

POLICY BRIEF

**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION**

Taking Political Parties Seriously in the Arab World

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Almost all Arab states currently hold regular elections at the national or local level, or both. Political elites and voters alike take elections very seriously, and they are increasingly significant battlegrounds for issues and policy debates. In the absence of other forms of democratic governance in most parts of the MENA, political parties can play a more decisive role as the bridge between the ruling elites and the general public, as the parties channel the public's demands and grievances. Despite the central role of parties in the political process—especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring—political scientists¹ and policymakers have greatly downplayed their capacity to promote stability and consensus-building in the turbulent, polarized MENA region. There is, however, ample evidence that political inclusion and pluralism can further political stability, curb violence and radicalization,² and minimize the likelihood of a military coup.³ Hence, the new administration should pay special attention to advancing more accountable and inclusive political systems in the Arab world. This goal can only be achieved by strengthening the role of emerging and established political parties, and by providing the support and resources they need to be stabilizing agents in the region.

In response to a global wave of democratization following the end of the Cold War and the accompanying rise of Islamism throughout the Middle East, many Arab countries ushered in a period of political liberalization during the 1990s. Electoral competition became the norm, although most political organizations

operated under close state supervision and even repression. For instance, political parties were allowed to form in some capacity in a number of Arab states (Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria), but were restricted in others—operating under different labels (i.e., “political societies” in Bahrain and “blocs” in Kuwait)—or were completely outlawed (Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia).

By the start of the 21st century, most of the secular and Islamist opposition parties, as well as the pro-regime parties, had mastered the rules of the game and were largely co-opted by the power-holding elites. These parties actively participate in elections with well-defined support bases and electoral strongholds, albeit with internal fragmentation, ideological polarization, and vague electoral platforms. Remarkably, despite their visible presence in the political arena for almost two decades before the Arab Spring, evidence shows that opposition parties were not the catalysts for mass uprisings and never demanded the demise of the long-standing regimes in Morocco, Egypt,⁴ Jordan, and Tunisia.

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, newly formed political parties mushroomed in transitioning Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.⁵ However, most of these emerging parties encountered numerous organizational and financial challenges, especially when faced with the electoral savvy of well-funded, highly organized Islamist forces. Elsewhere in the region, regimes have undertaken major political and electoral reforms to mitigate the possible effects of the uprisings. These include quota



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This policy brief is part of a series of recommendations from the Baker Institute for the incoming president's administration.

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reforms (Jordan and Algeria); granting women the right to vote and run for office (Saudi Arabia) as independents; reforming electoral laws (Kuwait); and introducing constitutional amendments (Bahrain). Morocco, in particular, introduced significant constitutional reforms in 2011 to appease the opposition and meet the demands of the revolutionary "February 20th Movement." In a move toward strengthening the role of political parties, the new constitution stipulates that the party acquiring the plurality of seats in the parliament is responsible for appointing the prime minister. The new reforms have also granted extended political and cultural rights to Morocco's ethnic minorities and women.

A recent study analyzing the policy congruency between political parties and the public in the current Moroccan parliament found strong evidence that political elites are indeed responsive to public opinion.⁶ Interestingly, the authors found that the two largest parties in the parliament (Istiqlal and PJD) are responsive not only to their support bases, but also to general public opinion. These findings demonstrate that parties have the capacity to play an important role in the political arena and to be truly representative of the public, even in more autocratic settings. Most importantly, these results also emphasize that gradual, incremental reforms may be the way out of the current governance crisis throughout the region.

Promoting strong, inclusive political party systems in the Arab world should be a top priority for the new administration. The U.S. should exert more pressure on the region's transitioning and autocratic regimes to reform their electoral systems and allow legitimate channels of opposition. Their efforts should primarily focus on the extended freedom to associate and form, less restrictive fundraising and campaigning laws, and the assurance of transparency and integrity in the electoral process. Rigged elections or the facade of legitimate elections will lead to further disenchantment by the public and greater mistrust in the political process. One key to resolving the crisis of legitimacy in the region today is to build pluralistic political systems in which

opposition voices—as well as those of other marginalized groups, including women and ethnic minorities—are integral parts of the decision-making process. The continual marginalization of these voices will lead to heightened levels of popular discontent, instability, and even violence.

ENDNOTES

1. Previous work on political parties in the MENA region has focused on their role as legitimizing tools for the incumbent regimes (Sater 2009), their importance to political events (i.e., for distributing rents and access to clientelistic politics) (Lust 2006), and their importance for determining, and rewarding, the regime's loyal followers and to punish opponents (Blaydes 2011).

2. Studies have shown that political inclusion of marginalized groups and opposition, mainly Islamist forces, may lead to lower levels of radicalization and conflict (see Schwedler 2006, 2011).

3. Joseph Sassoon, *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

4. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was not the catalyst of the uprisings of January 2011. However, they joined forces later with the revolutionary youth in Tahrir Square calling for the ousting of the regime.

5. See <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/13/path-to-sustainable-political-parties-in-arab-world-pub-53575>.

6. Marwa Shalaby and Abdullah Aydogan, "Parliamentary Agenda Priorities and Responsiveness under Authoritarianism" (paper presented at the 2016 Meeting of the American Political Science Association).