

# Political Parties in Young Arab Democracies

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>> Political parties proved largely irrelevant to the 2011 Arab uprisings. Without backing from parties, leaders or ideology, the facebook generation managed to mobilize the masses, articulate their demands on the streets and project them internationally via social networking sites. The role of political parties in democracies is to represent citizens' interests, foster participation, structure political choices and form governments. As Thomas Carothers explains in *Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies*, parties in young and struggling democracies are typically held in low regard. Perceived as corrupt, self-interested clubs built around a single leader, lacking a distinctive ideological identity and dogged by inter-party squabbling, they are largely disconnected from the lives of ordinary citizens. Challenges for political party development in the Arab world include building organisational capacities, forging a distinct message, developing grassroots constituencies, and, most importantly, winning citizens' trust.

## PARTY DEVELOPMENT IN TUNISIA, EGYPT AND LIBYA

In pre-revolutionary Libya, political parties were banned outright. Egypt and Tunisia were de facto one-party states overseen by a single strongman, and the 'ruling party' was largely merged with state structures. The few tolerated opposition parties were harassed on a regular basis and stood no chance of attaining any meaningful political power. Involuntarily, legal opposition parties helped to legitimise the system by partaking in token elections. This panorama caused today's Arab populations to view political parties as corrupt, useless, or both.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Arab political parties face an uphill battle to restore people's confidence in them.
- The dominance of Islamist parties is partly due to the lack of credible liberal alternatives.
- Reinventing Arab party politics will require a political and legal system in which elections give party representatives access to the core of power.

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»»»»» After the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, regime parties were disbanded, and dozens of new political parties were licensed, creating a highly fragmented political landscape. While parties played a marginal role in the revolutions, they gained relevance once the transitions began. The mass movement that deposed autocratic rulers largely failed to transfer its demands from social networks to party politics. Despite all reservations, political parties remain the only means of channelling mass support for the goals of the revolution into an institutionalised political consensus.

In **Tunisia**, following the ouster of Ben Ali in early 2011, the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) was dissolved. Most formerly banned parties, as well as a plethora of new ones, were licensed during the following months. Over 100 parties competed in Tunisia's first free and fair legislative election since independence on October 23, 2011. Turnout was over 90 per cent of registered voters. High fragmentation led to 31 per cent of the votes being cast to lists that remained unrepresented in the Constituent Assembly. With 40 per cent, the Nahda Party emerged as the strongest force, and formed a coalition government with the centre-left parties Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic. In 2012, several splits and mergers among liberal-leftist parties have reflected efforts to raise the liberal camp's appeal and political clout ahead of the 2013 parliamentary elections.

Ennahda's electoral victory has been largely ascribed to three factors. Firstly, the movement benefited from its reputation as a major voice of opposition against the Ben Ali regime. Many of its leaders were jailed for years. After the revolution, 'jail time' emerged as a mark of candidates' electoral credibility. Secondly, the party was the only formation that successfully reached out to grassroots across the country. Facing heavy political persecution, Ennahda had been practically absent from the Tunisian political scene for two decades, but in the run-up to the 2011 elections, Ennahda was the only party holding rallies and putting up posters in even the remotest villages.

Liberal parties lacked both the resources and consciousness to effectively reach out to rural areas. Thirdly, the party succeeded in devising a political message which, by promising to abolish the secularism 'forced' upon Tunisians by subsequent dictatorships, appealed to religious people and some anti-regime critics alike. While the party stresses its commitment to democracy in a reformist reading of Islamic law, many liberal Tunisians remain wary that Islamists might undo the country's modernist secular legacy.

Tunisian parties have little time to relax, with the next legislative elections announced for March 2013. The liberal opposition remains fragmented and ill-prepared to learn from strategic mistakes, although some recognise the need to 'talk to people in their homes, not through TV ads'. In May 2012, Al-Islah became the first Tunisian Salafist party to be licensed. Tunisia's main Salafist organisation, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, remains banned. The Nahda government's reluctance to take drastic action to prevent Salafist disturbances has been criticised as a way of compromising on programmatic integrity to secure Salafist votes. The growing strength of Salafism puts Ennahda in an awkward position and will require a clearer stance ahead of the 2013 election. For the liberal opposition, the two biggest liberal parties' coalition with Ennahda has dampened the prospects of building a united front against the dominant Islamist trend before the elections.

Political competition in Mubarak's **Egypt** was slightly more open than in Tunisia. A wider range of opposition parties were licensed, and the then banned Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was allowed to participate in elections via independent candidates. Dominated by Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), Egypt's political and legal framework barred opposition parties from entering the realm of core political decision-making. Following the ouster of Mubarak on April 16, 2011, the NDP was dissolved and its assets transferred to the state. As in Tunisia, a multitude of formerly outlawed and new parties were licensed, among them the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) linked to the MB, Salafist parties such

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as Al-Nour, and long-standing license candidates such as Al-Karama and Wasat. Most political parties are wary of being branded 'Islamist' or 'secular' (both perceived to have negative connotations), preferring labels such as 'civil', or 'Islamic reference'.

With less than a year to prepare for the post-revolutionary elections (November 2011 to January 2012), most newly-founded parties were highly inexperienced in terms of organisation, had only a

rudimentary party platform, and lacked the skills and experience to effectively reach out to voters across the country. The only exception was the FJP, which was able to rely on the MB's solid grassroots connections. Tolerated throughout Mubarak's rule, since the 1970s the MB had invested significant efforts and resources into devel-

oping its grassroots constituencies, including via a network of hospitals and other social institutions providing much-needed services.

In the run-up to the elections, various electoral blocs emerged. The MB formed a bloc with a number of liberal and leftist parties (including Wafd, Ghad and Tagamma), while other Islamist parties, including Al-Nour, assembled in a more conservative Islamist electoral bloc. With a turnout of 62 per cent of the electorate, the elections produced the expected MB majority (213 of the 508 seats). The Islamist alliance headed by the Salafist Al-Nour came in second, taking almost one quarter of seats. In an attempt to prevent an anti-Islamist backlash, MB/FJP leaders have been reluctant to form a pact with the Salafists, favouring alliances with liberals instead. Within the MB, debates on reforming the organisation have led to a number of splits and defections. The

FJP has yet to become fully independent from the MB. The latter's funding remains opaque as its lack of legal status relieves the movement from disclosing its funding sources.

In a May 2012 Pew poll of views on political parties and movements, 70 per cent of Egyptians expressed a positive perception of the MB, followed by the April 6th movement (68 per cent) and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF, 63 per cent). Notably, none of these are political parties, which fell behind (FJP 56 per cent, Al-Nour 44 per cent, Egyptian bloc 38 per cent). The outcome of the power struggle between the ruling SCAF, the MB, Salafists and liberal political forces will determine the degree to which elected party representatives are allowed to exercise the executive powers bestowed on them by voters. Although members of the Egyptian parliament have been elected, the powers and responsibilities of the mandate are yet to be specified by the constitution. The same will apply to the new president to be elected by June 2012.

Political parties in **Libya** were banned from 1972 onwards. Following the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi and the end of the 2011 civil war, in January 2012 the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) paved the way for the creation of political parties. Since then, 36 new parties have been licensed, with others awaiting approval. Libya's first democratic elections for a Constituent Assembly are scheduled for June 2012, affording the new parties even less time to prepare than their Egyptian and Tunisian neighbours. Of the 200 seats in the Assembly, 80 will be open for political parties, and the remainder will be reserved for independent candidates.

Libya's political party landscape is being created from scratch. This means that there are no institutional capacities, experience or skills to build on. At the same time, Libyan parties will not need to overcome the ingrained cynicism towards political parties which their peers in Egypt and Tunisia are facing. Moreover, creating a new legal and institutional framework provides an opportunity for the kind of fresh start that popular



## Political parties remain the only means of channelling mass support for the revolution into an institutionalised political consensus

»»»»» revolutions longed for. During the interim period, the NTC has been acting as Libya's de facto parliament. In April 2012, the NTC adopted a controversial political party law that banned the establishment of parties based on religion, tribe or ethnicity, effectively banning Salafists from running in elections. Following opposition from Islamist and federalist contenders, however, the rule was eventually dropped.

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood's newly founded party is expected to fare well in the parliamentary elections. Persecuted in Libya, MB leaders developed the organisation from US exile. Since 1999, a change in Gaddafi's approach from overt repression to co-option allowed the MB to set foot in Libya again. Unlike their peers in Egypt and Tunisia, however, Libyan Islamists have hardly any experience of grassroots outreach, as Gaddafi's rule prevented them from building both constituencies and a solid organisational structure within Libya. Ethnic diversity and the importance of tribe structures mean that political parties risk being organised along ethnic lines, and that traditional tribal and clan structures may outmanoeuvre official political institutions as vehicles of local governance. Other significant differences between Libya and its revolutionary neighbours are the security legacy of the civil war, and the far more positive economic outlook due to the country's oil and gas reserves.

#### **PARTIES IN TRANSITIONS: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

A number of themes stand out regarding the role of political parties' in the 2011 uprisings and the ensuing transitions. Experiences from political transitions across the globe provide useful lessons on how similar challenges were faced.

**Building organisational capacities.** Popular pressure for a legitimate government pushes for early elections. This means that newly-founded parties have only a few months to build up minimal organisational capacities: draft a platform, attract members, choose candidates, develop

institutional structures and campaign. In today's new Arab democracies, early elections benefit the few parties that already have these capacities and/or privileged access to funds. As hardly any public money is available to parties and funding from foreign sources is banned, parties often depend on a few private donors, hampering their independence. Only some Islamist movements, backed by foreign funds, were able to develop their organisational capacities under the dictatorship. The Islamists' institutional head-start carries the risk that one party will entrench its dominant position. However, in many transitions (e.g. Eastern Europe), initially fragmented party landscapes gradually re-concentrated as a small number of stable parties was able to consolidate a solid institutional and funding base.

Capacity building also means developing future party leaders and disassociating the parties' identity from that of individual leaders. In Ukraine, revolution leader Yushenko's party fared well in the immediate aftermath of the Orange revolution, but its success faded when Yushenko fell from grace. Following a youth-led revolution, the rotation of elites and the younger generation's access to central party positions is crucial for parties' appeal. In Putin's United Russia party, there is effectively no rotation of elites, and the party's youth arm serves to portray the party as a mass youth movement. For Arab parties of all stripes, enabling new generations to access party power will be key to their future. This is particularly true for those that existed previous to the revolution, as entrenched structures and traditions are likely to be perpetuated (as in the Argentinian Peronist party, for example). The challenge of organisational renewal is particularly urgent in strongly hierarchical MB movements, as demonstrated by the numerous splits of dissenting youth opposing the old cadre's top-down decision making.

**Developing grassroots constituencies.** As Carothers indicates, the immediate plunge into electoral campaigning poses huge challenges to newly-founded parties. Aware they might not survive if they are unsuccessful in the first elections,

parties focus all their efforts on Election Day. This is detrimental to long-term constituency-building and often aggravates the elements so often criticised in parties: shallow platforms, opportunistic self-interest, superficial messaging and a disconnection from the rural grassroots. Around the world, few stable political parties have evolved from immediate electoralism. Exceptions to this trend are a number of parties that were tolerated under the previous regime, using that time to build strong grassroots connections, which they then benefited from once genuine electoral competition opened up (e.g. the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan and the National Action Party in Mexico). In the Arab world, some Islamist movements' long-term approach to grassroots constituency building empowered them politically. As regimes fell, Islamist movements were the only political forces with the grassroots backing needed to fill the power vacuum.

#### **Forging a distinctive programmatic identity.**

Among the main criticisms of political parties is their programmatic vagueness. In an attempt to please as many voters as possible, parties avoid clear stances, instead proclaiming general goals like 'development' and 'democracy'. In consequence, parties lack the clear programmatic identity that is indispensable if parties are to orientate voters, articulate popular will and channel it towards electoral representation.

The integration of new democracies into global markets reduces the scope for distinctive identities forged around different macroeconomic policies. If all parties embrace IMF-guided market capitalism, citizens have no choice. This was the case in Latin America in the 1980s and 90s, where market reforms and privatisation ultimately did little for growth, poverty and inequalities, and people's hopes of achieving better living conditions, dignity and justice through democratisation were disappointed – and political parties were blamed.

While nationalist and faith-based ideologies have been used by various political forces in the ensuing struggle for power, they remained at the sidelines of the 2011 uprisings. The 2011 uprisings in the

Arab world happened for the sake of 'freedom and dignity'. The decreasing role of ideologies and the reduced range of policy choices leave a substantial void in parties' identities. Filling this void with religious or ethnic references can be hazardous for the success of democratic transitions. As experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Kenya) show, political relations based on kin, tribe or regions risk determining voting behaviour and dominate over formal concepts of citizenship.

MB affiliates' electoral victories in Tunisia and Egypt have been widely interpreted as a sign of the rise of Islamist ideology in the Arab world. As in other parts of the world, globalisation has led to a revival of local traditions and identity politics, including those associated with religion. Several authoritarian regimes sought to capitalise on this trend and instrumentalise religion to strengthen their hold on power. The aftermath of the uprisings has widened the spectrum of Islamist political actors, particularly with Salafists entering party politics. However, the appeal of the Islamists' ideological message is just one of several factors explaining their recent electoral gains. The extent to which their success can be regarded as a triumph of faith-based ideology per se will become clearer once strong non-faith-based political competitors emerge.

**Restoring trust.** Perceived as part of the problem that the revolutions sought to oust, political parties face an uphill battle to restore people's confidence in them as representatives of citizens' interests, and in multiparty democracy more broadly. Of course, parties can only be as good as the system in which they operate, and they are often blamed for broader problems such as economic crisis and poverty. The parties' need to win votes for survival fuels the need for money, which reinforces the illicit behaviour that damages voters' trust. Following a revolution, the degree to which voters identify a political party with the goals of the revolution is electorally decisive. In many African countries (e.g. South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, Senegal), former liberation movements managed to win elections on the legacy of the revolution/liberation they fought. Sometimes this led to

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»»»» a dominant party system in which the boundary between the party in power and the state was increasingly blurred (e.g. Kenya). This risk also exists in young Arab democracies in which a single Islamist party is dominant and opposition parties remain weak. Clean elections, successful first governments and parliaments, respect for accountability, transparency and rotation of power, and leaders with integrity can all help to restore confidence over time.

**CONCLUSION**

The Arab Spring established MB-affiliated Islamist parties as the dominant political force in the region. The Islamists' electoral success can be ascribed to the combined effect of their grassroots connection, their charity work, their image as the opposition, their privileged funding situation, and the appeal of their faith-based political message. The dominance of Islamist parties is therefore not necessarily a sign of mass faith-based ideology: it also highlights the lack of credible and efficient liberal alternatives.

Shunned before and ignored during the 2011 uprisings, Arab political parties are now coming to the forefront of transitions as revolutionary demands must be translated into viable political agendas. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the future of political parties will depend on the role and power ascribed to them – and to the elected state institutions – in the constitutions to be written over the coming year. A deep mistrust of the political class was among the dictators' parting gifts. The challenge for new and revived political parties is no less than reinventing Arab party politics. This will only be possible within a political and legal system in which democratic elections give party representatives access to the core of power.

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