

## LEFTIST PARTIES' TRAJECTORIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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### Introduction

Political Islam has dominated the literature on the comparative politics of the Middle East for over four decades now (Sigillò and Ramaioli, 2024). The phenomenon has been examined in all its dimensions, from its electoral strategies and success to its appeal within civil society to its changing ideological tenets to its contribution – whether positive or negative – to processes of democratization to its links to political violence. This overwhelming focus has tended to obscure the presence of several other political movements and currents, which have helped shape the politics of the region. For instance, with a few notable exceptions (Ismael and Ismael, 1998; Ismael, 2005 and 2007; Sluglett, 2018), studies on leftist politics have been very few and far between despite the significant role that leftist parties and movements have played in the Middle East and North Africa since colonial times (Jebari, 2020) and in the aftermath of decolonization (Guirguis, 2020).

Interest in leftist politics in the region has however resurfaced more recently in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings (Kalfat, 2014; Feliu and Izquierdo-Brichs, 2019). Following the fall of several regimes and the holding of free and fair elections, it was expected that Islamists would do well at the polls, and they duly did, but the nature of the protests as well as the demands emerging from the streets, with an emphasis on socioeconomic issues, also led to expectations that leftist parties would do reasonably well (Cavatorta and Çavdar, 2023). By and large, they did not and their electoral performances were underwhelming. There were popular demands for greater socioeconomic equality and a greater role for the state to ensure it chimed with long-standing leftist preferences and policy proposals, but leftist parties failed to capitalize on them. Thus, *what explains their lack of electoral success despite rather favorable conditions?* Several explanations have been offered to account for this.

First is the nature of the electoral game in the Arab elections. It has been demonstrated (Wegner and Cavatorta, 2019) that leftist and Islamist voters are actually quite close in their policy preferences when it comes to what kind of measures they would like to see implemented, including a stronger stance against US hegemony in the region and closer ties with fellow Arab

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and Muslim states, greater socioeconomic equality, and serious anti-corruption measures. The difference between the two sets of voters has to do with social values such as gender norms with Islamist voters far more conservative than secular-leftist ones. It follows from this that in a more conservative religious environment, leftist parties will perform poorly when such social values become electorally salient as they seemed to have been in post-Arab revolts elections despite the protests focusing on socioeconomic issues.

A second reason has to do with organizational differences (Resta, 2018; Sallam, 2022). Following the uprisings, Islamist movements and parties had a much stronger organization in place whereas leftist parties – the ones that had not been co-opted at least – did not have anywhere near the organizational strength of the Islamists. This is because leftist parties had suffered massively from repression and their links to traditional leftist constituencies in trade unions and universities had been cut off for a long time. Although repression had hit Islamists as well, it was far more difficult for authoritarian regimes to place religion – and the network of unofficial mosques and charities – under tutelage. When free elections finally came, Islamists could count on a widespread and strong network that could be mobilized quickly, resulting in significant electoral victories.

A final reason has to do with the historical tendency of the leftist camp to be divided with several parties vying for a rather limited pool of voters. The leftist camp was divided for instance between those parties and personalities that had agreed to cooperate with the authoritarian regime to keep Islamists out and those formations that had not been co-opted (Cavatorta and Haugbølle, 2011). The former lacked credibility and were quickly marginalized. The latter, despite enjoying a degree of popular legitimacy, were divided over ideological interpretations – and policies to promote – in addition to suffer from clash of personalities that prevented unity (see López García, 2019 for the Moroccan case). While the Islamist camp was not immune from divisions, with the struggle between Muslim Brothers and Salafists a clear example of that, Islamist parties showed much greater ideological coherence and electoral unity.

Although these explanations are all valid to a certain extent, they lack historical depth, and, much more significantly, they fail to engage theoretically with the international dimension of leftist politics. The contention here is that the previous explanations, focusing exclusively on a bilateral relationship between authoritarian regimes and leftist parties or between the latter and other opposition actors in the political system, do not do justice to how leftist parties operated and where their legitimacy and material resources came from. In a way, it is facile to assume that their ideological trajectory towards moderation, co-optation or irrelevance is the outcome of the policies implemented by the regimes against them. In reality, leftist parties have always been part of an international ideological camp that for a long time had the Soviet Union at its helm. The USSR provided both material and, possibly more importantly, ideological legitimacy and this sustained parties across the world and the Arab region too. Thus, when we shift the focus on parties with Marxist roots, it is useful to employ the concepts of external diffusion and isomorphism to explain their trajectory and, ultimately, their inability to succeed electorally. *External diffusion* refers to the way in which Marxist parties sought to accommodate the demise of world communism as an international project, from which they had derived ideological strength

and material resources. *Isomorphism* refers to adaptation to the extenuating circumstances (marginalization, repression, co-optation) under which they operated in the context of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes at home. It is thus the joint 'weight' of these two mechanisms that is at the root of where leftist political parties in the Arab world are now.

The notion of an external referent problematizes this overly domestic perspective and introduces a crucial factor in explaining how leftist movements have learned, changed and survived, albeit in a much-reduced role. The trajectory of leftist parties towards ideological moderation or electoral irrelevance tells us that an authoritarian context, no matter how repressive (as was the case of Egypt, Iraq or Syria) or skillful in co-opting opponents (as was the case of Morocco and Jordan), has limits in its reach against opposition actors when the latter can continue to be inspired ideologically and/or helped materially by an external referent; the Soviet Union in this case. It should be noted for instance that regimes' heavy-handed repression of leftist party members and leaders did not seem to dissuade them from renouncing their political engagement. What is more, profound conflicts within leftist formations did not lead to their ideological or organizational capitulation. The apparent success of the Soviet Union was employed as an act of faith in the inevitability of radical political change among Arab leftist militants no matter what the regimes in place did. It is only when doubts began to emerge about the validity of the Marxist project and when faced with the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union and its ideological apparatus that the regimes' policies towards leftist formations began to matter, leading them to make significant changes towards moderation or leading some of them to double down on their ideological convictions and losing popular appeal by doing so. Thus, the external dimension emerges as a crucial mechanism through which the leftist opposition learned in light of what occurred outside and not solely what occurred inside.

The repercussions of these dynamics can therefore be seen in the electoral marginalization of the left in contemporary Arab politics. The abandonment, for instance, of Marxism-Leninism and the turn towards some sort of social democracy has made several nominally leftist parties relatively marginal actors, unable to benefit from the dominant role that socioeconomic demands for greater equality, social justice and wealth redistribution (Achcar, 2013; Teti et al., 2019) played in the 2011 Arab uprisings. All this does not mean that there is nothing left of the Arab left. As Dahbi points out in his study of Morocco, which could be generalised across the region, leftist politics is still alive and quite well outside of elected institutions and it is thus in civil activism, trade union work and street politics that it might be able to regenerate itself and become once more a commanding political force in the Arab world. The socioeconomic conditions that led to the 2011 uprisings have not changed much, and a renewed impetus for change coming from below might benefit the left this time.

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