



January 2021

Med Dialogue Series no. 34

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean



Political Culture in the Arab World: Assumptions and Complexities

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Any debate on political culture in the Arab world, especially ten years since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, must tackle dominant assumptions that have been used by some outside observers regarding how the region does politics. These assumptions are wide and varied and range from seeing the Arab world's political culture as tied to autocracy, to regarding sectarianism as a dominant feature of political culture in the region, to trying to understand political culture through the prism of Islamism versus secularism. These assumptions are often based on dichotomies that are not just simplistic but also anachronistic as they fail to take into account ongoing changes happening in the region. Seeing the region through the lens of such assumptions also ignores wider processes that are taking place, which have to do with the relationship between the elites and ordinary citizens and the relationship between each and the state, and the implications of this for notions of national identity and collective memory. These complex dynamics are at the heart of political culture whether in democratic, quasi-democratic or non-democratic settings.

Political culture is not stagnant

A key assumption that the Arab Spring challenged is that the region is destined to authoritarianism, something that analysts have referred to as "Arab exceptionalism" or "enduring authoritarianism". Such an assumption regards the Arab world as destined to totalitarian rule and completely disregards multiple dimensions of political culture in the region, both formal and informal. A major reason for the endurance of this assumption, including recent proclamations about the so-called "failure" of the Arab Spring, is that observers making this assumption appear to be approaching the region from the top down only. Looking at political dynamics from the top down does show that in most Arab countries, non-democratic political systems endure. However, these political systems mask internal dynamics that are evolving across the region and that are pushing against the prevailing status quo. Therefore, when thinking about political culture in the Arab world, one must examine internal dynamics beyond those of the ruling regimes. Doing so dispels some myths that political participation in the region is stagnant.

While it is true that autocratic regimes persist in most Arab countries, political participation in the region is not stagnant. Before 2011, attention to political participation in the Arab world was mainly directed at loyalist political parties, with some regard for the presence of oppositions and for the role of civil society but only as secondary actors for the most part. The decade since the Arab Spring uprisings has shown that political participation is taking place in more arenas than ever before even if the political systems in place persist. As such, we can talk about the past decade as having witnessed a degree of opening up of the civic political culture in the region.

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Community initiatives are one arena in which this is taking place, particularly in contexts like Syria and Egypt where the ruling regimes closely monitor political engagement and try to quell any form of action that might challenge their power. In such places, communities work on a local basis to solve conflicts and foster a sense of trust among citizens on a micro level. Micro level community engagement aims to evade the watchful eye of the authorities but is important because it lays the foundation for restoring trust among citizens, which paves the way for more overt political engagement when circumstances allow.

Another arena is formal organisations like labour unions and syndicates in places like Lebanon where political parties tend to be dominated by ruling elites. Though new political parties from outside the status quo are emerging in the country, they remain relatively weak, but there is an increasing movement towards activists organising through professional syndicates. Members are mobilising so that the elected leadership of those syndicates hail from the activist milieu. As more syndicates free themselves from the shackles of the status quo, they use their positions to pressure the authorities for reform and to support individual activists in stand offs with the authorities. For example, the head of the Syndicate of Lawyers in Lebanon has represented activists who have been arrested by the authorities in blatant crackdowns on freedom of expression. This kind of representation elevates support for the process of reform that the activists are calling for into a form of systematic, collective action. In doing so, it is planting the seeds of modes of operation that are crucial for political change in the long run, paving the way for trust to be built among citizens and for recognition of the importance of institutionalisation of activism beyond street politics (such as protests and sit-ins).

Political culture does not equate sectarianism

An enduring assumption about the Arab world is that it is a region dominated by sectarianism, namely religious struggle between Muslim Sunnis and Muslim Shiites. The region has indeed witnessed such religious struggle throughout its history and more recently at the height of the rise of the terrorist group ISIS, which presented itself as a champion of Sunni rights in the face of “infidel” Shiites (even though in reality ISIS oppressed Sunnis as well). Tension between Sunnis and Shiites can also be attributed in modern history to the consequences of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 and its project of “exporting” its revolution outside Iran’s borders, which Saudi Arabia—as the leader of not just the Sunni world but the Islamic world at large—saw as a political threat.

However, when understanding the motivations behind the political behaviour of people, political entities and armed groups in the region, it is important not to regard sectarian tension as being about religion per se but as a political issue. In other words, sectarianism is a political tool, instrumentalised to rally mass support and acquire power. That is why in more recent years some scholars have started preferring using the term “sectarianization” instead of sectarianism, to highlight the intentional, active use of sectarianism as opposed to regarding sectarianism as a mere driver of political behaviour.

While not denying that sectarian tension exists in the region, it is simplistic to frame its conflicts as being mainly about sectarianism. The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad for example stoked sectarianism in Syria to present itself as the protector of minorities who are being threatened by Sunni extremist groups, when the reality is that the Assad regime itself oppresses all factions of Syrian society. In Iraq, political conflict is not about Sunnis and Shiites belonging to opposing political camps but about opposing political camps that each harbour people from different religious backgrounds or opposing camps whose members may belong to the same sect but which have different political visions and goals. Assuming that political culture in Iraq is primarily driven by sectarian interest misses how politics there is also about economic interests, military might and the pursuit of power, and that groups (militias, political parties) can act pragmatically as opposed to ideologically as they try to achieve those three goals.

When political culture in the Arab world is understood as being defined by sectarianism, religious ideology ends up being given more weight than it actually has. There is also the danger that civic movements that transcend sectarian boundaries are ignored because they do not fit this simplistic framework. Lebanon for example—with a history of sectarian tension throughout its Civil War—is

witnessing the rise of a movement against sectarianism among a significant segment of its youth population. In late 2020, student elections at three major universities in Lebanon saw members of “secular clubs” win more student council seats than candidates belonging to the ruling political parties in the country. Coordination among these student groups is taking place across the universities. This is not just another example of the importance of institutionalisation mentioned earlier, but also an indicator that even a country whose political culture was long defined by sectarian loyalty as a key driver is no longer what it used to be, despite the persistence of sectarian leaders in power. This once more underlines the importance of not limiting examination of any country in the region to a top-down approach, because what is happening at the grassroots level—though nascent—challenges dominant assumptions and trends alike.

Political culture is not about Islamism vs secularism

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 brought to the fore debate about Islamism and secularism, particularly in context of the first Arab country to witness a revolution in that era, Tunisia. Following the ousting of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia saw a rising role for Ennahda, known as an Islamist party whose leadership had been in exile during Ben Ali’s rule and whose return to Tunisia marked initial attempts by the party to influence the writing of the country’s new constitution in ways that many Tunisians saw as an imposition of an Islamist vision. Facing Ennahda were political groups like Nida Tunis, which presented themselves as secular. The two political parties were arch opponents for years, but eventually they formed a coalition government in a grand gesture of political reconciliation.

Egypt, on the other hand, saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power following the removal of President Hosni Mubarak in the January 25, 2011 revolution, but this was met with staunch opposition from the country’s military, which constitutes Egypt’s deep state. The military worked to remove Mohamed Morsi—a Muslim Brotherhood member who had been elected president after Mubarak—and the new president of Egypt, general Abdel Fattah El Sisi, has since been waging a severe crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.

The events in Tunisia and Egypt show that the division between Islamist and non-Islamist entities in the Arab world does exist. However, fixation on this division as the primary characteristic of political currents diverts attention from the evolutionary behaviour of groups like Ennahda or the PJD in Morocco (which after 2011 came to be represented in government at the level of Prime Minister), which are Islamist political parties that eventually came to exercise political pragmatism. Here it should be noted that the contexts in Tunisia and Morocco are different. Unlike in Tunisia, the PJD’s participation in government in Morocco was initiated by the ruling regime in an effort at co-optation of the country’s leading Islamist party.

A fixation with the Islamist-secular dichotomy also masks the divergent views regarding Islamist groups among certain states in the region. UAE for example regards the Muslim Brotherhood as a key political threat but the Emirates has supported some Salafi groups in the Libyan conflict (particularly Madkhali Salafis who have fought alongside UAE’s ally General Khalifa Haftar). Saudi Arabia historically sponsored various Islamist groups in a bid to spread Wahhabist ideology across the Middle East and beyond but its current leadership is moving away from this model and is instead embarking on a swift process of modernisation that is limiting the role of the religious establishment in the kingdom.

The Islamist-secular dichotomy also carries within it the assumption that Islamism has negative attributes while secularism is inherently progressive. Looking at Egypt and Saudi Arabia today reveals that the ruling regimes there may be shunning notions of Islamism but are exercising autocratic rule. This autocracy threatens freedom of expression and association in the countries. Political opposition is not permitted. Activists and journalists are being thrown in jail. And independent civil society is struggling to exist.

Lebanon presents another complication, which is that the pro-reform movement in the country which began on October 17, 2019 with street protests against the government is calling for Lebanon to adopt a secular political system and in doing so is also vocal against Hezbollah, Lebanon’s leading political

party, which happens to be a Shiite Islamist party. However, Hezbollah is not being critiqued because of its religious ideology but because of its political behaviour, since it is the most powerful party among Lebanon's ruling elites. It is therefore highly problematic to think of political culture in the region as dominated by a singular notion of Islamism or that it is based on regressive Islamism that is at odds with a progressive secularism.

Political culture, the state and the people

The above discussion shows that understanding political culture in the Arab world today should not be done through trying to impose simplistic frameworks but through examining the motivations and behaviours of the different actors in the region's countries and the contexts affecting them. Motivations and behaviours adapt according to external and internal factors. For example, Ennahda's embrace of political pragmatism has been largely driven by the desire to preserve the party's participation in local and national politics in Tunisia. Sisi's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood is driven by the Egyptian military's goal of eliminating the possibility of a popular political alternative rising in Egypt. And Lebanon's secular youth movement is driven by recognition that the country's problems—though linked to the wider geopolitical context that often rendered Lebanon a playground for competing external actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia—are largely internal and the result of its existing political system.

This brings to the fore dynamics at the heart of political culture, namely the relationships between different actors. Across the region and regardless of ideological background, ruling elites in non-democratic (like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and others) and quasi-democratic (like Lebanon and Iraq) settings see grassroots mobilisation by citizens as a threat to the status quo. They resort to various tools to preserve their power, including coercion (as seen in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon) and co-optation (as seen in Morocco). Often, in doing so, they try to make a claim over the notion of national identity, so that the ruling elites try to equate themselves with the state. Syria is perhaps the ultimate example of this, where the Assad regime seeks to exercise hegemony over Syrian national identity by branding any form of opposition treason.

Ruling regimes also sometimes raise the threat of instability to try to assert the importance of their continuation in power. This has been most vividly seen in Lebanon and Iraq in context of the protests that began there in October 2019. In both places, the ruling elites raised the prospect of war breaking out to try to frighten protesters. However, in both countries, protesters have been too young to harbour a collective memory of war that would act as a deterrent. Instead, they have been actively seeking to create a collective memory based on the activism experience and on having a shared vision for their countries based on reform and freedom. Both sets of protesters have sought to reclaim the "nation" from the rulers.

Tunisia remains the only Arab country in which this reclamation of the nation from the ancient regime is ongoing with a degree of success despite the economic and political hurdles facing its democratic transition. The 2011 Revolution in the country is a powerful component of the new collective memory shared by its citizens. Its civic political culture is dynamic and open, and unlike many other Arab countries, the government in Tunisia engages with civil society and its professional syndicates act as a government watchdog and often play a major role in steering the political process. In sharp contrast to Egypt, and despite the need for security sector reform in Tunisia, the Tunisian military has always stayed outside politics.

As such, Tunisia illustrates the possibilities of changes in political culture that can happen elsewhere in the region were other countries to also embark on serious processes of democratic transition. However, the discussion above has also underlined that even in non-democratic settings, political culture must not be written off as being about top-down rule or stale notions of good versus evil or other polar opposites. Even in the most autocratic settings, political culture is complex and citizens continue to seek ways to participate in politics, even at a micro level.

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