

Political Trends after Arab uprisings: The Transformation of Political Islam in a Changing Regional (Dis-)Order

Final Report

Political Islam – both as an ideology and a social movement – has witnessed massive changes since the onset of the Arab uprisings. The Arab uprisings have permanently altered the major political dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and left a lasting impact on state structures, non-governmental organizations, and political and social movements, including political Islam movements (PIMs). After decades of limited political participation, suppression, marginalization, co-option, and containment strategies pursued by ruling political regimes in the region, PIMs found themselves in an utterly new reality brought by Arab Spring uprisings. In some cases, PIMs in the region were able to gain prominence and international acceptance for the first time in their histories with commencement of democratization. In other cases, positioned as non-state actors, PIMs were entangled in protracted civil wars fueled by complicated, and often shifting, regional alliances. However, PIMs' integration into the domestic political spheres, alongside an array of other longly excluded political forces, were not sustained as the Arab uprisings were, in most countries, rolled back by the largely untouched networks loyal to previous regimes in state institutions. In most countries PIMs had a stake in the political power settings, these movements experienced extensive repression, which targeted a string of ideologically diverse political and social movements that led the uprisings. Overall, Arab Spring uprisings have changed the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion of PIMs in the MENA region.

These dramatic events are today having far-reaching impacts on PIMs in terms of ideology, structure, and geopolitical posturing. Fragmentation, radicalization, de-politicization, moderation, and organizational re-modeling are evolving features triggered by the Arab Spring uprisings and were brought onto center stage of PIMs. Thus, the goal of this workshop Al Sharq Forum held was to bring together academics, political Islam senior leaders, and state policymakers from the region, to inquire into and assess the different political, structural, and ideological transformations of PIMs that are taking place in the post-Arab uprisings' era, and to shed light on future possible trajectories that the phenomenon of Islamism and PIMs may experience in the near future. Thus, this report is based on the discussions held in the event between the participants.

Session one: Making Sense of the New Reality

In first session, participants addressed the main features of the Arab uprisings and the post-Arab uprisings that shaped PIMs in the region. The focus of the session was on the far-reaching implications these features had on PIMs' organizational structures, ideology, and political behaviour, in a broad sense. However, these features and their implications for PIMs were discussed through a futuristic perspective, where most of the participants' discussions were focused on how democracy-oriented PIMs could learn from the previous crises in the MENA region to undertake internal reform?

Resetting the Rules of the Game: Since the eruption of the Arab uprisings since late 2010, the most important challenge that PIMs, and other political actors faced after successfully toppling governments, is collectively agreeing upon the envisioned new state structure and model of governance. The challenge of reaching a political consensus on an inclusive governance model had three intersecting tracks: A) Political track B) Security track C) Developmental track. In order to develop a vision for a national model for governance, PIMs were required to re-order their priorities and shift from their focus on religious preaching (Dawah) and faction-oriented strategies in the political sphere to developing nation-wide visions for state-building. Participants stressed that the lack of consensus to build political legitimacy disabled political actors, of which PIMs spearheaded, from effectively tackling political and economic challenges in their countries. Some participants pointed out to the Tunisian Ennahdha Party and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (JDP) as a relatively successful experiences where these parties, particularly the Ennahda party that maturely engaged with other domestic actors in comprehensive political understandings.

The onset of the Arab uprisings was a turning point for PIMs as they were prompted to immerse themselves in the new reality and their core values were put into practical examination. One of the main challenges that PIMs faced was finding a way to co-exist with the international system while confirming to their traditional values they ascribe to. In this context, participants refer to the need to revise Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) in order to conceptualize the “civil state” and societal plurality in conformity with Islamic values. The outcome of such revisions would have implications for PIMs’ on several levels, including their agendas, strategies, and

instruments, where political Islam is in a constant process of reformulation. While not all participants necessarily agreed on the need to revise Islamic jurisprudence in order to induce change in PIMs’ approaches toward governance, several participants agreed upon the need to build concepts that confirm with democratic values.

Geopolitical Reposturing: With the rise of PIMs to power in many countries following the eruption of the Arab uprisings, Islamist movements/parties in power (whether leading governments or part of power-sharing agreements) were prompted to engage with regional and international actors, in contrary to approaches on regional politics they may have had subscribed to prior to reaching power, in some cases. The reconfiguration of the region’s political dynamics, shifting alliances, and growing power asymmetries in the Arab uprisings period and the post-Arab uprisings period has impacted PIMs’ perceptions of regional engagement. Since offset of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, a struggle over shaping narratives in the region has been taking shape, where PIMs sought to delineate their roles in uprisings and the following periods.

Some participants referred to Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and Russia, as major winners that received the dividends of the failed Arab uprisings. Amongst other countries, KSA, particularly, sought to bring back stability to the region through attempting to push back the IRI’s influence and uproot PIMs, but it was relatively unsuccessful in its endeavour. Several Arab uprisings were successfully rolled back by the joint Saudi Arabian-Emirati and Iranian-led coalition’s explicit/implicit interventions, where both regional axes perceived Arab Spring uprisings as having menacing knock-on impacts on their national securities and interests in the region. The success of



counter-uprisings in Yemen and North Africa, backed by Gulf countries mainly, especially in Egypt, sent shock waves to countries that saw relatively successful partial/comprehensive political transformations, as geographically distant as Tunisia and Morocco.

As a response to the construction of the Arab uprisings as a security threat in the Gulf sub-region due to their diffusionary-dimension, governments undertook varying actions to make sure that PIMs, as potential change instigators, are kept in check. The increased prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood's omnipotent mobilizational capacities following the eruption of the Egyptian uprising have alarmed most Gulf governments and brought their attention to their own PIMs at home. Every country in the Gulf sub-region crafted its own strategy on MB-affiliated organizations, based on the domestic conditions and political checks and balances. State strategy toward MB organizations in the Gulf sub-region largely depended on the extent to which these organizations were associated with broader movements aiming at political reform. MB-affiliated organizations in Kuwait and Bahrain were able to operate, although with limitations (especially in the latter). In Qatar, the MB was self-dissolved in 1999. In KSA, United Arab Emirates, and Oman, MB organizations were repressed or heavily surveilled, especially in the Arab uprisings period, with the exception of Oman, where the government cracked down on the MB back in 1994.

Session two: Political Islam in the Arab uprisings Era

In the second session, participants focused their discussions on the challenges that PIMs faced when they held power after the Arab uprisings.

Participants concentrated on the experience of the formerly ruling Freedom and

Justice Party (FJP), the political wing of the Egyptian MB, from 2012 to 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood and the FJP in power faced internal and external deficiencies. Internal challenges emanated from the inability to change organizational power configurations and address structural deficiencies. The elite rivalries within the Egyptian MB between the conservatives (known as the old guards) and the reformists practically ended in the favor of the former in 2008 when conservatives were able to takeover the guidance leadership office and consultative council via internal elections. Therefore, the FJP was the creation of the dominant conservative constituency in the Egyptian MB, rather than an all-inclusive outcome of internal power settlements, sustaining structural power deficiencies within the Egyptian MB mainly and the FJP as a consequence.

In terms of the FJP's external deficiencies in strategic partnering, some participants saw that the party's inability to stand on a common ground with secular parties and form formidable coalitions had ultimately weakened it. The Egyptian MB and the FJP saw the victory of Mohammed Morsi in the presidential elections, although with a very thin margin of votes, as a *carte blanche* to rule the country without forging broad coalitions with ideologically diverse political powers. This deficiency evolves from two shortcomings, internal and external. Internally, the very structural deficiencies of power-sharing and marginalization within the Egyptian MB reflected upon the party's conception of the post-uprising's party politics. Externally, the FJP failed in presenting itself in the first place as a grassroots movement that adopts an all-inclusive approach toward the religiously conservative segments of the Egyptian society. In this context, some participants pointed out to Turkey's Justice and Development Party rise to power as a classic model for a conservative party that realized successes in the early period of its political participation.



Participants attributed the problems of the Egyptian MB in power to the organization's structural deficiencies, in terms of participatory mechanisms, mobilization, and exclusion/inclusion, and hierarchical rigidity. Nevertheless, the legacy of excluding the Egyptian MB by the state is one of the main reasons that limited the organization and party's abilities to govern in both strategic and inclusionary manners. Therefore, some participants stressed that the Egyptian MB is in need for critiquing and revising their experience in power. However, senior figures from the Egyptian MB in the session disagree with most of the criticisms mentioned above. One senior figure that belongs to the dominating faction, known as the al Jabha al Tarikhiya (the historical front), argued that the reasons behind the failure of the Egyptian MB are structural and can be attributed to geography, history, and ideology, where the decision to undermine their experience and topple them was based on an external and foreign plot, rather than internal consensus. Another senior figure that belongs to the new rivaling faction, known as Maktab al Qiyada al Jadida (the new leadership office), says structural problems of the Egyptian MB are normally addressed in simplistic terms. This participant argued that the Egyptian MB has been contradicting itself as it presented itself as an organization aimed at religious preaching, but at the same time engaged in party politics against other actors. Another example is how the organization transformed itself from an institutions that seeks gradual change (bottom-up), to an institution that endeavoured to reach power (top-down).

Session Three: The Ongoing Metamorphosis of Political Islam

The third session was dedicated to discussing ideological and organizational transformations in PIMs that were brought by the Arab uprisings.

The dawah (preaching) and siyasah (politics) binary was the explanatory paradigm that discussants relied on to lay out and frame the ideological and organizational transformations in PIMs. Historically, the relationship between dawah and siyasah has been long seen as inextricable, representing the identity of a wide spectrum of PIMs in the region. With the far-reaching ideological impacts that were brought to PIMs, the dawah and siyasah binary was no longer an axiom, while not many PIMs sought to opt in favor of one of them at the expense of the other, the concept of compartmentalizing them has floated in internal debates. The Tunisian Ennahdha Party as prominent model for PIMs that transformed into a political party, abandoning dawah, albeit in a later stage from its establishment. The Egyptian case reflect a nominal transformation where the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood established the FJP to represent it politically without genuinely and structurally compartmentalizing dawah and siyasah or opting for one of them as a separate and exclusive realm of activity. The Moroccan model of the JDP reflect a more sophisticated case that might represent a middle ground between the Tunisian Ennahdha party and the Egyptian FJP.

For several discussants, the triumph of counter-uprisings brings a new chapter to existing debates on the dawah and siyasah binary. While ideology did not necessarily have a decisive or direct role in many PIMs' failure to govern in countries that experienced uprisings or political transitions, critiquing PIMs' conceptions of the classic dawah and siyasah binary is important to understand the multifaceted dimensions of their experiences in power. But whether revisions in PIMs would lead to fundamental changes or not, this is probably commensurate with a wide array of factors, on the organizational, national, and international levels. PIMs are more likely to be comfortable making progressive structural transformations



when they are conceiving stable political (exogenous) and organizational (indigenous) conditions, rendering them formidable for internal consensus and stable transition. In the opposite direction, in a de facto state of institutional fragmentation feeding a sense of organizational recalcitrance, PIMs are likely to be pushed toward insularism. In the counter Arab uprisings epoch characterized by intense repression, the fear of alienating wide factions within PIMs, leading to radicalization, defections, and loss of supportive constituencies, might be a substantial obstacles ahead of undertaking reform and redrawing relations between *dawah* and *siyasah*.

Altering the dynamics of domestic politics and changed perceptions in key global state actors toward PIMs have influence over the latter's policy choices toward maintaining/abandoning the classic *dawah* and *siyasah* binary, and reform generally speaking. Notwithstanding potential internal hurdles, the rise of the global anti-Islamism tide, driven by rigorous international and regional actors, may also create contingent imperatives for insularized PIMs to revise their institutional choices as means to maneuver and reposition vis-a-vis mounting these pressures aiming at restricting, if not completely eradicating their presence and activism. Alongside the same ideological lines of maintaining/disassociating the classic *dawah* and *siyasah* binary, participants discussed the expansive global relations of PIMs, specifically that of MB-affiliated movements in the region.

Whether PIMs should maintain or disconnect themselves from global Islamist networks, is another hotly debated topic, in large part due to its broad-based geopolitical dimensions. In February 2016, Jordan's MB declared disassociating itself from the MB's global network. The step taken by Jordan's MB is likely aimed at scaling down contention with the Jordanian establishment

at a time the regional trio comprised of Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt, of which Jordan is broadly aligned with, are vigorously tackling MB movements, albeit varyingly. According to a participant from Jordan's MB, the Jordanian Islamist organization is closer to disassociating *dawah* and *siyasah* from each other, where a consensus on the process was reached that only hinges upon being ratified by the concerned bodies. Almost one year from Jordan MB's dissociation from the global MB network, in January 2017, the pan-MB Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe decided to cut off ties with the MB's global network. These incidences show how the rise of the global anti-political Islam tide is shaping the institutional policy choices of PIMs in the MENA region and beyond, especially movements that are connected with the MB, whether institutionally or ideologically.

Downsizing exogenous influences, some participants in the session referred to such recent revisions as a culmination of undergoing transformations since 20 years (democracy, women's role in society, and religious minorities), but were prompted to crystalize at this stage by political contingencies. Rather than conceiving the transformations mentioned above as deep-seated ideological changes, the transformations should be understood as mere functional and administrative changes that took place given the immensely changing religio-political landscape, while the PIMs' paradigm centralizing Islamic religion as a comprehensive methodology for religious, social, and political reasoning and governance remains in place. A senior leader in the MB-affiliated *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* in Lebanon argued that while it is widely thought that PIMs undertook reforms under pressure as a response to the return of the deep state following the uprisings and the anti-PIM tide, other PIMs in the Asia Pacific region implemented reforms without similar



pressures, reflecting a weak correlation between repression (potential) and structural reform. A senior leader in Ennahda Movement seemed to disagree with the speaker mentioned above, arguing that authoritarian states in the region transformed PIMs into authoritarian movements that bundled areas of social and political action into one organizational structure; PIMs should re-transform themselves and unbundle different areas with the realization of democratization.

Such structural transformations in PIMs are conceived varyingly from attempts to more properly administer spheres of religious, social, and political activity in a new epoch, to attempts to liberalize PIMs. A participant stressed the importance of self-driven revisions, as endogenously evolving transformations have the potential to be more sustainable, vis-a-vis exogenously-driven revisions in response to political repression/pressure that are less likely to be sustainable and accommodated internally by internal factions and supportive constituencies. In other words, according to this perspective, political environments surrounding PIMs influence their policy choices, but reforms largely induced by external pressures and imperatives are likely to be fragile.

In this context, during the session Tunisian Ennahda Movement was particularly praised by a number of participants, especially researchers, as an outstanding model for a PIM that undertook structural reform. Some Egyptian and Jordanian participants from PIMs, mostly from the MB movement, expressed skepticism about the Tunisian experience, on the grounds that Ennahda Movement experience is still in a state of flux and probably need more time to reach a stable point. PIMs in the region, particularly MB-affiliated movements, implicitly compete on presenting themselves as emulatable models. The resilient rise of the historically MB-affiliated political Islam movements in

Morocco and Tunisia overshadowed other regional organizations that were crushed by the return of the deep state, notably in Egypt.

Session Four: The Ongoing Metamorphosis of Political Islam

The fourth session aimed to construct different relevant scenarios for the future transformations of PIMs in the MENA region in terms of ideology, organizational structure, and geopolitical posturing.

Participants discussed five convergent areas that shape how PIMs' may reform and reposition themselves in their societies as proactive actors:

Organization vs. State: Some PIMs that played roles in governing Arab countries that experienced uprisings did not develop political strategies to govern states, where strategies required for state-building are different in essence and scale from strategies they may have developed for administering their organizations. The problems PIMs face in this regard is a wider predicament that political forces faced following the eruption of the uprisings. Exclusion and marginalization by authoritarian governments for long years have weakened organized political forces' ability to develop a comprehensive vision for state governance, transforming PIMs into parallel communities that prioritized self-preservation and organizational consolidation over developing comprehensive visions for state-building and state governance. Based on previous experiences of several PIMs, these actors need to transcend their organizational boundaries and develop strategies for state-building and reform that go beyond the limited interests of their organizations, and in this realm, they need to work with other national actors.

Strategic Partnering: PIMs have developed a siege mentality against rivaling political forces in their societies, in part due to rule and



divide tactics that many governments in the MENA region have been pursuing for decades. During their time in power, many PIMs were limitedly successful in establishing strategic partnerships with other political forces and coalition-building to co-run their countries in a critical stage. PIMs need to revise their political strategies, political conceptions, and the legacies of their interactions with their political rivalries, to develop an ability to develop broad-based partnerships with non-Islamist political forces, namely secular parties and political movements.

Organizational Restructuring: Organizational structures of PIMs proved their resilience against crackdowns, internalizing a mirrored image of the state in the form of parallel state structures, as a response to decades of rigorous repression. These organizational structures proved their inability to respond to erupting uprisings, catch up with swift developments, and embrace political change. PIMs in the region might need to consider restructuring their organizations and develop strategies. Many PIMs remain locked in a dilemma, between restructuring their rigid hierarchical organizations in authoritarian environments, thereby risking exposure, and consolidating prevalent resilient structures to hedge against crackdown.

Methods of Political Change: Having received excessive blows from post-Arab Spring authoritarian regimes, there does not seem to be a strong consensus in many PIMs on how to operate in hostile environments. The option of resorting to violent means of action has been gaining momentum over the past years as a response to political desperation, but it has not prevailed in PIMs, with the exception of organizations that became entangled in civil wars in countries experiencing geopolitical changes. Increased internal fragmentations and weakening links between PIMs and their constituencies bolstered the rise of confrontational theses,

making internal cohesion and dialogue key priority targets for PIMs.

Ideology vs. Welfare: PIMs out of/in power after Arab Spring uprisings developed experience in governing their countries, or at least on the level of local communities through city councils. These movements need to evaluate the legacy of their governing experiences, where people, under economic distress, increased rates of unemployment, and inflation care more for welfare policies of ruling parties, and what they yield, more than their ideology. Therefore, developing the experience of PIMs in the realms of good governance for improved economic performance, is an extremely important area PIMs need to focus on.



ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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