

March 2021

KAS PoDiMed Survey 2020

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean



Democracy & Political Systems in the Middle East and North Africa

What are the Perceptions in the Region?

Executive Summary

In 2011, citizens across the region took to the streets to demand more accountability, transparency and social justice. The protesters of the Arab uprisings of 2011 not only demanded economic reforms, but also called for changes to political systems. Long-standing authoritarian rulers had long dominated the region with no country qualifying as democratic based on rankings by Freedom House. Citizens demanded governments that were more responsive to their needs with a greater respect for their citizenry. Among the countries surveyed, Tunisia and Libya witnessed a change in government, while Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco responded with significant reforms and economic support for citizens. Yet, these reforms did not meet the demands of citizens. In 2019, mass protests forced changes in leadership in Algeria and Lebanon while smaller-scale demonstrations have regularly taken place in Jordan and Morocco demanding reforms. As Tunisia's democratic transition has failed to bring tangible economic solutions, the preferred political system in the eyes of Arab publics remains contested.

The 2020 Survey of the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PoDiMed) makes clear that citizens prefer democracy, but significant numbers would trade it for a system that is effective at achieving meaningful economic results. Despite economic frustrations in the region, citizens report high political engagement. Clear majorities are comfortable approaching politicians, peacefully demonstrating, and participating in advocacy through civil society activity.

Yet, citizens' economic frustrations are significant and severe. These grievances appear to undermine perceptions of the benefits of democracy in the region. Citizens, in significant margins, are questioning the usefulness of parliaments in their respective countries. When asked if parliament should be abolished in favor of a strong leader, majorities in Libya (64 percent), Tunisia (61 percent) and Lebanon (58 percent) agree, as do nearly half in Algeria (47 percent). Only in Morocco is a minority in favor (39 percent) of such a political system. This result makes clear that citizens want a leader who can make necessary changes when economic grievances remain high. Relatively few see representative parliaments as part of the solution; instead, a focus on the country's leader and his or her ability to make necessary reforms appears to be the primary demand of the majority of Arab publics.

More concerning still, the survey finds that there are not consistent demographic differences across the region that support this position about the abolishment of parliament. There are few differences between rich and poor, youth and adults, and those with higher education as compared to those with lower education. This demonstrates that economic frustrations have far-reaching consequences across all segments of the population. Thus, the future of democracy is quite fragile in the region. Ten years since the Arab Spring, Arab publics are still ailing from the same economic challenges that originally led to the protests associated with the Arab Spring.

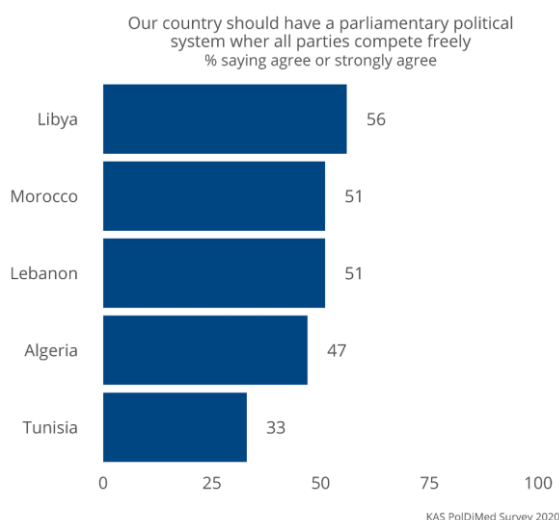
These findings are based on nationally representative public opinion surveys that included approximately 1,800 respondents in six countries: Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, with a total of 10,841 respondents. Respondents were chosen randomly, meaning the results can be generalized to the broader population. The surveys were weighted to account for any random variations that may exist by gender, age, level of education, or geographic area. The margin of error for each country is less than ± 3 percent. All interviews were conducted between October 26 and December 8, 2020. The surveys were conducted on behalf of the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PoDiMed) by Arab Research and Analytics Associates (ARAA).

System of Government

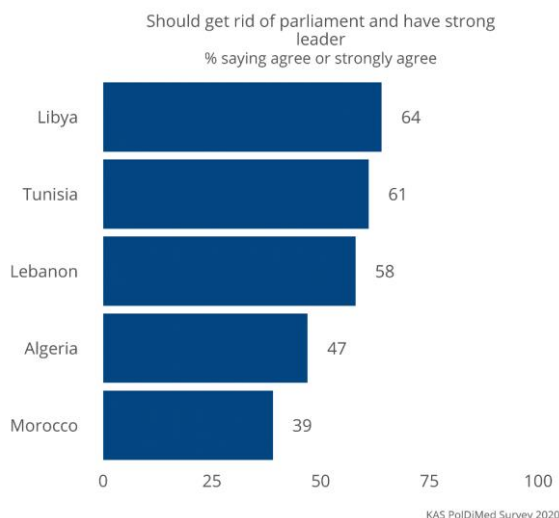
Given the tumultuous events of the last decade, the preferred system of government remains contested among Arab publics. On the one hand, there exists a very strong commitment to democracy. On the other hand, democracy hasn't really delivered in the case of Tunisia, or in countries where elections are a permanent feature of politics, like in Lebanon. In fact, in both countries, economic conditions have worsened over the last decade. Given this backdrop, the suitability of democracy for the economic well-being of Arab societies is under scrutiny.

The protesters of the Arab uprisings of 2011 not only demanded economic reforms, but also called for changes to political systems. Long-standing authoritarian rulers had long dominated the region with no country qualifying as democratic based on rankings by Freedom House. Citizens demanded governments that were more responsive to their needs with a greater respect for their citizenry. Among the countries surveyed, Tunisia and Libya witnessed a change in government, while Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco responded with significant reforms and economic support for citizens. Yet, these reforms did not meet the demands of citizens. In 2019, mass protests forced changes in leadership in Algeria and Lebanon while smaller-scale demonstrations have regularly taken place in Jordan and Morocco demanding reforms. As Tunisia's democratic transition has left most worried about the country's future economic trajectory, the preferred political system in the eyes of Arab publics remains contested.

The survey makes clear that citizens prefer democracy, but most would trade it for a system that is effective at achieving meaningful economic results. When asked whether they agree or disagree that their country should have a system of governance overseen by parliament where all parties compete in elections, support is mixed. In most countries, around half favor this form of liberal democratic system, ranging from a high of 56 percent in Libya to 47 percent in Algeria. Among the countries surveyed, support is by far the lowest in Tunisia (33 percent) even though Tunisia is widely considered the most democratic. In part, this low level is likely due to frustration over this political system to deliver tangible economic outcomes to improve the lives of citizens since the revolution, making it clear that Tunisians don't only demand input legitimacy but also output legitimacy in exchange for their support.



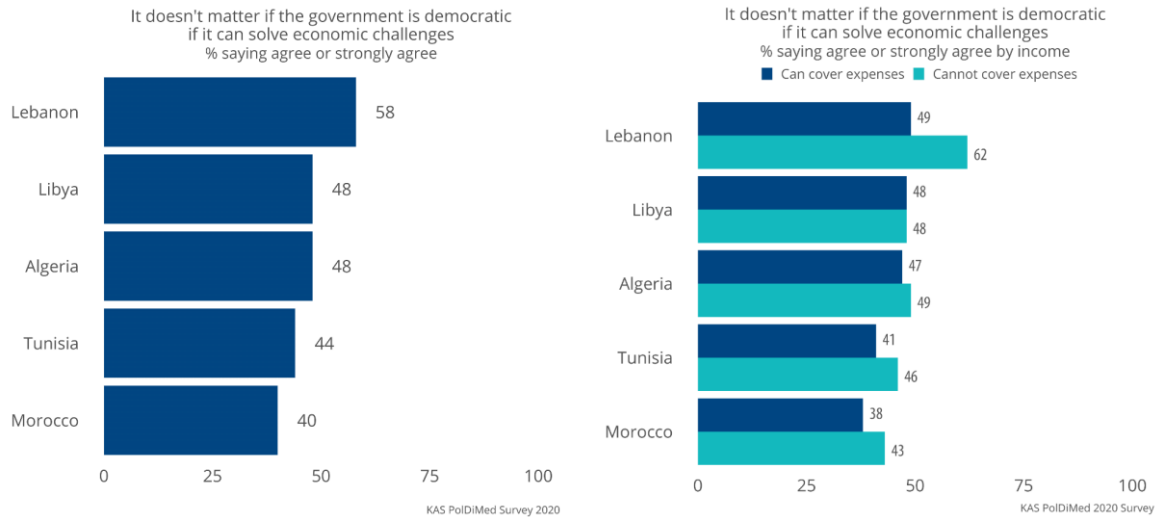
Across the countries surveyed, there is a clear desire for more effective leadership and this desire for an effective leader is shared across MENA countries. When asked if their country needs a leader who can bend the rules if necessary to get things done, majorities agree in all five countries where the question was asked. More than two-thirds agree in Libya (79 percent), Tunisia (76 percent), Lebanon (74 percent), and Algeria (68 percent). Support is lowest in Morocco, but half still agree. These results suggest that most citizens are far less concerned about procedures and full adherence to legal rules or institutional norms as long as it means a leader can deliver results.



Moreover, citizens’ frustrations appear to undermine the usefulness of parliaments. When asked if parliament should be abolished in favor of a strong leader, majorities in Libya (64 percent), Tunisia (61 percent) and Lebanon (58 percent) agree, as do nearly half in Algeria (47 percent). Only in Morocco is a minority in favor (39 percent) of such a political system. This result makes clear that citizens want a leader who can make necessary changes when economic grievances remain high. Relatively few see representative parliaments as part of the solution; instead, a focus on the country’s leader and his or her ability to make necessary reforms appears to be the primary demand of the majority of Arab publics.

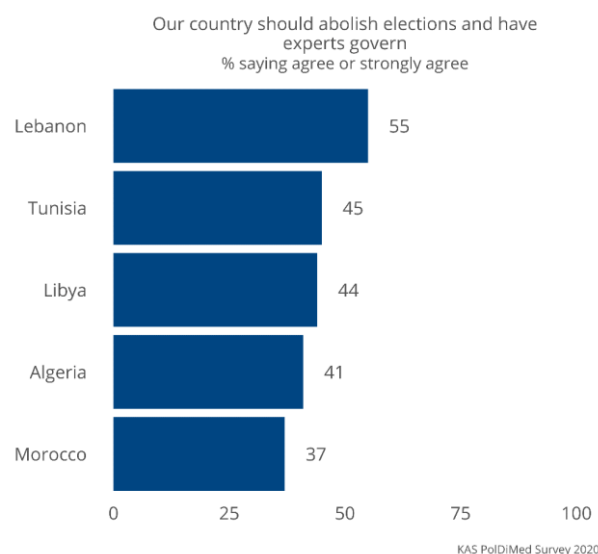
Notably all segments of Arab publics support this view about the abolishment of parliament. There are few differences between rich and poor, youth and adults, and those with higher education as compared to those with lower education. This indicates that frustrations are pervasive and transcend conventional expected cleavages on support for strong leadership. Ultimately, this finding suggests that leaders who claim to break the hold of existing political elites are likely to have significant success, perhaps even more so if they say they are willing to take whatever steps are necessary on behalf of the people. Poor economic outcomes combined with political systems that have not been able to successfully address them appear to have created conditions that are favorable to populist leaders taking hold.

Yet, most citizens still profess a solid commitment to democracy. When asked whether they agree with the statement “it doesn’t matter if the government is democratic if it can solve the economic challenges,” a majority (58 percent) in Lebanon agree. But in no other country does this statement receive clear majority support. Still, that 48 percent of Libyans and Algerians, 44 percent of Tunisians and 40 percent of Moroccans do support this claim, indicates that the utility of democracy for economic development is suspect, and large segments of the population are willing to give up on it if economic conditions don’t improve.



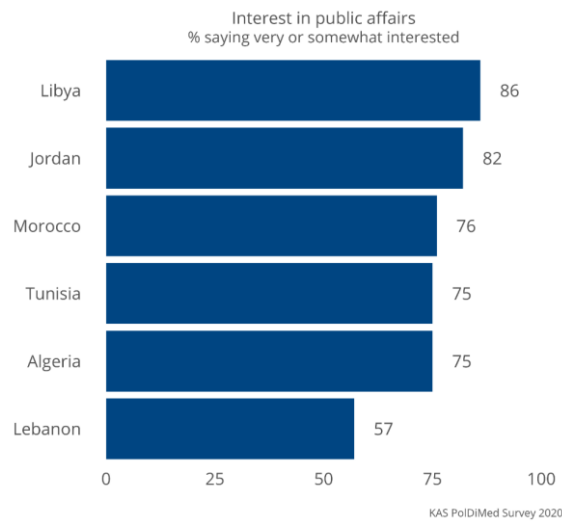
Important variation exists within countries on this item. Across all countries, youth ages 18 to 29 are somewhat less likely to support this assertion. In Tunisia, 30 percent of the youth support this statement compared to 50 percent of the older population. Similar trends exist in Lebanon and Algeria, where the youth are more likely to reject the abandonment of democracy. Similarly, those with higher levels of education and those who are more affluent are also more likely to reject this statement. Clearly, economic struggles influence such assessments. For example, among those in Lebanon who say they can't cover their expenses, a full 62 percent agree that it doesn't matter if a government is a democracy if it can solve the country's economic challenges.

Given the ongoing economic struggles in Lebanon as a result of the collapse of the financial system, it's also of little surprise that a full 55 percent also agree with the statement "Our country should abolish elections and have experts govern." Tunisia comes in second on support for this statement with 45 percent agreeing. And while in Tunisia the youth ages 18-29 are more likely to reject this statement (38 percent of the youth support this compared to 47 percent of the older generation), there is no such difference between the youth and the older generation in Lebanon. Clearly, the ability to address economic challenges will continue to serve as the litmus test for the success of democracy and democratic experiences in the region.

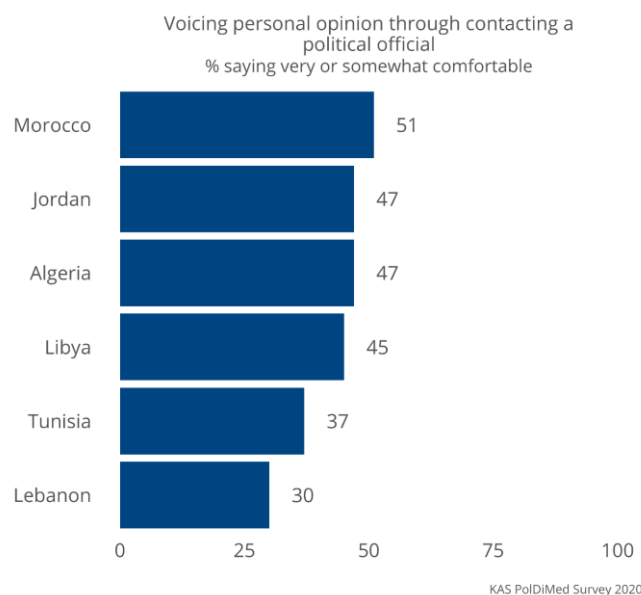


Political Participation and Engagement

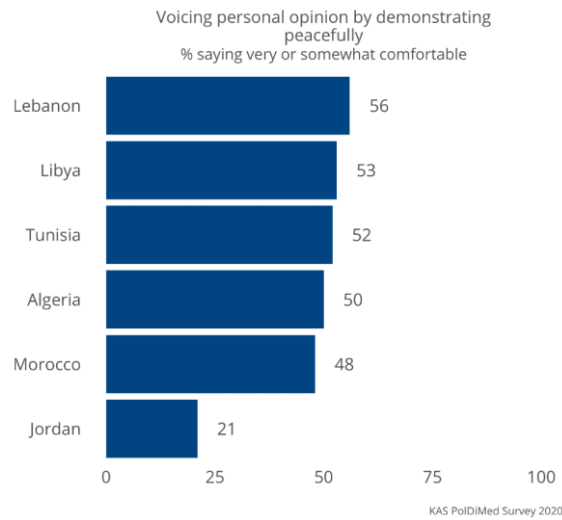
Arab citizens are highly engaged politically. Majorities across the region profess a keen interest in public affairs, with more than 75 percent of citizens in all but one country surveyed reporting they are very or somewhat interested in public affairs. The exception is in Lebanon, where a smaller majority of 57 percent pay attention to public affairs. Markedly, very few differences exist between the youth and the older generation, rich and poor, male and female and higher and lower levels of education on this question. Public interest is broadly shared across all major demographics within the population.



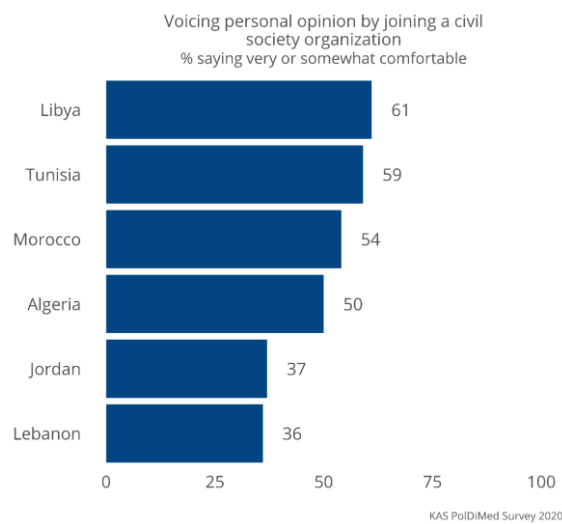
In fact, we see that Arab publics are also generally comfortable contacting and reaching out to their political officials. This highest score was in Morocco, where 51 percent of citizens state that they were comfortable doing so. The lowest scores, however, are in Lebanon (30 percent) and Tunisia (37 percent). While the lack of political efficacy in Lebanon is more understandable given existing economic challenges, the result in Tunisia is a bit more surprising given that it is the only ‘consolidated’ democracy in the region. This result could signal a general lack of trust in parliamentarians. Also of note, there are few notable differences between age groups, levels of education, income and gender across countries, indicating that citizens from all backgrounds are about equally comfortable reaching out to public figures.



The survey also asks citizens whether they felt comfortable taking part in peaceful demonstrations, joining civil society organizations, and joining political parties. Even while polity and freedom house report very little movement in political and civil liberty scores over the last decade, we see that majorities and significant pluralities voice their comfort level with the participation in peaceful protest. The exception is in Jordan where only 21 percent said they were comfortable peacefully protesting. In other countries comfort levels were far higher, with 56 percent in Lebanon, 53 percent in Libya, 52 percent in Tunisia, 50 percent in Algeria and 48 percent in Morocco express this sentiment.

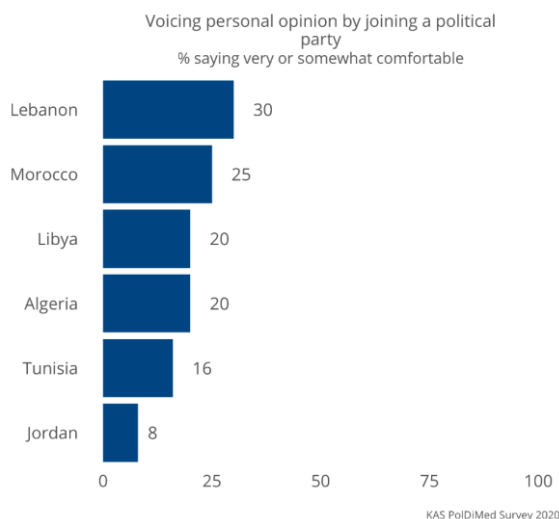


Given that the decade after the Arab Spring has witnessed countless protests across several countries appears to suggest that Arab publics and their leaders are far more likely to accept citizens voicing their concerns in the public sphere. So even while objective indicators on democracy have not moved much, the data here suggest political efficacy is high and that there appears to be political toleration by regimes for this efficacy across the region.



Citizens are also comfortable joining civil society organizations to voice their opinions. Yet, we see some differences in comfort-levels across countries ranging from a high of 61 percent in Libya to just 36 percent in Lebanon. The result for Lebanon is notable given that Lebanese are the most comfortable participating in protests but the least comfortable joining civil society. Clearly, the last few years inform these findings. Many new politicians in Lebanon have and continue to emerge from civil society. Recently, Lebanese have engaged in widespread, sustained and creative protests linked to the October Revolution to demand more accountable and transparent governance. With the ongoing port and currency crises, confidence in the political establishment, and civil society, continues to decline.

In fact, Lebanese held the lowest levels of trust for civil society organization among all Arab citizens. While majorities across all countries report they trust civil society, only 38 percent report trusting civil society in Lebanon. Of those who trust civil society, they are much more likely to voice their personal opinion by joining civil society. While those who distrust civil society are less likely to join. It appears that those in urban areas are less likely to trust civil society (37% report they trust CSOs) compared to those in rural areas (where 46% say they hold levels of trust for CSOs). It appears that events in the last few years in Lebanon have dealt civil society a significant blow.



Political parties, as an outlet to express political demands, remain the least attractive to citizens. In no country does more than a third of the population feel comfortable joining parties to voice their opinions. In democratic Tunisia, a scarce 16 percent of the population say they are comfortable doing so. This might signal that Tunisia is far from institutionalizing political parties in ways that command more support from citizens. Indeed, moving political parties to appeal to citizens on a general level is quite vital for successful democracy. In Jordan, we find the lowest levels of comfort among citizens for joining political parties to voice opinion. Only 8 percent reported that they would be comfortable doing so. Alongside the findings that Jordanians remain the least comfortable joining civil society and political parties, suggests that Jordanian citizens have the fewest political access points to voice concerns. In part, this also may be due to the low levels of trust found in political parties across much of the region, particularly in Jordan.¹

¹ See [Trust in Institutions Report](#).

Conclusion

These results demonstrate that MENA publics have nuanced understandings of foreign powers. Foreign Economic challenges will continue to be the lens through which democracy and democratic governance are evaluated. Citizens demand objective economic improvements and are increasingly frustrated with governments for their failure to deliver results. One of the most durable correlations in studies on political and economic development is the correlation between economic development and democracy. Democratic challenges will not emerge from a lack of appreciation for democracy. The results of the survey demonstrate that there is significant support for democracy but also make it clear that challenges will ensue if economic crises are not resolved.

Despite high levels of frustration, citizens remain politically engaged. It appears in the decade since the Arab Spring, citizens are more comfortable expressing their voices through protest and civil society. Perhaps this signals the hope and aspiration that citizens can change and influence politics. The results show that citizens believe in the power of their own voices in the face of authoritarian structures that persist. Yet, whether Arab citizens are heard and their economic concerns addressed remain the core issues that will determine the future vitality of democracy in the region.

Conducted by:

Arab Research and Analytics Associates (ARAA) is a collaborative team of analysts specializing in public opinion research in the Middle East and North Africa. Its team combine decades of experience surveying this region in more than 20 countries. ARAA works with its clients to gather reliable and accurate data on public opinion across the region. ARAA has conducted surveys on behalf of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Stanford University, and Deakin University, among others. For more information, visit www.araaconsulting.com or contact info@araaconsulting.com.



About KAS PoDiMed:

The **Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean** of the **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PoDiMed)** implements transnational projects from Tunis with reference to the entire area of the southern (Maghreb) and eastern Mediterranean (Mashrek). It is designed to strengthen political dialogue, social and economic integration in the region and to promote long-term partnership with the European Union. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is a non-governmental German political foundation with over 100 offices worldwide and 12 programs in the MENA region. Nationally and internationally, we work for peace, freedom and justice through political education. The consolidation of democracy and development cooperation are our particular concerns. For more information, visit www.kas.de/poldimed or contact info.poldimed@kas.de.



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