The Path to Sustainable Political Parties in the Arab World

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SUMMARY

Dozens of new political parties have emerged in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia since the start of the Arab uprisings. While many of these forces played an active role in overturning old orders, they have struggled to develop coherent identities, establish effective support networks, and build sustainable constituencies. To participate effectively in the political process, new, largely secular parties must overcome their institutional challenges and improve their long-term capacity to deliver what the people need. The fate of these emerging parties will play an outsized role in determining the success of the political transitions taking place in the Arab region.

Recommendations for Emerging Political Parties

- Develop clear, detailed programs that go beyond stating what the party is against and define what it is for, addressing society’s real economic and social needs.
- Design programs through extensive consultations with constituents rather than relying on the advice of small groups of experts.
- Abandon dated, ideological platforms and find new ways to package solutions to the challenges of creating jobs, ensuring economic mobility, establishing equality before the law, fighting corruption, and guaranteeing fairer and wider political representation.
- Promote educational policies that encourage pluralism, tolerance, respect for different points of view, and critical thinking.
- Develop real connections with the people, learning from Islamist parties that have built constituencies over decades by providing health, education, and other services.
- Define new and creative strategies to collect small but regular donations from a broad base of citizens.
- Convince members of the business community to more actively fund emerging political parties by demonstrating that a strong, independent, and stable party system is in their interests.
- Reduce the unsustainable emphasis on individual party leaders and personalities.
- Encourage the consolidation of secular political parties by focusing on “big-tent” politics.
THE STRUGGLES OF EMERGING PARTIES

The fall of ruling regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia opened the floodgates of political participation. Parties proliferated as people seized the opportunity to organize politically and make their voices heard in the democratic process. In Egypt, more than 60 parties contested parliamentary elections. In Tunisia, the number of parties surpassed 100. And in Libya, as many as 142 new political parties registered to compete in the country’s first legislative elections.

The vast majority of these new parties failed to do more than register with the government. Doing little to establish themselves on the ground, they in effect existed only on paper. Even those parties that emerged as key players generally failed to achieve any significant electoral impact in initial parliamentary elections. Instead, older and more established organizations performed most effectively. The top performers included Islamists, such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia’s Ennahda, parties that have built effective networks at the grassroots level for decades through philanthropy, social services, and promises of better governance.

The exception was Libya, where essentially no parties had existed during the rule of Muammar Qaddafi, so all parties were technically new. The newly established National Forces Alliance (NFA) secured more seats than any other party in Libya’s 2012 elections, though independents dominate the legislature.

As the transitions progressed, however, emerging parties began to assert themselves more forcefully, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. Weaker parties folded, and larger parties began to form coalitions to increase their influence on the political scene.

In Egypt, parties that formed around leading secular politicians after the 2012 presidential election along with other emerging forces established the National Salvation Front in November 2012. The coalition played the leading role in mobilizing opposition to Mohamed Morsi’s administration until a campaign launched by the grassroots Tamarod movement began to pick up steam in May 2013. The party landscape in Tunisia shifted rapidly after the 2011 parliamentary elections, and a new secular party, Nidaa Tunis, emerged as an effective challenger to the Ennahda-led government. Opposition parties eventually convinced Ennahda to hand over power to a caretaker government and commit to new elections. Meanwhile, the NFA continues to be the largest party in Libya, and it commands the highest levels of public awareness and approval, with most other emerging political parties only peripheral actors.

Emerging secular political parties in all three countries are still struggling to establish themselves in their respective political systems. Despite some coalition building, the political party scenes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia remain highly fragmented. And with the possible exceptions of the NFA in Libya and Nidaa Tunis in Tunisia, parties lack sufficient levels of public awareness and support to be effective political players.
DIFFERENTIATING PARTIES IN A CROWDED FIELD

With the emergence of so many parties after the Arab uprisings, voters have faced a herculean task in trying to identify which party would best represent their interests. The problem has been made worse by the fact that many parties seem to be mirror images of each other, devoid of ideology and reliant on a small core of elite supporters. Even those parties that have adopted an ideology often appear to downplay the extent to which it defines their identity, and almost all parties have vague and underdeveloped platforms and plans. The result is a morass of poorly distinguished political organizations that can be almost impossible for voters to tell apart. Often, parties have relied on the personalities of their founders rather than on clear programs, making them unsustainable in the long run and raising skepticism among citizens that the real aim of such parties is the personal glorification of individuals rather than the people’s well-being.

Rejecting or downplaying ideology is a strategic choice that reflects these parties’ reading of the external political environment and internal political constraints. Ideology is perceived by many as divisive and bereft of actual policy benefits, so some parties do not see the point in establishing themselves as ideological. Even parties that claim an ideological affiliation appear to temper its importance to reduce internal divisions.

Instead, these emerging forces have focused on building larger parties by forging a series of political alliances. The Indian National Congress Party is at times mentioned as an example to emulate. This model emphasizes building coalitions that combine support from specific local networks, constituent blocs, and smaller parties. The goal of this structure is to enable the parties to interact more effectively with the people and their needs.

The strategy is not necessarily wrong. After all, tired ideologies neither appeal to voters nor offer effective solutions, and parties are correct to focus on building local relationships with constituents. The problem, however, is that in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, most of these parties emerged without a strong social base or other raison d’être. This fact, combined with the sheer number of parties, means that most been unable to connect with enough people to stand out in a crowded field.

The situation has been exacerbated by the parties’ lack of clear plans and programs—they have little to offer to the constituents with whom they establish contact. This deficiency is likely in part the result of the parties’ lack of experience in governing. That is, citizens in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia were excluded from the policymaking process under previous regimes, so it has been difficult for them to develop realistic but appealing policy proposals. These platforms could improve as party members acquire additional electoral, legislative, and policy experience, but the catch, of course, is that parties first need to generate enough support to participate in elections.
Establishing Sustainable Support Networks

The support networks of emerging parties, including committed organizers, fundraisers, politicians, and ultimately voters, also remain underdeveloped, as demonstrated by the low levels of support for and name recognition of even the most established parties in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Instead, these parties must typically rely on a small core of elite party members for fundraising and on a media-driven political presence.

Such dependence on a small group of wealthy donors is not sustainable in the long term, since these donors often try to use parties for their own interests, while the people come to view the parties as corrupt. Yet, it is difficult for emerging parties to break out of this framework. They seem to be stuck in a trap here as well: anemic finances make it difficult to attract supporters, and a lack of supporters precludes the development of a robust and broad-based fundraising network.

Moreover, the sheer scale of the challenges involved with competing at the national level is an impediment. For instance, parties hoping to broadly contest local elections in Egypt must choose between as many as 52,000 open positions. And while parties are attempting to extend their influence by opening local offices in locations outside the capital, the financial burden of running these offices means that they often need to be funded entirely by party members in these localities, who may or may not exist.

Meanwhile, underneath the surface is significant societal distrust of political parties that developed during decades of authoritarian rule in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Many citizens, including youth activists who might be able to boost the parties’ visibility and activeness, will not join parties because they believe such an affiliation will compromise their political influence. When youth activists do join parties, their commitment tends to be weak, and many parties have suffered from mass resignations of members unhappy with specific decisions. As a result, building stable coalitions has been challenging. This volatility also discourages expansion as parties refrain from making decisions that might increase their influence but could upset their internal balance.

Parties have also struggled with the tools to recruit supporters and build broader constituencies. Social media in particular has been ineffectual; though it has provided a platform to voice opinions, it has not attracted new members to parties.

Operating in an Uncertain Political Environment

Beyond inexperience and problematic funding arrangements, the tumultuous environments of political transition in which these parties operate make matters even worse.

For one, the parties must confront rapidly shifting political developments to which even the most robust political organization would have difficulty adapting. The quick pace of change has contributed to the parties’ inability to develop longer-term...
platforms and a cohesive identity and to differentiate themselves from their rivals. With citizens demanding immediate reactions as developments occur, parties feel pressured to express opinions on day-to-day events even when it is not necessarily in their interest to do so. One party from Egypt has reported publishing an average of two official statements every day and still being criticized for reacting too slowly.

The severe political polarization that is afflicting Egypt, Tunisia, and, to a lesser extent, Libya also compounds the challenges parties face in building sustainable support networks. As polarization between Islamist and secular political currents deepens, an increasing number of potential voters become off-limits to emerging secular parties, which must compete for a smaller pool of the same voters.

Finally, parties have struggled with a vague and uncertain legal environment, as the rules concerning party organizing and fundraising develop slowly and unevenly. As laws and constitutions are written, parties focus more on trying to influence the new rules of the game, in the hopes of establishing party-friendly systems, and less on developing their own identities and support networks.

A ROAD MAP TO SUSTAINABLE PARTIES

The records of emerging political parties in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia over the past three years have been decidedly mixed. While the initial explosion of party growth was followed by the beginnings of consolidation and increasing activism by the more successful parties, there is no denying the fact that all of these forces still face serious challenges. The parties’ problems with defining their identities, building sustainable support networks, and dealing with uncertain political environments are significant. And parties struggle with weak finances, undefined programs, and an inability or unwillingness to focus on the economic demands that matter to most citizens of the Arab world. To move in the right direction, emerging parties need to think bigger with an eye toward the future.

The international community can play an important supporting role. While public and state resistance to foreign democracy assistance programs has made it increasingly difficult to work directly with political parties in the Arab world, opportunities to promote the development of stronger parties by advocating for beneficial systemic conditions still exist. International actors should encourage governments to adopt laws that facilitate open and free political discourse, combat corruption, enable political organizing and fundraising, and promote fairness and transparency in electoral systems. They can also demand a solid commitment to holding free and fair elections that enable citizens to participate effectively in the democratic process.
But the real source of change will be the emerging parties themselves. They must adopt clear objectives to improve their on-the-ground performance and organizational capacity.

**DEVELOP PROGRAMS**

Create clear, detailed programs that address citizens’ real economic and social needs. Emerging secular parties have gained some traction in explaining that they are not Islamist parties—an important step because some citizens are concerned that Islamists would threaten the political, cultural, and religious diversity in their societies. But they have done a poorer job defining what they stand for, particularly when it comes to addressing key economic and social concerns, such as job creation, more inclusive growth, and equitable treatment before the law. While emphasizing values such as pluralism and inclusion is a necessary part of democracy building, secular parties also need to develop more comprehensive proposals that address the concerns that matter most to citizens in their countries.

Engage in extensive consultations with constituents rather than relying on the advice of small groups of experts. Party building is a long game that will take time in the best of circumstances. Parties should therefore be patient when developing their identities. Instead of impulsively reacting to the latest news or asking a small committee of experts to draw up arcane and esoteric plans, parties should seek wider popular buy-in by involving the public in developing their own platforms. This can be achieved through activities such as national town hall meetings and visits to remote areas to seek direct feedback from citizens on their needs. Parties can then make use of that feedback when developing their platforms.

Abandon dated, ideological platforms and find new ways to package solutions. The old secular Arab ideologies such as pan-Arabism, Baathism, and socialism are no longer relevant to the problems afflicting Arab societies. Their policy prescriptions amount to no more than tired slogans that parties should avoid. Instead, emerging parties must find new and creative ways to convincingly sell real policy solutions to the challenges of creating jobs, ensuring economic mobility, boosting investment, establishing equality before the law, fighting corruption, and guaranteeing fairer and wider political representation. Belief in democratic principles, rule of law, and diversity in society is good, but unless parties can also offer practical solutions to economic and social challenges, they will be unable to appeal to average citizens.

Promote education policies that encourage pluralism, tolerance, respect for different points of view, and critical thinking. Bolstering the long-term health of their countries’ fledgling democratic systems requires parties to be strong advocates for education reforms that emphasize pluralism and tolerance. Parties’ policies should prepare the next generation from an early age to be true citizens rather than subjects.
BUILD GRASSROOTS NETWORKS

Forge real connections with the people. Emerging parties can learn from Islamist parties that have built constituencies over decades by providing health, education, and other services. New secular parties will not be able to establish the extensive social networks of their Islamist rivals overnight. But they need to develop strategies for tapping into existing social networks, such as unions and student groups, in the short term and for building their own networks in the longer term. Having a voice in the media, as many of these parties do, is a start, but it is not enough to reach the people effectively.

Develop new and creative strategies to collect small but regular donations from a broad base of citizens. Parties need to maintain their relationships with wealthy donors and to develop sustainable fundraising capabilities. They also need to build networks of regular, small donors. Doing so will require creative campaigns, particularly in small and poor countries, where population size and general lack of wealth are real impediments to fundraising. Fundraising is one of the most significant challenges facing any emerging political party in the Arab world.

Convince members of the business community to be more active in funding emerging political parties by demonstrating that a strong and stable party system is in their interests. There are significant opportunities to raise funds from the private sector, and political parties should not hesitate to access that resource pool. The business community in the Arab world has a habit of standing with autocratic regimes. Emerging secular parties should make the case to the private sector that a stable, vibrant, and pluralist party system is a key component of a functioning democratic government capable of promoting economic growth.

RESTRUCTURE PARTY ORGANIZATIONS

Reduce the emphasis on individual party leaders. Parties based on the personality cult of a single leader will not be able to sustain themselves in the long run. While a popular founder might provide an initial jolt of needed support, parties must strive to build their organizations in a way that does not rely on the political fortunes of a single person.

Focus on “big-tent” politics. Secular parties have already begun to consolidate in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, and these parties should encourage and accelerate the process. Emerging secular parties should recognize that their political interests can be better protected if they join a broad, big-tent party with significant societal support rather than remaining a small party with more autonomy but no power.

THE FUTURE OF EMERGING POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

It is difficult to tell whether emerging secular political parties in Egypt, Libya, and
Tunisia are moving in the direction of sustainable, democratic development. Despite the many challenges they face, there is still hope that all three countries will develop more robust party systems that include a viable third way that navigates between established Islamist and old-regime actors. If emerging parties focus on developing clear platforms, building stronger grassroots networks, and restructuring their organizations, eventually they will be able to overcome their weak levels of popular support and grow into effective forces for democracy and pluralism in the Arab world.

Note: This outlook is based on a forthcoming book by Marwan Muasher, The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism, and discussions with party leaders from Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia at a Carnegie Middle East Program workshop held in Amman, Jordan, on September 30, 2013. Carnegie junior fellow Scott Williamson contributed to the Amman workshop and to this outlook.