Political Participation is a Multifaceted Concept, and its dynamics are shaped by context. As in other world regions, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) most citizens participate in formal and informal politics in hopes of improving their everyday conditions. MENA citizens commonly talk about the importance of participation for improving the political and economic situation and working toward a better human rights and democratic record. Securing employment and achieving better pay or resources are also often considered political acts—especially in this region, where parliamentarians are more likely to be effective as service providers than as policymakers. For many, political activity has an immediate, economic dimension. However, while the broader population may be motivated to participate by material interests, activists—whether through political parties, civil society, or social movements—seek immaterial interests as well. The 2011 Arab Spring reflected these two goals, as people came together demanding both “bread” and “dignity.”

This chapter examines citizens’ motivations for participation, as well as the pathways through which they engage in political action. These spheres are sometimes formal avenues, such as political parties, elections, and civil society organizations; more often, they are not. The chapter begins with a discussion of citizens’ attitudes and interests. It then examines their participation in formal venues, assessing the limitations of electoral and civil society activity. The third section turns to informal political venues and examines how seemingly apolitical activities form an important type of political participation in the region. The chapter concludes with an examination of how relatively new technologies and social media are shaping patterns of political engagement across the region.

Citizen Attitudes in the MENA

A variety of political attitudes structure patterns of political participation in the MENA. MENA citizens are concerned about the economy and the corruption that plagues their political systems. They also show distress regarding possible terrorist attacks. They have little trust in political parties or parliaments but remain strong supporters of democracy.

The Economy and Corruption

MENA citizens agree that the economic situation and corruption are the most important problems facing their countries. The recent Arab Barometer poll found that the vast majority of Egyptians and Moroccans stated that the economy was one of the top-two challenges
facing their country. Lebanese and Algerians were the least to express this concern, although even in these countries the economic situation worried the majority of respondents. Citizens are less concerned with corruption, although it is the second-most important problem, worrying nearly half of the respondents across the countries (see Table 5.1).

Transparency International (TI) data also reflects citizens’ concern regarding corruption. TI found that one in three people in the MENA reported paying a bribe over the last year. It finds, moreover, that fewer citizens of North Africa felt that corruption had increased a lot or somewhat over the past year (46 percent) than those of the Mashrek and the Arab Gulf, where 80 percent stated that it had. Ninety-two percent of Lebanese stated that corruption had risen, the highest of any country in the survey. The Lebanese and the Yemenis are particularly critical of government efforts to address public sector corruption, with 67 percent of Lebanese rating their administration’s efforts as either very or fairly bad; among Yemenis it was 91 percent.

These economic concerns prompt citizens to consider leaving the country. The Arab Barometer finds that nearly one-quarter of all MENA citizens consider emigrating. The desire to emigrate is highest among Lebanese (30 percent), followed by the Palestinians (28 percent) and Moroccans (27 percent), and lowest among Egyptians (18 percent). In Algeria, the reasons for considering moving are divided between economic reasons (45 percent) and both economic and political reasons (28 percent), but in other countries, the vast majority think of leaving for economic reasons.

Democracy

As shown in Table 5.1, few citizens rank “achieving democracy” as one of the top-two challenges facing their countries. Algerians were more likely to see democracy as a challenge than Jordanians. This does not mean that people of the MENA are content with the state of democracy in their countries. Across the region, citizens rate the extent to which they think their country is democratic as 5 out of 10, with 10 being “democratic to the greatest extent
possible.” Citizens are aware that their countries are not democratic, but in the current climate, they do not see this as a top priority.

That said, MENA citizens continue to support democracy. The vast majority (82 percent) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “A democratic system may have its problems, yet it is better than other systems.” When asked if the statement “Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government” was closest to their own opinion, they differed more in their responses. Jordanians (66 percent) stand out as having the greatest support for this statement. Only 16 percent agreed with the statement “Under some circumstances, a nondemocratic government can be preferable,” and 15 percent agreed with “For people like me, it does not matter what kind of government we have.” The Lebanese also showed very high support for the statement that democracy is always preferable. Algerians are at the other end of the scale, as 39 percent felt the statement was closest to their opinion, while 36 percent stated that under some circumstances a nondemocratic system is preferable. Palestinians (42 percent) demonstrated relatively less support for the preference of a democracy under any circumstances.

Security and Terrorism

MENA citizens also express widespread concern about terrorist attacks. As shown in Table 5.2, when asked how worried they were about the possibility of a terrorist attack nearly all Tunisians and Egyptians said “very much.” Jordanians express the least degree of concern, but even there, 65 percent of respondents were worried. Moreover, the percentage of Jordanians who feel their personal and family safety and security are ensured or fully ensured has increased since 2011.

Trust in Institutions

Arab citizens’ trust in institutions mirrors their greater concern for security over democracy. Across the region, we find that citizens express trust in security organs, while they distrust institutions related to democracy.

When asked about their trust in public institutions, MENA citizens overwhelmingly rank the armed forces and the police as the top-two institutions they trust a great deal or quite a lot. At the top of the scale, 98 percent of Jordanians have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the armed forces and 95 percent in the police. In the former French colonies of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon, citizens trust the armed forces significantly more than the police. Eighty-four percent of Lebanese express trust in the armed forces and 50 percent in the police. Palestinians express much less trust in both the army and the police than citizens of other states in the Arab Barometer survey. Palestinians trust the police (44 percent) and armed forces (41 percent) a great deal or quite a lot (see Figure 5.1).

MENA citizens trust the legislature and political parties much less. Egyptians express the greatest trust in political parties, with 19 percent saying they trust them a great deal or quite a lot; only 7 percent of Jordanians hold these views. As discussed in Chapter 3, such lukewarm trust in political parties across the region can be attributed to the ineffectual roles political parties have played in parliaments, a result of low parliamentary autonomy and efficacy. Indeed, elected councils of representatives (parliaments) do not fare much better, and MENA citizens rank them as the second-least trusted institution (see Figure 5.2).

Lebanon stands out for the fact that its citizens have exceptionally low trust in all institutions other than the army and the police and that they have relatively high trust—in terms of
TABLE 5.2 ■ Concerns over a Terrorist Attack in Your Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Algeria</th>
<th>Palestine</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
<th>Lebanon</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
<th>Tunisia</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = 100%) 8,394 1,200 1,196 1,200 1,200 1,197 1,201 1,200

Source: Arab Barometer data. Used with permission.

FIGURE 5.1 ■ Trust in the Police and Armed Forces

Source: Arab Barometer data. Used with permission.
ranking—in political parties. Only 15 percent of Lebanese express a great deal or quite a lot of trust in political parties, yet political parties rank as their third-most trusted institution.

**Relations with the United States**

Citizens are divided over whether they prefer stronger economic relations with the United States. When asked if they want their country’s relations with the United States to become stronger, remain the same, or become weaker, relatively similar numbers of Algerians, Egyptians, Lebanese, and Palestinians choose each response. Jordanians, Moroccans, and Tunisians overwhelmingly support stronger economic relations with the United States (see Figure 5.3).

At the same time, when asked about the influence of the United States on the development of democracy in their country, only Moroccans responded positively; 28 percent said it was very or somewhat positive, and 30 percent stated it was neither positive nor negative. Tunisians, Jordanians, and Algerians were relatively divided on the issue, while Lebanese, Palestinians, and Egyptians were resoundingly negative, as shown in Table 5.3.

When asked “What policy do you think would be the most positive thing that the United States could do in your country?” most MENA citizens say that the United States should not get involved (see Figure 5.4). This sentiment is particularly strong in Egypt (62 percent) and Tunisia (50 percent). Across the MENA, the second-most common response was resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, according to 38 percent of Palestinians and 34 percent of Jordanians.

The Lebanese, Tunisians, and Moroccans in relatively large numbers also would like the United States to promote economic development (26 percent, 10 percent, and 19 percent, respectively).
When Jordanians and Lebanese were asked what they think the influence of the United States has been on the conflict in Syria, both responded very negatively: 69 percent of Lebanese and 52 percent of Jordanians responded very or somewhat negative. In Lebanon, this included 50 percent who responded very negative.

**Postrevolutionary Tunisia and Egypt**

If we look in-depth at Tunisia and Egypt where the outcomes of their 2011 revolutions have been dramatically different, survey results show that both Tunisians and Egyptians share much consensus regarding their views on democracy but differ regarding the economic situation and satisfaction with the government. Most Egyptians (59 percent) feel that the economic situation is much better or somewhat better than it was just prior to the uprising and the 2013 coup. In contrast, only 15 percent of Tunisians rate the economy as being good or very good, a decline from 27 percent shortly after the 2011 uprising. Similarly, the percentage of Tunisians who expect the economy to improve over the next three years to five years has decreased from 78 percent just after the revolution to 55 percent in 2013 to 49 percent in 2018.

Yet Tunisians continue to have confidence in the democratic system. Eighty-six percent of Tunisians agree that democracy is the best system of governance—an increase from the
70 percent who agreed with the statement shortly after the revolution. Fifty-three percent of Egyptians agree with the statement “Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.” Egyptians continue to prefer a “parliamentary system in which nationalist, left-wing, right-wing, and Islamist parties compete in parliamentary elections,” although support for this has fallen to 39 percent as compared to 69 percent in 2013.

As Tunisians continue transitioning to democracy, there is a growing concern among Tunisians whether or not democracy is appropriate for their country. Part of this decline may be related to the fact that 73 percent of Tunisians agree or strongly agree that their fellow citizens are unprepared for democracy, a substantial increase from the 2011 and 2013 surveys. At the same time, support for political Islam has decreased. Half of Egyptians believe that laws should be based equally on shari’a and the will of the people; this is down from 68 percent in 2013. Similarly, while 70 percent of Egyptians agreed or strongly agreed that the government and parliament should enact laws mostly or entirely based in accordance with Islamic law in 2013, this dropped to 34 percent in 2016. The number of Egyptians who believe that religious leaders should have influence over government (16 percent) or should hold office (25 percent) has remained the same since 2013 but is significantly lower since 2011. The declining percentages may reflect the impact of the Freedom and Justice Party’s time in power. Tunisians also have similarly low levels of support for political Islam. Only 11 percent support the Islamist party, Ennahda. This is equal to the secular party, Nidaa Tounes (12 percent).

The Afrobarometer findings also reveal a sharp increase in the number of Egyptians who see their country as democratic and are satisfied with the way democracy is working. Yet at the same time, they perceive lower levels of political freedoms and have lower levels of support for democracy and elections. This may be explained by what appears to be growing support for a strong executive: popular support in the president has almost tripled since 2013.

### TABLE 5.3 Influence of the United States on the Development of Democracy in Your Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Algeria</th>
<th>Palestine</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
<th>Lebanon</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
<th>Tunisia</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very positive</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat positive</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither positive nor negative</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat negative</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very negative</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N = 100%)</td>
<td>8,352</td>
<td>1,190</td>
<td>1,197</td>
<td>1,193</td>
<td>1,199</td>
<td>1,191</td>
<td>1,192</td>
<td>1,190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Arab Barometer data. Used with permission.
As with other citizens in the Arab world, Tunisians and Egyptians remain worried about their security (see Table 5.2). However, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of Egyptians who say their security is ensured or fully ensured since 2013 (nearly 80 percent compared to 20 percent in 2013). More Tunisians (71 percent) state that they feel the security of their families is secure than in either 2013 (52 percent) or in 2011 shortly after the revolution (66 percent).

While overall Egyptian satisfaction with the government has increased since 2013, Tunisians have significantly lower levels of trust in public institutions than in 2011 or 2013. The decline in trust of government appears to be related to its perceived failure to address key challenges facing ordinary citizens. Fewer Tunisians state that the government is doing a good or very good job at managing the economy, reducing inequality, or creating jobs than in either 2013 (52 percent) or in 2011 shortly after the revolution (66 percent).

While overall Egyptian satisfaction with the government has increased since 2013, Tunisians have significantly lower levels of trust in public institutions than in 2011 or 2013. The decline in trust of government appears to be related to its perceived failure to address key challenges facing ordinary citizens. Fewer Tunisians state that the government is doing a good or very good job at managing the economy, reducing inequality, or creating jobs than in either 2013 or 2011. The most precipitous decline is among those who say that the government is cracking down on corruption to a great or medium extent.

**Postreform Jordan and Morocco**

If we examine the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, both of which have undergone reform processes in response to protesters’ demands in 2011, we find that both Moroccans

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*Source: Arab Barometer data. Used with permission.*
and Jordanians rate the highest in terms of the perception of what their respective governments are achieving.

Jordanians’ views on a wide variety of issues have remained consistent or have improved since 2011. In 2011, 44 percent of Jordanians stated that the economic situation was good or very good, and in 2016, this number rose to 46 percent. Regarding the economy, 68 percent agree that the economic situation is either much better or somewhat better than in 2011, and 53 percent state that the government is doing a good or very good job at managing the economy. Importantly, 55 percent believe that the government is cracking down to a large or medium extent on corruption. This is a significant increase over previous surveys.

Moroccans also are increasingly optimistic about their country, as 66 percent evaluate the current economic situation as very good or good, and 32 percent say it is much better or somewhat better than in 2011. However, Moroccans are divided on their government’s performance at managing the economy—42 percent state the government is doing a very good or good job, but 43 percent say it’s doing a bad or very bad job.

While Jordanians are marginally more supportive, both Jordanians and Moroccans express relatively strong support for the extent to which they believe their country is democratic. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being a complete democracy, 75 percent of Jordanians and 58 percent of Moroccans ranked their country as 5 or above.

Post–2011 Algeria

Algeria experienced a series of limited protests between December 2010 and early 2012. Until 2019, when the country experienced its own Smile Revolution, forcing its president to step down (see Chapter 9), Algerians remained among the least mobilized of MENA citizens—at least on a mass scale. Yet public opinion in 2016 suggested that there were growing frustrations with the political status quo.

In 2016, Algerians rated Algeria as less democratic than previously. On a scale of 0 to 10, with a 0 being a complete dictatorship, 65 percent of Algerians ranked the extent to which their country is democratic at 5 or less. At the same time, more Algerians believed democracy is appropriate for their country, as 70 percent of Algerians gave a ranking of 5 or higher.

In 2016, Algerians also were less likely to be satisfied with the government. While 70 percent rated the government’s performance at providing security in the country as good or very good, the government did not fare well in other areas. A majority of Algerians gave a bad or very bad rating regarding the government’s performance in several criteria: keeping prices down (82 percent), creating employment opportunities (78 percent), narrowing the gap between rich and poor (76 percent), managing the economy (67 percent), improving health services (60 percent), and addressing educational needs (57 percent).

Sixty-five percent of Algerians felt that their household economic situation is good or very good. Along with Morocco, this was the highest ranking of all countries in the Arab Barometer survey. Yet Algerians expressed significant economic anxiety and perceived the economy as worse than before. Only 27 percent of Algerians ranked their country’s economic situation as either good or very good, a significant drop from previous surveys (66 percent).

FORMAL AVENUES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Formal avenues of political participation, whether political parties or associational activities, exist across the MENA; however, not all avenues are present in every country in the region.
Moreover, regime strategies to induce political participation in line with regime preferences or to limit engagement have changed over time. In the context of political pressures emerging from the Arab uprisings of 2011, these changes continue both in regimes that collapsed and in those that have managed to maintain power but, in the process, instituted partial reforms.

After independence, most MENA regimes instituted projects of state corporatism as a way to manage participation and foster development. In such cases, especially in the late 1960s and 1970s, regimes directed political participation through state-controlled professional syndicates, labor unions, and political parties. By creating spaces where political activity was legitimated, regimes attempted to micromanage the content and form of such political participation. In return, proregime segments received perquisites and benefits. Relying on state corporatism further distances citizens from the states and from the possibilities of holding authoritarian regimes accountable.

However, as the resource base dwindled and Islamist elements penetrated these associations, the corporatist model became far less effective. Multiparty competition gradually increased after the 1980s. Well before the Arab Spring uprisings, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Palestine began holding multiparty, parliamentary elections.

Political Parties and Elections

Political parties are one of the most obvious arenas for direct political engagement. Through political parties, people can articulate their interests, mobilize their votes, and allocate their support to certain policy positions and interest groups. Political parties also play an important, albeit somewhat limited, role in political society. Some existing political parties predate the independence era and survived authoritarianism. Many others did not survive and were either liquidated or co-opted by existing regimes.

During the populist era (1960s and 1970s), regimes often only allowed proregime parties, such as the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria, or gave them constitutional and political advantages, thus discouraging the entry of other parties. The latter was the case with the Ba'thist Party in Syria and Iraq and the Neo-Destour in Tunisia. By the late 1980s, in the face of economic crisis and structural adjustment pressures many regimes allowed for additional political opening and liberalization. This led to the entry of new political parties. Since the 1990s, the number of political parties in the region has mushroomed.

What Do Regimes Gain from Permitting Political Parties?

Rather than a sign of a burgeoning democracy, the holding of elections is often a survival strategy or what Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger call a strategy of adaptation for authoritarian regimes. In other words, elections can help maintain authoritarian regime stability. They allow leaders to manage political elites by bringing them into the political process, thus keeping them accountable to the existing regime. Authoritarian leaders often manipulate elections so that the electoral process results in outcomes that give domestic credibility and legitimacy to leaders in power. By uniting potential supporters and would-be opponents in an election context, authoritarian regimes are able to remain durable and stable across time.

Examining Egypt under Mubarak, Holger Albrecht demonstrates how the opposition, particularly opposition political parties, indirectly acts as a pillar of authoritarian rule. First, the opposition contributes positively to the regime’s quest for political legitimacy and its image as a relatively liberal authoritarian regime. Second, the opposition provides a “rent-seeking”
function. By tolerating the opposition and creating an image of pluralism, the authoritarian regime fulfils the expectations of and demands by Western governments and international institutions. This helps attract political rents, particularly development funds from abroad. The third authoritarian dimension of opposition is co-optation. Parties serve as transmission belts for the co-optation of social groups and interests not represented by the regime. Fourth, political opposition provides a “channeling function.” Political parties channel dissent, making it easier for authoritarian regimes to assess discontent among the population and measure the potential for a social crisis to develop. Finally, the opposition provides a potential moderating function. Inclusion in the political system has the potential to deradicalize the opposition.

Scholars examining Islamist political parties identify three dynamics by which inclusion in electoral politics can lead to moderation. The first involves electoral incentives. Opposition parties broaden and moderate their positions in order to attract votes beyond their narrow core constituency. The second dynamic relates to institutional structures. Opposition parties must mount campaigns, raise funds, and develop policies. This requires practical leaders and good administrators, not revolutionaries and underground cells. Third, once in power, opposition parties must deliver services, leaving little time for ideology, political rigidity, or radicalism.

Why Are Political Parties Weak in the MENA?

In the MENA, parliaments are not authorized to design, pass, and implement policies without the heavy-handed role of the executive. Because they cannot influence meaningful policy changes, incentives for parties to develop wide and encompassing issue-oriented politics or outlooks are lacking. As a consequence, political parties in authoritarian MENA countries are weak: vehicles of clientelistic redistribution, agents that promote personalistic ties and relations. After the Arab Spring, countries like Egypt and Tunisia witnessed a surge in the number of new political parties, following the easing of restrictions on registering and participating in political parties. Yet many of the new parties that formed were not well experienced, largely because they emerged out of authoritarian environments that had suffocated political activity, and thus, also did not have well-developed political platforms with wide appeal to the population.

Reaching out to citizens under authoritarianism is a significant challenge. Typically, parties form around issues and mobilize citizens in support of demands. Yet political parties in authoritarian countries in the MENA have not developed into organizations that espouse issue-based platforms for several possible reasons. Opposition leaders are often co-opted by the regime. The activities of opposition parties are often restricted or hindered. In addition, elections are commonly rigged so that opposition parties obtain few seats in parliament. Opposition parties furthermore have very few channels through which to launch complaints of electoral harassment or wrongdoing.

Once they gain access to parliament, their ability to influence policy remains limited owing to executive oversight of the legislative body. Authoritarian rulers “wall off” the executive branch so that no act of legislature can transform the system. In much of the region (with countries like Israel being clear exceptions), the cabinet is appointed from outside the parliament, and it must approve all legislature passed in parliament. The executive is not accountable to the elected parliament or legislative assembly. Because of weak legislatures, political parties are unable to influence meaningful policy changes.

Many political parties thus remain personalistic, tribal, kin based, and narrow, lending themselves to a model of clientelistic distribution rather than constituency interest aggregation. Parties
are primarily sources of patronage and *wasta* to government services that tend to retain constituent loyalty at election time through the distribution of clientelistic perquisites and benefits.

Party identification and policy issues often have less influence on voting behavior than the possibility of receiving *wasta*. For example, in Jordan, access to state resources is the primary motivation for participation in elections. Citizens do not necessarily possess democratic aspirations or policy preferences when they vote; instead, they hope to leverage more benefits from existing regimes. Under this system of “competitive clientelism,” as Ellen Lust calls it, voting revolves around patronage with constituents determining their voting preference based on their perception of who can deliver the goods. Furthermore, those individuals with personal relations with candidates are more likely to vote as they anticipate that they are more likely to benefit from the candidate’s patronage.

In the end, national elections reinforce rather than undermine the authoritarian regime by providing elites an opportunity to compete over special access to a limited set of state resources that they can then distribute to their clients. Political parties tend to have a pro-regime bias because, more often than not, they are rewarded for catering to the regime, and it is these benefits that keep party constituents happy.

**Why Do Opposition Parties Participate in Elections?**

If opposition parties are weak, restricted in their activities, and ultimately play an indirect role in supporting authoritarian regimes, why do they participate in elections? Despite being limited or controlled, elections can be considered “moments of opportunity” in an otherwise repressive environment. In his study of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt under Mubarak, Samer Shehata observes that elections and campaigns provide opportunities for groups that otherwise face serious restrictions on political activity to engage in politics. While protest marches, rallies, campaign posters, and even political meetings are often restricted in authoritarian regimes, these activities are tolerated during election periods. This similarly was the case in Tunisia under the former president, Ben Ali. Opposition parties were allowed to run against the president’s party in order to give the appearance of genuine political competition. In Egypt, as elsewhere, elections under Mubarak meant increased repression of opposition parties, but they were simultaneously periods of increased oppositional political activity.

**Public Participation in Political Parties**

Given the lack of trust MENA citizens have in political parties, it is not surprising that few citizens state that they are members of a political party. In Jordan and Egypt, where respondents expressed the least amount of trust in political parties, fewer than 1 percent of citizens claimed to be party members. Political party membership among Palestinians and Lebanese is significantly higher (14 percent and 12 percent, respectively), which is consistent with higher percentages of Palestinians and Lebanese who trust political parties (17 percent and 15 percent, respectively). In comparison, party membership in Canada and Europe is 2 percent in the case of the former and just under 5 percent in the case of the latter (membership levels range between as high as 17 percent and as low as less than 1 percent). In the United States, where citizens can state a party preference when registering to vote (and
in this sense, it is difficult to speak of party membership), the proportion of voters calling themselves “independent” reached 42 percent in 2017.

Civil Society

Civil society is a term that is increasingly popular—not only with academics but with government officials, aid workers, international agencies, and a wide variety of other professions. Yet it remains a term that is difficult to define and one that is contested. It is often referred to as the “third sector,” separate from the state and from the market or business. It is the sphere of associational activity that, as is discussed in the following text, is commonly understood as being central to the democratization process. Taking a dominant conceptualization of civil society, this chapter defines civil society as those voluntary groups, associations, or organizations that are engaged in nonstate activities and that through their activities, either directly or indirectly, redefine the boundaries between state and society by increasing the separation between the two. However, we shall see that in the MENA, many scholars also include mosques and discussion groups as part of civil society as these too perform many of the democratizing functions of organizations more typically included in definitions of civil society.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, there is a rich history of civil society in the MENA. During the colonial period, the middle-class and professional sectors galvanized civil society activity as a means of mobilizing toward independence, and these associations were vital in training and producing the national leaders. After independence, and even in the authoritarian regimes of the region, civil society remained. The Arab Spring gave a new lease on life to civil society organizations (CSOs), with hundreds of new such organizations registering in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The Libyan case is particularly important because it was not what could have been called a “civil society” before the 2011 revolution. Between 2011 and 2014, a plethora of CSOs established for the first time, ranging from sports to environmental to professional associations. With the breakdown of security in 2014, many CSOs are now inactive, and many of the activists have fled the country. However, an active network of CSOs remains.

Democratization and the Civil Society Debate

Civil society remains important for bottom-up approaches to democracy. In addition to contesting ruling regimes, civil society is useful for enhancing democratization through various direct and indirect mechanisms. Social scientists offer four different kinds of propositions to explain the relationship between associational life and democracy.

The first claim is that civic organizations serve as agents of democratic socialization, and they increase members’ support for democratic institutions and generate such values as moderation and tolerance, which are important for deliberation. Larry Diamond posits that members who participate in civic organizations are more likely to learn about the importance of tolerance, pluralism, and respect for the law. They also learn about their potential political roles in society and that they have a right to be represented in their governments. In Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville attributes the success of US democracy to the country’s rich associational life. Associations serve as “schools for civic virtue,” he wrote. Habits of association foster patterns of civility important for successful democracies.

A second claim is that associational life can effectively increase the levels of social capital among members—that is, trust and norms of reciprocity increase in organizations and thus increase the likelihood of cooperative ventures among members of society as a whole. In
Making Democracy Work, Robert Putnam argues that membership in horizontal voluntary associations enhances social capital (interpersonal trust) necessary for cooperative ventures in society as a whole, which in turn leads people to “stand up to city hall” or engage in other forms of behavior that provide an incentive for better government performance. Putnam, for instance, finds that political institutions in northern Italy are more accountable and more efficient than political institutions in southern Italy. The success of local governance in northern Italy, he claims, is highly correlated with associational activity that cuts across social cleavages and interests, bolstering the levels of pluralism, tolerance, and especially social trust and reciprocity in northern Italy. Putnam correlates the density of horizontal voluntary associations with strong and effective local government: “strong society; strong state.”

In democratic societies, this theory works well for the reinforcement of democratic rule. In nondemocratic societies, however, it is not clear how social capital can enhance the democratic governance of a regime. As social capital in democratic settings may create opportunities for citizens to collectively seek the help of democratic institutions, so too can the same logic apply in nondemocratic regions, where citizens can seek local public officials through any available avenue, whether it is formal (directly through the state) or informal (through clientelistic channels). As associational life in northern Italy promotes civic engagement in ways that are important for the efficiency of northern Italy’s local governance, so too can associational life in southern Italy promote civic engagement in ways that sustain the inefficiency of local governance there.

A third claim is that associations foster democracy by mobilizing ordinary citizens into the political process. In the pluralist tradition of political science, policy results from competition among organized groups in the public arena; thus, associations are critical for representation of a diversity of interests in the public sphere.

Associations in nondemocratic regions can link citizens to states; however, this depends on the available avenues to do so. If associations directly seek government channels but find officials apathetic to their concerns, they may develop ideas and attitudes about participation that do not conform to the anticipated generation of attitudes in democratic states. Having been shunned from government offices, members may distance themselves from seeking government help. If, in contrast, the association has strong connections to government through clientelistic channels, members may learn that to derive benefits, resources, and responses from government they need to seek informal channels to represent their interests. In these cases, associations can very well reinforce clientelistic tendencies. The attitudes and behavior of associational members may exhibit their support for clientelistic forms of participation as well.

A fourth claim is that civic organizations that have substantial memberships can place the necessary constraints on authoritarian governing structures. Civic organizations can serve as key sites for citizen mobilization and expression. Associations can serve as counterweights to centralized governing apparatuses by mobilizing sectors of society to oppose authoritarian tendencies. This concept has been at the heart of much of the literature on mobilization, opposition-regime relations, social movements, and revolutions.

This formulation accounts for much of the work explaining civil society successes in bringing about democratic outcomes. The ability of civic organizations to serve this monitoring role depends on the context in which the organizations operate. Many states severely restrict the freedom of association for fear of the plausible monitoring role associations can play or co-opt CSOs so that they become part of the regime apparatus. In democratic settings, freedom of association guarantees that a variety of interests and views will enter mainstream public life.
Associations can play important roles in linking their members to activity that is supportive of broader democratic outcomes and participation. In nondemocratic settings, like many states in the MENA, the ability of associations to function freely often depends on the program and the association. Where associations might be seen as disrupting the status quo, they can face restrictions on their activities or be disbanded altogether. The fact that associations supportive of the nondemocratic regime in power enjoy rights and privileges that are not guaranteed to associations in the opposition raises the issue as to what type of civic engagement these progovernment associations espouse. Those that are supportive of the nondemocratic regime may promote values that are not critical of the nondemocratic policies of the regime, or they can reinforce clientelistic behavior—both of which are at odds with the findings that associational life can promote democratic citizenship and outcomes.

Mapping Civil Society

Civil society in the MENA includes a variety of associations: professional associations, charitable societies, business groups, trade unions, private societies, social clubs, sporting clubs, youth centers, medical clinics, and literacy and empowerment centers. In contrast to a lack of trust in political parties, citizens of the MENA tend to trust CSOs. CSOs in the MENA comprise both secular and religious organizations, mosques, and mosque-based networks of activity. In many states, secular and religious associations compete with one another. In Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco, and Lebanon, Islamic organizations are extremely well organized. They offer effective services and avenues for delivery, and they are capable of mobilizing their constituents, catering to their needs, and understanding their frustrations.

In the aftermath of World War II, civil society activity became a direct casualty of populist regimes. Civil society activity, not directly linked to the goals of regimes, was drastically curbed. This pattern occurred in most one-party states—Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, Mauritania, and Somalia—and in some monarchies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and several Gulf states. These regimes established social contracts with their citizens. According to Saad Eddin Ibrahim, under these new populist regimes, “explicit” or “implicit” social contracts were orchestrated between centralized states and their citizens. States attempted to advance socioeconomically, create government jobs, advocate social justice, achieve independence from external influences, and work for the liberation of Palestine in return for citizens’ support of these populist strategies, or at least their acquiescence.

As such, civil society activity was seriously limited and constrained. A plethora of laws and decrees were passed to limit civil society activity, and the dominant political parties co-opted and annexed organizations to consolidate their rule. In the 1960s and 1970s, the organizations of modern civil society suffered from both internal state control and international isolation. Yet the populist social contract would come to an end with the 1990 Gulf crisis and the hegemonic influence of the United States in the region. Wars and conquests left several MENA states lacking legitimacy and domestic support. These levels of legitimacy were once vital to keeping the social contract alive.

Within this new environment of reduced legitimacy, civil society has gradually been playing a new role. Several CSOs have sprung up in the region. According to Ibrahim, the number of civic associations is estimated to have grown from twenty thousand in the mid-1960s to about seventy thousand in the late 1980s. One-third of these civic associations were located in Egypt alone. In the 1990s, CSOs began playing a stronger role in political development and contestation; however, in recent years, their activities have been severely

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curbed and controlled once again. In Egypt, for example, under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, even the most innocuous CSOs are no longer considered acceptable.

As International Monetary Fund structural adjustment policies began to be implemented in the 1980s, regimes allowed for greater political freedoms. This also enabled greater civil society activity. An important component of this civic boom is that international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have played a more prominent role in the MENA. The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed states coming under the pressure of international monetary organizations and donor countries to structurally adjust their economies, resulting in increasing inequalities and growing poverty levels across the region. As the material grievances of citizens increased, so did the urgency of addressing these realities. Thus, charitable CSOs began to grow in number as well. In many instances, regimes promoted the growth of civic associations to help with the worsening economic conditions. After the economic reforms of this period, for example, the Moroccan state recognized that resources often used to appease the public were in gradual decline. Allowing the emergence of civic associations, the regime rationalized, would place more of the financial burden of demands on civil society actors. The regime needed a partner to meet the economic woes of the populace—and what better way to do this than to expand the number of state partners (opposition or not) within the civic sphere?

During these economic transformations, one of the major segments of civil society that has suffered has been organized labor. While economic liberalization policies favored privatization at the expense of labor and led to higher levels of unemployment, organized labor lost much of the power that it possessed during the years when MENA states could afford to hold on to bloated bureaucracies. The leaders of organized labor unions have become less influential in recent years. Although trade unions protested the ways in which economic adjustment affected their members, in the end the forces of economic liberalization won out. Labor unions today are quite weak and ineffective and certainly do not possess the legitimacy and popularity they once enjoyed.

Islamists also found this void quite lucrative for their own mobilization strategies and altruistic agendas. Many of the new civic associations that sprang up to address growing inequalities were dominated by Islamist actors and championed by the Muslim Brotherhood across the region. Hizbullah also played a key role in mobilizing the associational terrain to address growing economic disparities across Lebanon.

Charitable societies play an important role in the distribution of zakat (alms), educational supplies, basic food items, and clothing. For many women who are still unable to access urban centers for education, CSOs serve as key sites of empowerment, skills enhancement, literacy, and the opportunity to socialize and integrate in local communities outside the realm of the household. Arguably, these venues remain crucial for the empowerment of women.

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed the growth of professional civic associations. This was a direct result of the growing levels of education across the region. These associations include lawyers’ societies, medical associations, and other professional groupings. In the absence of a free media and fully representative parliaments, the sector of professional associations provided a forum for open political engagement and discussion.

Building on this infrastructure, civil society also played a key role during the Arab uprisings in 2011, and the uprisings themselves sparked the creation of several new CSOs. A study of the demonstrations in both Egypt and Tunisia found that significant numbers of protesters were involved in civil society associations.
Challenges and Opportunities of Civil Society, Post–Arab Spring

Civil society activity serves as an important outlet for intellectual growth, civic and political engagement, deliberation, associationalism, and mobilization. However, it continues to face ever-growing restrictions and ongoing manipulation by the authoritarian regimes in the region. CSOs risk becoming folded into the domains of the regime, but they also risk marginalization if they are isolated from political society. In many of the states in which the authoritarian regimes were toppled in 2011, civil society now faces the challenge of remaining alive and relevant in times of civil war. Even in Tunisia, civic associations still find themselves having to navigate a web of government regulations and restrictions. They have to negotiate their principles against the overwhelming needs of resources to keep their programs alive. They have to navigate a civic terrain divided by clientelistic perquisites and benefits.

Civic associations also look for international collaboration and linkages. Yet the geopolitics dominating the MENA, where accepting US funding is often perceived as collusion with US security interests in the region, has reduced the funding options available to civic leaders. Despite these challenges, however, the civic terrain continues to be vibrant and dynamic, attracting significant segments of the population.

This is important, for civil society associations not only are critical for promoting accountability and democracy; they serve a variety of other significant functions as well. First, where states are increasingly reducing the social contract between state and society, CSOs have filled an enormous gap. Civil society networks offer much-needed services and goods to constituents. Second, CSOs also remain effective outlets of political society, even when they are not directly contesting the state. In CSOs, citizens meet, debate, engage, and discuss local and national political developments. In Israel, CSOs work toward bridging the rift between Jewish and Arab Israelis. For many citizens across the developing world, associational life and activity are the only forms of active political or community involvement. Outside these associations and organizations, citizens possess very few channels for political recourse and may remain marginalized from the elite-dominated political world. Civil society offers particularly important spaces for otherwise marginalized segments of society to meet and interact. For many young women, participation in a local civic association or sports club remains the only way to get out of the house and develop skills and capacities that are not found at home.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Citizens also engage in social movements to demand broad social and political change. While this engagement is closely related to civil society, it is important to examine how and why activists choose to mobilize in social movements. This section examines participation in more loosely organized networks that often characterize such movements, drawing on theoretical literature to explore engagement and its implications.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Social movement theory has its origins in Marxist theory. It revolves around the conception of power as centralized and mobilization as being driven by class issues. Under this classic version of the theory, economic factors are seen as creating conditions that divide the...
working class and landowners. This economic inequality between the “haves” and “have-nots” is then seen as driving the working class into forming interest groups to mobilize for their economic rights and material interests.29

Social movement theory later evolved into focusing less on the economy and class divisions and more on mobilization among various interest groups. In new social movement theory, groups of people are conceived as rational actors who form organizations to mobilize for issues that matter to them. Such organizations include activist groups, women’s cooperatives, and unions. A key theory in this context is resource mobilization theory, which looks at how people operating under an organization engage in instrumental action to secure resources for their organization in order to mobilize for issues.30 Networks are an important component of this theory, as social networks are seen as ways through which activists share information and resources. Unlike the Marxist conception of power dynamics within activist organizations, the focus on networks sees power as diffuse and shared among different members of those networks.31

Mobilization in Contemporary Social Movements

Social movements have been prevalent across the MENA, and social networks form an important component of those movements. Women’s rights groups, for example, are active in Iran, Lebanon, and even Saudi Arabia, where they have formed civil society networks calling for changes in personal status laws (in the cases of Iran and Lebanon) and in electoral law (asking for women’s right to vote in Saudi Arabia). Youth networks have also been active, often using social media to highlight issues of importance to the younger generations. These included the youth campaigns that emerged in Egypt between 2004 and 2011, which used blogs and later Facebook to bring the young together and to mobilize.

Such networks in Egypt deserve further attention since they have helped inspire similar networks across the MENA. The origin of those networks can be traced back to the Kifaya movement, which started in late 2004. Kifaya—The Egyptian Movement for Change—was a popular movement calling for political change whose existence was catalyzed by the possibility that then-president Hosni Mubarak would be extending his presidential term—after having ruled Egypt for over three decades without ever having gone through an election—and that his son Gamal might be his political successor. Kifaya activists came from different social backgrounds, and most were youth not affiliated with political parties. They took part in demonstrations, signed petitions, and launched blogs to call for freedom of expression and human rights and make public their rejection of the potential Mubarak succession plans. Kifaya activists were met with crackdowns by the regime, but they continued to mobilize even after the 2005 presidential election—which the regime orchestrated to guarantee a win for Mubarak. Activists documented and declared their objection to electoral fraud and incidents of police brutality, and they collaborated with Muslim Brotherhood youth on issues of common interest, such as rallying against political detentions. This youth mobilization later gave birth to the movement that began in 2008, whose first activity was a national strike on April 6, 2008, in support of workers’ rights. The April 6 movement started as a Facebook-based network, but its activities expanded over the years to include more effective offline action, mainly lobbying and street protests. Its members played a key role in mobilizing people for the January 25 protest that formed the start of the Egyptian revolution in 2011.32

The combination of online and offline methods of mobilization used by Egyptian activists since 2004 helped inspire activists across the region. Using the media—first, blogs and
then social media—to publicize demands and organize protests became prevalent as witnessed in various antiregime protests in Tunisia in 2008, during the Green Movement in Iran in 2009—where people protested against what they perceived as the fraudulent reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president—and during the Arab Spring. In 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Morocco, and Syria, social networks similar to the Egyptian ones described here emerged, demanding political reform. What characterizes all those networks is first, that they were diffuse in terms of the distribution of power among their diverse members. Their demands, actions, and platforms were bottom-up and grassroots based, as opposed to being directed by leaders from above. In many cases, the movements had many leaders or were leaderless. Second, their members came together because of their agreement on a common cause, as opposed to official political party affiliation or belief in a certain ideology.

**Identities and Demands**

Resource mobilization theory focuses on how these different kinds of networks mobilize through examining their structures and ways of obtaining resources, but it does not explain the ways through which members of social movements construct meanings and identities. *Construction* here refers to the cultural context of social movements, which in turn impact the movements’ grievances and goals. Social constructionism theory addresses this through emphasizing the role of cultural processes in social movements. It draws attention to how the cultural context impacts who mobilizes and how, including how activists portray themselves and their ideas to the world. In this theory, cultural frames affect the identities that activists have and the symbols they use to communicate their identities to the world.

Applying social constructionism to political participation in the MENA, one begins to see differences in how different groups express themselves and the different frameworks they use. Although women’s rights groups in different countries may mobilize for a similar issue, the way their demands are articulated and the activities they use for this purpose vary in different countries. Women’s rights groups in Yemen, for example, often use a religious framework in the way they define themselves and their demands (invoking Islam as a religion of equality between men and women), while most women’s rights groups in Lebanon do not. Moreover, in addition to mobilizing in the formal political sphere (e.g., through Lebanese women’s groups’ lobbying of parliament to change personal status laws), mobilization can take place in the cultural sphere through symbolic action (e.g., through the staging of public events or the wearing of symbols referring to the group demand). In Lebanon, for instance, women’s rights activists distributed handbags with slogans about personal status law reform on the streets in order to spread their message.

Steven Buechler summarizes a number of key trends within new social movement theory that can help with understanding the dynamics of social movements in the MENA. The first trend is the already-mentioned attention to symbolic action in civil society. For example, in 2008, Kifaya, which was also a movement against human rights violations and corruption and for freedom of expression in Egypt, staged public action in a religious shrine in Cairo (Sayyeda Zeinab) whereby people swept the floor of the shrine while calling out for freedom from tyranny. In this action, the activists used a traditional symbolic act (sweeping the floor of shrines) as a way to highlight an issue of importance to the movement.

The second trend is the focus on the goal of social movements as being about achieving self-determination for people rather than about increasing people’s power within an existing
status quo. Lebanese protesters who demonstrated against the occupation of Lebanon by Syrian troops in the spring of 2005 did not aim to enhance their influence relative to that of the occupier but to highlight the importance of citizens’ self-determination and sovereignty, which constituted a challenge to the status quo. In other words, the goal was not to alter the balance of power while keeping the political milieu intact but rather to change the political milieu itself.

The third related trend is the focus on postmaterialist values rather than materialist gains. Unlike Marxist frameworks that see group mobilization as being about enhancing economic resources, new social movement theory focuses on issues, such as Kifaya’s and the April 6 movement’s focus on human rights and freedom.

The fourth trend is viewing activist groups as undergoing a complex process of constructing collective identities, as opposed to having clearly defined, structured identities. Kifaya’s members came from a variety of backgrounds—religious and secular, young and old, affiliated with political parties and unaffiliated—but who all constructed a common identity as reformists. A similar process of identity creation took place in Iran in 2009, with the Green Movement that formed in opposition to the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president also being an unstructured movement with members from diverse backgrounds.

The final trend is the recognition of the existence of temporary networks as a component of mobilization, rather than seeing successful mobilization as being solely the product of centralized organization. The 2011 uprisings perhaps best illustrate this point.

A key dimension of all the uprisings was that they were popular protests by citizens reclaiming their sense of dignity, who came together not just from organized networks but also from informal networks. For example, in Egypt the April 6 movement, which had formed in 2008 as a social media–driven youth opposition movement, was a loosely organized group that played a key role in the January 25 revolution, while in Yemen, the Islamist party Islah played an active role in the demonstrations. But in addition, informal networks of people from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds also took part in the protests. A significant number of those people were citizens who did not belong to organized groups. In this sense, although social movement theory is certainly useful for understanding the dynamics of political participation during the Arab uprisings, it does not explain the full range of activities that could be characterized as such—not only during the uprisings but also before then.

INFORMAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In the absence of effective states to represent citizen interests and where the rule of law tends to be weak, informal networks and institutions remain the most reliable and effective outlets for exercising one’s voice. Informal political participation is the most common type of political engagement in the MENA. This kind of political participation takes place in everyday life, through informal networks and institutions that include family life, kinship networks, and tribalism. Informal political participation includes political discussion groups in the home as well as more organized discussion forums. It also may include Qur’anic study groups, the creation of networks, or even working in a charity. Through informal “avenues of participation,” as Singerman calls them, and other forums, participants critically discuss public policy in ways they cannot do in the formal political sphere, participate in the creation of new ways of thinking about politics, create informal pathways to decision-makers to let their opinions be known, or influence election outcomes. Informal political participation is never
far from formal political participation, and it forms the often-invisible backbone of social and political change of the type witnessed in the Arab Spring. The intent of informal political participation is not necessarily mass political change as was attempted in 2011. In fact, many participants in these discussion groups and networks may not even view their own actions as political. However, the Arab Spring would not have been possible without these types of informal political activities that created a shared sense of what needed to be changed politically and of community connected together via family, neighborhood, mosque, or virtually.

**Why Is Informal Political Participation So Common?**

Informal political participation is an important type of political participation in the context of states that are overly present in the formal political sphere and largely absent in the economic lives of MENA citizens. Political parties are weak, and in some cases nonexistent. CSOs are commonly prohibited from any sort of political activism. Civil society activism in general has become increasingly risky for those who take part. In this context, informal political participation offers opportunities for free speech and association outside the eyes and ears of the state.

Informal political participation allows citizens to remain within the bounds of legal and acceptable activities. Informal political activities do not demand or require an explicit political stance. Participants may view their activities as social, economic, political, or equally all three. The popularity and strength of informal political participation lies in the fact that it is woven into the daily social and economic lives of their participants and therefore is part of the daily fabric of society.

**How Can Social Gatherings Be Considered Political?**

“Qat chews” are an example of a common and important type of informal political participation in Yemen. Qat chews are informal gatherings in which people come together to engage in the traditional practice of chewing leaves of the qat plant, a stimulant that produces effects similar to caffeine. Qat is chewed primarily in the home but also in public or semipublic places such as the office of a CSO. People meet to discuss social problems, political issues, or literary matters. They often entail a formal presentation about some issue of interest. Others begin with the reading aloud of a newspaper article. Still others are less formal with a general discussion of a variety of issues.

As Lisa Wedeen explains, social gatherings such as qat chews are political in at least three senses. First of all, people share information about political events and discuss their significance publicly at qat chews. Qat chews thus create citizen awareness. They promote political engagement and critical debate. These are not only political acts but ones that are inherently democratic. Second, qat chews are forums during which power relationships between elites and constituencies are negotiated. Representatives of the village, electoral district, or local group are held responsible for their actions at qat chews and must respond to the needs of participants by guaranteeing goods and services or advocating on their behalf. Third, during some qat chews actual policy decisions are made. Political parties and parliamentary committees, for example, may hold their meetings, discuss events, and make policy decisions during qat chews. Similarly, political activists organize political rallies at some qat chews.

Even if informal gatherings such as qat chews do not directly or immediately lead to free and fair contested elections or to regime change, they are sites of political debate where
issues of accountability, citizenship, and contemporary affairs are discussed and negotiated. These are important political acts particularly in authoritarian regimes where political debate and criticism are at best ineffective or at worst illegal and dangerous.

Diwaniyyas in the Gulf states, such as Kuwait, similarly are important “mini-parliaments” where the informal/formal and private/public meet and are intertwined. Much like qat chews, diwaniyyas are sites of traditional culture, daily social life, and of political activity. The term diwaniyya refers both to the place where social gatherings occur inside the house and to the activity of gathering together. In Arabic, the word majlis means the place of sitting, and in Kuwait, as in many of the other Gulf states, the place of sitting—the room used for (men’s) social gatherings—is called the diwan. Today, there are male, female, and mixed diwaniyyas. In many cases, a separate structure is now built outside the house for the specific purposes of diwaniyyas. While many diwaniyyas are for family and friends to socialize and talk business and politics, others can be quite specialized in terms of who attends them and the subjects discussed.

Diwaniyyas are the seeds of many of Kuwait’s CSOs today. Prominent intellectuals and activists hold diwaniyyas after major political decisions and events, to many of which members of parliament are commonly invited. The political influence of a diwaniyya depends on current events, the activism of those attending the diwaniyya, and the political orientation of the owner of the diwaniyya. At election times, candidates may set up tents for diwaniyyas, or they may attend other diwaniyyas in order to meet voters. Candidates have little chance of being elected without going to diwaniyyas.

The important interface between formal and informal political participation in Kuwait is perhaps best seen in the role the diwaniyya played in reinstating Kuwait’s parliament in 1990. When the amir banned political parties and dissolved parliament in 1985, members of parliament and intellectuals began holding what soon was called the Monday Diwaniyya (as it was held each Monday) in order to express their outrage and, most importantly, to demand the reinstatement of parliament. The Monday Diwaniyya became so large that loudspeakers had to be used for all those in attendance to hear. Despite police efforts to stop the Monday Diwaniyya, it continued to take place and to draw crowds. Eventually, the Monday Diwaniyya led to a dialogue and the reestablishment of the parliament.

An important element of diwaniyyas and other forms of informal political participation that revolve around the home and family lies in the fact that they are “protected spaces.” Mary Ann Tetreault points out, as diwaniyyas are in the home and in that strict sense in the private sphere, they can be held without the government permits that other meetings (“public” meetings) require. Along with the mosque, diwaniyyas provide a space that largely is protected from authoritarian state intrusion. Although diwaniyyas are generally not banned, largely because it is very difficult for the government to do so, the Kuwaiti government has arrested the leaders of particularly influential oppositional diwaniyyas and has tried to restrict their influence.

As protected spaces, diwaniyyas are highly popular as forms of political participation in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, we also see citizens increasingly engaging in discussion forums. In contrast to diwaniyyas, discussion forums, called muntada, are not social gatherings in the home. Rather, they are large scheduled lectures on specific topics. One of the first discussion groups in Saudi Arabia was the Tuesday Forum, established by a former leader of the main Shi’i opposition movement in 2000. The lectures and discussions are posted online following the forum, reaching a much-wider audience than those in attendance.

Discussion forums are helping to create a culture of dialogue and debate in Saudi Arabia even if their audiences are limited to intellectuals and the educated. Yet their potential for
social and political change is not lost on authorities who commonly ban discussion forums for periods of time.

Even in countries with comparatively greater freedom of the press, regimes consider informal gatherings as politically threatening. In Jordan, the king has spoken out harshly against political salons. (*Political salons* is the term given to the after-dinner gatherings that take place in private homes throughout Jordan and particularly in the capital, Amman.) In some cases, political salons are more organized, outside the home, and more akin to discussion forums. On more than one occasion, when the “chattering class” has become too critical of the king’s policies, particularly the reversal of many of the political liberties and democratic rights that had been gained during the 1990s, the king has criticized the political salons of “some areas of the capital.” He once called them “mafias” that must be stopped.52

The majority of qat chews, *diwaniyyas*, and political salons are not intended to be oppositional. As Wedeen states, the ideas for and organization of oppositional political activity may arise out of qat chews or *diwaniyyas*; however, qat chews and other types of informal political participations cannot a priori be designated as subversive.53 Qat chews, *diwaniyyas*, and political salons may just as equally be hosted by those supportive of the regimes in power.

**How Are Networks Political?**

It is not only through discussion and debate that Arab citizens engage in informal political participation. Singerman’s groundbreaking work on Cairo’s urban poor under Mubarak shows how the urban poor participate in politics through the creation and mobilization of informal networks. These networks begin with the family unit and intersect with formal institutions and representatives of the state. Through their networks, the urban poor are political actors that compete with other actors for power, legitimacy, and resources.

In their efforts to ensure the maintenance and reproduction of the family, the urban poor, particularly the female heads of families, create vast networks of connections and exchanges that weave in and out of the extended family and neighborhood, informal savings associations, day care and literacy centers, health clinics, food cooperatives, local businesses, mosques, markets and schools, marriage brokers, private charitable and voluntary associations, workplaces, the army, ministries, and the offices of members of parliament. These networks are created to secure basic needs such as food, employment, and education and to gain credit, access services, choose a spouse, arbitrate conflict, and encourage the political, social, and cultural norms of the community.54 In other words, they are created and mobilized to fulfill material, social, and political aims.

The networks of the urban poor not only have consequences for the informal economic sector, but they have political dimensions to them as well. Some of the connections within the network are created with patrons and can be considered patron–client ties; others are not. Members of parliament may be involved in local associations. Day care centers, health clinics, food cooperatives, and schools provide useful information about the community for politicians as much as they provide access to public goods and services for the urban poor.55 Much like the *diwaniyyas* in Kuwait, members of parliament have a much better chance of receiving votes when they participate in the networks of the urban poor.

Asef Bayat similarly argues that people across the MENA engage in political acts, particularly acts resisting the state, through their actions in everyday life.56 The Tunisian street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi, whose altercation with a policewoman and consequent self-immolation
triggered the Tunisian revolution, is an example of the millions of people in the MENA who make up the “urban subaltern.” These are the men and women on the margins of society—the unemployed, the working poor, the disenfranchised—who are forced to work illegally as street vendors, beggars, or prostitutes in the public spaces of cities. These people, the urban subaltern, live in constant insecurity and tension with the authorities of the state. This tension may result in fines, bribes, assault, or jail. As Bayat points out, the urban subaltern also develop solidarity through their lived experiences and daily confrontations with the state.

Bayat calls such groups of people “social nonmovements,” to emphasize their lack of organized structure. Social nonmovements include nonmovements of the poor to claim rights to use public spaces. Nonmovements do not put organized direct pressure on the government as social movements do. They do not push for political reform. Their actions are done by individuals to ensure their daily activities and are often not regarded as political acts by the state. But by doing so, they slowly change the status quo. The encroachment of the status quo “begins with little political meaning attached to it,” but it can turn into “a collective/political struggle” if people’s “gains are threatened.” During the Arab uprisings, Bayat argues that the nonmovements of the youth and the poor became more coordinated and took part in the uprisings.

Networks may also strengthen social bonds and create a sense of community bound by a worldview in a manner somewhat similar to qat chews discussed earlier. In her research on Islamic charities in Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan, Clark finds that networks of shared meaning are created through the provision of charity—raising donations, contacting funders, distributing aid, or providing medical care. The act of participating in charity activities brings different networks together. Communities of participants internalize and promote a particular set of values in these networks.

Clark finds that what makes Islamic charities “Islamic” and what makes working with the charity political is the feeling of solidarity, of a mission, of teamwork among those who work in the charity and its associated networks. What differentiates Islamic charities from their secular counterparts is the belief of those working in the charities and their networks that they are promoting Islam through their work.

Insiders to these networks may attribute any degree of political meaning to their actions. Some may perceive their charity activities simply as those of a good Muslim. Others may regard their charity work as an act that demonstrates the failure of the state to provide these services adequately. This ambiguity contributes to the ability of the networks to expand and to their strength.

Clark’s research on women’s Qur’anic study groups in Yemen similarly demonstrates how social networks have important political dimensions. While many Yemeni women attend qat chews, others participate in Qur’anic study groups. At a Qur’anic study group or nadwa, women gather in a home to read passages from the Qur’an and discuss themes important to the practice of Islam. These are social gatherings that bring friends and women from different social networks together on a weekly basis. By participating in nadwas and the networks in which they are embedded, women gradually may develop new worldviews that are more in line with the Islamist movement, become active in an Islamist-sponsored charity, or may join the Islamist political party.

Nadwas form part of a woman’s larger informal social networks. They bring Islamist women who are active members of an Islamist political party together with women who volunteer in a religious charity or those who are clients of the charity with those who are friends...
and neighbors of the hostess. A teacher at an Islamic school or university may ask one of her students to lead a *nadwa*. A friend who hosts one *nadwa* may be asked to attend another.\(^{62}\)

Women often do not participate in *nadwas* for political purposes, but the networks in which they engage can have important political significance. The networks gradually may play an important role in social and potentially political change as participants adopt a more Islamist world view, support the activities of the Islamist movement, or vote for an Islamist party.

**How Does Informal Political Participation Translate into Formal Political Participation?**

Gwenn Okruhlik’s research on the Islamist movement in Saudi Arabia provides an excellent example of how informal political participation in the home and mosque becomes formal political participation.\(^{63}\) Okruhlik’s research questions how a powerful Islamist movement arose to challenge the regime under conditions of authoritarianism and in a society where concern to protect the family reputation is paramount. The Islamist movement first emerged during the first Gulf War (1990–1991) when US troops were stationed on Saudi soil. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia experienced an Islamic resurgence. Several nonpolitical informal Islamist groups established during this time and advocated a spiritual awakening. They were not involved in oppositional politics against the regime. The Gulf War transformed these loose underground nonpolitical groups into an organized and explicitly political movement that called for the overthrow of the ruling family.

The war brought to the surface issues that had long been discussed within the home—the deviation of the regime from the straight path of Islam and the corruption of the royal family. Both the mosque and the home served as protected spaces in which people voiced

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**BOX 5.1**

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND SEXUAL MINORITIES: FROM INFORMAL TO FORMAL ACTIVISM**

One of the newest types of CSOs to emerge following Tunisia’s revolution are human rights organizations that defend the rights of minorities, including sexual minorities—the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) populations. In Tunisia, it is illegal to engage in same-sex conduct, and LGBT+ persons are often prosecuted under Penal Code Article 230, according to which an offender may receive up to three years in jail for sodomy. LGBT+ populations also suffer from discrimination, harassment, and violence. Many of the minority-rights CSO founders worked in HIV/AIDS organizations during the Ben Ali era. The seeds of many of the CSOs were planted well before the revolution when activists created informal networks in order to find victims of violence safe spaces to stay, for example. After 2011, activists turned to human rights and created formal, legal associations. LGBT+ activism is risky; however, activists have lobbied political parties and created allies in the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee, a presidential committee comprising legislators, professors, and human rights advocates. The hard work may be paying off. In June 2018, the Committee released its report, recommending that the government repeal Article 230.
their discontent with the Saudi regime and constructed oppositional alternatives to history, the status quo dogma, and the prevailing ideology. Sermons and discussions in the mosque and home created alternative historical narratives that resonated with people and empowered them to confront the authoritarian state. Sermons and discussions in the mosque and home created alternative historical narratives that resonated with people and empowered them to confront the authoritarian state.64 Family networks were vital to disseminate information and to mobilize support underground.65

Following the war, the opposition clergy made their dissent public and presented several petitions to the king demanding political reform. In 1992, under pressure from the Islamist movement, the king created a Consultative Council comprising Saudi citizens to advise him and other political reforms. While the Islamists did not succeed in regime change and the majority of Saudis do not support Islamist terrorism, through protected spaces and networks, Islamists helped formalize an important debate among Saudis concerning what it means to be Saudi, the meaning of citizenship, and the relationship religion and state.

**What Role Did Informal Political Participation Play in the Arab Spring?**

Informal networks of participation are well established in the MENA, and they play an important role in collective action. The Arab uprisings can only be truly understood by going beyond the formal institutions of civil society and political parties or even broadly based social movements. Research has demonstrated the important role that the support infrastructure that informal networks had created before the uprisings played during the uprisings as people mobilized as a group. As Laila Alhamad argues, “Islam-based networks played an integral part in the everyday lives of people, holding urban society together by providing spiritual guidance, accepted norms of behavior, and ways of conducting private and commercial transactions.” The informal networks of mosques served as a key source of mobilization during the uprisings, not just for Islamists, who had used the mosques as mobilization sources before the uprisings, but also for non-Islamists, as mosques facilitated the gathering of people in large numbers in public spaces, serving as the nuclei and starting points of public demonstrations.

Tribes played a similar role to mosques as support networks. In Libya and Yemen, tribes play an important role not only in terms of ethnic ties but also political ties—in those places, many people’s primary affiliation is to the tribe, rather than the regime. Under the Muammar al-Qadhafi and Ali Abdallah Salih regimes, the tribes had existed as providers of “support networks for religious, professional, and other needs” for their members—and in doing so, as protectors from the state. When the uprisings began in those countries in 2011, the tribes played a key role in mobilizing people against the al-Qadhafi and Salih regimes when the tribal leaders decided to side against those rulers.

Youth groups also form informal networks all over the MENA. In Morocco in 2010, youth formed an online Facebook group to discuss political reform, calling itself “al-Facebookiyoun.” Encouraged by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, more young people formed informal, temporary networks in a number of cities in Morocco to organize public protests calling for reform. The networks called themselves the February 20 movement, but they did not follow a hierarchical structure and were not organized groups. Membership was transient—what brought the youth together were ideas and issues revolving around reform, and the meetings the youth held to discuss their ideas and demands were characterized by being leaderless. Similar leaderless, informal youth networks exist across the MENA.
So, too, artists, writers, and intellectuals are active all over the MENA, producing works that contest the ruling regimes. In Syria, the cartoonist Ali Ferzat published cartoons that subverted the national narrative constructed by the Asad regime. In Iran, conceptual artists and filmmakers are prolific in creating products that critique the political status quo of the Islamic Republic. In Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, and several other countries, political humor is a popular avenue for expressing dissent and contestation. Collective action is typically thought of as an action undertaken by a group of people—the goal of which can only be achieved if everyone participates in the action. However, Stephen Wright says that collective action can be performed by one individual when that person’s act is done in the name of the group and for the sake of the collective good, as opposed to personal gain. In Wright’s sense of the term, the MENA can be regarded as rich in collective action, which became a pronounced group struggle during the Arab Spring.

What emerges from this discussion is the importance of culture and ideas in processes of political participation in the MENA, as well as the merger of the political and the cultural spheres. The Arab uprisings of 2011 took this merger to a higher level, as processes of cultural production themselves became processes of political participation in a direct way. Tahrir Square in Cairo during the January 25 revolution became the hub of cultural-political activities that used poetry, songs, drawing, and theater as means of political expression. As people gathered in the square demanding the fall of the Mubarak regime, they often carried placards displaying humorous slogans. One placard, for example, had the word Leave written in hieroglyphics, below which an Arabic explanation directed at Mubarak said, “It’s written in hieroglyphics so that maybe you’d understand it, you pharaoh.” This is an example of how everyday “quiet encroachment”—here in the form of political humor—was transformed into a tool of group political participation.

The Arab uprisings brought together formal networks like civil society groups, social movements (like the April 6 movement in Egypt), and informal networks (like the February 20 movement). They also involved ordinary people whose political participation prior to the uprisings had taken place outside of the realm of networks altogether.

**Political Engagement through Violence**

Sadly, other forms of informal political engagement in the MENA, as elsewhere, include violence against the state. Other than the fact that what are labeled as terrorist groups all engage in violence, the diversity of terrorist groups makes it difficult to put them under one label. Terrorist groups differ in terms of the following:

- Their goals—nationalistic and seeking a homeland, ideological, or a hybrid of both
- Their targets—the state or symbols of Western imperialism, for example
- Whether or not they accept the state system established by the former colonial powers in the MENA (e.g., the Islamic State [IS] rejects current boundaries)
- Whether or not they are state sponsored (e.g., Hizballah receives funding from Iran)

As is discussed in the chapter on religion, society, and politics and in the individual country chapters in this book, these are just a few of the marked differences between groups that choose to operate outside of formal political avenues and legal informal political avenues.

Yet if we look at the violent groups such as the IS and other salafi-jihadi groups that have grabbed international headlines since 2011, we can see a common relationship between violent expression of political engagement and formal political participation. The seeming success of ISIS and other groups in gaining recruits is at least partially related to the limited and/or ineffective political opportunities for expression in their respective states and, often-times, also to the lack of or ineffectiveness of moderate Islamist political parties within their state’s political systems.

In this regard, we can see the impact of Egypt’s 2013 coup, which removed President Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Party’s candidate, from power and resulted in the government declaring the Brotherhood’s political wing (the Freedom and Justice Party) a terrorist group and arresting hundreds of Muslim Brothers or sending them into hiding. With the banning of the Freedom and Justice Party, the regime in Egypt eliminated what was once the most important moderate Islamist political option for thousands of Egyptians. The Freedom and Justice Party won more seats than any other party in Egypt’s 2011 parliamentary elections, and in the 2012 presidential elections, Morsi won over 50 percent of the votes. In the context of the then-ongoing Syrian civil war—where IS was experiencing stunning, if not shocking, military and political successes—IS was able to, in the words of Egyptian scholar Khalil al-Anani, “seiz[e] the . . . moment to present itself as a role model for young Islamists around the globe, pushing them to adopt its ideology and emulate its tactics and strategy.”

To angry, mobilized Islamist youths throughout the region, Islamist political parties now seemed ineffective, co-opted, or archaic at best—if an Islamist political party was even allowed to run in their respective country. The strategy of nonviolence was perceived as a failure and the model of violence as superior.

NEW CHANNELS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The Arab uprisings also demonstrated the increasing importance of new channels of participation. This included satellite television and online media, as well as Internet, text messaging, and other technologies. First, these new technologies provided new sources of information, often beyond the regime’s control. Second, they created new venues for participation, often engaging individuals who were previously not politically active.

The Role of the Media: Satellite Television and the Online Media

The “Facebook revolution” was one of the nicknames given to the Egyptian revolution that took place on January 25, 2011. This characterization of the revolution is inaccurate since the revolution was not simply the product of online activism. However, the nickname
does point out the important role that the media, mainly satellite television and the Internet, have been playing in political participation in the MENA since the late 1990s.

Significant change in media dates back to at least 1996 with the birth of al-Jazeera, the MENA’s first twenty-four-hour satellite news channel. The channel’s broadcasts were in sharp contrast to what the MENA television landscape had been accustomed to since the introduction of television to the region in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Al-Jazeera represented an opportunity for MENA journalists to participate in the creation and global dissemination of their own stories, away from the traditional reliance on foreign news agencies and television channels. It also supported the broadcasting of political views that often criticized the behaviors of several MENA governments. In that, al-Jazeera broke an important taboo in MENA television; in the past, most television channels—especially state-owned ones—had either acted as regime mouthpieces or simply refrained from political critique. This led many scholars to characterize MENA satellite television as supporting the move toward democratization in the MENA.

Al-Jazeera was also a pioneer in the MENA with its live coverage of conflict and its airing of news scoops. While its coverage of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, particularly video messages by al-Qa’ida leader Osama bin Laden, shed a negative light on its activities, the channel maintained a degree of credibility. This credibility was bolstered with its coverage of key events in the region such as the Iraq war of 2003; the Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2009; and the uprisings in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria in 2011.

In those instances, al-Jazeera distinguished itself through disseminating the citizens’ points of view. This took place not only through live coverage by al-Jazeera reporters but also through the channel’s reliance on user-generated videos sent by “citizen journalists” for broadcast. As such, al-Jazeera allowed Arab citizens to participate more directly in the making of news, and hence, to be more active participants in local and regional politics.

Although MENA governments sometimes interfered with al-Jazeera’s reporting, the channel—as well as the several other television stations that have proliferated in the region over the past decade—made a positive contribution to political participation in the region. Oppositional movements in particular found a new platform through which they could air their views.

The Role of Technology in Political Engagement and Participation

The rise of satellite television coincided with the rise of Internet use in the MENA. Like satellite television, the Internet challenges the monopoly on state information through increased information sharing and the broadcasting of individual opinion. Some scholars have argued that use of the Internet and other modern technologies (examples of “horizontal communications”) would, as Augustus Richard Norton claimed, eventually produce the “slow retreat of authoritarianism in the Muslim world.”

Before discussing the role of the Internet in political participation, one must remember that the Internet is still relatively limited in its use in the MENA and that those who do have access do not necessarily have unlimited and unconditional access. Due to political, economic, and educational reasons, many MENA citizens do not use the Internet. Today, 42 percent continue to report not using the Internet at all. Interestingly, the percentage of Internet users in Egypt and Tunisia, the countries that witnessed the first Arab Spring
revolutions, are the two lowest in the MENA. Sixty-eight percent of Egyptians and 56 percent of Tunisians currently do not use the Internet. These percentages were even higher at the time of the revolutions.

Ever since the Internet was introduced in these countries, ruling elites have attempted to find ways to control what people could and could not view on it. The fears were twofold: First, there was fear of “political subversion,” and second, the religious and conservative segments of the population feared that Internet access would “undermine ‘traditional’ values.” To limit Internet access, individual states took different approaches; in Saudi Arabia, for example, the regime “opted for a high-cost, high-tech solution, while Iraq under Saddam Hussein surrounded Internet use with barely-penetrable bureaucracy.”

Regimes’ responses to dissidents expressing unfavorable opinions about the state on the web demonstrate the seriousness with which the state takes the Internet as a medium of disseminating public opinion. The Egyptian state under Mubarak, for example, arrested bloggers who expressed negative opinions of the regime. Moreover, the freedom of expression that is often found in other countries via the Internet is not always present in MENA states; in countries where people are aware that the state controls much of the content on the Internet and monitors Internet activity, people often self-censor. Numerous states—including Oman, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the UAE, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Libya, and Morocco—have been found engaging in Internet censorship. When the Egyptian January 25 revolution started, the Mubarak regime went as far as shutting down the Internet and mobile phone networks altogether to prevent their use for street mobilization.

The Mubarak regime’s extreme measure against modern communication technologies acknowledged the potential for them to be used as tools of political mobilization. As Deborah Wheeler argues, “Individual citizens manage to work around the state, constructing a wide range of interests, meanings, and practices, which often challenge norms.” This engagement links “communities of people who are increasingly voicing opinions, making demands.”

New forms of technology have been important ways to network individuals and provide information. The Internet and even text messaging have been decisive in affecting protest behavior, collective mobilization, and new forms of formal and informal e-networks important for political and social ties. In the mid-2000s, blogging arose as a key platform for the airing of dissident views, political demands, and holding the state accountable. In Iran and Egypt in particular, blogs were used to expose human rights abuses, criticize state hegemony, and connect young people who aspired to change their societies and political systems from within. Mobile phones acted as supplementary tools in this process. For example, in Egypt the Misr Digital blog set up by Wael Abbas became the main site for the dissemination of videos of police torture of detainees in Egyptian jails, which were downloaded by users onto their mobile phones and disseminated via Bluetooth. This informal networking raised awareness about torture as well as public action by people, who demonstrated in the streets of Cairo against this infraction on human rights by the state.

By the late 2000s, the rise of social media further enhanced the potential of new technologies to act as political participation tools. Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook allowed citizens to document events and actions by the state, from police beatings to election fraud, and disseminate news about those actions. Visual evidence in the form of photographs and videos was sent not just to their immediate networks but also globally,
supporting citizen journalism. Facebook use in 2012 reached over fifty million users. Three million individuals use Twitter, and YouTube gets 170 million daily views in the region. Social media helped youth across borders gather for a common cause. As such, even in countries characterized by high levels of censorship, like Tunisia under Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the Internet facilitated political participation through supporting the creation of transnational networks of activism and civil society.78

Citizen journalism, in-country networks, and transnational networks themselves later became ways through which the Internet and mobile phones could be used to coordinate public action on the street. The April 6 movement in Egypt is an example of this, using Facebook and YouTube to rally people to participate in strikes and demonstrations between 2008 and 2011. The 2011 uprisings were also examples of how new technologies could be used hand in hand with public action as tools of political participation. In Egypt, a Facebook page originally created in 2010 by youth to protest the unlawful killing of a young man, Khaled Said, at the hands of the police, evolved into a platform calling for government accountability. This quickly grew to gather Egyptians in the country and abroad to discuss Egypt’s political future as the country prepared for new parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010 and 2011. The page We Are All Khaled Said became a space to mobilize for antiregime demonstrations, the biggest of which sparked the revolution of January 25. In Syria, YouTube became a key medium for people to document the assaults by the regime on Syrian people and towns at the beginning of its civil unrest. As such, the social media are a tool for informal opposition movements and networks to engage in public action.79

Yet authoritarian governments also have learned the power of social media. In an effort to weaken and depoliticize civil society activism, Lebanon’s cybersecurity apparatus called in activists for questioning over their social media posts. Furthermore, as Marc Lynch points out, social media has proven to be just as capable of transmitting negative and divisive ideas and images as they had been at spreading revolutionary ones.80 In postrevolutionary Egypt, for example, Twitter and Facebook contributed to the growing hostility between Islamists and liberals.

CONCLUSION

That the MENA remains largely authoritarian does not signify a lack of involvement among the region’s populations. The 2011 uprisings were testimony to the political awareness and engagement of the population. Citizens employ a variety of modes to better represent themselves and their societies. From the urban poor to the elite, from those who are illiterate to those who carry degrees of higher education, men and women, young and old, those loyal to tribes and those embedded in tight families, those who frequent the mosque and those who embrace secularism, and those who support their states to those in the opposition—political participation for each of these segments takes on an intimate and meaningful form of activity. MENA citizens have been able to adapt to their current political environments, use existing pathways, and create or resurrect modalities of participation that allow them in some consequential way to represent their interests and the interests of their communities and help them chart a better future for themselves and their children.
SUGGESTED READINGS


