

POLITICAL PARTY DEVELOPMENT BEFORE
AND AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

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Political parties have long struggled to gain traction in the Arab world due to a number of inhibiting factors, among them a potent mix of repression and government co-optation. But this is not to say that the region has lacked viable opposition forces. Islamist movements—most of which are branches or descendants of the Muslim Brotherhood—have over time consolidated their position as leading political actors in the region. Yet such movements are a far cry from traditional, Western-style parties. Most political parties, after all, do not double as states-within-states, with parallel networks of mosques, clinics, banks, businesses, daycare centers, and even Boy Scout troops. Islamist parties do. It was their long-term focus on education and social service provision—rather than on contesting elections—that ultimately helped propel Islamist movements, and later their associated parties, to political prominence.

Whether acting according to the traditional model of party competition (where winning elections is an end) or “alternative competitive” and

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

“restricted competition” models¹ (where winning is a means), political parties generally seek to win elections and assume executive power. However, in the Arab world, parties were rarely given the opportunity to govern—or to even think about governing—at the local or national level. Citizens saw little utility in joining parties that would never be permitted a real stake in the political process. Only in one country, Morocco, was there a semblance of genuine multi-party competition. During 1998’s “*alternance*,” the Socialist Union of Populist Forces (USFP) led a left-of-center government, after winning a plurality in parliamentary elections.

Unlike Morocco, most Arab countries do not have a tradition of political party activity. On the eve of the 2011 uprising, most of Egypt’s legal parties, for example, had memberships in the mere hundreds or thousands and were derided as “cardboard parties,” or *abzab cartoniya*. The liberal Wafd Party was something of an exception, as it could claim a storied tradition as one of Egypt’s pro-independence parties during the country’s short-lived “liberal era” of the 1930s and 1940s. During a brief political opening after Hosni Mubarak became president in 1981, the Wafd—which had reconstituted itself in the 1970s—seemed poised to regain some of its former prominence. But despite a solid showing in the 1984 elections, it subsequently descended into irrelevance, demonstrating the impossibility of developing healthy party politics in an authoritarian context.

Elsewhere in the region, the intellectual and ideological decline of the left has made it difficult for certain parties to re-emerge after repressive measures are lifted. In Jordan, the National Socialist Party of Sulayman al-Nabulsi briefly came to power in 1957 before an embattled King Hussein cracked down and curtailed the activities of political parties, eventually banning them altogether. When martial law was lifted, leftist and socialist parties tried to reconstitute themselves but failed to gain popular support and withered away.

In Communist South Yemen, the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) was the longtime ruling party. After unification, it joined President Ali Abdullah

¹ This traditional model is best approximated by Anthony Downs’s spatial model, first presented in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1957. For alternative models, see Donald A. Wittman, “Parties as Utility Maximizers,” *The American Political Science Review*, 67 (June 1973), p. 495.

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

Saleh's General People's Congress in a governing coalition. After the defeat of Southern forces in the 1994 civil war, the YSP was weakened considerably with leaders fleeing into exile and its organizational structures damaged. Just as importantly, though, the Saleh regime became increasingly authoritarian after the civil war, making it difficult for the YSP—and any other party besides the Brotherhood-affiliated Islah Party—to build significant support.²

In country after country, the growing tendency to resort to state repression—in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Algeria, and Tunisia—fatally weakened political party life in the 1990s. To the extent that citizens wished to become involved in politics, they tended to join civil society organizations, professional associations, and, as mentioned, religious movements. However, as inconsequential as they may have seemed, political parties still served a purpose under some semi-authoritarian regimes. Rather than eliminate dissent altogether, the ruling regimes hoped to manage and contain it. Political parties provided the illusion of freedom and pluralism. The totalitarian nature of Baathist Iraq and Syria had become quaint and outdated. The better, less costly way to subdue the opposition was to give it just enough room to breathe, but little more. Elections gave regimes a chance to “legitimize” their rule and employ the language of democracy for authoritarian ends. The whole enterprise was not particularly convincing, but nor was it entirely meaningless. Opposition parties used elections—and all their accompanying rules and procedures—to negotiate the boundaries of political contestation. As Nathan Brown writes, “Regimes and oppositions bargain continuously and without final resolution over who may run in elections, who will oversee balloting, how votes will be translated into seats, who may observe the electoral process [and] how campaigns will be conducted.”³

Semi-authoritarian regimes also had political parties of their own, although these were almost exclusively vehicles for professional advancement, distribution of power to allies and friends, and the management of patron–client relationships. When the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions occurred, the supposedly “mass” parties of the National Democratic

² For more on political parties in Yemen see Ahmed A. Hezam Al-Yemeni, *The Dynamic of Democratisation: Political Parties in Yemen*, Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003.

³ Nathan J. Brown, *When Victory is Not an Option: Islamists Movements in Arab Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 26.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

Party and the Constitutional Democratic Rally, each claiming membership in the millions, quickly crumbled. Some ruling parties, such as Yemen's General People's Congress (GPC), proved more resilient and survived the uprisings, albeit in a weakened state. Revolutions against ruling parties raise the question of what role, if any, those parties should be allowed to play during the transition, with Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen opting for different approaches depending on the particular nature of the transition. As Ellen Lust notes, "Popular demands to ban or blacklist former regime allies are especially prevalent where elites have not defected from the old order to be at the forefront of reform."⁴

Importantly, the ongoing transitions in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt (at least before the July 2013 military coup) have provided new spaces for the formation and development of political parties. With the fall of old regimes, parties were now, for the first time, allowed to win elections, thereby propelling them to a newfound prominence as the primary vehicle for political expression and representation. Past restrictions were lifted, allowing liberal and leftist parties their first real opportunity to reach new audiences, build party structures, and even play a role in government. Meanwhile, Islamist movements—the Egyptian and Libyan Muslim Brotherhoods and al-Nahda in Tunisia—established political parties that, while at least nominally independent, represent, to varying degrees, the interests of the parent movement.

Despite a flourishing of new parties in quantity if not in quality, those that found themselves in the halls of government in Egypt and Tunisia came under mounting criticism for their failure to address economic woes. Those in the opposition, meanwhile, too easily resorted to obstructionism while failing to provide coherent alternatives. Increased polarization in these countries raises the question: what makes a "loyal opposition?" Political parties themselves may decide that party politics is not the best avenue to challenge constitutional orders that they see as illegitimate. The resort to street protest and civil disobedience—as occurred in late 2012 over President Mohamed Morsi's moves against Egypt's judiciary and, later, with the 30 June 2013 mass protests—may

⁴ Ellen Lust, "Voting for Change: The Pitfalls and Possibilities of First Elections in Arab Transitions," Brookings Doha Center—Stanford University Project on Arab Transitions, May 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/05/09-arab-democracies-lust>, p. 2.

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

lead to a re-emergence of civil society and vibrant popular movements, but it is just as likely to arouse an anti-democratic populism and undermine the institutionalization of strong party systems.

The Development of Party Systems

Carles Boix defines a “party system” as “the national profile, in terms of number, size, and ideological preferences, of parties.”⁵ As the United States, Britain, France, and other early democracies developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, parties gradually cohered, adopting defined programs and exacting growing discipline from millions of members and supporters.

Party systems are products of a country’s particular history. Over time, they become entrenched and self-sustaining. What happens at the start of the democratization process is not incidental, nor can it be easily reversed. This is what makes transitional periods particularly tense and polarizing. The stakes over a permanent constitution, separation of powers, and the role of religion in public life—in other words the very shape of institutions—are particularly high. And institutional frameworks are not easily changed. Referring to Brazil’s transition, Frances Hagopian wrote that “individuals rise who are adept at the political game as it is played, and they use their positions to perpetuate modes of political interaction that favor them. In this way, political arrangements, once in place, condition future political behavior and possibilities.”⁶

The electoral system, which Giovanni Sartori calls “the most specific manipulative instrument of politics,” may be of even greater importance than constitutions.⁷ Electoral laws can either encourage the development of political parties, or ensure that they remain weak and ineffectual. In the Middle East, Jordan is perhaps the most striking case. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the country was experiencing what, for a time,

⁵ Carles Boix, “The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems,” in Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 501.

⁶ Frances Hagopian, “Democracy by Undemocratic Means? Elites, Political Pacts, and Regime Transition in Brazil,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 23 (July 1990), p. 148.

⁷ Giovanni Sartori, “Political Development and Political Engineering,” *Public Policy*, 17 (1963), p. 273.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

appeared to be a promising democratic “experiment.” However, the move toward democracy was derailed with the advent of the now notorious “one-vote” electoral law, or *sawt al-wahid*, which was decreed in 1993 by King Hussein. The 1989 elections had been conducted under a plurality block voting system in which voters in a given district could cast a ballot for as many candidates as there were seats.⁸ This benefited well-organized groups like the Brotherhood that could count on the commitment and discipline of their members. This dynamic would change dramatically under “one-vote.” Now, in a district of six seats, each voter could cast a ballot for only one person rather than six. Single non-transferable vote (SNTV) is an increasingly rare electoral system, with only a handful of countries—including Afghanistan and Vanuatu—using it on the national level. As Democracy Reporting International notes: “A reason for the infrequent use of SNTV as an electoral system is that it is widely acknowledged to be specifically disadvantageous toward the development of political parties and because it tends to result in votes being cast for individual candidates or those who represent specific groups in a district rather than those who stand for political party platforms.”⁹

In countries where ethnicity or tribal affiliation remains paramount, SNTV can prove even more damaging to party development. With only one vote, indigenous Jordanians were more likely to vote for a candidate from their tribe. As a result, “independents” dominated every subsequent parliament. In the 2007 parliamentary elections, political parties won less than 10 percent of the total seats. District size is another important variable. Where candidates can win a seat with only a few

⁸ For example, if a district had six seats, Jordanians could vote for up to six candidates, which benefited groups like the Brotherhood. In turn, smaller leftist groups and Christian candidates sought alliances with the Brotherhood. Both sides benefited. A Brotherhood supporter could vote for the two Brotherhood candidates running in his or her district, vote for one Christian, one leftist, and still have one vote to spare. Similarly, a Christian, with a vote to spare, could vote for two Christian candidates as well as the two Brotherhood candidates. By being selective about which districts to contest and by forming alliances with a variety of individuals and groups, the Brotherhood could effectively guarantee the victory of nearly all its candidates.

⁹ “Assessment of the Electoral Framework: The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan,” Democracy Reporting International and New Jordan Research Center, Berlin: Democracy Reporting International, 2007, pp. 16–17.

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

thousand votes, intimate personal connections and familial ties are the keys to electoral success.¹⁰ Ideological or programmatic considerations become secondary to most voters, making it difficult for political parties to gain support.

Despite the experience of Jordan, Libya, under the guidance of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and pro-democracy NGOs like the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), adopted SNTV to elect eighty out of the 200 seats for its General National Congress in 2012. The other 120 seats were reserved for independents. One of the rationales behind this was to prevent any one political party from dominating the elections, which would in turn prevent any one party from monopolizing the process of writing the permanent constitution. While Libya's electoral law is of course subject to amendment, there is, again, the matter of path dependence. Party systems are self-sustaining. Individuals and parties elected under a particular system are unlikely to use their power to propose an entirely different system. Interestingly enough, it is the Israeli model that may be most instructive here. Israel's pure form of proportional representation, enacted in 1948, was only expected to be a temporary arrangement. Once elected, a constituent assembly would then pass a permanent electoral law.¹¹ However, as Vernon Bogdanor notes, "this assumption overlooked [the fact that] those who thrive under a given electoral system come to have a vested interest in preserving it, fearing that any change might hurt them and help their opponents."¹² Despite efforts at reform, the electoral system of 1948 remains in place today. Yet for all its faults, the Israeli system did not necessarily impede party formation. Libya's system, on the other hand, does. The combination of SNTV and an institutional bias favoring independents, as well as the continued importance of tribal loyalties, does not bode well for the coherence or discipline of Libyan political parties.

¹⁰ In the 2003 Jordanian elections, a majority of deputies won their seats with under 4,000 votes. See "Assessment of the Electoral Framework," p. 12.

¹¹ See Vernon Bogdanor, "Israel Debates Reform," *Journal of Democracy*, 4 (Jan. 1993), pp. 66–7.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 67.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

The Historical Encounter with Hizbiyya

Each country has its own unique historical encounter with multi-partyism, or *hizbiyya*. It is this history that bears its weight on the present, albeit to varying degrees depending on the country in question. In the 1930s and 1940s, Egypt featured a deeply flawed but functioning parliamentary system. There were reasonably free elections, with power alternating between political parties. Yet the system was a far cry from democracy: Britain and its client monarchy routinely intervened in domestic politics. The period between 1944 and 1950 saw the rapid collapse of successive governments, eight in all.¹³ As Joel Gordon recounts, “escalating political violence marked a period of increasing disillusion with parliamentary rule that encompassed all sectors of Egyptian society.”¹⁴ When revolution swept Egypt in 1952, it did away with the elements of the old regime, including the political parties. Not just in Egypt but across the region, avowedly nationalist leaders came to power, promising unity and purpose as part of a totalizing vision that brooked little dissent. What ensued was a massive, controlled project of social engineering, bankrolled by the largesse of the bureaucratic state. Unsurprisingly, political parties (except, of course, the one party) were seen as anathema.

Islamists, too, were suspicious of *hizbiyya*. As recently as the early 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood was split on whether to formally take part in parliamentary politics. There was the legacy of founder Hassan al-Banna, who saw *hizbiyya* as a “device which has given legality to the appetites of the rulers and the tyrannies of authority.”¹⁵ He saw the various parties as elite structures beholden to special interests, which failed to give voice to the concerns of common Egyptians. Moreover, they were little more than pawns in the global chessboard, victims of Britain and the king’s unending political machinations.¹⁶ Similarly, Umar al-

¹³ Joel Gordon, “The False Hopes of 1950: The Wafd’s Last Hurrah and the Demise of the Old Order,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 21 (May 1989), p. 193.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 261.

¹⁶ Interestingly, however, Banna had better things to say about the American political system, which he saw as being bound by a national consensus and, therefore, united. The two parties competed during election season and

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

Tilmisani, general guide of the Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s, argued that political parties would “split public opinion into antagonistic factions.”¹⁷

In Libya, political parties were banned, with only brief interruptions, from 1951 through to the end of Muammar Qaddafi’s rule in 2011. Qaddafi, like Nasser before him, layered his opposition to partyism with ideological justifications. Among other things, he argued that political parties produced factionalism and division and were a “contemporary form of dictatorship.”¹⁸ Such views did not disappear overnight in Libya. In April 2012, after conducting nationwide focus groups, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) found that many Libyans still expressed “discomfort with political parties due to the legacy of Qaddafi’s propaganda” and saw them as “untrustworthy, conniving, and motivated by secret agendas and possibly unduly influenced by foreign countries seeking to interfere in Libyan politics.”¹⁹ Qaddafi’s legacy may help explain the lack of vocal opposition to an electoral law that disadvantaged political parties.

The Egyptian and Tunisian regimes, in contrast, allowed for some political party participation, however weak and circumscribed. At one time Egypt had relatively strong parties, such as the liberal Wafd, contesting elections—and winning them—in the 1930s and 1940s, as mentioned above. Even during the years of Mubarak and Ben Ali’s repression, Egypt and to a lesser extent Tunisia had legal parties which ran candidates in elections and participated in parliament. After the uprisings in both countries, political parties did not have to start from a blank slate in terms of both popular perceptions and organizational structures. Two parties in Tunisia that would play an important role in the post-revolution period—the liberal Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the leftist Progressive Democratic Party (PDP)—had devel-

offered differing policy prescriptions. On issues of “sovereignty,” however, they acted similarly. See Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, p. 261.

¹⁷ Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 125.

¹⁸ “POMED Backgrounder: Previewing Libya’s Elections,” Project on Middle East Democracy, 5 July 2012, p. 9.

¹⁹ Megan Doherty, “Building a New Libya: Citizen Views on Libya’s Electoral and Political Processes,” May 2012, National Democratic Institute, p. 13.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

oped some name recognition and political legitimacy as opposition parties under the Ben Ali regime (although the former was banned, while the latter chose to boycott successive parliamentary elections).

New Parties, Old Cleavages

History also matters in other ways. In their seminal study, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (1967), Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan argue that the process of state formation and modernization, along with fundamental shifts in economic structures—the Industrial Revolution and accompanying urbanization—gave rise to differences among citizens that provoked lasting cleavages.²⁰ The fact that economic cleavages are paramount in most Western democracies, then, is no accident, given the particular sequence of events in the modernization process. Meanwhile, it was in Catholic-majority countries that clericalism and anti-clericalism became a major dimension of conflict. On the other hand, where the Reformation succeeded in displacing the Catholic Church and its role in economic and political life, religious divides, while still relevant, tended to fade to the background.²¹

The economic dimension of conflict in Western Europe became institutionalized over time—or “frozen,” in the terminology of Lipset and Rokkan—in the form of parties that self-defined according to economic concerns, in particular the distribution of capital and the state’s role in economic production.²² Yet it would be a mistake to think that party systems are historically determined. The literature on party alignment strongly suggests that “parties themselves . . . are the main drivers behind party system change and stability.”²³ As Nick Sitter puts it, “the parties have stolen the show.”²⁴

²⁰ Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, London: The Free Press, 1967.

²¹ Boix, “The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems,” pp. 502–3.

²² For a useful discussion of the “freezing” and “thawing” of party cleavages, see Claude A. Bonilla et al., “Social or Political Cleavages? A Spatial Analysis of the Party System in Post-Authoritarian Chile,” *Public Choice*, 146 (2011), pp. 9–21.

²³ Nick Sitter, “Cleavages, Party Strategy and Party System Change in Europe, East and West,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 3, 3 (2002), p. 448.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

Parties decide which issues to prioritize in order to distinguish themselves from the competition. It is this process of parties interacting with the electorate and, of course, each other that gradually produces the party system. As Adam Przeworski and John Sprague note with regard to the rise of socialist parties in Western Europe: “Class is salient in any society, if, when, and only to the extent to which it is important to political parties which mobilize workers.”²⁵ Again, party systems like electoral systems are unlikely to change dramatically, notwithstanding major internal or external shocks. Parties inject cleavages into politics. Those cleavages in turn become more salient, forcing other parties to respond to and address them in the public arena.

These considerations are important in situating the Egyptian and Tunisian experiences. Both countries feature underlying patterns of party stability, which are likely to hold, at least in some form, for the foreseeable future. The relevant historical episode, particularly for Egypt, can be tied to the events of 1967, when Arab countries were routed by Israel in the Six-Day War. Such a stark defeat provoked unprecedented soul-searching, leading many to conclude that the socialist experiment had failed. An emerging narrative—which would become the Islamist narrative—was that the Arab world had strayed from the teachings of Islam and that it needed to return to true Islamic principles. And so the Islamic revival began in earnest, spreading across the region, encouraged by the release of imprisoned Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the early 1970s. Gulf oil money provided an additional boost. Islam had yet to become the defining political issue, but it soon would.

The 1980s saw the Egyptian Brotherhood’s foray into parliamentary politics. After being decimated by the Nasser regime, the group grew exponentially in the 1970s, reaching out to new audiences, gaining recruits, and rebuilding its organizational structures. When President Hosni Mubarak opened up Egyptian politics in the early 1980s and promised competitive elections, the Brotherhood entered the fray, despite its discomfort with party politics, and formed an alliance with the ostensibly secular Wafd Party. The Brotherhood’s Salah Abu Ismail justified the decision on purely practical grounds: “They didn’t allow us to form a party on the basis of *aqidah* (creed) ... and closed the door of

²⁵ Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 10–11.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

dāwa, so we are not able to raise our voices on the pulpit or through [our own] political party, so what is left for us except to work through an existing political party?”²⁶

From the outset, Islamists lobbed accusations at the Wafd for not respecting Islamic law.²⁷ The Wafd certainly tried, revamping its electoral program to address the Brotherhood’s concerns. In its original 1977 program, there was only one passing mention of *sharia* as the “original” (*aseel*) source of legislation. The 1984 program, in contrast, included an entire section devoted to the application of Islamic law, in which the Wafd stated its agreement that Islam is both *din wa dawla* (religion and state) and that *sharia* is the principal source of legislation.²⁸ The program also called for efforts to combat moral “deviation” in society, to purify the media of anything contradicting *sharia*, and to emphasize the media’s role in actively guiding Egyptians toward a moral life.²⁹

Its alliance with the Brotherhood was an important factor in pushing the party toward such a posture. But it was far from the only one. The Wafd was not operating in a vacuum. The political and religious context in the country was changing; Egyptians had become more religious and more concerned with applying Islamic law. The Wafd, in turn, needed to adapt to its environment and respond to the evolving preferences of an increasingly conservative electorate. Interestingly, much of the religious content of the 1984 program remained in the 1987 program, well after the alliance with the Brotherhood had come to an end.³⁰

These developments would have far-reaching consequences for the evolution of Egypt’s party system. At this point, the Brotherhood was acting like a “niche party,” a term used by Bonnie Meguid to describe “single-issue” or limited agenda parties, whose *raison d’être* is to elevate an issue of importance that has been insufficiently addressed by mainstream parties. Niche parties, according to Meguid, “[adopt] positions only on a restricted set of issues ... [They] rely on the salience and

²⁶ Hasanayn Tawfiq Ibrahim and Hoda Raghieb Awad, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun wa al-Siyasa fi Misr* [The Political Role of the Muslim Brotherhood under Limited Political Pluralism in Egypt], Cairo: Markaz al-Mahrusa, 1996, p. 97.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 137.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 173.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 176.

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

attractiveness of their *one* policy stance for voter support.”³¹ For the Brotherhood, the one overarching concern during this initial period of parliamentary participation was the role of Islam in public life. The group was much less like a traditional political party than a sort of “*sharia* lobby.”

According to Meguid’s niche party–mainstream framework of interaction (which she calls the “modified spatial theory”), mainstream parties (in 1980s Egypt, the ruling National Democratic Party and the Wafd would both qualify) have one of two choices when dealing with a newly introduced niche issue, in this case the application of *sharia*. They can opt for a “dismissive strategy” and treat it as insignificant, thus lowering its salience in the minds of voters. Conversely, the mainstream party can try to attract supporters of the niche issue by “acknowledging [its] legitimacy ... and [signaling] its prioritization of that policy dimension.”³² In this way, the introduction of a niche issue into the political arena does two things. First, it raises the issue’s salience in the minds of voters and other opposition parties. Second, it provides incentives to the niche party to emphasize its distinctiveness on its niche issue, in order to ensure that voters still see it as the most credible proponent, despite mainstream party efforts at appropriation.

This framework helps provide a better understanding of the rightward shift in Egypt’s political scene during the early transition phase (2011–13). More importantly, though, it explains the “freezing” of ideological and religious cleavages in Egypt and the broader Arab world. Islamists were helping to push Islam into the public discourse like never before. Liberal parties, some of which were trying to curry favor with religiously minded voters, were compelled to speak the language of religion. In a conservative country, many voters were susceptible to religious rhetoric. But it was the actions of groups and parties like the Brotherhood that capitalized on voters’ receptiveness. The cleavages solidified, and they would continue to solidify in subsequent years.

³¹ Bonnie M. Meguid, “Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success,” *American Political Science Review*, 99 (Aug. 2005), p. 348. See also Avital Livni, “When Niche Parties Go Mainstream: The Case of the Islamist AKP in Turkey,” unpublished paper, Nov. 2008, pp. 1–3.

³² *Ibid.* p. 350.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

Party Systems in a Democratic Era

Egypt has had the distinction of being exceedingly polarized along “Islamist–secular” lines, but it is a matter of degree, not kind. Tunisia, informed by the tragic experience of the Algerian civil war—also fought along Islamist–secular lines—gravitated in a similar direction in the 1980s and early 1990s. It was then that al-Nahda, formerly the Movement of the Islamic Tendency (MTI), emerged as the main challenger to Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali’s staunch secularist rule.³³ Despite widespread fraud, al-Nahda—which, like the Egyptian Brotherhood, was denied legal status as a political party—won 15 percent of the vote and as much as 30 percent in key cities in the 1989 elections. This was too much for Ben Ali, who soon launched a brutal crackdown on Islamists, sending as many as 10,000 to prison. Al-Nahda’s leader Rachid Ghannouchi went into exile in London, where he was to remain for the next twenty years.

By defining themselves in opposition to the Islamists, secular auto-crats played their own role in making Islamism, or the lack thereof, the defining political issue for a generation. This was often by design, helping rulers gain support from the international community—and many secularists at home—as the lesser of two evils. In addition, they could use the specter of Islamism to repress all opposition, including liberal and leftist political parties, which they did with marked enthusiasm. The religious dimension of conflict overlapped somewhat with the economic, although it was not always obvious where one ended and the other began. Regime allies in Egypt and Tunisia were not only opposed to Islamism; they were also using their close ties to the ruler to amass considerable wealth. The Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes both oversaw impressive annual GDP growth of 5 to 7 percent in their later years, benefiting a whole new breed of regime-dependent oligarchs. In 2008, the former head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, called the Tunisian economy an “example for emerging countries,” while the World Bank named it a “top reformer” in regulatory reform.³⁴ Islamists

³³ For discussion of MTI’s origins and rise, see Marion Boulby, “The Islamic Challenge: Tunisia since Independence,” *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (Apr. 1988), pp. 590–614; and Emad Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.

³⁴ *Doing Business 2009: Comparing Regulation in 181 Economies*, Washington, DC: World Bank & International Finance Corporation, 2008, p. 79.

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

and their backers were not necessarily poor, as the conventional wisdom had it, but they were shut out of business and investment opportunities. As repression worsened, their firms were closed and their assets seized. There was an economic elite, but, increasingly, also a counter-elite that felt unjustly excluded from sharing in economic gains.

By the time Egypt and Tunisia experienced their revolutions, the Islamist–secular divide was already well entrenched. Revolutions can introduce new patterns of identity and organization, and many hoped that democratic transitions would allow Arab polities to put the intense ideological polarization of the past behind them. And for a brief moment, it seemed like they might. In Tahrir Square, Muslim Brotherhood members, Salafis, liberals, and leftists found themselves on the same side, united in their desire to bring down a dictator. In the early days following Mubarak’s fall, politicians and parties spoke of a new era that would transcend the old divisions. But, soon enough, Egypt fell back into its previous patterns, yet this time with a vengeance.

After the 2011 uprising, Egypt’s economic situation deteriorated considerably. For most ordinary Egyptians, this was the abiding concern. The debate over *sharia*, on the other hand, seemed beside the point, having little effect on the daily challenges they faced. Yet in the media discourse and in election campaigns, the fundamental divide, as it had been since the early 1980s, was between Islamists and non-Islamists. Importantly, the proliferation of new parties created an atmosphere of “outbidding.” The Brotherhood and its newly established Freedom and Justice Party no longer had a monopoly on the votes of the Islamist faithful. The emergence of Salafi parties—which won 28 percent of the vote and 25 percent of the seats in the 2011 parliamentary elections—led to a kind of “tea-party effect,” dragging the political spectrum further to the right.³⁵ Egyptians, a large majority of whom are religiously observant, were naturally receptive to appeals based on religion. Yet it was Egypt’s political elites and parties that aggressively pushed religion to the forefront of national debate. The advantages in doing so were obvious for the Islamists. But liberals as well as old regime elements—lacking a dis-

³⁵ For more on Salafi political participation after the revolution, see Stephane Lacroix, “Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism,” Brookings Doha Center, June 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/06/07-egyptian-salafism-lacroix>

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

tinctive program or a clearly defined ideology—used the fear of religious rule to rally their base to the polls with varying degrees of success.

A related question is why the economy failed to emerge as an important cleavage in the early stages of the transition. Both Egypt and Tunisia seemed to be particularly ripe for economic, class-based appeals. Indeed, candidates routinely promised more jobs, better wages, and campaigns to root out poverty, corruption, and any number of other social ills. Yet it was hard to pinpoint significant differences between the circulating economic programs, which, with few exceptions, offered variations on the same theme: market-driven growth coupled with protections for the poor and social justice for all. Ironically, it was leftist rather than liberal parties that did the worst in the first parliamentary contests. To the extent that economics mattered in the elections, it was often in the form of old-fashioned patronage, such as when the Brotherhood launched the “*millioniyat al-khayr*” initiative on the eve of parliamentary elections, providing 1.5 million kilos of meat to millions of Egyptians.³⁶

The choices of the largest parties tend to set the contours of political debate, forcing competitors to react and respond. Islamist parties had never been known for focusing much attention on economic policy. To the extent they did, they promoted a surprisingly free market-oriented economic vision, something that was likely to play well with investors rather than ordinary voters. Meanwhile, because their economic platforms differed little from those of their Islamist counterparts, liberal and leftist parties found themselves constrained. And, in any case, their own economic vision, beyond the broad outlines, was similarly underdeveloped. Identity, on the other hand, was easy to argue. The lines seemed less ambiguous. One liberal candidate, who ran and lost in Egypt’s 2011 elections, put it this way: “I did not run a political campaign; I was running a campaign that depended on me telling voters I’m not an atheist.”³⁷

Libya provides an interesting counterpoint to its neighbors. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, Libya did not have anything resembling an existing political community. Qaddafi’s rule was characterized by a purposeful,

³⁶ Ikhwan Online, 25 Oct. 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?SecID=211&ArtID=93919>

³⁷ “The Beginnings of Transition: Politics and Polarization in Egypt and Tunisia,” Brookings Doha Center, Apr. 2012, p. 2, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2012/04/19-democratic-transitions>

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

and ultimately brutal, effort to block the emergence of institutions. Even mildly autonomous institutions would weaken his grip on power. In a total autocratic order, this was not to be tolerated. There was no real judicial establishment, no political parties, no parliament, and no civil society. Just as there were no political parties, there was no “party system” nor any recognizable political cleavages.

After Qaddafi’s fall, Libya’s Islamists, well aware of their comparative advantage, tried to make religion an issue. Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Sawan accused Mahmoud Jibril, former prime minister and leader of an alliance of liberal parties, of being a reincarnation of Qaddafi for not embracing Islam’s role in public life.³⁸ Ali al-Sallabi, perhaps Libya’s most prominent Islamist figure, called Jibril an “extreme secularist” who would take the country back toward “tyranny and dictatorship.”³⁹ The strategy failed, partly because Islamists were attempting to create a cleavage that did not resonate in the Libyan context. Far from being a secularist, Qaddafi, for all of his anti-Islamist repression, was more than comfortable injecting his own idiosyncratic understanding of Islam into the public sphere. As George Joffe notes, Qaddafi “intended to express the original ideas put forward in [the] 1969 [revolution] in specifically Islamic form.”⁴⁰ This included efforts at “Islamizing the economy” and “institut[ing] an austere morality based on Islam.”⁴¹ In Egypt and Tunisia, there was a “Westernized” secular elite that feared Islamists would threaten their very way of life. In Libya, “beer and bikini” voters did not exist, in part because there was neither beer nor bikinis.

The dozens of newly established parties that emerged in Libya reflected this conservative consensus. As George Grant of the *Libyan Herald* reported on the eve of the July 2012 elections: “It is very difficult to find a Libyan, either within the parties or on the street, who would describe himself as secularist, with an overwhelming majority insisting that Islam must play an important role in political life.”⁴² Even the most

³⁸ See Chapter 15, this volume.

³⁹ Patrick J. McDonnell, “Libyan Rebel Factions Showing Fissures,” *Los Angeles Times*, http://www.denverpost.com/nationworld/ci_18888312

⁴⁰ George Joffe, “Islamic Opposition in Libya,” *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (Apr. 1988), p. 622.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² George Grant, “Elections Analysis: So Who Are They and What Do They

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

“liberal” party—Jibril’s National Forces Alliance (NFA)—endorsed *sharia* as a principal source of legislation.⁴³ Other liberal parties followed suit with little hesitation. By appropriating Islam and, in effect, moving to the right, liberal parties were able to neutralize the Islamists’ claim to religious authenticity. Unique among its Arab neighbors, the liberals of the NFA dominated the country’s first elections, garnering thirty-nine out of eighty seats, while the Brotherhood’s political arm, the Justice and Construction Party, won only seventeen seats.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that religion will not emerge as the primary cleavage in Libya. Nothing about the party system is “frozen.” As the leader of the opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood is in a strong position to make Islam a much greater issue than it has been thus far. It is also unclear what alternative cleavages could develop, beyond allegiance to tribes and local notables. Underlying patterns of party stability matter. Libya has none, at least not yet. Cross-country comparisons with Egypt and Tunisia will offer opportunities for comparative inquiry into how and why particular party systems develop.

Are Strong Parties Good for the Arab World?

The architects of Libya’s electoral law appear to have wanted a system that would forestall the domination of any one party. What it might do instead is constrain the development of strong, disciplined parties (the NFA was, itself, a party made up of more than forty smaller parties organized around tribal and regional allegiances). Some would argue that this is precisely the point. Similar concerns emerged in Egypt, where opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood warned against the monopolization of power by one party. The Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won 37 percent and 52 percent of the vote in parliamentary and presidential elections, respectively, yet it formed a government in August 2012 that included only five FJP members out of more than thirty ministers. (Even after two limited Cabinet reshuffles in January and May 2013, less than a third of ministers hailed from the movement.)

Actually Stand For?” *Libya Herald*, 30 June 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=10156>

⁴³ “Charter of the National Forces Alliance,” p. 3, http://www.nff.ly/Eltahalof_Mesak.aspx

PARTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

Due in part to higher levels of polarization, the notion of a technocratic government, presumably free of partisan allegiances, steadily gained favor in the Egyptian national debate.⁴⁴ President Morsi, in one of his first moves, appointed Hisham Qandil, a relatively unknown figure who had been a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, to the position of prime minister. This push for technocratic governments reflects—as well as amplifies—the increasingly widespread view that political parties, despite (or perhaps because of) their popular mandate, cannot be trusted with something as serious as government. Perhaps more problematically, it makes it difficult for the electorate to hold political parties accountable for their performance in subsequent elections, since they are not fully implementing the partisan platform for which they were presumably elected. By depending on unelected technocrats, there is also the question of democratic legitimacy and the type of ruling bargain that will come into existence between leaders and their constituents. As Miguel Angel Centeno argues in his study of technocracy: “It seems that the very same characteristics that promote technocratic control also make it inimical to democratic rule. The empirical evidence certainly supports a pessimistic perspective.”⁴⁵

In the longer term, technocratic governments are likely to limit, or at least postpone, the emergence of economic or class-based cleavages, which, in turn, is likely to allow the religious dimension of conflict to remain dominant. The very premise of technocratic governments is that economic growth requires the implementation of ideologically neutral economic policies—a matter of doing what “works.” Whatever the merits, this effectively removes economic policy from partisan debate. Opposition parties will, of course, criticize the governing party’s stewardship of the economy, but more on the grounds of execution and performance than differing economic philosophies.

Another model is the coalition-building of Tunisia’s transition period, which has put political parties at the forefront. While Tunisia’s ideological cleavages are considerable, they had been mediated through a transitional process which was recognized as legitimate by most relevant

⁴⁴ See Sharif Elmusa, “Qandil and the Mystique of Technocratic Governments,” *Egypt Independent*, 26 July 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/qandil-and-mystique-technocratic-governments>

⁴⁵ Miguel Angel Centeno, “The New Leviathan: The Dynamics and Limits of Technocracy,” *Theory and Society*, 22 (1993), p. 325.

BEYOND THE ARAB SPRING

actors. This, at least initially, depressed the desire for technocratic solutions. After the election of a constituent assembly in 2011, three parties—representing Islamists, liberals, and leftists—joined together in a coalition, known as the troika. Instead of selecting technocrats or unaffiliated figures, the parties divided cabinet ministries among themselves. But it did not last, with 2013 featuring mounting opposition calls for the removal of the government and the appointment of “independents.” However, as Tunisia’s transition has demonstrated, even if briefly, societal cleavages can be managed through a legitimate process that prioritizes accountability to the electorate. Yet after the uprisings, establishing—and maintaining—that legitimacy has proven the most difficult part.