally out of the party, and their collaboration proved useful to both sides. When the PJD controlled parliament in 2011, the ideas espoused during their campaign were aligned with those of the Palace (Abouzzohour & Tomé-Alonso, 2019). The PJD's foreign policy proposal prioritized European-Moroccan relations, safeguarding Moroccan territories, and strengthening Moroccan-Arab relations (Abouzzohour & Tomé-Alonso, 2019). By adopting domestic and foreign policy positions that are aligned with the Palace, the PJD was allowed to actively participate in governing.

The party also exhibited pragmatism in dealing with other political actors, in its first government forming a coalition with the powerful Istiqlal Party, the conservative, rural-based Popular Movement (MP), and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). Despite winning a lower number of seats, its junior coalition partners were over-represented in the cabinet (Abdel Ghafar & Hess, 2018). Following a government crisis in 2013, the Istiqlal Party would leave the coalition and a number of ministers from the National Rally for Independents (RNI) would join the Cabinet (Garcia & Larramendi, 2017).

Tensions with the Palace & Socio-Economic Challenges

The 2016 election would be more difficult for the PJD. Despite its pragmatism and acceptance of the King as the final arbiter, over their first term tensions between the PJD and the Palace festered. Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane's popularity continued to grow, which the Palace and its supporters continued to view with suspicion. Benkirane had a critical role in the formation and ideological progression of the PJD[1], and the importance of his leadership of the organization cannot be overstated. A powerful orator with a common touch in tune with the everday challenges Moroccans face, his popularity was always going to be an issue for the Palace.

Thus, after winning his second election in 2016, under indirect pressure from the Palace, Benkirane was unable to form a coalition government in 2016 and was forced to resign. Saadeddine Othmani, his deputy, was asked by the King to form a government and successfully did so within a month of Benkirane's resignation. Othmani's acceptance of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) in government was perceived as a capitulation to the Palace, considering that Benkirane did not accept the party when he was attempting to form a government (Allawi, 2017).

Othmani's appointment also caused rifts within the PJD itself. During the 2017 Party Congress, the leadership, as well as the rank and file, had to decide if they will defy the palace and maintain Benkirane as the party's secretary general or comply and declare Othmani the new head of the party. Members went for the latter aiming to keep their presence in the political sphere (Zollner, 2019).

As the PJD continued to manage its relationship with the Palace, it continued to lose popularity with the Moroccan population given its inability to deal with mounting socio-economic challenges and pressures. Unemployment continued to rise, reaching 11.5 % in 2020 (World Bank, 2022), and youth unemployment at a much higher rate at 26% (Statista, 2022).

In addition, the PJD was also unable to fight entrenched corruption despite promises to do so (Maghraoui, 2015). Misguided policy decisions were made in government, including supporting a law that would have teachers working on two-year contracts. In supporting that law, the PJD jeopardized teachers' economic stability creating unfavorable conditions for large segments of Moroccan society (Abdelhadi, 2021).

It's also interesting to examine the PJD's support base in urban and rural areas as socio-economic pressures mounted in its final years in government. Historically, the PJD has a stronger support in the urban areas where it governed several big cities, as it tar-

[1] During the 1970s, Benkirane was a member of the Chabiba Islamiya, a more extremist Islamist group that rejected the political order Under King Hassan II. He then decided to attempt to work politically within the law and from the 1980s was trying to create a political party. He finally integrated the existing empty shell party, the Mouvement populaire démocratique et constitutionnel (MPDC) with the members of al harakat al tawhid wal islah (Movement for Unity and Reform) resulting from the merging of his organisation al islah wal tajdid (Movement of Reform and Renewal) and the organisation Rabitat al mustaqbal (Association of the Islamic Future) in 1996.

gets middle-class voters (Baker, 2017; Elafrite, 2021), while rural areas tended to be more pro-Palace because of its links with rural elites (Baker, 2017; Elafrite, 2021). Support from urban areas allowed the PJD to win in 2011 and 2016, but in the 2021 elections and reflecting mounting socio-economic pressures and the inability of the PJD to deal with them, the participation rate was less than 30% in 23 urban electorates (Michbal, 2021). On the contrary, 66,94% of voters participated in the Laâyoune-Sakia El Hamra region (Challenge, 2021), showing how the rural part of the country led to the defeat of the PJD.

Foreign Policy Divergences

Foreign policy became another arena for disagreements with the Palace, as the PJD attempted to take its own positions on regional affairs. The 2013 Coup in Egypt and the removal of Mohammed Morsi was a case in point. The PJD decried the events as illegitimate while the Palace welcomed interim President Adly Mansour (Abouzzohour & Tomé-Alonso, 2019, p. 454). The PJD eventually realized that defying the state's position posed risks and decided to distance itself from any connections with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (Abouzzohour & Tomé-Alonso, 2019, p. 454).

Palestine and the Abraham Accords were another source of tension between the Palace and the PJD. In line with other Islamists in the region, the Palestinian cause has historically been a top priority for the PJD, which considers it a religious, ideological, and political issue that should not be abandoned (della Ragione, 2021). In his 2020 speech to the UN General Assembly, then Prime Minister Othmani stated "There can be no just or lasting peace unless the Palestinian people can exercise their legitimate right to establish an independent and viable state with Jerusalem as its capital" ("Morocco: No peace without recognition of Palestinian rights", 2020). Before he became PM, Othmani had authored an article titled "Normalization Is a Civilizational Genocide" which was critical of Egypt and Jordan's peace treaties with Israel (Lmrabet, 2021).

Normalizing relations with Israel has always been a controversial issue for the PJD, which historically opposed normalization, even submitting a symbolic bill in 2013 that would have banned any relations between Morocco and Israel (Della Ragione, 2021). Even though the bill didn't pass, it gave a chance for the PJD to highlight to its constituency the continued importance of the Palestinian cause. This again is in line with other Islamist actors across the region, who, in their decades in opposition, used the Palestinian cause as a mobilizing tool to rally support on university campuses, syndicates and the street. Despite this, and given the dominance of the Palace, the PJD was forced to accept the normalization deal and voiced its support, much to the chagrin of its constituency (Al-Anani, 2021a). Despite the acceptance of the leadership of the PJD of the deal, some members went as far as calling for a freeze of Othmani's membership for violating the party's principles (Alaoui, 2020).

Ennahda: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

After years of repression and exile (McCarthy, 2018), Ennahda's moment came in 2011, and it seized it, winning a plurality of the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections ("Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party wins historic poll", 2011). Given Tunisia's strong secular tradition known as laïcité, wide segments of Tunisia's population were worried about what an Islamist win would entail for their country and society, and what policies they would implement in government. The movement itself was also unsure, given it had regularly revised and updated its political platform between 1989 and 2011, but it did so as an opposition group in exile that would unlikely ever have the opportunity to implement its policy preferences, but suddenly they were in power (Abdel Ghafar & Hess, 2018, p. 14). As a leader in the movement put it, Ennahda had to both rebuild itself and develop a clear platform (Abdel Ghafar & Hess, 2018, p. 14).

Key to Ennahda's transformation into a well-oiled political machine is the leadership of Rachid Ghannouchi, who co-founded Ennahda in 1981 and consequently was imprisoned (1981-1984, 1987-1988) when the party was illegal (Sadiqi, 2020). Ghannouchi understood that the secular minded Tunisian electorate was fearful of Islamists, and thus to allay the fears of Tunisians and exhibit pragmatism similar to the PJD, Ennahda worked through an informal coalition with two other parties (Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic) in an alliance that was informally known as the Troika. Seeking to expand the coalition, the Troika attempted to forge alliances with other prominent parties, such as the Wafa movement and other secular parties; but the parties chose not to associate themselves with Ennahda but rather work alongside it in government. Opposition to work alongside Ennahda was a result of the party's unpopularity amongst secular circles, and parties such as the Democratic Alliance feared that making an ally out of Ennahda would not be welcomed by supporters.

Ennahda's participation was multifaceted in that it focused on amassing votes and influencing the policy-making process in alignment with its ideological base. As the party achieved more electoral success, it came under pressure from the Destourian party. To adapt, the party formed an entente with Nidaa Tounes in 2013 to defuse a growing crisis sparked by the assassination of prominent opposition leader Mohammed Brahmi (Gall, 2013), and to avoid the type of polarization in Egypt that lead to the 2013 Coup. Both parties agreed to power-sharing in February 2015, a move that local and international observers heralded as proof of Tunisia's steady progress towards inclusive and democratic governance (Kadlec, 2016).

To continue to allay the fears of Tunisians, Ennahda was also moving away from the term "Political Islam" and was instead in support of a "Muslim democracy." Its return to the political scene in 2016, where the hizb (party) was separated from the haraka (religious movement), manifested in the form of the party's congress (Cimini, 2021). Despite

rebranding the movement, Ennahda's popularity continued to decline with just 52 of 217 parliament seats going to Ennahda in the 2019 elections from 89 in 2011 (Cimini, 2021).

In the 2019 presidential elections the Party also lost, with its candidate Abdelfattah Mourou not even succeeding in passing to the second round (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019).

The Break Down of Consensus Politics

Despite that, factions from Nidaa Tounes broke off to form their own front, the alliance held until 2018. Over that period, Ennahda also became subject to internal rifts and contests, and frustration with the party grew as it failed to enact any real change. Essebsi and Ghannouchi's alliance grew distant as power struggles pushed Nidaa Tounes to marginalize Ennahda from governance, and in 2018 Essebsi announced the end of a four-year alliance.

Although Nidaa Tounes links with the Islamists caused many defections from its ranks, Mr Essebsi appeared keen to ally himself with Ennahda at a time when his leadership in Nidaa was being challenged (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). However, the defeat of the Nidaa Tounes candidate in the December 2017 parliamentary elections by a candidate representing Tunisians living in Germany made Nidaa Tounes rethink its coalition with Ennahda, as they felt that their closeness to Ennahda had alienated many would-be Nidaa Tounes voters and thus broke off the alliance (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). While some have argued that the end of the alliance was positive for Tunisia (Grewal & Hamid, 2018), the increased polarization would set in motion the events that would lead to Tunisia being mired in its own constitutional coup.

Since the Arab Uprisings and to many of its members, the party had compromised its principles to preserve any remaining vestige of power. Key members outwardly expressed their disapproval of Ghannouchi's leadership and left the party after playing an active role for decades, such as Abdelhamid Jelassi and Zied Laadhari, then secretary general of the Party (Ghanmi, 2020). Members within Ennahda's leadership refused to acquiesce to Ghannouchi's management of the party and gave up their association with the party entirely.

What began as a process of gradual isolation from governance eventually morphed into an all-out exclusion from politics when Tunisian President Kais Saied dismissed Parliament in July of 2021 (Parker, 2021). Ghannouchi, then Parliament speaker, was barred from entering parliament (Parker, 2021). One month later, Ghannouchi overhauled the party's executive committee, dismissing all members from their roles (Hamudi, 2021). The removal of important figures within Ennahda's leadership precipitated a crisis within the party. Just two months after Saied's dissolution of Parliament, over 100 senior members from Ennahda resigned, including Abdellatif Mekki, Tunisia's previous health minister ("Over 100 Ennahda Members Resign amid Tunisia's Political Crisis," 2021). Mekki, who became very popular in Tunisia due to his response to the COVID 19 pandemic while health minister (Bin Younes, 2021), established his own party named the Labor and Achievement Party,

which deepened the fragmentation within Ennahda as it attracted dissatisfied leaders and rank and file members from the party.

A year later, in the leadup to the constitutional referendum, which took place in July 2022, President Saied restructured the "Independent High Authority for Elections" (ISIE). The body was responsible for overlooking the referendum that was to deal with constitutional and legal reforms. Members of the body were selected by Saied, who ensured that they were opponents of Ennahda, including Sami Ben Slama, widely recognized for his anti- Ennahda positions ("Tunisia: President names pro-coup members to new election commission," 2022). Barring Ghannouchi's entry to Parliament, propping up anti- Ennahda sentiments, and capitalizing on the internal crisis facing Ennahda sent clear signals. Saied was blatant in his suppression of the movement and disapproval of their position in Tunisian politics. Having said that, Ennahda had done most of the harm to itself. After riding the wave of popularity after the Arab Spring, an April 2022 poll showed that 89% of Tunisians no longer trust Ghannouchi. (Shams FM, 2022).

The FJP: Broken Promises & State Repression

While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has participated in formal politics over the years, 2011 would provide an opportunity to reach Egypt's top echelons of power through the ballot box after the Arab Uprisings. The day after Mubarak was overthrown, the MB announced the formation of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which would become its political arm. The MB, historically organized via a Guidance Bureau and a Morshed (Supreme Guide), began to operate as two distinct but connected organizations. While members of the newly formed FJP argued that the party was completely separated from the movement, the Guidance Bureau continued to exercise strong influence over the party (Abdel Ghafar & Hess, 2018, p. 17).

The FJP made considerable gains in the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, winning 235 seats, or 37.5 % of the vote. Together with their Islamist allies, they controlled a majority of the parliament and thus dominated the constitutional process, resulting in a constitution ratified by referendum in December 2012, with increased Islamic references and increased opposition from secular-minded parties (Abdel Ghafar & Hess, 2018). In the following presidential elections, the MB's Mohammed Morsi, having left the Bureau Council and joined the FJP after the MB's primary candidate and financier Khairat el Shater was disqualified from running, became the FJP's presidential candidate.

Before the run-off election in a meeting at the Fairmont Hotel (Ikhwan Web, 2012), Morsi promised pro-revolution and pro-democracy activists and politicians that he would govern by consensus and be inclusive as a President, which helped to sway the election in his favor. One year after the election, most of the 'Fairmont Group' as they became known, had withdrawn support for the president, citing his failure to live up to his promises (Wahab,

2013). The Brotherhood had also adopted a more confrontational approach with the Egyptian military and the so-called deep state, paving the way for the 2013 Coup and the brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood (Momani, 2013).

After the Coup, which was backed by wide segments of the population, the Brotherhood was declared illegal and reported by the Egyptian state as a terrorist organization (Ayoob & Lussier, 2020, p. 87). Mohammad Badie, the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide at the time, was sentenced to death in 2014, and MB members who managed to avoid detainment by the Egyptian state sought exile in states such as Turkey and Qatar. For those remaining in Egypt and having been pushed out of formal politics, some MB members were indeed involved in violent activities through targeted assassinations of state officials and other acts of premeditated violence. Some members of the MB left the group altogether and joined Jihadist groups (Willi, 2021, p. 358).

Into Exile

The mass arrest of key figures within the Brotherhood's leadership coupled with senior members seeking exile led the MB to establish the "Crisis Management Office for Egyptians Abroad" in Istanbul in 2015. Establishing a base abroad allowed the Brotherhood to continue its activities and outreach to the organization's supporters. As it consolidated its presence abroad, the Brotherhood reflected on its approach to the period between 2011 and 2013. The organization's leadership attempted to understand how it would survive considering the ongoing attacks on its members by the Egyptian state.

Following the government's crackdown, the Brotherhood announced a "third founding." (Willi, 2021, p. 367). This encompassed a broad change of the Brotherhood's leadership where over 65% of its members were impacted (Willi, 2021, p. 367). In this period, the Brotherhood grappled with the internal fractures that erupted after the death of Mohammad Kamal, a leading voice in the Crisis Management Committee (Willi, 2021, p. 366). Tensions were already soaring at the time due to disputes between the Guidance Office and the Crisis Management Committee (Willi, 2021, p. 366).

Kamal's death necessitated a reshuffling of the Brotherhood's leadership to curtail dissidents from advancing a separation between the old guard, represented by the Guidance Office, and the new guard, represented by the Crisis Management Committee. The Brotherhood's new founding resulted in issuing "Vision 28" which was essentially the Brotherhood's acknowledgement that the organization did not manage to succeed in integrating

with Egyptian society at large post 2011. Vision 28 was a by-product of several meetings that took place between the Brotherhood's leadership aimed at understanding the causes behind the group's failure and to re-orient their approach accordingly (Willi, 2021, p. 368).

A Splintered Organization

Through its base in Istanbul, the MB was able to continue operating, albeit with limited function, and use Turkey as a base for its media operations. Since 2020 and as part of regional escalation efforts and Turkey – Egypt rapprochement, Turkey has reduced its receptiveness to the Brotherhood and directly called on Brotherhood-affiliated channels to tone down their anti- Egyptian state rhetoric (Willi, 2021, p. 368). The organization is under the current leadership of Ibrahim Munir, the group's chargé d' affaires and deputy to the Supreme Guide ("Muslim Brotherhood Renews Confidence in Deputy Head Mounir", 2021), who claimed the position after the arrest of Mahmoud Ezzat, then acting leader of the organization, in 2020 (Al-Anani, 2021b).

In 2021, divisions within the Brotherhood reached a high point when Ibrahim Munir removed six leading figures from the organization (Al-Anani, 2021b). One was Mahmoud Hussein, who was leading the movement in Turkey (Al-Anani, 2021b). Additionally, five high-ranking Shura council members were also dismissed (Al-Anani, 2021b). Munir alleged that Hussein breached several articles of the Brotherhood's code ("Muslim Brotherhood Suspends 6 Senior Members," 2021). Accusations were denied by Hussein, who responded by calling on members to remove Munir from his position (Al-Anani, 2021b). Munir and Hussein's conflicting stances rippled throughout the organization, where two main camps currently exist (Al-Anani, 2021b). One supports Munir, who operates the Brotherhood's base in London, and the other supports Hussein, who operates the organization's base in Istanbul (Al-Anani, 2021).

Part Two: Key Issues Impacting the Future of Islamists in North Africa

While the domestic context of each case study is different, five key issues will have an impact on Islamists making a return to the political arena or not.

Tension between *Daa'wa* and Politics: There continues to be tension between Islamist's religious and political activities. While Ennahda has worked to resolve such tension and focused on a political platform via party politics (albeit with an Islamic point of reference), the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood remains first and foremost a religious organization that is involved in politics. Its rebranding to the FJP aside, the MB's short-lived experience in government highlighted that ideology continues to be a key factor in their discourse, and an inability to separate the MB from the FJP as a political party. In Morocco, the PJD's loss may actually empower Al Adl Wal Ihsan which remains the largest, most disciplined Islamist group in Morocco working outside of formal political structures (Kayyali, 2021).

Role of Regional Actors: While countries such as Turkey and Qatar had supported Islamists across the region, this support has greatly diminished given current regional dynamics and détente. At the same time, countries that have opposed Islamists from the get go such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to overtly or covertly block the return of Islamists to politics. The UAE in particular has been quite interventionist in its approach, backing anti Islamist forces across the region, and is likely to continue to do so under Mohammed Bin Zayed who views Islamists and Iran as the key security threats for Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies (Reuters, 2022).

Disconnect Between the Leadership and the Youth: In each of the parties, and with varying degrees, there continues to be tension between the group's leadership and its younger members. In Tunisia for example after Kais Saied's Constitutional Coup, Ennahda's youth were deeply unhappy with the party's leadership, calling on them to bear responsibility for the failure to achieve the demands of the people and to acknowledge the state of tension and anger given the ineffectiveness of the party's political, economic and social policies, as well as the way it has managed its political alliances (Jebli, 2021). The MB's youth as well continue to be disenchanted by the organization's continued divisions (Al-Anani, 2021).

Socio-Economic Pressures: North Africa continues to suffer from many of the socio-economic issues of a decade ago including high youth unemployment and growing inequality. The COVID 19 pandemic has exacerbated all of these issues across the three countries. In Tunisia, Ennahda was not able to address many of these underlying conditions that continue to plague the Tunisian economy, and was not able to offer alternative economic policies (Ben Salem, 2020). Similarly, the PJD was not able to offer alternative policies, pursued a neoliberal approach to economic policy combined with social welfare programs for those hurt by such policies. Signs of conflict between these competing priorities highlight the challenges Islamists face when they move from opposition where it is easier to block or oppose certain policies, to government where you have to develop actionable policies to improve the livelihoods of people.

Resurgent Authoritarianism: It was always going to be challenging for Islamists and other opposition forces to be involved in formal politics in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts. More than a decade after the 2011 Uprisings, it is now even more challenging given the resurgent authoritarianism across the region. In each of the three countries, with varying degrees, entrenched interests and the so-called deep state worked diligently in the background to decapitate any threats to their entrenched interests.

Part Three: Conclusion & Outlook

All these factors combined indicate that it will be challenging for Islamists to make a political comeback, but they should not be written off so fast. Given their history, presence and popularity amongst segments of the population, it is likely that they will retain some

influence and can return to the political scene at a later stage if they have fully processed the lessons from the past decade.

Out of all the parties, the PJD is the most likely to return to power. Given that they still hold seats in parliament and are not outlawed or persecuted like other Islamists in the region, this gives them a base to mount a comeback but operate within the parameters set by the Palace. Over their years in Government, the King and the Moroccan media had been very adept at pointing the blame to the PJD's inability to address Morocco's mounting socio-economic challenges. Given now that the *Mekhzen* is firmly in charge, it will become increasingly difficult to deflect the blame to the PJD. Already, PM Aziz Akhnouch is facing growing calls to resign due to his inability to deal with growing prices of basic goods and fuel (El Atti, 2022). While he or any other *Mekhzen* connected PM may be able to withstand such pressures in the short term, Morocco's socio-economic pressures may provide a re-invigorated PJD a path back to power over the next years.

In Tunisia, Ennahda may be sidelined for now but also has prospects to return to government at a later stage. Most recently, former Tunisian minister and vice-president of Ennahda Noureddine Bhiri, stated that "Ennahda is ready to withdraw from its positions of responsibility to end the crisis in Tunisia." (Ayesh, 2022). Given the current dynamics of Tunisian politics, and the approval of the new constitution (albeit with limited participation) a tactical retreat from politics by Ennahda would allow it to regroup, reorganize and make a comeback at a later stage. Similar to Morocco, Tunisia's mounting socio-economic pressures are likely to be a key factor impacting the return of Ennahda. Already working in opposition to Kais Saied, Ennahda has supported the UGTT's nationwide strike in June over wages and spending cuts ("Tunisia: Ennahda supports UGTT strike," 2022). Such dynamics are likely to continue as Ennahda moves back to full opposition mode working outside any ruling coalition.

Out of the three Islamist actors, the Muslim Brotherhood is the least likely to make a comeback to politics anytime soon. President Sisi and the Egyptian Army are firmly in control, and any political opening that allows the Muslim Brotherhood to fully participate in any political process is unlikely.

Similar to Morocco and Tunisia, Egypt has also been facing growing socio-economic pressures, especially since the Russia Ukraine war and the impact on food prices. Such pressures may have influenced the Egyptian government's launch of a "national dialogue" in April of 2022. The initiative aimed to bring diverse civil society actors together through a shared forum that would foster dialogue among Egypt's political and social actors but expectedly, the Brotherhood was not permitted to participate (Middle East Eye, 2022). In an interview in July 2022, the London based Leader of the MB Ibrahim Munir, who passed away in November 2022, expressed that the Brotherhood was no longer interested in challenging the Egyptian regime. When asked about the dialogue, Munir welcomed the initiative but emphasized the importance of including the Brotherhood in nation-wide dialogues (Evans, 2022). For the time being, this remains unlikely given the Egyptian government's position on the exclusion of the MB from any political avenues, however limited.

Biography

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THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN TUNISIA

Youssef Cherif

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Introduction

For well over a decade, Tunisia was praised as the democratic role model in the Arab Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). Political parties could work without being coopted by the system, unlike parties in Algeria, Morocco or Jordan for instance. They were not easily manipulated as their Egyptian counterparts. They were not hereditary family turfs or ethnic movements, such as the case in Lebanon or Pakistan. There was a vibrant political life, and it seemed as if everything was politicized in the country.

Yet, from mid-2021 and until March 2023, Tunisia is a republic without a parliament and where political parties have no weight. The questions that we will try to address in this chapter are: what went wrong? How come the seemingly powerful political parties -such as Ennahda- vanished in front of the party-less president who is Kais Saied? To try to answer, we will focus on the role of parties and their work in parliament before and after 2011, then we will look at the popular expectations after 2011 and how the parliamentary system has developed since then. Finally, we will attempt to explain what all this means for the Tunisian political system and what it might look like in the future.

The Everlasting Crisis of Democracy

Talking about the crisis of political parties, or the crisis of democracy, is nothing new. In fact, when reading Socrates or Plato, one encounters debates about this predicament that continue to be of relevance. Similarly, the question of the death of democracy or the decay of political parties, that we encounter nowadays in many media and academic discussions, is not new either. Every now and then, major thinkers or ideological currents claim that political parties are dying and that a new era is starting, before political parties appear anew, again and again.

In fact, just half a century ago, a group of leading political scientists published a long report entitled "The Crisis of Democracy" whose first line starts with the question: “Is Democracy in crisis?” (Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975, p.I). They feared that “the disintegration of civil order, the breakdown of social discipline, the weakness of leaders, and the alienation of citizens” would lead to the end of democracy (Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975, p.2). In this report, the authors shed doubts on the governability of Europe under democracy, and evoked the decay of the U.S.'s party system. Yet, history proved them wrong. Europe has more democracies today than when the three scholars made their observations in the 1970s, and the U.S continues to be a democracy with a dual-party system, against all odds.

Overall, countless observers raised concerns regarding low electoral turnouts, declining party and civil society memberships, public distrust in politicians and in the instruments of democracy, etc. Everywhere, “citizens have become increasingly disengaged from the traditional channels of political participation” (Ekman & Amna, 2012). The mass party and the catch-all party are relics from the past (Ignazi, 1996), we are told; this is proven by figures related to party membership, the lack of party identification, and the volatility of party affiliation. France and the United Kingdom are cases in point, with parties losing thousands of members every year. One cannot help but notice that the historical Right-wing and Socialist parties are losing elections after elections in the last decade in many European countries, most notably in France and Italy.

The decline in party membership is perhaps the most alarming sign. It has been noticed in old and new democracies. In the United Kingdom, one of the world’s most established democracies, surveys from the mid-2000s showed a major political apathy among important sections of the youth, who felt unrepresented by politicians and political parties (Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest, 2005). Similar findings were reported in Zambia, one of the youngest democracies in the world, where citizens shunned political parties, even though they were given the liberty to join after the fall of dictatorship (Bratton, 1999).

But many counter examples exist. In Spain, Greece, Italy, and even France, new parties keep emerging and mobilize the younger generations or those who feel disenchanted by the existing political offer. Podemos, Syriza, or the Five Stars Movement are just a few names that mushroomed from the 2000s on. German and Scandinavian parties continue to evolve, along with important youth movements, and be an integral part of the political system.

Political parties and political participation, along with democracy, seem to be always in crisis. Humans debate continuously and political parties channel their debates and disagreements. And because democracy allows disagreements to be aired publicly, nothing is hidden, unlike under dictatorship where there is always a calm façade that hides reality. But thus far no serious alternative has emerged and, when it comes to Europe and the the U.S., the crisis did not lead to a collapse of the system. On the contrary, democracy continues to advance and reform itself. The crisis of democracy appears, therefore, to be a healthy debate that regulates the system, rather than destroy it.

MENA is not an exception in this regard. What makes the region special, however, is the resilience of authoritarianism more than in any other part of the world. The Third Wave of Democracy did not reach it and Arab regimes proved resilient until 2011 (Huntington, 1970). It was therefore difficult to study Arab political parties and Arab political participation until recently, because political parties were almost inexistent, and also because the authoritarian systems in place would discourage such studies.

The Arab Uprisings slightly reversed course. But it was only in 2020 that an exhaustive work on Arab political parties was published, "The Routledge Handbook on Political Parties" in the Middle East and North Africa (Cavatorta, Storm, & Resta, 2020). Over the years, a growing number of scholars focused on issues related to Islam and Democracy,

or authoritarianism, but not on the working of political parties per se. Tunisia, at least until 2021, became an exception. It was a place where it was possible to study political parties and political participation, with limited risks posed by the state apparatus.

The Tunisian Political System

The Post-Colonial Authoritarian System

Like most MENA states, Tunisia jumped directly from the wagon of colonialism to that of authoritarianism. While it was built as a republic and institutionalized by a Constituent Assembly in 1957, it was effectively ruled by Habib Bourguiba, its founding president and later dictator for life, through his party the Neo-Destour, which had a total monopoly in parliament (all 98 seats in the 1956 elections and all 90 seats in 1959). By then, there were two major parties in the country, the Neo-Destour and the Communist Party. But, with the latter's outlawing in 1963, Tunisia became a one-party state. It is only in 1981 that the ban on political parties was lifted, permitting the creation of a number of parties, including by socialists and communists. Still, following the elections of 1981 and 1986 -widely thought to be rigged- the Parti Socialiste Destourien (PSD, which replaced the Neo-Destour in 1964) continued to monopolize parliament. In fact, the latter grew from 101 seats in 1964 to 136 in 1986, always filled by the PSD.

Bourguiba's removal in 1987 by the country's national security chief turned interior minister and then prime minister, Zinelabidine Ben Ali, led to what some called the Tunisian Spring. Ben Ali's "Constitutional Coup" did actually follow the constitution and there was no major change in state structures or in the political and military leadership. More parties were legalized, freedom of the press increased, and it seemed as if the country was finally democratizing. Still, when elections took place in 1989, Ben Ali became president with 100% of the votes, and the Rassemblement Constitutionel Démocratique (RCD, the new name of the PSD) got 141 of the 141 seats in parliament. As Ennahda's Islamists grew stronger and Algeria's problems began to deepen -the country went through a bloody decade of civil war that left more than 100.000 people dead- Ben Ali staged a crackdown. By 1991, the short-lived Spring was over.

The two decades that followed witnessed important developmental achievements in Tunisia, but also a worsening of political life, the country becoming a de facto police state. Political debates disappeared. New political parties and civil society organizations were formed, an upper chamber (Chamber of Advisors) of 126 seats was added to the Tunisian Parliament in 2002, the number of seats in parliament reached 214 in 2009; but these were mostly cosmetic reforms that could not rein-in Ben Ali's dictatorship. Authoritarian governance made political parties useless, in the day-to-day politics and in the eye of a majority of citizens.

Post-2011 and the Advent of Democracy

The scene changed in 2011. After less than a month of protests, the police state built by Ben Ali could not resist the popular anger against the collapsed regime. The president and his family were given amnesty by the Saudi Kingdom and they settled in Jeddah. It was the

beginning of the Arab Uprisings (popularly dubbed the Arab Spring) - a leaderless movement that spread from Tunisia to the rest of the region and whose protagonists' demands oscillated between socio-economic reforms and, simply, the 'fall of the regime'. What few Tunisians -and Arabs- asked for, however, was the establishment of a liberal democracy and the creation of political parties. The move towards a liberal democracy, however, is what happened, but out of necessity not out of demand.

Therefore, with Ben Ali's fall, Tunisia was left without a strongman for the first time in its modern history. Just like in 1987, a constitutional framework was found and the parliament speaker, Fouad Mebazaa, became president. He himself signed the decrees dissolving parliament, the Chamber of Advisors, and the RCD. An ad-hoc parliament of 155 members was established, the Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution, de la Réforme Politique et de la Transition Démocratique, composed of politicians and civil society activists, before a Constituent Assembly of 217 members was elected in October of the same year.

The highlight of the post 2011 era is therefore the freedom that characterized its climate. The political party-approving body, the General Directorate of Associations and Political Parties, was moved from the Ministry of Interior to the Prime Minister's office. Since January 2011, more than 200 parties were approved and thousands of local and international civil society organizations were given a permit to operate in the country. Some of these parties are resurrections from the Cold War, many openly Marxist, pan Arabist, or Baathist, while others are more modern and innovative.

Tunisia went through six major elections since 2011. The first one is that of the Constituent Assembly, on October 23rd, 2011, when 11,686 candidates competed. Yet, although it was Tunisia's first free and fair election, there was an abstention rate of around 50% (only 4,306,535 people went voting). Actually, many Tunisians went to the polls thinking that voting would change their economic conditions -because that's how many political parties attracted them to the polls, by promising a better future- without grasping the complexities of the work of a constituent assembly or the writing of a constitution. Furthermore, to win their votes, political parties resorted to populism, making all kinds of pledges. It was a polarized election, with an important role for religion, identity, social cleavages, and regionalism (Van Hamme, Gana & Ben Rebbah, 2014).

Three years later, in 2014, there were legislative elections, followed by presidential elections. 3,407,867 people voted in the legislative elections, and 3,339,666 people voted in the presidential ones. The decline in number of voters is perceptible, even if the demographics of the country kept increasing. These elections were also highly polarized, especially that the period between 2011 and 2014 was marked by important geopolitical changes, in the region and in the world: Syria and Libya were fragmented by civil war, Egypt witnessed a military coup that stopped the democratic transition, Algeria entered a new phase of isolationism following the incapacitation of its president, Russia returned as an influential player in the MENA, terrorism and migration were threatening Europe.

In 2018, local elections took place, a first step in the path towards decentralization. There was a record abstention rate, estimated at around 65% (1,914,239 people went to the polls, a confirmation of the declining trends in political participation). Then in 2019, following the sudden death of president Beji Caid Essebsi -he was 92 years old, legislative and presidential elections took place. These elections were polarized as well, characterized by a new wave of populism. As expected, abstention was high (around 60% for the legislative), and the number of voters for the legislative was the lowest since 2011 (2,946,628 people participated in the legislative round).

In each one of these elections, Ennahda would get either the first or the second largest block in parliament. But other than that, new parties and political figures emerged constantly. The successive parliamentary configurations of the last decade never looked the same. In fact, there was a rejuvenation of politics in Tunisia in the last decade. The difference with advanced democracies, however, was that Tunisia's new parties never lasted after their election. Once in power, they disintegrate, Ennahda being the exception that proves the rule between 2011 and 2021.

In this constellation, there were different types of parties. Ennahda, for instance, was a classical institutionalized party with an ideology, at least in the first half of the decade. It is a conservative party whose main reference is Islam. Its members are for the large part religiously inclined individuals who dream of a less westernized Tunisia. The party revisited many of its dogmas after 2011, and it does not call itself an Islamist party anymore; but its grassroots remain the same. Nidaa Tounes, however, was a catch-all party whose main ideology was to oppose Ennahda and which formed around the persona of a leader, Beji Caid Essebsi. It adopted a local form of secularism to counter Ennahda, but it was also a party that attracted many of the pre-2011 elites. Now, however, it is almost inexistent. The Union Patriotique Libre and Qalb Tounes were parties with no ideology, whose sources of funding remain dubious and whose leaders' goals continue to be unclear. They are very discreet today with basically no activity. Al-Aridah al-Chaabiya (the Popular Petition) was rather a tribal party whose exiled leader had no strategy to rule, as shown when the party ended up as one of the largest parliamentary blocks in 2011, but unable to issue clear proposals or participate in government. It disappeared by 2014. Then there was Aich Tounsi, a civil society organization turned political party that relied mostly on its leader's wealth. It was disbanded after 2019. There were tens of other political parties but, apart from Ennahda, all these parties shrank within a year or so after their formation or election.

When studying Tunisia, many scholars were lured by the two-party model, building theories on the Ennahda-Nidaa Tounes tandem (Example: Cimini, 2020). But while Ennahda could claim to have had more than 100,000 members at its climax in the last decade, as it was in full operation between 2011 and 2021, that figure is problematic for a party like Nidaa Tounes. The latter was formed around 2013, but by 2017 it was already an empty shell. This did mislead many scholars and practitioners who looked at Tunisia like a two-party system or hoped to see it evolving into that model. It was never the case; political parties were too weak and they were only partly institutionalized.

Actually, Tunisia is a perfect case of "a transition without players" (Eyadat, 2015). Political parties were not representative of their voters, and the gap between citizens and political elites never ceased to widen. Tunisians were expecting a socio-economic transformation. The elite -political leaders, intellectuals - promised to listen to them and improve their lives if they voted for them. Oftentimes, a political reshuffle or an election would take place, and political leaders would announce that a new era of change and prosperity was coming. But nothing happened. The elite kept playing political games, permitted by democratic life, whereas the masses became disillusioned with politics, and democracy (Farag, 2020).

Since 2021

A decade after its inception, the system was exhausted. Political parties with little representation were loathed by a majority of the population. Whenever a poll is conducted, political parties, politicians, and parliament would figure at the lower end of the pyramid, usually with less than 10% of confidence vote (IRI, 2020). Furthermore, Tunisia went through a period of revolution (2011), political polarization (2012-13), terrorism (2013-19), and Covid-19 outbreak (2020-21); it was economically on its knees at the end of the the 2010's. The international context and the collapse of neighboring Libya complicated the situation. In 2021, the moment was ripe for a power grab, because the disenchantment was general. That is what president Kais Saied did on July 25th, and that is why his move faced so little opposition.

Saied immediately dismissed the government and parliament and began ruling by decree. All of a sudden, political parties became irrelevant. A year later, power continues to be operated without parliament, and because legislative elections took place in December 2022, Tunisia had already spent a year and a half with no parliament and basically no role for political parties. In many Tunisians' minds, this confirms that democratic institutions -like the parliament and political parties- are useless. It would justify, in their opinion, the disdain of the President for political parties, and it also explains and legitimizes Bourguiba and Ben Ali's authoritarian rule. The narratives around political transition and the values of political debate have been erased in less than two years.

In July 2022, Tunisians voted for a new constitution in a referendum that was marked by an abstention rate of around 70% (2,830,094 voters). The result, nonetheless, was a massive 'Yes' (94.6%). Under the new constitution, Tunisia returns to the presidential system. There will be again two chambers of parliament, with a role to be defined. However, the chambers' role is expected to be largely advisory, with the all-powerful President playing the arbiter and the unchecked guarantor of the respect of the constitution. The very low turnout in the first round of legislative elections (around 10% in December 2022, and there are no indicators for a better turnout in the second round) adds to the marginalization of the parliament. In short, a return to the general settings of pre-2011, with a stronger constitutional role given to the President.

Political Participation and Political Parties since 2011

Institutional Problems

As shown above, political participation was in perpetual decline since the onset of democracy, and political parties could not mobilize in a sustained way. Actually, there was a de-legitimization of political parties (Ben Salem, 2020). Overall, democratization was followed by a brief period of popular euphoria that quickly vanished away. Debates about politics occupied the public sphere, but concrete political participation did not take off. And, in general, discussions -on media, social media, coffee shops- turned around the negative aspects of politics and politicians, more than any constructive project or long-term vision.

This lack of participation is well rooted because Tunisian society has a weak culture of civic participation. Speaking to a former president of a political party, he explained that very few Tunisians actually work or dedicate time in civil society, situating their size to around 0.5% of Tunisian society. This may look surprising because of all the praise that Tunisian civil society receives globally. However, Tunisian civil society organizations are often compared to their peers in the region, where civil society is inexistent. They are also regularly addressed via quantitative lenses, not qualitative ones. They are numerous indeed, but their actions are limited, and many are as empty shells as political parties. Therefore, be it for political engagement or civil society dedication, the pool is limited in size. This is also reflected in the relationship of Tunisian citizens with political parties. It is the mentality of the party-state. A party leader was once asked by someone he was trying to recruit: "Why would I join if the party won't get me a job?"

The weak institutional organization of Tunisian political parties is linked to the issue of limited engagement. There are indeed more than 200 political parties in the country, but most of them are no more than groups of individuals who meet in coffee shops or in makeshift offices, often when elections are about to happen, before dismissing right after. Most political parties are not institutionalized, and it is the leader's decisions that are the most important. Ennahda is again the exception that proves the rule, as it employs more than a 100 people, but the next party in size would employ around 10 people.

The ego of leaders is another recurrent issue in Tunisian political parties. These are extremely personalist parties whose fate and fame are tied to those of their leaders. This has increased the fragmentation of parties, because parties that have the same ideology and goals cannot merge; X leader cannot stand to be under or equal to Y leader. The issue has affected all parties, including Ennahda, whose founding leader is unwilling to step down after staying more than four decades at the center of decision making, even following successive resignations in his ranks and the collapse of the democratic transition.

The issue of institutionalization is associated with a larger problem, that of funding. In Tunisia, public funding is not available for political parties. Politicians have therefore to either rely on their own funds or on what rich donors give. In the case of Ennahda, there is a large and committed membership, which provides revenues. But in most other parties, this is problematic. Donors, sometimes, want something in return for their donations. Furthermore, the Tunisian law has loopholes when it comes to political funding. For instance, an individual cannot donate more than 60,000 TND (around €20,000) to one single political party. But the same individual can donate to multiple parties at the same time. And if the individual donates via other names (i.e., family members), there is no scrutiny. So, for instance, an individual with a wife and five children can donate 420,000 TND to a political party, while another party donor cannot give more than 60,000 TND to a party (s)he supports because (s)he is single or (s)he would like to respect the law.

Ideological Fragmentation

With more than 200 parties, there is a large pool available for Tunisians to pick from. The party fragmentation dispersed votes as, quite often, the difference between parties is limited and they make similar pledges. There is no distinct ideological offer; i.e., most parties call themselves 'social-democratic'. In 2011, Parti démocrate progressiste, Afek Tounes, Congrès pour la République and Pôle démocratique moderniste were found to compete for the same electoral pool (Van Hamme, Gana & Ben Rebbah, 2014). Even Ennahda left its Islamist mantle, rebranding itself in 2016 (Souli, 2016). Ennahda's rebranding did actually backlash in Tunisian political life; by becoming less conservative on questions related to family and religion, Ennahda opened the path for more extremist groups to advance and take its place (ISIS, al-Karama…). This is reminiscent of Europe in the 1980s, when right wing conservative parties became ruling parties, allowing more radical right-wing groups to emerge (Ignazi, 1996). Ennahda, in the meantime, lost its bases and could not gain new supporters.

Moreover, the weak ideological offer has favored political secessions; parties often fragmented shortly after their foundation. There was little party discipline in parliament and political tourism -the act of MP's swinging between parties- became frequent. This is witnessed from the grassroot to the leadership level. Furthermore, many careerists, or those seeking local privileges, joined parties to serve their own interests; they would claim that they join because they believe in the party's ideals but it is actually their personal enrichment or interests that they advance, a complaint often stated by party leaders. Many joined for self-enrichment, and corruption became apparent. This does affect party governance and also how people look at politicians.

Anti-Democratic Propaganda and Sentiments

The legacy of centuries of authoritarianism is difficult to uproot. Many Tunisians prefer to live under a strong authoritarian leader than under a constellation of political parties, especially in light of the economic collapse of recent years. With time, the role of parties

was demonized, and the military and security forces' image took precedence. This is not unlike what is happening in other parts of the world, but in the case of Tunisia surveys showed that the more voters are in the anti-system perspective, the more they are willing to favor the army's advance in politics (Albrecht, Bufano, & Koehler, 2022).

Authoritarian legacy comes hand in hand with anti-democratic propaganda. And any revolution produces a counter-revolution led by those who were defeated. Tunisia is not an exception here neither. After the removal of Ben Ali and his system, the security, economic, and intellectual elite that benefited from his rule and sanctioned it found themselves on the losing end, and they defended themselves. Therefore, they would use media, social media, and their leviers of influence to contrast the 'chaos' of democracy with the stability and prosperity of dictatorship. This group grew with time to involve even people who were opposed to Ben Ali but felt disenchanted after his fall. It was common to hear politicians, MP's, or even government officials complain about democracy and political parties, in private or in public. There is indeed an "adversary culture" -a concept that Crozier et al. warned about in the 1970s (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, 1975, p.6-7) - among important segments of the Tunisian elite that sees democracy as a source of all-evil.

Media and social media played an important role in disseminating these ideas. Local outlets first of all, either owned or funded by local counterrevolutionary networks, or by opportunists and other media moguls, did play a major role in discrediting politics in the country. Foreign media played a similar role, funded by Gulf states -namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia- where major Arab media outlets operate. These regimes did lead a strong anti-democracy campaign (Oz, 2015; Uniacke, 2021). Furthermore, because political parties are banned in these states, they try to advance their model as an example; successful states that do not need political parties and parliaments. Indeed, mass media and social media are a double-edged sword for democracy (Webb, 2005).

Furthermore, because the country's economic situation is in disarray, citizens were disenchanted with their politicians and the political system. This hatred of politicians and political parties led to the idealization of technocrats and bureaucrats, seen as a better and more organized alternative. They also looked for an alternative to the status-quo; this can explain the overarching role of the main labor union, the UGTT, the vote from outside the political game, or the semi-sacralization of the army. This is, more importantly, what pushed for the election and the blind support of Kais Saied, an idealist populist who is using the army and the police to consolidate his rule, while deconstructing Tunisia's liberal democratic institutions.

The Future of Tunisian Politics

Weak parties lead to weak democracy. Therefore, even if political parties continue to operate in Tunisia, they will not be able to score much better than in the past. Until the emergence of new and alternative political movements, with grassroot activism, the political scene will be more of the same.

On the other hand, Kais Saied's 2021 power grab showed that the gun remains stronger than the text. Even with the most complete constitution and with all its guarantees, if an individual or an institution has control over the army and the police, they can change things as they please. If democracy is to survive or to be recreated in Tunisia, these forces require to be incentivized, and a stronger culture of democracy needs to be disseminated among their ranks.

Currently, President Kais Saied's populism is destroying politics. Scholars noted that "the challengers to the party could be defined as 'non-partisan parties': charismatic-like movements where a leader, without a partisan organizational structure which provides for a clear decision-making process or members' recruitment/participation, attains a dramatic success… In [such] cases no formal organization exists before or beyond the leader: the party is 'insignificant' vis-a-vis the leader. It is not a question of personalization of politics or the influence of mass media. It is a challenge to party per se. Not surprisingly, [such] movements [or individuals] express distrust for party, seen as a dividing tool of the national community, as an obstacle to the fulfilment of the general common wealth. Therefore, new political actors, led by appealing/populist/charismatic leaders (in ascending order of potential destructiveness of party organization) may challenge the monopoly of the traditional party over the vote-structuring function" (Ignazi, 1996). Even though without a movement or a party, Saied is going that path. The crisis of legitimacy has produced extreme right parties in Europe in the 1980s (Ignazi, 1996). Something similar is happening in Tunisia, with an exclusionist type of politics that smashes any opposition and strengthens one-man rule.

There is a global trend that points to the end of classical political parties in many parts of the world, and the emergence of movements like Syriza or Podemos is an indicator. Is this what is happening in Tunisia? Or will the next political system that the country is adopting be the alternative? The question is legitimate, but it was posed elsewhere, and history proved thus far that the only alternative to political parties and political participation, in countries where democracy is not rooted enough, is authoritarianism.

Biography

Youssef Cherif is the Director of Columbia Global Centers, Tunis (Columbia University), a researcher at Leiden University who specializes in North African affairs and contributor to a number of think-tanks. He was previously the Al-Maidan Libya Project manager at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and an expert affiliated to the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES). He consulted for the Arab Institute for Business Managers (IACE), the UN, The Carter Center in Tunisia, etc.

Youssef Cherif holds a Chevening Master of Arts in International Relations from the Department of War Studies of King's College London, and a Fulbright Master of Arts in Classical Studies from Columbia University, where he first went as a Visiting Scholar. He comments or writes regularly for several media outlets, including Al Jazeera English, France 24, BBC, DW and think-tanks such as Carnegie, DGAP, IEMed and ISPI.

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POLITICS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NORTH AFRICA:

Present Trends and Future Outlook

Intissar Fakir

Politics and Civic Engagement in North Africa: Present Trends and Future Outlook

Intissar Fakir

In the North Africa and Middle East region, there is a battle for citizenship currently lurking behind the façade of a reemerging authoritarianism. Indeed, in most cases, the revolutions and transitions that spread across North Africa and the Middle East since 2011 have crystalized into resurgent authoritarian regimes that target freedoms and liberties and reverse political openings, while still contending with the economic and governance crises. But this is only one layer. Behind this is an ongoing struggle to define citizenship that prioritizes gaining a pathway to popular empowerment and agency. In the years since 2011, populations have been vocal and clear about their priorities—dignified living which requires economic wellbeing and some degree of responsive state management. This realization is changing the way governments appeal to their citizens and the way people interact with their governments. Ideological appeal is waning, economic development is at the fore of the government agenda as they continue their quest for efficient governance while political participation diminishes in favor for more direct and urgent need to shift priorities and force change.

It is important to understand the significance of popular empowerment that emerged in North Africa over the last 11 years and the implications of the precedent. It has been a remarkable yet intangible shift in the perception of people's ability to affect the seemingly unchangeable. While the region's heterogeneity and wide variances across and within countries often undermine efforts to generalize — this trend is prevalent in most countries.

Gradually emerging in North Africa has been a social transformation prioritizing a path to greater local agency and empowerment regardless of how democratic it may be or how aligned it is to a particular ideology. Today's apparent return to authoritarianism is a relevant process for the future of the region, but the key issue moving forward will continue to be the people's focus on improvements in governance and expansions of economic opportunity. Even the acceptance of the rise of authoritarianism might reflect a growing public perception of the authoritarian regimes' increasing ability to govern better due to their experience and control of governance structures compared to newcomers. But the sense of agency and the empowerment that the region's populations continue to seek prioritizes economic wellbeing after decades of poverty and vulnerability.

This focus will likely be the key lens through which autocrats who claim they can deliver where the democrats failed will be assessed. Economic demands were part of what drove the protest movements of 2011 in the first place and will remain the primary motivator of popular mobilization. This mobilization, in turn, will continue to powerfully engage

populations especially in countries where trust in political processes is low. In response, authoritarian governments have been and will continue to push a development agenda that promises good governance and that provides economic improvement and opportunity while restricting political and civil liberties. However, there are very few examples among Gulf economies, notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar that have been able to deliver on these promises in the broader Middle East and North Africa. Other countries neither have the resources nor a clear path to foster such foundational changes.

Regimes may aspire to such a benevolent authoritarian model, and this might even be theoretically accepted by the population; but there are few realistic pathways to its achievement. At the same time, populations are eager to build their own agency as well as their own ability to shape their lives. This creates a disjuncture between what is offered, what is achievable, and what is wanted. The desire to maintain and gain agency will continue to manifest in more protests and mobilization as a main response to undesirable government action or acute economic and social crisis. Political parties are not likely to regain any form of popularity if they are unable to effectively work for the people, for their constituency, and neither will the parliaments to which they ascend. However, this will not make them any less useful for regimes perpetually searching for ways to legitimize themselves or display their democratic credentials—real or feigned. At the same time, and together with mobilization, longer-term efforts to look for new ways to create participatory futures beyond protests will continue, particularly within civil society groups that seek to instill and foster a sense of civic engagement through dialogue.

Regional governments — potentially reflecting an understanding of growing popular sentiment but certainly due to the irrelevance of parties and representative bodies, the state leaders' need to maintain credibility and trust, and the broader geopolitical situation being in flux — will continue to move away from ideology and toward pragmatism. This is what is behind regional populations' acceptance of authoritarianism (in addition to crackdowns on democracy movements and associated fatigue). Younger populations are growing less concerned or motivated by nationalism, pan-Arabism, anti-Zionism, or other ideologies that defined the relationship between governments and older generations. At the same time, regimes are also showing greater ability to act outside ideologies that long defined them to address changing geopolitical dynamics.

This negotiation over what it means to be a citizen versus one's present and future relationship with the governments will continue to inform not just by where the region is today and how it will face the challenges and dilemmas of tomorrow.

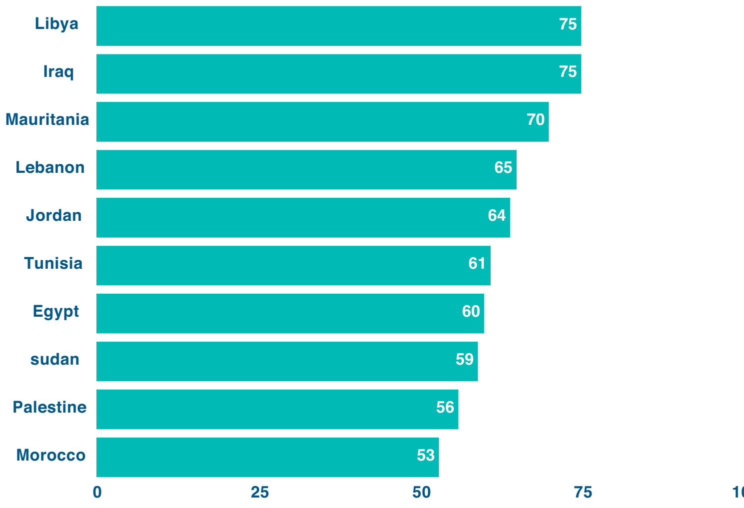
Current Trends

Dissatisfaction, disappointment, and alienation predominantly define North African and Middle Eastern populations' relationships with their states. The initial success of the 2011 protests in dislodging dictators and the potential for sweeping change engendered feelings of incredible hope and empowerment. For a time, many in the region felt they could replace governments that were corrupt, repressive, and unable or unwilling to deliver services, justice, or security. But as transitions dragged on — giving way to instability, violence, or uncertainty and disruptions, the status quo ante resettled. Once again, governance, the workings of government, the decision-making process, and, by extension, state institutions started to be viewed as inaccessible and the domain of a non-responsive, disdainful, and corrupt elite. In this context, trust and legitimacy are now diminishing, engagement is limited, and alternatives remain elusive. Today, the political struggle in the region is no longer predominantly defined by the dichotomies of religious vs. secular forces, or democracy vs. autocracy, or even liberalism vs. illiberalism. The juxtaposition of autocracy and democracy is not so clear-cut in the context of regimes whose relationship with democratic principles and commitments to freedom remain limited across the region. Rather, the determining factor for which direction today's political struggles in the region will take depends on which path can promise popular empowerment and agency in determining the future, particularly these countries' economic future.

The quest for democracy and democratic reforms in North Africa (be it through bottom-up movements, as in 2011, or, prior to that, through foreign intervention or external pressure) has not distilled a sense of seeking democracy for democracy itself but rather for the promise of what it can deliver. Rule of law-based systems could grant accountability and transparency, which, in turn, would lead the way toward more stability and prosperity. Although various countries experimented with different degrees of democratic pursuit, a cautionary tale of collateral economic and security damage emerged. In some countries, including Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq, the collapse or breakdown of previous systems led to violence and human suffering. Tunisia, which initially experienced the best outcome from the revolutions that swept the region in 2011, nonetheless faced significant economic challenges that jeopardized its political transition. These setbacks turned many citizens against democracy, decision-making through consensus, the role of elected institutions, and the absence of a powerful central leader. This frustration, in part, paved the way for Tunisia's current President Kais Saied to advocate for and achieve a centralized political system that diminished the role for other elected officials while also weakening the checks on presidential authority.

However, Saied's appeal stems from his promise of increasing popular empowerment. The president has consistently talked of giving power back to citizens. Whether he will deliver on this or not, his promise has found desperate and receptive ears. It is within these concerns that the nostalgia for the old regimes and strong figures ought to be understood. This indicates the precarity that many throughout the region felt, seeing their countries' economies and national stability as well as their own economic situation worse than they were prior to 2011. And those who did not, worried they might find themselves in similar

circumstances. Arab Barometer Survey data show an overriding concern with stability and order, especially within countries struggling with protracted conflict or that have suffered the impact of regional instability.

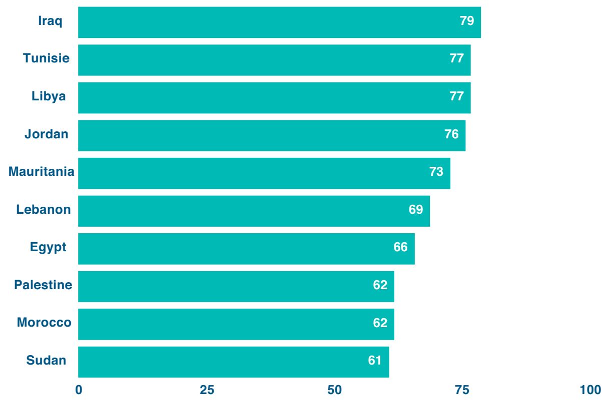


Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022)

The inherent contradictions of public sentiment can sometimes be read as a rejection of democratic trappings and principles. But if asked in the abstract whether citizens view democracy favorably and/or desire it, the answer is often yes. At the same time, the process of democracy acquisition and transition has been convoluted, protracted, and painful, testing the limits of such preferences. Clearly, citizens' aspirations encompass the universal set of wants and needs: from freedom to dignity to access to basic services, including healthcare, education, food, water, and security. Dignity and what it means to live with dignity was and remains an important motivator behind popular efforts to forge a path forward. But this component of people's aspirations is abstract and therefore one that is difficult to measure. It can mean anything; the desire to be treated with respect to one's ability to earn a living based on what skills they have gained and abilities they have built. In the latest wave of Arab Barometer surveys, populations across the region indicated that the type of ruling government was of less concern if it could resolve economic crises.

As long as a government can solve our country's economic problem, it does not matter what kind of government we have

% soying they strongly agree or agree



Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022)

Preference for type of government

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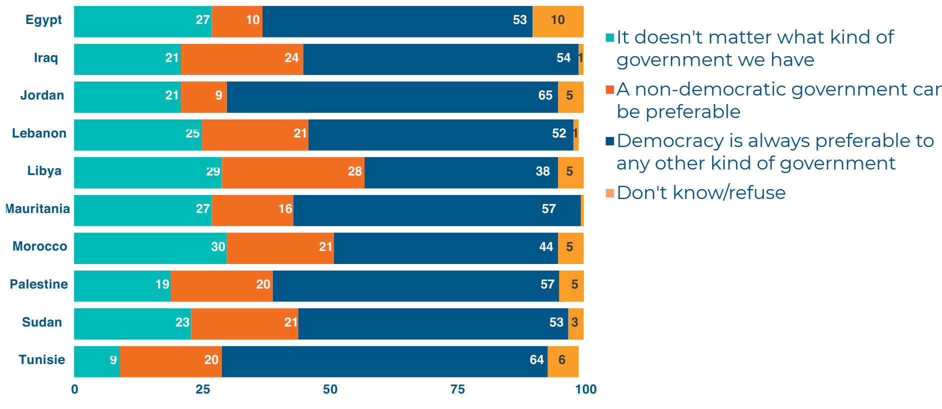


Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022)

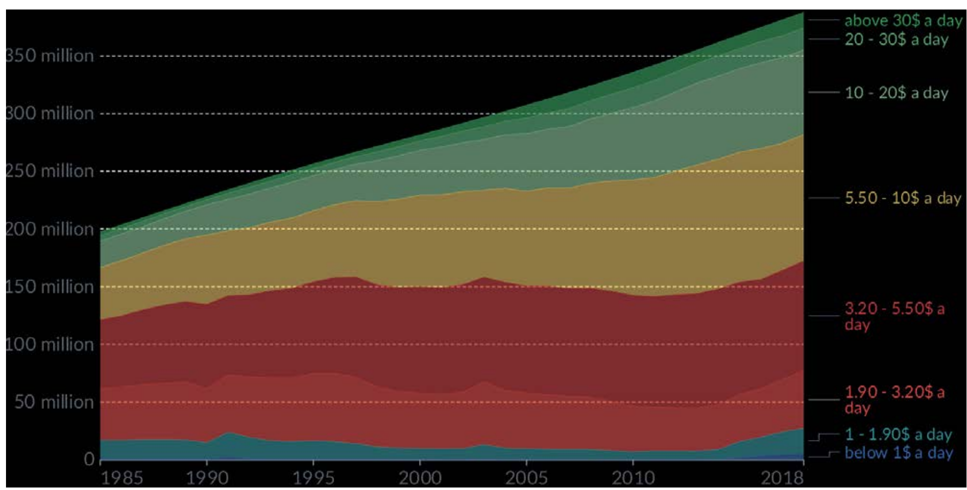
Economic vulnerability

The same demands that motivated 2011 remain unresolved and have become direr as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These demands reflect two concurrent realities. First are the improvements in standards of living and human developments that preceded the late 1990s-early 2000s. Health and education saw notable progress — infant mortality decreased, maternal health improved, and life expectancy increased. So did access to education, although unemployment remained an issue across the board, particularly for younger people. Arguably, such limited improvements recorded in prior decades were enough to increase expectations and motivate populations to seek continued advancement. Second is the extent to which the region lags on key development issues, such as gender equality and especially income inequality and poverty (Sahel-Isfahani, 2010). The decade following 2011 was marked by instability and halting transitions, and so it did not move the needle significantly on the above development indicators. Furthermore, over the past nearly three years, the global coronavirus pandemic highlighted and heightened existing social vulnerability and placed a bigger focus on economic fragility.

Prior to 2011, the region had fallen short of reducing poverty in line with global progress. Poverty reduction efforts overall failed to reach the global development goals laid out in the 1990s. Undoubtedly, some regional and notional progress was registered but not enough to keep up with global standards, and certainly not enough to keep up with the sheer scope of local demands. The result has been that poverty and "multi-dimensional poverty" are not decreasing at the required rate; rather, they are increasing. This means regional poverty is not only measured in terms of income and spending but in terms of access to nutrition, clean water, education, healthcare, and sanitary conditions. (Abu-Ismail and Al-Kiswani, 2018). In 2020, the World Bank reported a doubling of rates of extreme poverty in the region. In 2018, 7.2% of the population lived at or below the $1.9 per day line, from 3.8% of the population back in 2015 (Freije-Rodriguez and Woolcock, 2020). A higher percentage lives at the poverty line of $3.20 a day. Some of this can be explained in part by the ongoing conflict and violence in parts of the region. But other elements have played a role too, such as decades of policies that deprioritize spending on social safety nets and investing in human capital.

Distribution of population between different poverty thresholds, Middle East and North Africa, 1985 to 2018

All figures are adjusted to account for inflation and price differences across countries, and are expressed in international dollars at 2011 prices.



Source: World Bank, PovcalNet (2021)

Note: Consumption per capita is the preferred welfare indicator for the World Bank's analysis of global poverty. However, for a number of countries is measured in terms of income. An income basis is common amongst high income countries and Latin American countries.

A 2018 report from the Economic Research Forum that contextualizes poverty rates in the region — keeping in mind variations of income and economies — explains that as much as 40% of the region's population are multidimensionally poor (Abu-Ismail and Al-Kiswani, 2018). More jarringly, inequality continues to grow and the chasm that separates the poor from the wealthy is wide and deep. This inequality is perceived as more acute in an age of boundless visual access to displays of outstanding wealth and materialism, which sharply contrast with the experiences of vast numbers of people unable to access life's basic amenities and needs. As the world around them advances, the region's populations feel an acute sense of impoverishment. Worse still is that their children's future does not promise to be better than theirs. This "mass pauperization" will remain a generational challenge (Khouri, 2019). Upward mobility is limited by structural challenges such as quality of and access to education that are endemic to many Arab countries. Moreover, uneven job market growth makes opportunities sporadic and unsustainable. This was the case even before the outbreak of COVID-19. With the pandemic, the vulnerable populations saw even more adversity (Freije-Rodriguez and Woolcock, 2020). All of this is compounded by perceptions of corruption and inefficient management of state resources. Corruption remains a big concern, as most of the region's countries score in the low 100's and more importantly most of them failed to make headway in their fights against corruption in recent years (Transparency International, 2022).

Trust in State Institutions

With this social reality and outlook, most people have little illusion as to their government's ability to address these persistent problems. Most of these governments, despite some effort, had not generated long-term economic growth. Furthermore, during the past decade, the region limited spending on infrastructure and public services to keep budgets under control as well as limited and deprioritized social programs and human development spending (Fakir and Alkoutamy, 2020). The rising set of global challenges, of which the pandemic is but one, are testing popular tolerance of these governments and will likely continue to change the way governments behave. Most countries in the region are still ruled by governments of yesterday — those that have survived in Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf, or those that have been reconstituted in a more repressive configuration since 2011, as in Egypt and Algeria. These governments of yesterday lack the trust of their populations to resolve either long-running or novel problems let alone build prosperous and safe futures. Trust in state institutions has registered a persistent decline, especially since 2011. In most countries, trust in the government (which also reflects trust in the executive) is slightly higher than trust in legislatures (with the notable exception of Lebanon, where the parliament scores marginally higher than the government).

This distinction between governments and parliaments reflects the extent to which the executive is more empowered to govern while politicians and parties suffer from prevailing mistrust. World Economic Forum surveys show low rates of trust in politicians. The trust displayed in the Gulf countries reflects effective management in countries where elected officials do not exist or have limited consultative authority (Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar).

Public trust in politicians

In your country, how do you rate the ethical standards of politicians?
(1 = extremely low; 7 = extremely high)

Show: Competitiveness Region - Middle East and North Africa

Info	Rank/137	Country/Economy	Value (1-7 (best))	Trend	Dist. from highest
i	2	United Arab Emirates	6.3		
i	4	Qatar	5.9		
i	12	Saudi Arabia	5.2		
i	19	Oman	4.7		
i	24	Bahrain	4.5		
i	40	Jordan	3.7		
i	49	Iran, Islamic Rep.	3.4		
i	50	Israel	3.4		
i	53	Morocco	3.4		
i	67	Egypt	3.0		
i	68	Kuwait	3.0		
i	75	Tunisia	2.9		
i	80	Algeria	2,8		
i	115	Yemen	2.0		
i	128	Lebon	1.7		

Source: Word Economic Forum, Executive Opinion Survey. For more details, reter to Appendx C of this [i]Report[i]

Limits of Ideological Appeal

One of the functions of political parties is to provide a means for their constituents to convey priorities and access decision-making. In most countries, parties have not functioned as such. On an ideological level, parties have lost their appeal and credibility following decades of experimentation in Arab societies and political systems. The communist parties did so gradually, after the Soviet Union's collapse. In turn, centrist nationalist parties failed to distinguish themselves or maintain the legitimacy they gained from independence struggles decades earlier. Leftist parties slowly also withered, overshadowed by the appeal of Islamist factions from the 1980s onward. The Islamist parties built a reputation on their desire to serve the population. Their service provision credentials in several instances—the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Palestine—helped cement their popularity. They pushed this promise while upholding their piety as a shield against corruptibility. Limited though positive experience in the opposition, as in Morocco, added to their credibility. But mostly, their distance from governing institutions gave them the benefit of the doubt and propelled them to power in Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Entering governments after achieving unrestricted ability to participate in post-2011 elections, however, eventually resulted in the same popular disillusionment with the Islamists that befell other parties. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party managed to take about 40% of seats in the Egyptian legislature. In 2012, Mohammed Morsi, the party's leader, won the presidential elections. The party's time in power, though limited, contributed to growing polarization and fed into fears of a destabilizing Islamist takeover. In Egypt's experience, the party that had accessed power through the ballot box, was unseated in a coup and subsequently subjected to a violent crackdown by the state security apparatus. That perception of an Islamist threat throughout the Muslim Brotherhood's brief experience in power was informed, in part, by the party's failure to create and articulate a governance plan, its membership's lack of technical expertise, compounded by a series of ideological and tactical blunders that left the party flailing (El-Sherif, 2014). This provided fodder for the division and vilification campaign that preceded President Sisi's coup.

In Morocco, the Islamists — mainly the Justice and Development Party (PJD) — had a relatively successful first term, leading the government from 2012 to 2016, but not without key compromises that chipped away at their appeal. In local elections that took place in 2015, widely viewed as a referendum on their national leadership, they recorded wide gains. And by the time of the second parliamentary election since 2011, Islamist forces proceeded to increase their parliamentary control and form a second coalition in 2016. But over the course of their second term, they faced substantial challenges, some self-inflicted and some coming from the monarchy as well as other parties fearful of their rise; all this increased popular dissatisfaction with their rule. The second PJD-led government was weak even before the pandemic. Internally, the party faced deep fissures after a bruising government formation process that the monarchy manipulated through other political actors to diminish the Islamist faction's influence in government. What emerged over the course of four years was a weak government without any hallmark programs or reforms. The process through which Morocco managed the COVID-19 crisis was dominated by technocrats handpicked by the King. The PJD, in turn, was sidelined. Furthermore, the government was blamed and scapegoated for various implementation challenges and shortcomings.

The Islamists' experience in Tunisia carries some parallels to Morocco and even to the experience in Egypt. While the Ennahda Movement remains the strongest parliamentary faction in terms of votes, its reputation has shifted to that of simply another ineffective party. It has become prone to divisions, partisanship, and narrow interests —despite the party making a calculation in 2013 to prioritize national cohesion and step away from power. But this experience is easily forgotten in the wake of the divisions and infighting inside the parliament. Meanwhile, the ossified leadership in the person of Rachid Ghannouchi, the party's patriarch who refuses to give up any control, has done little to help Ennahda. Ghannouchi emerges in polls as the least popular leader in Tunisia. Collectively, after decades of promises to govern better than the entrenched systems that kept them out of power, the Islamists failed to live up to their promises.

On a practical level, few regional political parties, if any, are viewed as having succeeded in bringing governance or decision-making closer to citizens' needs. Increasingly most parties have grown divorced from their grassroots base, lacked the ability to articulate a coherent and rooted program, and certainly failed to implement any such program. Whether the culprit was the parties themselves or the larger political forces in each country that co-opted and used them, the results have been the same. People no longer view parties and elected institutions as the path to political participation.

What is remarkable about the experience of Kais Saied's power grab in Tunisia is how his suspension of the parliament was not only accepted but helped legitimize his broader plan. Tunisians' disapproval of their political class and anger toward them for failing to deliver a sustainable economic plan grew as indecisive government after indecisive government watched over a shrinking economy (Megerisi, 2021). In that sense, ridding Tunisians of the parliament was not only accepted but applauded as the legislature became, in the span of six years, a symbol of dysfunction. Tunisians turned out in thousands to celebrate Kais Saied's dismissal of parliament on July 25, 2021. Part of the reluctance to push Kais Saied to undo his initial push to gain more power were concerns that would reinstate a dysfunctional parliament that Tunisians have grown to disdain.

In Morocco, parties repeatedly proved as unappealing to the population as they are inefficient. Most political parties in Morocco over the course of their experience shifted their allegiances from their constituents to the monarchy, which, more than any voter, has determined their ability to survive and thrive. The most recent legislative and local elections of September 2021 brought to power the National Rally of Independence (RNI) not because of this party's ideological appeal or its strong grassroots connections but in part because the party is studded with rich businessmen-technocrats close to the Palace with reputations as effective implementers who could bring some of their business acumen to running government.

Outlook

Projecting the identified trends can help predict the medium-term future of civic engagement in the region. The trends discussed in this section carry forward the analysis laid out in the previous section, the analysis of current dynamics, perceptions of political developments, considerations that dictate or motivate behavior of government and people, and the end goals driving these changes.

As governments grapple with their citizens' current priorities concerning economic conditions, wellbeing, and empowerment, the ruling regimes are increasingly pursuing pragmatic actions and policies, reflecting the diminishing ideological component of political engagement. On the domestic front, governments are likely to continue pushing a largely apolitical agenda even as their ability to address economic challenges focuses on the short rather than the longer term. At the same time, state institutions and participatory mechanisms, when they exist, will continue to reflect the same disenchantment — especially as parliaments and parties continue to face the same diminished appeal. Finally,

popular mobilization to impact change, a process that has been successful in various measures, will continue even as younger populations seek more long-term ways to shape the future.

Pragmatism over Ideology

Nationalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism are losing their appeal as ideological cornerstones of many regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, despite having shaped convictions and been a part of the way those governments and parties defined themselves to populations for generations. The Palestinian question, for instance, provides one bellwether for this shift. For governments in the region, the issue of Palestine was often a part of their domestic discourse for their own gains rather than a real commitment to the cause. However, more recently, several regimes have shifted their decades-long rejection of Israel to pursue robust bilateral agreements with that country. The grounds for this acceptance had been paved through a gradual abandonment of Palestinian rights, but the past couple of years saw a final and official shift from vestiges of a Pan-Arabist Palestinian cause-driven foreign policy. The implications are that most of the region's governments now grasp the limited returns of this support. For example, the Moroccan monarchy has sold normalization with Israel in very practical terms: Morocco can boost its international alliances, which will enable Rabat to better negotiate on the Palestinian issue. But the most powerful motivator has probably been the potential benefit of trade, investment, and economic exchanges for the population.

In contrast, fewer and fewer governments remain wedded to their strong ideologies that come at the expense of their popular appeal. For example, the Algerian government, dominated by the military, has stayed true to its ideological convictions of anti-imperialism and a pro-Palestinian posture and has been unwilling to compromise on them. But younger populations are less committed to these convictions and are decreasingly swayed by them. As for practical needs across the region, governments are eager to show their populations that they understand their priorities and can respond accordingly. And in that, governments might prioritize economic visions and recovery plans in the manner of a benevolent authoritarian system that supplies opportunities for economic development, growth, and human development while maintaining a tighter hold on politics, limiting, or eliminating room for dissent, free expression, and criticism. The implication of this approach is that it focuses on the relationship between the government and the people on the former's ability to deliver on economic wellbeing.

Attempting Pragmatism

Most leadership circles in the region are reckoning with a tight timeframe to improve their populations' economic standing and create opportunities. The failure to do so has become a more acute threat to these regimes' stability than domestic political dissent. As such, efforts to refocus on economic and human development have become widespread across the region. An important element of this is various regime's efforts to improve public administration, streamlining administrative processes, implementing digitized administration and record keeping—improving access to information and services online as well. There have been several advances in this regard many of which came into focus during the pandemic when various governments pushed ahead to digitize sectors like healthcare and education in a record time.

In the decade prior to 2011, debate raged about the necessity for economic reforms to go hand in hand with democratic reforms, and U.S. pressure on these governments specifically underscored simultaneous political reforms and economic liberalization. But since the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutions, various governments have put forward grand economic visions to diversify and liberalize and above all elevate their citizens' wellbeing. Some governments have not been able to live up to these promises, however, as they found themselves in the throes of one self-inflicted economic crisis after another — as exemplified by Egypt and Tunisia. In 2016, Egypt notably launched Vision 2030, which expresses lofty goals of poverty reduction, equality, sustainable development, and growth (Egypt Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, 2016). The implementation of this program has so far taken the shape of lucrative mega-projects that have enriched the Egyptian military. Their benefit to the broader population remains dubious, and these initiatives, combined with the military's role in their execution, have arguably contributed to a worsening macro-economic outlook for the country (Mandour, 2019/2021).

Another notable example is Morocco's New Development Model (Fakir and Werenfels, 2020). The approach includes an integrated economic and human development model that is meant to provide a remedy to the last ten years or so that witnessed a stagnation and a decline in economic wellbeing for many. This model also makes grand and ambitious promises for the sort of sweeping economic growth that prioritizes the economically vulnerable. The program, however, was launched in the middle of a particularly turbulent period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and global economic uncertainty. And two years on, with those and subsequent exogenous crisis compounding existing economic stresses, there is virtually no discussion of where the implementation of the New Development Model stands.

Similarly, the Algerian government which relies on rents and alternates state incentives with repression to keep the population subdued, has struggled since 2013 to maintain the same level of state spending given the fluctuating oil prices (Fakir and Ghanem, 2016). Each time the inherent weaknesses of the country's command economy would grow serious enough to boost political will for reform, oil prices would subsequently rise, circumventing the immediate need for those reforms; such has been the cycle. In 2022, when

energy prices again surged, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced a new monthly allowance for youth currently looking for employment, which attracted broad interest. This reflects not only the state's efforts to keep a restless young population pacified but also the population's understanding of these benefits as compensation for the lack of domestic opportunities to seek competitive employment (Boubekeur, 2022).

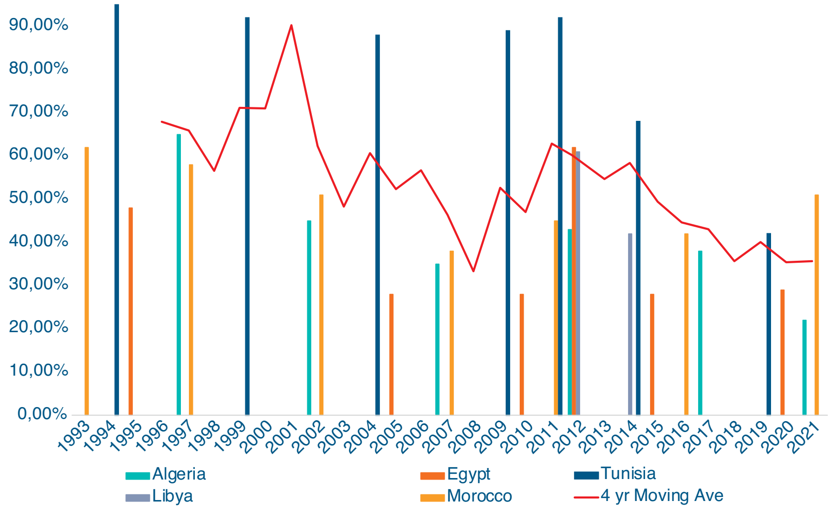
In Tunisia, likewise, officials often grumble about young people's unrealistic expectations that the state provide employment for them. Yet this is after decades of state-controlled policies that narrowed the path to a competitive and open economy. This crucial point about youth expectations on the one hand and the state's role on the other reflects a long-running frustration not only among populations — especially younger ones — of oil-producing economies but of all North African economies that have failed to develop and reform enough to allow for sufficient economic opportunities at home. This frustration is then compounded into anger when states promise to focus on economic wellbeing but prove time and again unable to deliver it. These promises that hint of benevolent authoritarianism will do little to shift popular expectations.

Another key element to this is the rhetoric and the effort to address corruption. Corruption in the region has been a long-standing grievance and issue that has hampered economic growth and development in different ways. Gaining popular appeal has often involved some sort of progress or crusade against corruption. In Tunisia, Kais Saied's anti-corruption promises have been perhaps the most tangible promise in his nebulous vision for Tunisia. Before him, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's anti-corruption campaign was one of his government's key priorities earning him both praise and condemnation. Another example in Algeria was President Tebboune's anti-corruption campaign that targeted former political and business figures many of whom had previously enjoyed complete immunity. While these can at times be politically motivated—to solidify control of one faction or one person—in the end they enforce some accountability where there had been none. The accountability can be selective, but it appeals as an effort where either there previously was none, or where corruption is so pronounced that the need is dire. According to IMF research efforts have evolved into improving accountability and transparency of state action especially on economics and finance, streaming and simplifying bureaucratic processes and structures, and more directly strengthening anti-corruption laws and regulations (Jarivs et al, 2021). Many governments are in principle committed to this, but obstacles remain in implementation and in real accountability.

The Future of Civic Engagement

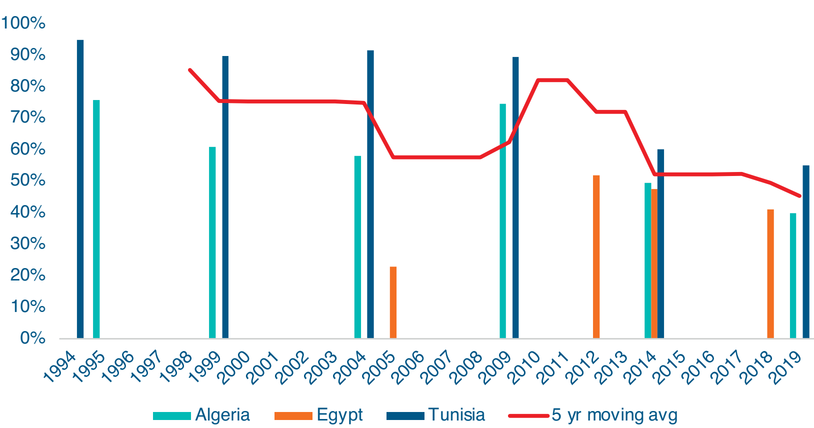
Alternative political engagement, particularly in the form of popular mobilization and protests, became common in North Africa since 2011. This trend is likely to continue as such mobilization, while not a substitute for true political participation, offers the opportunity for more immediate action. Political processes have lost their appeal, are distrusted, or viewed as futile, which creates acceptance and even calls for action outside of these processes. Beyond voting, the path for citizens to influence the formulation of laws and policies is limited. And the laws themselves — in the event they do reflect some popular inputs — are not guaranteed implementation let alone impact.

Voter turnout rates give some albeit limited insights into the extent to which populations participate through elections. According to IDEA data, participation rates in elections — both presidential and parliamentary — in North Africa have gradually decreased. Throughout the 1990s-early 2000s (and certainly before that), it was difficult to trust voter turnout data with any degree of confidence. However, with the presence of international election monitors, greater efforts on the parts of governments to improve election logistics, and fewer incentives to skew election data, the post-2011 election trends might give a more accurate view. The caveat, of course, is that there has not been a mass of elections over the past decade to provide a particularly strong basis for analysis. Still the data available shows a decline in voter turnout, which could be explained by several factors. The most compelling and most reflective of local sentiments is dissatisfaction toward governments in general, elected institutions, and political parties. Political parties based on decreasing ideological appeal in many cases, and the lack of trust as vehicles for participation in decision making process, many parties are struggling to maintain their grassroots ties, and are speaking more powerfully to the entrenched structures and actors with whom they are obliged to operate as a surer way to survive and remain relevant. For instance, political parties in Morocco must appeal to the monarchy even more powerfully than to grassroots. Similarly in Egypt, political parties must appease and appeal to forces beyond and more powerful than grassroots. All this is resulting in a loss of trust of and growing ambivalence toward parties. Yet in certain cases the picture is murkier, as for instance in Lebanon. While social dissatisfaction with governments and elected officials, and parties have grown stronger in the aftermath of a myriad of social, economic and security crises, political parties in many instances remain the key vessels for confessional representation.



Source: IDEA voter turnout data base.

Presidential elections participation rates



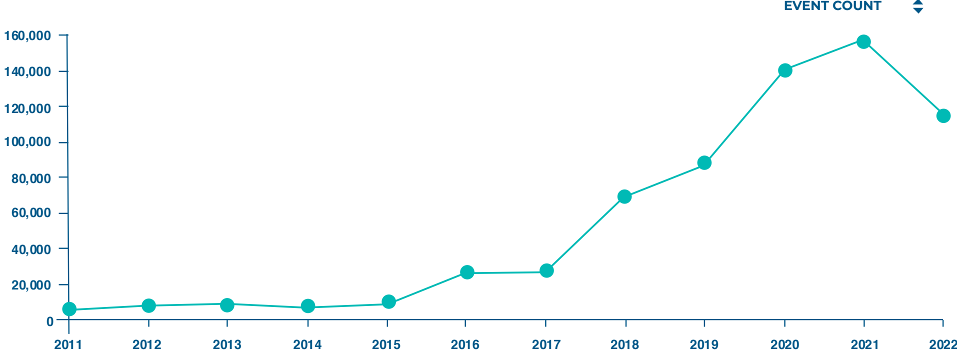
Source: IDEA voter participation database

This trend, if it continues points toward further irrelevance of parties and less interest in electoral politics along with an ongoing search for alternatives to participatory mechanisms.

Protests as Participation

Mass-mobilization has been able to offer an option for dissatisfied populations seeking pushback against their governments. Once the initial challenges to mobilizations are overcome and there is momentum, mobilization and protests movements have proven successful in drawing attention to issues, and in many cases in ensuring a degree of quick response.

The following chart from ACLED data tracker on the numbers of protests reported in the Middle East from January 2011 until October 2022.



There are enduring examples of this from across the region. In Morocco, several stand out. First among them was a rare display of popular anger against a particular royal act. In 2013, in a gesture of goodwill toward Spanish monarch Juan Carlos, King Mohammed VI pardoned 48 jailed Spanish citizens, including one person imprisoned on charges of rape of children aged 4 to 15. The news of this prisoner's release riled up the population and sparked large-scale protests. Although the protests were repressed violently, they eventually led to an investigation into the release and a reversal of the pardon (El Yaakoubi, 2013). Though the prisoner has not been returned to Morocco, he is serving his sentence in a Spanish jail (Pérez, 2013).

Another example was the Rif protests of 2016, which began in the city of Hoceima, in the aftermath of a violent incident. A fish vendor following a dispute with local police jumped into a dumpster to retrieve his confiscated fish. The dumpster compressor crushed him, propelling widespread anger that galvanized Morocco's entire northern region (Fakir and Young, 2017). The protests drew condemnations of the police and officials' brutality toward citizens, and more powerfully succeeded in raising both domestic and international attention to the urgency of the Rif's long overlooked social and economic vulnerability. The protests also forced the government to provide immediate attention to the region.

In Tunisia, organized and sustained protest movements around a clear single or key issue have also proven effective in forcing concrete action or promises of action. One notable example was the Kemour movement, which sprang up in 2017 to draw attention to the plight of the marginalized Tataouine area as well as demand job creation. The protests re-emerged in 2021, even with the constraints of the COVID-19, demanding that the government follow up on its promise (Meddeb, 2021). The ***Manesh Mesameh*** hashtag-turned-movement (which translates to: I do not forgive) is another example of popular mobilization. It emerged in 2015 against a sort of economic amnesty for hundreds of businesspeople who made their fortunes during the Ben Ali era by benefiting from long-running monopolistic practices that allowed them to amass substantial wealth.

The authorities, to be sure, often violently repressed these movements. Many of the people associated or engaged in these movements are still in prison, as in the case of Morocco's Rif protests, for example. But where they have been successful, these movements spotlighted civic energy and a popular desire for empowerment. These movements were particularly successful when they were organized around a clear, not all-encompassing goal and where they managed to sustain a certain rate and frequency of mobilization despite disruptions. Mobilizing in the sense of citizens gathering, and naming and shaming has become a more effective avenue.

In Algeria, the 2019 Hirak protests were effective at ensuring that the ill and absent President Abdelaziz Bouteflika did not clinch a fifth term. Bouteflika had consolidated his hold on the presidency over the course of two key terms, during which he oversaw the end of the Algeria's civil conflict. He then amended the constitution to allow himself a third term. However, toward the end of it, he succumbed to a stroke that left him incapacitated. Still, he managed to secure a fourth term while effectively absent. It was widely understood that the country was run by a close circle of his family and friends, unelected and unaccountable to the public. Once it was clear President Bouteflika or his handlers would run him for a fifth term, Algerians rose in protest, every Friday calling for the end to what had become a political comedy.

The popular movement galvanized by this cause succeeded in forcing a post-Bouteflika transition. The demonstrators' success was limited to accomplishing this single mission, however. A confluence of domestic and global factors prevented the movement from transforming into a coherent opposition that could undertake other projects. As is often the case, the movement's strengths began to play against it. The wide and diverse movement soon showed divisions of purpose, priority, and ideology. The government began to crackdown on key figures and groups within the Hirak protests and within the opposition more broadly. And then the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic limited mobilization patterns, taking the last gasp of air out of Hirak's sails.

Pandemic-related disruptions to people's abilities to organize protests is likely to be temporary. Already, soaring food and fuel prices have mobilized people in various parts of the world, and the Middle East and North Africa are likely to follow suit. Since 2021, the delayed impact of supply chain interruptions, rising inflation, and, more recently, the Russian war in Ukraine have tested stronger global economies. In North Africa, where economic resilience is limited, bouts of protests are likely to follow, motivated by economic pressure or social or political grievances.

Although the linkages between social unrest and economic pressure are anything but clear cut, the high inflation, growing food insecurity, and supply disruptions are undeniably compounding the previous strains of the pandemic. Some of the hardest-hit economies, in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Turkey, are already grappling with potential unrest (Ramadan, 2022). Oil and gas exporters can blunt some of these pressures as oil prices have climbed to $100 per barrel since the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine and the associated as well as separate disruptions to energy supplies. Households across the region are on the brink of hunger as what they can afford gets them less and less. In Morocco, monetary policies succeeded in

keeping inflation currently at 6.4%; but price instability was a contributing factor in the major protest waves the country saw over the past 11 years, in 2011 and 2012, 2016, and 2018 (Aourraz, 2022). In Tunisia, inflation has reached 8%, state coffers are empty, and Tunisians are struggling with shortages of flour, rice, and sugar. These global pressures playing out in fragile domestic context will continue to test governments' abilities to respond, especially oil-importing economies that are cash strapped and already shouldering heavy debts.

Building Citizenship

What protests have in expedience they lack in long-term engagement and thoughtful vision for a fully participatory future. However, there are grassroot efforts to find a more enduring means to engage and harness civic energy through informing, educating, and teasing out views and opinions regarding building coherent visions around the future. Several local initiatives are seeking to do exactly this, to build a form of citizenship that can appeal to all, especially the younger generations.

Fundamentally, the current push and pull between populations and states is about defining the relationship between government and governed populations. Although the region's people and governments are not monolithic in their views, and each experience is unique in its circumstances and specific outcomes, what appears to be at play in many of these places is mostly an effort to build citizenship and define what it means. In the era before 2011, people in the region did not approve of their governments or felt they represented them; yet these governments managed to convince, oppress, and coerce their populations into acceptance despite mediocre performance, and they could always fall back on ideology. In the first few years following 2011, it seemed that populations would successfully resist authoritarianism and reject poor governance, seeing democracy as the surest path toward these ends. Populations looked to what they perceived as credible and pragmatic but mostly Islamists political parties (most of which had distanced themselves to some degree from their religious wings), which gained their vote. Yet the Islamists ultimately failed, contributing to the resurgence of authoritarians whom populations now accept on the implicit condition they can prove more effective at delivering better governance and economic opportunity.

Thus, regional governments increasingly understand the need to devote their energy to improving people's lives and relieving acute economic pressure, even as corruption remains and is fed further and as human rights abuses increase. For observers, this requires looking at state actions and priorities not through the lens of 2011 reform and democracy but through the pragmatic lens that most people in the region are likely to look through. However, now the timescales for these governments to act are shorter and the populations' needs are greater. Failures of the Middle East and North Africa's authoritarian governments to deliver required reforms could, thus, lead to another cycle of anger, mobilization, possible instability, and even another attempt at top-down regime transformation. But on the other hand, these governments could deliver just enough to forestall such an outcome — perhaps assisted in this by a more active populace that keeps pressure on the authorities to respond to their plight.

Biography

Intissar Fakir is currently the director of the North Africa and Sahel Program at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC and has expertise on the politics and societies of the Maghreb region. Prior to working with MEI, she was the Editor-in-Chief of Sada and a Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She has previously worked in several NGOs that support a range of reforms across the Middle East and Africa by empowering and building the capacity of local actors. Her writings have been published in a number of think tank and media outlets in the Middle East, the U.S., and Europe.

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CONCLUSION

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Like other waves of democratic transitions in history, the process of political change in the MENA region has been protracted and marked by missed opportunities and unexpected setbacks. Since the last decade, the Middle East and North Africa region has been on a roller coaster ride of hopes and expectations, culminating in a new regional geopolitical order characterized by a plethora of political developments and actors. Numerous political institutions and parties, which would be indispensable for a successful democratic transition, have failed to respond to the needs of the local population or to build a relationship of trust with citizens. Their main concerns remain an improvement in their economic situation, the creation of jobs and prospects, as well as transparency, justice and the fight against corruption.

Islamists' experience in government has drawn a lot of attention in the last decade given their retreat from the political scene in almost all the countries where they swept into power. Even in Tunisia where they rebranded themselves to survive for a decade, President Kais Saied's last grip of power imposed a new reality for their participation in the political realm. The authors agreed in this study that in almost all the cases across North Africa, their image has seriously suffered. The critical changes and continuities of Islamist movements and parties in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco carry some parallels. Yet, while they still retain some influence in Morocco and Tunisia and may come back to the political forefront, they will be most likely isolated and marginalized in Egypt for the decades to come.

So far, political parties regardless of their ideological affiliations, failed to induce change instigated by protests and they became mostly passive players in the political scene. Arab Barometer surveys, as mentioned in this study, demonstrate that when asking MENA countries about the most effective way to influence a government decision at the national level, the results show that in none of the nine countries – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia – where the question was carried out did more than one-in-five mention working through a political party. Mauritania ranked top (17 percent) and Libya (15 percent), but elsewhere at most about one-in-ten say that working through political parties is the most effective way to influence decisions at the level of the national government (Arab Barometer, 2022).

Confidence in the ability to act and the sincerity of parties in the region is alarmingly low. Even the young population associates parties primarily with clientelism, mismanagement and self-interest. Yet the young people of the region are quite political; they are interested in international developments, economic contexts and concrete problems of everyday life. But their forms of organization are changing fundamentally. Parties are not perceived as a form of political organization. A lack of appeal to the general population, a lack of

inner-party democracy and nonexistent party programs certainly contribute to this.

Despite the growing winds of authoritarianism and technocratic populism which sweep over the MENA region, the last decade proves that the road of repression is harder than before. Grassroots protests, bottom-up mobilization and the connecting and mobility power of social media imposed a new reality on authoritarian regimes which can alter the development of the political terrain at any given time. Top-down political systems operated by authoritarian leaders, often aligned with the military, no longer manage to attract the polls and authoritarian resilience is at stake as no regime in the MENA region is confident enough to remain in power (Ottaway, 2021)[1].

The battle for citizenship is clearer than ever in the MENA region. Thus, redefining the role of civic engagement and participation in such a way as to define the relationship between the government and the population is essential. The future of civic engagement depends on the ability of civil society and social movements to surpass the restraints of authoritarianism. In this regard, results from the 2020 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung survey suggest that civil society organizations (CSOs) might represent an alternative that could help fill the gap resulting from the weakness of existing political parties. In five of the six countries surveyed across MENA – Morocco (76 percent), Algeria (65 percent), Tunisia (62 percent), Libya (60 percent), and Jordan (51 percent) – at least half said they trust civil society organizations fully, a lot, or somewhat. Only in Lebanon do fewer than half have confidence in CSOs (38 percent).

Nevertheless, the important role of political parties for a living democracy and organized pluralism of opinion and competition of ideas should not be neglected. Beyond civic engagement, parties remain an important instrument for organizing opinions on the basis of convictions and bringing them into political competition.

In summary, within the ongoing political change in the region, there is a clear decline in the importance of ideology and an apparent authoritarian resilience, which further accelerates the isolation of political parties. This political fragmentation coincides with an urgency to prioritize economic stability and recovery which remain the region's top priority. Failure of authoritarian governments in the Middle East and North Africa region to open up to citizens' demands and embark on a serious course of reform could result in another cycle of anger, mobilization, possible instability, and even another attempt at regime change. This scenario could be avoided if these governments - with the involvement of a more active and empowered population acting as watchdogs - strive for pragmatism while implementing necessary reforms. Political parties, in need of multidimensional reforms, should certainly play a role in this.

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