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THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

by Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi

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1. Background

The dynamics of change at the global level

In the last two decades a number of dynamics at the global level, such as the decline and fall of the Soviet Union, the crisis of mass-based ideologies and the re-organisation of production (i.e. crisis of fordism-keynesianism, smaller and de-located production units, etc.) have determined a change in the patterns of mass mobilisation and participation both in Western democracies and in authoritarian regimes. The general trend is, above and beyond the different political contexts, towards a gradual dismantling and, in any case, a loss of efficacy of mass-based political organisations (e.g. parties, trade unions) coupled with a marked decline in the political ideologies characterising the Cold-War period, in favour of a 'purely technical' economicistic discourse and/or, apparently in opposition, a revival of religious-ethnic identities.

The decline in the organised collective political participation of the lower and middle classes in its traditional forms is observable also in newly established democracies, such as in Latin America, where growing social inequalities, corruption and political violence go together with a de-legitimation of the democratic system determined mainly by the lack of activism and efficacy of political parties.[1] A similar trend is also visible in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes even if, in this latter case, the decline is more in mass mobilisation from above through corporatist-populist institutions reinforced by the loss of efficacy of non-religiously based political opposition parties.

The dynamics of change in the Arab world

In the Arab World, regional and national events have interacted with international structural transformations, at times reinforcing, at times modifying, at times weakening them. The political appeal of the nationalist and developmentalist ideologies prevailing after independence, was dramatically undermined by the Arab defeat of 1967. The debacle had different effects on the countries involved, but in general demonstrated that Arab nationalism and socialism (epitomised by Nasserism and Ba'athism) had failed to transform Arab societies, thus strengthening the position of those advocating a reconsideration of political and ideological structures in the region.

The 1973 war and the following oil boom contributed to shifting the regional power balance from 'radical' populist states to the conservative oil-exporting monarchies (e.g. Saudi Arabia), while the crisis of post-independence 'radical' state ideology combined with the emergence of political Islam, frequently supported by both governments – in search of a new legitimacy - and private interests linked to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf oil states.

All these events, connected with global changes, have brought about a general re-structuring of politics in the region, although the timing and effects have been different from country to country, depending on the local balance of forces and historical configurations of power.

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[1] Dabène, Olivier (2000), "L'état de la démocratie en Amérique Latine", in Jaffrelot, Christophe (ed.), *Démocraties d'ailleurs. Démocraties et démocratisations hors d'Occident*, Paris, éditions Karthala.

Political liberalisation in the Arab World
The most evident representation and tool of this process of change and political re-structuring was the introduction in most Arab countries of some forms of *political liberalization* in the 1980s and 1990s, centred on renewed participatory mechanisms that are formally more democratic (multi-party systems, reform of the legal framework for non-governmental organisations, etc.), accompanied however by the *de-politisation* and *elitisation* of political confrontation.
This process of political liberalization - which combines the enlargement of formal venues for political participation with control (if not command) of the use of the elites' political space and demobilisation of mass participation - is generally based on two basic features:

1. *A system of control of elite political participation* - meant to regulate and fine tune it according to regime convenience - based on repression and cooptation measures that encompass:
▪ the upholding and sometimes even *reinforcement of repressive policies* (emergency law, military tribunals, torture, use of the army for policing purposes, etc.);
▪ the use of an extensive set of tools to *manipulate and control the liberalised political institutions* (electoral laws, licensing of political parties and associations, laws regulating freedom of press and speech, etc.).
2. *A system of demobilisation of lower social strata based on:*
▪ *the de-ideologisation of the regime discourse* coupled, since the late 1980s and 1990s, with the promotion of a globalised discourse on the promotion of democracy and civil society in support of *the de-responsabilisation of the state with respect to its citizens* (e.g. as provider of services or development);
▪ a general *de-politisation of political confrontation*, in which the opposition also participates insofar as it does not try to represent (with the relative exception of the Islamists) alternative political interests and instead shares in the same globalised discourse as the regime (e.g. no real political programmes, no active grass-roots base, etc.).
▪ a progressive *dismantling of populist corporatist institutions* (in countries where they played a major role) substituted by more private/informal/neo-traditional forms of clientelism, linking to the regime's various urban or rural 'notables', each with its own constituency built on a 'private' clientelist basis.

2. The research focus

The workings and limits of the 'carrot and stick' system that the 'liberalised' Arab authoritarian regimes have used so far to control the elites' political space have been analysed at length, mostly in terms of authoritarian resilience.[2] Less attention has been given by the literature to the change in power relations that that authoritarian resilience

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[2] Kienle, Eberhard (1998), *Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt. A Grand Delusion*, London, I.B. Tauris; Albrecht, Holger; Schlumberger, Oliver (2004), "'Waiting for Godot': Regime Change without Democratisation in the Middle East", *International Political Science Review*, 25, 4, 371-392; Bicchi, Federica; Guazzone, Laura; Pioppi, Daniela (eds.) (2004), *La questione della democrazia nel mondo arabo. Stati, società e conflitti*, Monza, Polimetrica.

implies, that is to say to the change in the social bases of the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and to its interaction with global structural change.

This project intends to explore some of the key dynamics and consequences of the restructuring of the state's role and functions in the political sphere in the Arab region by looking at the *changes in the patterns of political mobilisation and participation* of different social groups and at the impact of external influences on them, both in terms of global structural change and of specific external actors' policies.

2.1 The changing political strategies of regimes in terms of cooptation and (de)mobilisation of different social groups

The general trend in the last three decades has been a marked decline in mass mobilisation of lower and middle social strata through the dismantling/loss of efficacy/relevance of corporatist-populist institutions (state-parties, state trade unions), a decline of state ideology (where it constituted a pillar of the regime legitimacy) and a parallel upholding or, sometimes even reinforcement, of informal (neo-patrimonialism, private-public symbiosis) and communitarian (tribal, ethnic, religious) affiliation-cooptation. This process has different dynamics in the different national contexts and is at the centre of the current recomposition of the modes of governing.

To sum up, besides marked national differences, it can be argued that the region has to some extent witnessed a general transition from *post-colonial inclusive hegemonic regimes (i.e. political regimes characterised by*
large popular mobilisation (populism), strong ideology and hardly any political competition) to more competitive oligarchies (i.e. political regimes characterised by higher intra-elite political competition and middle-lower class demobilisation).

This process is more evident in post-populist countries such as Egypt and Algeria, where the political dynamics of the last two decades or so could be set against post-independence 'radical' étatist and welfarist policies, based on the mobilisation of lower and middle social strata. In Egypt, the National Democratic Party (regime's hegemonic party, heir of the Nasserist Arab Socialist Union) is rapidly changing both in its ideology[3] and its organisational form (e.g. the increased role of independent candidates or businessmen and technocrats). While the party is no longer a tool of popular mobilisation, its role as a clientelist, non-ideological party seems to be reinforced.

A similar trend can also be detected in those Arab countries which never had a *populist* period - such as the Kingdom of Morocco and Jordan or the 'communal state' of Lebanon – in which the main forms of oppositional politics in the 1960s and 1970s - i.e. the major vehicles of the middle and lower classes' entrance into politics - were still based on some forms of socialism, Nasserism or Ba'athism. In the last two decades, and even more so in the 1990s, the decline of non-religiously-based opposition parties has permitted a relatively smooth clientelist recomposition of politics in the guise of a de-politicised 'democratic transition'. In Morocco, the elections in 1997 and the formation in 1998 of the first opposition government (appointed by His Majesty) inaugurated a new regime strategy of consensus building and selective opposition cooptation. The strategy aims at picking the *'interlocuteurs du pouvoir'* from those factions and families profiting from the economic reform, while at the same time marginalising other actors,

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[3] Ben Nefissa, Sarah (2004-2005), "Le déblocage du débat démocratique en Egypte, legs nassérien et poids du secteur privé", *Maghreb-Machrek*, 182, 59-78 ; Ben Nefissa, Sarah; Arafat, Ala al-Din (2005), *Vote et démocratie dans l'Egypte contemporaine*, Paris, Karthala.

such as trade unions and parts of the Islamist movement.[4] In Lebanon, after the long parenthesis of the civil war and the following Syrian hegemony on the country (1983-2005), the politics of the *zaim* have been re-emerging recently, that is complicated and fragile games of international and national conflicts and alliances meant to allocate different spaces and roles, while corruption and clientelism mounts in the absence of non-communitarian based politics.

These elitist recompositions of the political space under the banner of 'political reform and democratisation' are in tune with and sometimes even encouraged by the prevailing international discourse that has equated democratisation with a liberalisation compatible with the strategic interests of dominant powers, their local clients/allies and with the neo-liberal orthodoxy of development.

2.2 Changing elites and their impact on the mobilisation and participation of different social groups

In the last two decades, elites in the Arab world have at least partially changed in response to new policy priorities, which have, in turn been influenced by the structural transformations mentioned above (e.g. economic reform, bureaucratic institutions' loss of relevance, political liberalisation, etc.). Not only have elites changed, but so have the mechanisms and channels of their recruitment: private-sector business representatives have found their way into the upper echelons of the state; elite members with military or bureaucratic backgrounds have started to run private businesses; a new generation of technocrats has acceded to administrative positions. Notwithstanding the symbiosis of 'new' and old' elites and the fact that the lines between 'opposition' and regime elites are blurred, the result of this process is still increased elite 'variety' and increased competition between different elite factions.[5]

Political theory suggests that increased intra-elite competition could have a positive impact on the political mobilisation of those social strata previously excluded from any active political involvement. In brief, increased conflictuality between elite factions, typical of *competitive oligarchies*, could drive elite groups to search for the support and, hence, the mobilisation of progressively larger parts of the population.

Yet, there is nothing inevitable in this process. For instance, when carried out by a top-down process, political mobilisation of larger social strata does not necessarily lead to greater active political participation capable of contributing to a real process of political liberalisation and democratisation. Real enlargement of political participation depends on a number of complex variables (e.g. civil and political rights; the repressive apparatus; the effects of external pressures). But, the most important variable of all is the intensity of political pressure for enlargement of participation coming from lower social strata organised in parties, trade unions or similar organisations: if elites have an interest in building their own constituencies, especially in a privatising clientelist/neo-patrimonial system, they might not have an interest in politicising social conflict in fear of undermining the status quo and loosing their elite status.

This is reflected in the evident lack of popular constituencies and alternative political programmes of the main opposition parties. Political parties, in fact, are more tools for elites' client-seeking than for the channelling and expression of different social

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[4] Catusse, Myriam; Vairel, F. (2003), "'Ni tout à fait le meme, ni tout à fait un autre'. Métamorphe et continuité du régime marocain", *Maghreb-Machrek*, 175, 73-91.
[5] Perthes, Volker (eds.) (2004), *Arab Elites. Negotiating the Politics of Change*, London, Lynne Rienner.

interests. Mainly for this reason, the crisis and lack of legitimacy of non-religious *political parties* in the Arab world has become worse in the last few years. The 2005 elections in Egypt demonstrated that the Wafd, the newly created al-Ghad and the small parties of the left are clearly out of the electoral game. Also in Morocco, the consensus-building policy of the King - referred to above – coincided with a loss of the constituencies and political relevance of political organisations (parties and trade unions) that had developed out of the independence struggle and which historically had an important role in the country. The heyday of Lebanese political parties was, by contrast, the period preceding the civil war.[6]

The only political actors with a popular constituency are the Islamists thanks mainly to their efficient network of services (e.g. Justice and Development Party in Morocco; Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan; the Hezbollah in Lebanon): they are for structural and organisational reasons more efficient in building their redistributive and clientelist networks. In many countries of the region, such as Egypt and Jordan, the religious-conservative bourgeoisie – which benefited from the oil boom and economic reform - is using its popular constituencies to bargain a larger role in the ruling coalition.

Apparently to compensate the decline of parties, in the last decade or so, there has been a boom of the Islamic and non-Islamic *associational sector* (NGOs, etc.) in all countries of the region. Many of the opposition reform movements of the last years have been organised and led by associations or platform of associations (e.g. *Kifaya* in Egypt, the movement for the reform of the Mudawana in Morocco, the *Qornet Shehwan Gathering* for the Syrian withdrawal in Lebanon). The associational sector - in line with what is happening in other parts of the world - is portrayed by international donors and Western governments, as well as by national elites, as a more agile channel of political participation with respect to traditional parties. However, associations can hardly replace the political role of parties and trade unions in terms of mass representation and political weight and contribute, in the long run, to the fragmentation of the political landscape (e.g. the occupied territories of Palestine). In the best cases such as the ones mentioned above - they remain elite pulpits for delivering sermons for international consumption. In other cases, they are easily controlled and coopted by the regime and sometimes even praised for their social role, which relieves the state of its responsibility vis-à-vis its citizens.[7]

Finally, another factor that can distort national opposition elites' strategies is the support or opposition of foreign governments, depending on the elites' propensity to defend and represent foreign states' interests at any particular time. This was the case in the 1970s and 1980s with conservative Sunni Islamist movements which were supported or at least not opposed by Western powers against the left and the Soviet Union's influence in the region. On the contrary, in the nineties, and even more so after 2001, the alleged danger of an Islamic revolution was used to justify repressive regime policies. Very recently, new contacts seem to be opening between the US and some moderate Islamist parties (PJD in Morocco or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). In the current international context, domestic elite actors could find it more useful to seek international legitimacy than support the mobilisation of their own national

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[6] el Khazen, Farid (2003), "Political Parties in Postwar Lebanon: Parties in Search of Partisans", *Middle East Journal*, 57, 4, 605-624.
[7] Ferrié, Jean-Noel (2003), "Les limites d'une démocratisation par la société civile en Afrique du Nord", *Maghreb-Machrek*, 175.

constituencies. The carefully planned 'Beirut spring' of last year or the recent Egyptian mobilisation for reform are good examples of this trend. Conversely, political opposition movements can be delegitimised in the eyes of their constituencies by Western support.

2.3 The changing channels and forms of political demands from below

The process of political restructuring outlined in the previous paragraphs is having an impact on the way political demands from below are formed and channelled, making the state less-accountable to its own citizens in the end.

The dismantling of populist corporatist institutions in post-populist states and, in general, the decline of the public sector as the prime garantor of the citizens' living standards has diminished the role of the state as the main channel of popular demands. Although political mobilisation from above was in no case comparable to democratic active participation nor were post-independence nationalist ideologies (such as Nasserism and Ba'athism) class-based, still populism implied a certain responsibility of the state with respect to the organised corporatist interests of those social strata previously excluded from the political arena.[8]

The process of demobilisation and de-politisation of the middle and lower social strata, which has characterised political liberalisation in the Arab world, is not compensated - as mentioned - by renewed activism on the part of parties and trade unions, but rather by the continuation and sometimes even reinforcement of informal patron-client relations, increasingly re-oriented from the state to private actors, such as businessmen, rural notables, community leaders.

In Egypt, Morocco or Tunisia, it is the local 'notable' (businessmen, landowner, etc.) who provides, thanks to his links to the state-regime, services to the population in exchange for labour or votes. This is most evident in the countryside, where the return of extensive landed properties is reinforcing 'feudal' practices (e.g. in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia),[9] but it is also happening in the cities, as attested to by the selling of votes in Egypt and Morocco.[10] Popular demands are thus increasingly channelled apolitically through the traditional 'avenues of (informal) participation'.[11]

Although we cannot rely on free-elections or opinion polls, it can safely be argued that the worsening economic situation, increasing inequalities and the regimes' loss of political legitimation are determining a loss of political consensus, especially in those social strata marginalised by recent policies. However, lack of consensus does not automatically create political pressure from below or, at least, not in an organised and effective form – and this not only because of the regimes' repressive and coercive policies.

In this respect it is perhaps worth mentioning that - regardless of the kind of polity - lower class participation is more difficult to organise and develop than elite/individual

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[8] Bianchi, Robert (1989), Unruly Corporatism. Associational Life in Twenty-Century Egypt, New York - Oxford, Oxford University Press; Posusney, Marsha Pripstein (1997), Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions and Economic Restructuring, New York, Columbia University Press.

[9] Ansari, Hamied (1986), *Egypt, the Stalled Society*, Albany, State University of New York Library; King, Stephen (2003), *Liberalization Against Democracy. The Local Politics of Economic Reform in Tunisia*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.

[10] Ben Nefissa; Arafat, op. cit., 2005 and Catusse; Vairel, op. cit., 2003

[11] Singerman, Diana (1995), *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

participation: effective political participation of large numbers of people does not come spontaneously once institutional or coercive obstacles are removed. Instead, it needs to be structured and organised.

As underlined by Pizzorno,[12] the essence of politics is precisely the construction of the political preferences of large number of people through the elaboration of collective identities. Collective identities are then the precondition for the calculation of individual benefits (interests) at the mass level. In this sense, politics is much more focused on constructing and modifying the 'needs of the people', than on satisfying them. Ideologies play an important role in this fundamental process of political socialisation as they contribute to the defining of long-term collective interests to which the enjoyment of short-term individual interests should be subordinated. Therefore, the construction of collective identities is a precondition for effective collective political action. The crisis of post-independence mass-based ideologies and the conservative character of Sunni Islamism are hampering the emergence of collective political action from below.

Other forms of expression of discontent from below are possible and have, indeed, sporadically taken place in the Arab world, but are also easily isolated and repressed. They often take violent and spontaneous forms. This is the case with the most extreme forms of religious protests (e.g. Islamic Republic of 'Ain Baba or jihadist groups in the upper Nile valley in Egypt) and popular riots. In Morocco, the current process of political recomposition started in the wake of a huge wave of protests and general strikes in Fez in 1990. In Egypt, popular riots are a regular happening (1977, 1986) and are also a likely scenario today due to the population's worsening socio-economic conditions.

3. Research areas

Following from the above, the dynamics and consequences of the re-organisation of the state's political functions and the restructuring of politics in the Arab world can best be investigated through analysis of **the changes in the patterns of political mobilisation and participation of different social groups and their interactions with external variables.** In the specific, we suggest three areas of research: *(i) the changing political strategy of regimes in terms of cooptation and mobilisation of different social groups; (ii) the changing elites and their impact on the mobilisation and participation of different social groups; (iii) the changing channels and forms of political demands from below.*

The main general questions that the research project plans to investigate through these research areas are:

- How are the social bases of regimes changing? What impact does this have on the modes of governing?
- What impact does the restructuring of politics have on the political mobilisation and participation of middle and lower social strata?

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[12] Pizzorno, A. (1966), "Introduzione allo studio della partecipazione politica", *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 3-4; Pizzorno, A. (1996), "Mutamenti delle istituzioni rappresentative e sviluppo dei partiti politici", in *Storia dell'Europa*, vol. 5: *L'età contemporanea*, Torino, Einaudi, pp. 961-1031. But also Foucault or Gramsci.

• How do global structural trends and international/regional actors affect the forms and contents of political mobilisation and participation in the Arab World?

(i) *The changing political strategies of regimes in terms of cooptation and (de)mobilisation of different social groups*
This research area aims at assessing how the cooptation/mobilisation strategies of the Arab regimes have changed in the last two decades and what impact this change has on the composition of the ruling coalitions, the modes of governing and the political participation of middle and lower social strata.

The main questions to be asked in each case study are:
• How have the cooptation/mobilisation strategies of the regime changed in the last two decades or so?
• What impact does this change have on the recomposition of the ruling coalition, the modes of governing and the political participation of middle and lower social strata?
• What impact does such change have on regime stability and legitimation?
• What impact do external variables have on regimes strategies?

(ii) *Changing elites and their impact on the mobilisation and participation of different social groups*
This research area aims at assessing how the changes in elite composition and in elite strategies impact on the political mobilisation and participation of larger social groups.
The main research questions to be asked are:
• How do different factions of the elites (the lines between 'organic' participation and opposition are blurred) organise their political influence with respect to the regime?
• What are the incentive structure and the rationale of elite constituency building?
• What impact do changing elites and elite strategies have on the political mobilisation and participation of middle and lower social strata?
• What impact do external variables have on elite political behaviour?

(iii) The changing channels and forms of political demands from below
This research area aims at assessing how the changing political role of the state and the restructuring of politics impact on the channels and forms of political demands and participation from below.
The main research questions to be asked are:
• What forms do popular demands take and how are they organised?
• How is popular discontent manifested?
• How do the strategies of elites and regimes affect the forms of oppositional popular mobilisation?
• How do external variables affectthe forms and organisation of popular demands?

4. Methodology

The research areas outlined above could be analysed by taking into consideration:
The discourse/ideology of mobilisation

Analysis (e.g. subjects, dissemination, recipients) of the political discourse (e.g. speeches, platforms, interviews, political programmes) of major internal and external political actors.

(i)   The discourse of the regime (e.g. government, King/President) and of its components (old-new guards, military, technocrats, regional leaders)

(ii)   The discourse of the opposition elites and their components (e.g. secular, religious, different ideologies – liberal, socialist, nationalist)

(iii)   The international discourse (e.g. Western countries, industrialised countries, Arab countries, international donors/institutions) on the national situation

The organisation and the strategies of mobilisation

Analysis of the organisational forms (e.g. parties, associations, ethnic groups, etc.) and strategies (e.g. cooptation, alliances, use of the means of communication, etc.) of political mobilisation used by major internal and external political actors

(i)   regime actors (e.g. liberalisation/de-liberalisation; elite cooptation; international alliances; regime parties);

(ii)   opposition actors (e.g. old and new parties; NGOs, movements, alliances, platforms)

(iii)   international actors (e.g. forms and beneficiaries of bilateral – ex. USAID - or multilateral – ex. Euro-Med Partnership - international policies – ex. funding, political support, support of specific initiatives NGOs).

An actor-based framework:

The analysis of the research areas outlined above could be organised according to an actor-based framework. In this case, the mutual influences of the various international/regional/domestic actors should be analysed to single out their power relations and how they affect the policy choices of the different actors in connection to a (or a set of) specific issue/s at a given time.

An event/issue-based framework:

The analysis of the research areas outlined above also could be organised according to an event/issue framework. In this case, the various discourses and strategies of major international/regional/domestic actors should be analysed by studying their reactions to:

 (1) major national/international events (e.g. National elections or Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, succession in Morocco, etc.).

(2) main national/transnational issues (reform of labour code or family code, regional issues such as Palestine, occupation of Iraq) .