

A high-angle, top-down photograph of a massive crowd of people, likely at a protest or public demonstration. The crowd is dense and fills the entire frame. Many individuals are holding large Iranian national flags (green, white, and red horizontal stripes with a central emblem). The people are dressed in casual summer clothing, and some are wearing hats. The overall atmosphere appears to be one of a significant public gathering.

Edited by Dara Conduit  
and Shahram Akbarzadeh

# New Opposition in the Middle East



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Dara Conduit • Shahram Akbarzadeh  
Editors

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# Contentious Politics and Middle Eastern Oppositions After the Uprisings

*Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh*

The Middle East is no stranger to political contestation. Although an outpost of authoritarianism throughout the twentieth century, oppositions in the Middle East existed as tolerated ‘regime-loyal’ coalitions such as the National Progressive Front in Syria, through popular ‘anti-system’ movements seen in those who overthrew the Shah’s regime in Iran in 1979, and in the form of the ‘semi-tolerated’ opposition groups that contested elections despite no chance of winning power such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> These patterns provided a rich set of case studies for scholars of Contentious Politics, who noted structures and repertoires of contestation unique to illiberal political environments around the world.<sup>2</sup> However, the Middle East underwent a seismic shift following the outbreak of the 2009 Iranian Green Movement protests and the 2011 Arab Uprisings, which recast the boundaries of the relationships between rulers and the ruled across the region.

The June 2009 Iranian presidential election represented a seminal moment in Iran’s post-revolution history. Following a closely contested campaign between the hard-line incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and

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the reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi, Iran's state news agency announced that Ahmadinejad had won in a landslide result. The following day, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the street in support of Mousavi with the simple but powerful slogan, 'Where is my vote?', marking the formation of the Green Movement.<sup>3</sup> The protests continued at key junctures over the following six months, at their peak drawing more than three million people onto the streets. The movement did not succeed, with the Iranian regime brutally cracking down on peaceful protesters and arresting the movement's leaders. Nonetheless, the events had a significant impact on the politics of contention in Iran, redrawing the lines of political activity in the Republic. The regime's renewed authoritarianism, and particularly its crackdown on Internet activity in Iran, led to a shrinking of the Iranian opposition's political space.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the regime's new sensitivity to public opinion—particularly around the question of elections—provided limited new political openings for opposition members.

The following year, broad-based protests broke out across the Arab Middle East. In December 2010, the Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in protest to local government corruption and shrinking economic opportunities. This single act prompted large-scale protests across Tunisia which eventually felled the country's long-reigning leader Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Bouazizi's grievances and the messages of the Tunisian uprising resonated deeply across the region. Within weeks, Egypt's long-term President Mohamed Mubarak was overthrown, and protests spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria. This provided a once-in-a-lifetime political opening across many Middle Eastern states. Although few of the Arab Spring's overt goals were achieved, the sudden shift in political opportunity structures has seen the emergence of new patterns of opposition across the Arab world.

In many ways, therefore, the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Uprisings changed the nature of opposition in the Middle East. Providing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for political change, the events created new openings and barriers to opposition. This volume examines the nature of this shift over seven case studies from a Contentious Politics perspective, interrogating the ways in which oppositions have morphed in relation to their changed operating environments. Contentious Politics offers an important framework for understanding these shifts because it views regimes and opposition movements under the one conceptual umbrella, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the two ostensibly separate forces. Although it does not view all regime or opposition behaviour

as the product of structure or agency, it highlights the important ways in which the two sets of actors co-exist, survive and push boundaries.

This edited volume therefore asks questions such as: To what extent is opposition behaviour in the Middle East a product of its political environment? What sort of limitations have environments imposed on movements? How have groups used the political opportunities that emerged after 2009/2011? Did international actors shape the dynamics of contestation? And is the post-2009/2011 environment better or worse for Middle Eastern oppositions? In answering these questions, the chapters show that the Arab Spring and the Green Movement unleashed small shifts across the region that have led to a fundamental change in the politics of contestation. As Dabashi observed of Iran, ‘No country can “go back to business as usual.” The climate has changed—for good.’<sup>5</sup>

### CONTESTING AUTHORITARIANISM BEFORE THE GREEN MOVEMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

Scholars of Contentious Politics have made a significant contribution to understanding the Middle East through their extensive work on the existence and nature of political contestation under authoritarianism. To McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow, Contentious Politics involved:

Episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interest of at least one of the claimants.<sup>6</sup>

The process of collective political contestation can be undertaken by non-violent groups, networks or social movements and can span violent or non-violent opposition under authoritarianism, democratic or community politics. Tarrow goes so far as to argue that even civil wars should be considered as part of the ‘larger episodes of contention from which they emerge and to which they may eventually give way.’<sup>7</sup> The study of Contentious Politics therefore observes the way contestation occurs, including the repertoires of contestation that actors use, the regimes in which they exist and the political opportunity structures that shape operating environments in and beyond the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> The model has also enjoyed considerable application outside authoritarian climates, through scholars examining right-wing global politics, indigenous rights movements

in Mexico, political contestation in rural China and social movements during periods of crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Most opposition movements in the Middle East prior to 2009–2011 fell into the category of opposition groups under authoritarian regimes. Although significant political differences exist between the states, most countries in the Middle East exhibited some authoritarian characteristics. According to Linz:

Authoritarian regimes are political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism ... without intensive nor extensive political mobilization ... and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.<sup>10</sup>

Albrecht suggested that oppositions under authoritarianism fit into three distinct categories: ‘regime-loyal opposition,’ ‘tolerated opposition’ and ‘anti-system opposition,’ although at times the distinction between the three is not clear-cut.<sup>11</sup> Oppositions can also occupy different spaces at different times. A group may be non-violent in one period and violent in another, while other groups in the Middle East such as Hezbollah simultaneously possess both violent and non-violent wings. Although this may be a survival tactic, it often leaves groups vulnerable to state repression because of the perceived duplicity.

Not all opposition types exist in every state, but the presence of regime-loyal and tolerated oppositions in otherwise authoritarian states such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco prompted authors to consider whether opposition groups had become integral to the survival of authoritarian regimes by creating the impression of popular legitimacy. As Brumberg noted:

To endure, they (authoritarian leaders) must implicitly or explicitly allow some opposition forces certain kinds of social, political, or ideological power—but things must never reach a point where the regime feels deterred from using force when it deems fit.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, many authors argue that rather than undermining the foundations of authoritarianism, the presence of opposition activity can strengthen an authoritarian regime. Zartman observed that opposition groups often end up complicit in the authoritarian regime’s longevity by shrouding it in a modicum of democratic legitimacy, while Brownlee found that electoral processes under authoritarianism ‘tend to ratify rather than redistribute the power that competing groups wield.’<sup>13</sup>

Oppositions under authoritarianism often look quite different to their counterparts in democratic political environments. Opposition characteristics and behaviour are not isolated from ruling governments and are inevitably shaped by interacting with an authoritarian regime. Tilly and Tarrow argued that ‘the shape of institutions and regimes always affects movements,’ while Lust-Okar found that opposition activity is directly shaped by the institutional structure of political contestation in a state.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, a small political opening such as allowing opposition groups to nominate for election, or to exercise control in a state sector such as social welfare, can fundamentally change the way a group operates from above. This focus on regime impact prompts advocates of Contentious Politics to observe not only a group but also the regime they exist in and political opportunity structures in which they operate. Anderson warned that studies that give excessive attention to,

The societal context of political opposition obscures the important fact that political opposition develops in relation to the prevailing political order. That is to say, opposition is a response or reaction to the exercise of political power.<sup>15</sup>

In authoritarian climates, shifts in a group’s political platform therefore often reflect political changes within the state. Likewise, changes in opposition tactics, such as increased popular pressure or the use of violence, can prompt changes in regime political structures. This underlines the importance of viewing both the group and the state as mutually reinforcing.

Scholars of Contentious Politics have theorised such patterns of opposition, understanding that groups surviving under authoritarian conditions face unique political challenges. Even those that enjoy the privilege of regime tolerance can never consider their status permanent and so exist on a precarious plane on which they must create political programmes that will appeal to constituents without prompting a regime response. This calculus is governed by a regime’s ‘political opportunity structure’ and the relationship between ‘threat’ and ‘opportunity.’<sup>16</sup> However, Goldstone and Tilly noted that the relationship between regime threats and opportunities is non-linear, in that threat is not the exact opposite of opportunity.<sup>17</sup> They argue that the relationship amounts to more than ‘as opportunity expands, actions mount; as opportunities contract, action recedes.’ Severe state repression for example can often present a new opportunity for collective action, as seen in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. As Brockett noted,

Repression generally succeeds in smothering contention if the prior level of mobilization was low. However, if state violence is increased after a protest cycle ... is well underway, this repression is more likely to provoke even higher levels of challenge, both nonviolent and violent, rather than deter contention.<sup>18</sup>

In the same way, opposition cooperation or challenge are not mutually exclusive. However, under ordinary circumstances, survival for oppositions under authoritarian regimes is guided by what Beatty dubbed the 'twin imperatives of challenge and survival.'<sup>19</sup> That is, actors must carefully calculate the level of challenge they pose to a regime without undermining their own chance of surviving into the future. A group is of no value if it allows itself to be annihilated by the ruling regime, and therefore groups must develop a nuanced understanding of any opportunity. This sense was captured by a commander of the Karen National Defence Organization in Myanmar, who explained: '[our] only success is we haven't disappeared, like the [Tamil] Tigers in Sri Lanka. We stand [up] and defend the people.'<sup>20</sup> As a result, tolerated opposition groups are often accused of taking a soft or apologist line on ruling governments and are seen as ineffective advocates for their constituents. However, such restraint can be an outcome of a movement's leaders' calculations of the optimal level of agitation that does not risk the movement's own survival. In many regimes, very little agitation may be possible. It is nonetheless worth noting that this subjective assessment too is a risk factor, open to miscalculation by pushing the boundaries too hard or not pushing enough.

Opposition groups under authoritarianism are often seen to push for only incremental reforms or compromise on long-held political positions, rather than pursuing their ultimate objectives outright. Many justify their decisions in terms of the bigger picture: a small sacrifice in favour of the regime may enable the opposition to have greater influence in another arena. In Egypt, for example, the number of Muslim Brotherhood candidates contesting national elections declined from 156 in 1995 to 76 in 2000. The group avoided areas where it would compete with prominent members of the ruling party and nominated less-known Brotherhood members with no history of interaction with Egyptian security forces.<sup>21</sup> Although this may have decreased the Brotherhood's chances of having an impact, the decision was made in the context of operating under authoritarianism. Likewise, Schmidmayr noted that for the Islamist opposition in Kuwait and Bahrain:



Even fundamental decisions such as Islamists' stance vis-a-vis the incumbents seem to be determined by a meticulous reading of the situation and an analysis of opportunities and constraints. Therefore, in their day-to-day dealings with the regime and the incumbents, Islamists certainly stick to their well-known dogmas, but are ready for compromise when it benefits them. Similarly, blunt confrontation with the government is often nothing more than a political strategy.<sup>22</sup>

This means that some groups pragmatically overlook ideological objections to the incumbent regime in return for an opportunity for engagement. Such concessions are an inevitable trade-off for tolerance, although as Schmidmayr added: 'with the systemic settings offering relative advantages to those who accept the rules and repression to those who do not, the choice is actually not so hard to make.'<sup>23</sup> This cost-benefit analysis is also not unique to the Middle East. Rigger observed that in Taiwan, 'quasi-governmental organisations relinquished the possibility of autonomous political action ... in exchange for their privileged position.'<sup>24</sup>

Although authoritarian regimes may seem the only gatekeepers of political activity, oppositions also retain agency in deciding how to respond to opportunities. Studies have shown that oppositions under authoritarianism rarely fully commit to regime political structures in case the governing regime closes a political opening. Commenting on Islamist movements, Brown argued that groups in authoritarian climates often only partially surrender themselves in quasi-democratic processes, arguing that 'semiauthoritarian politics encourages them to focus on political participation but gives them little reason to commit fully to a political path.'<sup>25</sup> In this regard, oppositions may seem insufficiently committed to democratic processes, but in practice such characteristics might be a self-preservation technique, another legacy of authoritarianism. If a group were to play its entire hand in an electoral or alliance process, it could have deleterious consequences should the authoritarian regime retract its privileged status.

Many of these characteristics leave permanent imprints on oppositions, as oppositions in changed or post-authoritarian environments do not enter new political arrangements with a clean slate in which they can reimagine themselves in any shape they choose. The tactics used by those attempting to survive authoritarianism are internalised and become difficult to change after the collapse of an authoritarian regime. As Bermeo argued:

The experience of dictatorship can produce important cognitive change ... people modify their political beliefs and tactics as a result of severe crises, frustrations, and dramatic changes in environment.<sup>26</sup>

These findings were echoed by Boudreau, who found that ‘movements under authoritarian regimes must always anticipate state repression and explicitly incorporate this anticipation into their plans’ even years later.<sup>27</sup> This memory extends not only to the repertoires of opposition but also to the survival mechanisms, with Boudreau adding that the memory of repression in Southeast Asian case studies ‘shaped movement strategies and mobilization patterns by suggesting the costs and consequences of collective action.’<sup>28</sup> Della Porta too found that ‘memories of repression had an impact on the challengers’ in the German Democratic Republic in 1963 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>29</sup> She added that in the Middle East and North Africa, ‘memories of police massacres played a role in pushing the opposition towards mainly peaceful strategies.’ In practice, such experiences can manifest in ineffectual mobilisation techniques, a lack of transparency, closed membership ranks, poor relations with coalition partners, attempts at power monopolisation and the constant hedging of bets with a ‘Plan B’ should the political opening fail. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt’s behaviour in government post-2011 may have been influenced by such patterns.

## CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AFTER THE GREEN MOVEMENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

The Green Movement and the Arab Spring marked the most significant shift in political opportunity structures that the Middle East had seen for decades. Initiated from below, the popular protest movements reconfigured political opportunity structures by reducing (albeit temporarily in many cases) the cost of opposition by shrinking authorities’ ability to target individuals, increasing the cost of repression and providing a chance for oppositions to push for a restructuring of the Middle East’s political topography. In some cases, heavy-handed regime responses spurred further mobilisation, with actors sometimes using violent means to back up their claims. Although for many, this marked a change from previous tactics, it is consistent with the observations made by Tilly and Tarrow who argue that since ‘opportunity structures and established repertoires shape the forms and degrees of contention ... in mainly authoritarian regimes,

the repertoire leans toward lethal conflicts and tends to produce religious and ethnic strife, civil wars, and revolutions.<sup>230</sup>

It is in the context that authors in this volume examine the ongoing impact of the Green Movement and the Arab Uprisings on opposition in the Middle East. Although the events attracted many young and new actors with no history of opposition, veteran opposition movements, groups and individuals also joined the chorus, bringing with them decades of experience as oppositions to authoritarian regimes. However, it is shown throughout this volume that although the events offered a range of new opportunities for opposition groups in the Middle East, many of these chances were short lived, with decades of authoritarianism casting a long shadow over the future of the Middle East.

In Iran, for example, the government was able to regain control of the political sphere following a long crackdown that saw many of the Green Movement's leaders arrested, sowing fear amongst the remaining activists. The failure of the Green Movement exacted an enormous cost on the reform and women's movements, with many of their members jailed, exiled or deterred from mounting future campaigns. Nonetheless, while these opposition movements were significantly weakened in the aftermath of 2009, the regime also learned a lesson about the latent popularity of its opponents and the power of Iran's population—especially its youth—when it wants to be heard. This has led to a shift in the balance of power between structures and agents in the Islamic Republic, creating opportunities for new patterns of limited political contestation.

By contrast, the Arab Uprisings succeeded in Tunisia and Egypt in overthrowing long-reigning autocrats and fomenting the development of new patterns of government-opposition engagement. Both countries experienced subsequent democratic electoral processes in which long-term opposition movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood were able to come to office. However, the events did not lead to the total harmonisation of government-opposition relations in each country. By 2013, Egypt had experienced a counter-revolution that overthrew the elected government, empowered Egypt's powerful armed forces and installed a new authoritarian regime. Although Tunisia's parliamentary process proved more resilient, the weakness of state institutions provided new spaces for contentious interaction. This has led to a blossoming of opposition in some quarters but has also created new opportunities for radical groups, including *Salafi-jihadists*. In this regard, government-opposition relations changed significantly in both Egypt and Tunisia after 2011.

In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, by contrast, the Arab Uprisings were repressed by regimes that deployed powerful sectarian narratives to subdue their opponents. Previous opportunities for tolerated opposition were quickly closed as the states cracked down on all challengers and strengthened authoritarian tendencies. In Syria too, the Assad regime attempted to use a narrative of ‘otherness’ to justify its repression of the popular uprising, but was unable to stem its momentum. By summer 2011, the country was on the verge of war. Although the Syrian regime made no substantive political concessions, the structures defining political activities nonetheless shifted dramatically outside the country. Indeed, with the political space suddenly opened up to a range of foreign state actors in addition to the Syrian regime, the Syrian opposition’s political opportunity structures shifted, enabling new patterns of contestation.

The book therefore draws a picture of the many and varied impacts of the Green Movement and the Arab Spring on opposition in the Middle East. The popular movements were united by their calls for freedom, reform and governmental accountability, and given urgency by the region’s economic underperformance. But it is also notable that those involved in the contestation that followed were overwhelmingly united in their decision to make political claims against the existing states. While oppositions called for regime change, few questioned the state as the legitimate and most effective vessels for political change. This is no small feat given that the 2011 Arab Uprisings (and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State group) were often viewed as a challenge to the region’s Westphalian political order.

## NOTES

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## CHAPTER 2

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# The Women's Movement and State Responses to Contentious Campaigns in Iran

*Rebecca Barlow*

The Iranian women's movement is a nebulous entity comprising activists in the classical sense (women who have devoted their lives and livelihoods to advocacy and lobbying efforts); non-governmental organisations focusing on issue-based areas such as violence against women; reformist politicians; and a whole range of individuals working to promote and protect women's rights in their respective spheres of influence—lawyers, publishers, journalists, artists, and more. Two overarching approaches to change have characterised the women's movement since the late 1990s and very much occupied the academic literature at the turn of the century: Islamic feminism, which promotes working within the state's theological framework using religious reinterpretation, and secular feminism, which promotes working outside formal corridors of power without overt reliance on religious precepts. Importantly, although the two approaches can be considered analytically distinct, in practice they often operate simultaneously, may be employed by one and the same activists depending on circumstance, and can sometimes be mutually reinforcing.

Islamic feminism experienced a surge under the administration of the reformist presidency of Muhammad Khatami (1997–2005) as the Women's

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Faction—a group of reformist parliamentarians who worked within the government, employing religious reinterpretation to amend restrictive laws on women’s status. Following the end of the official reform movement in 2005, however, the arena for action shifted to the street in the form of large-scale campaigns: sustained, organized claims against the government. The One Million Signatures Campaign (OMSC), launched in late 2006 during a time of conservatism under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, called for an end to all discriminatory laws against women. The Campaign to Change the Male Face of Parliament (the Parliament Campaign), launched in late 2015 under the moderate administration of President Hassan Rouhani, advocated gender-sensitive governance, including greater participation of women in politics.

On the one hand, the women’s movement has stood the test of survival under tremendously difficult circumstances by adapting the mechanisms employed to fight for change depending on opportunities or threats presented by the regime. However, this chapter shows that both the OMSC and the Parliament Campaign demobilised despite not having reached their goals. In both cases, demobilisation was the result of a volatile political landscape where civic space opens and contracts in constant (but unpredictable) cycles, and with the contraction comes state crackdown on civil society. Perhaps the most devastating in this regard was the backlash of 2009, when security forces were deployed to crush the popular Green Movement uprising against the reinstatement of conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. OMSC activists inevitably bore the consequences of the wider crackdown; the campaign never recovered and some activists expressed a deep reticence to reignite activities even after the moderate government of President Rouhani came to power in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst focused, short-term campaigns have a place, Iran’s operating environment has constrained the ability of the women’s movement to plan and deploy long-term strategies for change that can sustain ideological shifts from above. This is perhaps one of the movement’s greatest problems. Progress on women’s rights is slow and fragile; activism in this space must be continuous and sustained, otherwise even the smallest of gains can be lost. Although a formidable task in the Iranian context, if the women’s movement is to make greater progress on advancing their claims for equality, they must consider ways to develop longer-term strategies for change that have the potential to become self-sustaining over time.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several key theoretical premises from Tilly and Tarrow's work on Contentious Politics provide the framework for analysis.<sup>2</sup> The practice of contentious politics varies and changes in close connection with shifts in political power. The state makes the rules governing contention—who can claim, via what mechanisms, and towards what outcomes; and the state has the coercive means to control contention—the police, the courts, the prison system, and so on. Different governments present different opportunities for activists to advance claims, as well as constraints (or 'threats') that caution them against doing so.<sup>3</sup> When the state in question is a 'hybrid regime'—that is, one that combines elements of democracy and undemocracy, such as the Islamic Republic (this point is elaborated upon further below)—particular forms of contention emerge. Hybrid regimes tend to be the backdrop for combinations of 'contained' and 'transgressive' contention, producing unstable and unpredictable outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Contained contention takes place within a regime, using established institutional routines. Transgressive contention takes place outside institutional boundaries and challenges those protected by those boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Broadly speaking, Islamic feminism can be considered a form of contained contention, whereas secular feminism a form of transgressive contention.

The volatility of hybrid regimes means that actors enjoying a degree of regime acceptance one day may experience revocation the next. Activists in Iran contend with such an environment. As is shown later, Iran's political landscape is characterised by a constant cycle of relaxation and openings for civil society, followed by crackdowns and restrictions. Since the end of the reform movement in 2005, the women's movement has focused its efforts on the deployment of 'contentious campaigns': sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on targeted authorities. Unlike a one-time petition, declaration, or gathering, a campaign extends beyond any single event but includes combinations of contentious performances.<sup>6</sup> Tilly and Tarrow contend that campaigns usually demobilise when the policy in question is changed/implemented/overtaken.<sup>7</sup> But actors might also disperse due to disillusionment. Both the OMSC and the Parliament Campaign demobilised before meeting their goals. This was due to the heavy response of the authorities to the claim makers and the waning aptitude for change within the women's movement as opportunities for making claims were reduced.

## OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

Tilly and Tarrow's conception of 'hybrid regimes'<sup>8</sup> are those systems that combine 'systematic segments of democratic and undemocratic rule operating side by side,' and may include regimes with strong rule of law, *as well as those that lean more towards authoritarianism.*<sup>9</sup> Whilst it is by no means uncontroversial to claim that Iran is home to a form of democracy, the point is arguable. Abdolmohammadi and Cama's view that Iran is a 'peculiar hybrid regime' is based on two hypotheses: one, the originality of Iran's modern political system depends on a constitutional compromise between secular and clerical components and two, although the constitution privileges clericalism, the institutional arrangements between the two components give rise to democratic expectations and political demands for change that can and have generated tension and instability, thereby compromising clerical authority.<sup>10</sup>

In the late 1970s, political Islam gained prominence in Iran on the back of a mass movement thirsty for political, social, and economic transparency and accountability. Engrained in the 1979 Revolution was a desire amongst leftist opposition groups to the Pahlavi Monarchy to establish a new democratic system where the political leadership was answerable to the people and represented national interests. However, rule by the people did not sit easily with Islamist elements of the Revolution and their charismatic leader, Ruhollah Khomeini. Popular sovereignty would have to be demarcated, they argued, within limits set by God. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic reflects something of a compromise between leftist and Islamist revolutionaries in that it institutionalises two cohabiting systems: the appointed clerical positions of Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, the Expediency Council, and the Judiciary represent the 'Islamic state,' while the elected political/non-clerical offices of president and the parliament constitute the 'republic.'<sup>11</sup>

But the theocratic and republican aspects of the Iranian state have never worked particularly well together. In fact, in post-revolutionary Iran (the period following the death of Supreme Leader Khomeini in 1989), the hybrid system has produced what Abdolmohammadi and Cama call 'stability phases' together with 'cycles of protest' as tensions between the democratic and undemocratic elements of the regime ebb and flow.<sup>12</sup> The Rafsanjani administration (1989–1997) was a time of reconstruction and growth following Iran's decade-long war with Iraq. The Khatami administration (1997–2005) focused on expanding civil society and enhancing

its capacity to provide checks and balances on government. The early years of Khatami's presidency saw the rise of the student movement as a powerful voice against repression but were followed by a period of severe crack-down from conservative elements of the regime and mass disappointment over the failure of meaningful reform. The Ahmadinejad administration (2005–2013) ushered in a period of great conservatism. After allegations of electoral fraud that saw Ahmadinejad elected as President for a second term, this period gave rise to the Green Movement protests of 2009, followed by an intense and drawn out wave of repression. The Rouhani administration (2013–present) carried with it a revival of expectations for change but these waned reasonably quickly as electoral promises to ease government restrictions over people's lives were not delivered. This is consistent with Tilly and Tarrow's contention that hybrid regimes are particularly volatile in terms of the opportunities and constraints faced by contentious actors.<sup>13</sup> As is shown later, the unpredictability involved in cycles of stability and protest has had heavy implications for the ability of the women's movement to plan and deploy long-term strategies for change with the potential to become self-sustainable over time.

Tension between the popular and the divine models of government is evident in the Iranian Constitution, which maintains divine caveats to popular sovereignty. A prime example of this concerns women's status. Although the Constitution touches on the concept of equality between the sexes, the wording is ambiguous and qualified. Article 20 states that men and women should 'enjoy equal protection of the law, in conformity with Islamic criteria.' Article 21 stipulates that 'the government must ensure the rights of women in all respects, in conformity with Islamic criteria.' In essence, the Constitution subjugates women's rights to the state's interpretation of the Sharia, a legalistic elaboration of Islam's holy texts developed between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. Sharia laws restrict women's civil liberties, political and economic rights, and physical integrity. Many laws in Iran's legal code overtly discriminate against women in the areas of marriage, divorce, custody of children, testimony, *diyyeh* (blood money), freedom of movement, and freedom of expression.

Taken together, Sharia laws on women inform a prescriptive gender ideology in Iran wherein women are subjects of the private sphere ('housewives' and 'homemakers') and men are public agents (the 'breadwinners').<sup>14</sup> This has provided a basis for policies that restrict women's participation in education and employment and promote their role in domestic life. A few examples illustrate the point. Legislation introduced

in 2012 prohibits women from 14 fields of study and restricts their admission into a further 241 fields, including specialisations in engineering, mathematics, physical education, political science, and religious studies. The Comprehensive Population and Family Plan (approved by parliament in 2015 but not yet in legislation at the time of writing) provides economic incentives to employees that prioritise the hiring of male jobseekers and to women who stay at home to care for children and the elderly. The Plan is based on the view put forward by the regime that women's education and employment weakens family life, is harmful to children, and is to blame for Iran's rising divorce rate. The Reduction of Office Hours Act for Women with Special Circumstances (introduced in 2016 and still under consideration in parliament at the time of writing) mandates a reduction in the number of hours women can work per week, prohibiting them from applying for and filling full-time positions.

### KEY MECHANISMS FOR CHANGE

The question of whether to work within formal corridors of power and employ religious arguments to progress women's demands (contained contention) or to avoid theological entanglement and employ secular rights-based discourse (transgressive contention) is an issue that was debated at length in the academic literature, and within the women's movement, throughout the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>15</sup> Islamic feminists contend that discrimination against women is based on erroneous interpretations of Islamic texts, as opposed to the spiritual message of Islam itself. Islamic feminists believe women can be empowered through gender-sensitive re-readings of Islam's holy sources. The notion of *ijtihad* is a driving force of the Islamic feminist project. *Ijtihad* allows for intellectual reinterpretation of Islamic texts and applies human reason to the Sharia legal code to ascertain whether certain injunctions are applicable or suitable to modern circumstances.

Islamic feminism is closely tied to religious intellectualism in Islam and found a ready home in Iran's reformist government of 1997–2005. In 2000, 13 women were elected as members of the Sixth *Majlis* (parliament) forming the reformist bloc that came to be known as the aforementioned Women's Faction. According to one of its members, Elaheh Koolaee, the Women's Faction challenged the conservative gender ideology of the regime 'from within the Islamic framework by relying on the progressive teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini.'<sup>16</sup> The strategy met with some success.

The Women's Faction contributed to legislative changes that allowed single women to travel abroad to study,<sup>17</sup> granted women automatic custody of children under 7 years of age,<sup>18</sup> and raised the minimum legal age for girls to marry from 9 to 13 years of age.<sup>19</sup>

Over the course of Khatami's Presidency, the clerical elite's tolerance for reform grew thin. The Guardian Council rejected the majority of bills proposed by the Women's Faction, and those that were passed were 'carefully emptied of their progressive content.'<sup>20</sup> This was a source of great frustration for the Women's Faction and posed a major problem for the viability of their methods since they were always very careful to argue how proposed changes to women's status were consistent with Islam. By relying on sources endogenous to the Islamic tradition, Islamic feminists were provided room for movement inside the boundaries of state acceptability, while at the same time challenging conservative interpretations of women's status in Islam. But working within theocratic boundaries also proved to limit Islamic feminism's potential. The government was careful and strategic in selecting which religious arguments to accept as legitimate for the 'Muslim woman' and which to dismiss.

Iranian lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi eloquently describes the problems with employing a theological basis for change in Iran. She argues that although *ijtihad* creates space for new understandings of Islamic principles, it also provides a tool for authoritarian powers to repress in the name of Islam: 'Invoking Islam in a theocracy refracts the religion through a kaleidoscope, with interpretations perpetually shifting and mingling and the vantage of the most powerful prevailing.'<sup>21</sup> In line with Ebadi's analysis, there is an alternative to a purely Islamic feminism. Secular feminism does not apportion to Islam the responsibility of solving women's problems in Iran. In fact, secular feminists view the merging of religion and politics as part of the very problem that Iranian women face. As far as secular feminists are concerned, the disjuncture between the state's gender ideology and Iranian women's lives has little to do with theology and everything to do with temporal power and privilege.

At the far end of the spectrum, secular feminists from the Iranian women's diaspora have argued that the separation of mosque and state is a prerequisite for the establishment of women's rights and gender equality in Iran.<sup>22</sup> This position does not find a mode of praxis in Iran, where all actors (regardless of personal belief or ideology) must stay within the red lines of the state and be able to demonstrate how arguments for change are not an affront to Islam. However, what defines the secular feminist

approach inside Iran is the positioning of efforts for change outside formal corridors of power. Following the demise of the reform movement in the mid-2000s, the women's movement shifted its focus from formal spaces of governance towards popular street politics.

### THE ONE MILLION SIGNATURES CAMPAIGN

2005 marked the beginning of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration, a conservative government that went to considerable lengths to undo the efforts of the reform years, including in relation to women's status. One of Ahmadinejad's first steps as President was to rename and reconstitute Khatami's much praised *Centre for Women's Participation* to the *Centre for Women and Family Affairs*, reinstating the regime's view on women's rightful place within the private sphere. The growth of the non-governmental sector slowed significantly under Ahmadinejad's presidency, and activist groups faced intensified intimidation and harassment.<sup>23</sup> Only months after Ahmadinejad took office, the women's movement launched the OMSC, petitioning all discriminatory laws against men. The timing of the initiative supports Goldstone and Tilly's theory that the relationship between threat and opportunity on the one hand, and activism on the other, is not straightforward: disproportionate threats can, in fact, spur oppositions into action.<sup>24</sup> Ebadi contends that the wave of conservatism brought on by the Ahmadinejad regime is precisely what prompted the women's movement to launch a mass popular campaign.<sup>25</sup>

The first official campaign statement, posted on the campaign website, Change for Equality, on 27 June 2006, read: 'The true path to equality will not be paved through the existing power structure or a dialogue solely with men and women in positions of power.'<sup>26</sup> Rather, street politics was preferred, with activists going door-to-door, talking face-to-face with everyday Iranians about women's issues in cafes, parks, schools, and at sporting events and social gatherings. This was a clear preferencing of transgressive contention, as opposed to contained contention. The motivating premise of the campaign was spelled out in its petition statement: 'The Iranian government is a signatory to several international human rights conventions, and accordingly is required to bring its legal code in line with international standards. The most important international human rights standard calls for elimination of discrimination of all forms, including that based on sex.' To bring the government towards a position of



enacting legislative change for women, the strategy employed was two-fold. First, campaigners would engage in grassroots advocacy around women's rights and gather signatures petitioning discriminatory laws. Second, a team of lawyers within the campaign would draft a bill of proposed legal reforms and present both the bill and signed petition statement to parliament in a lobbying effort to initiate processes around law reform. The overarching purpose of signature collection was to use public opinion as a springboard to pressure the government into accounting for women's demands.

The campaign's information pamphlet, *The Effect of Laws on Women's Lives*, communicated the discriminatory aspects of the Iranian legal code and its impact on the lives of everyday women in lay terms. The pamphlet questioned several aspects of both the Civil Code and the Penal Code, claiming that they contravened Iran's commitments to eliminating discrimination based on sex according to its international treaty obligations. Iran is a State Party to five of the ten Core International Human Rights Instruments embedded in the United Nations treaty system: the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) (ICERD); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) (ICESCR); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) (CRC); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (CRPD). With the exception of the ICERD, which does not contain any reference to the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sex, each of the remaining core human rights treaties ratified by Iran contain specific provisions relating to the human rights of women and the girl child. The core human rights treaties are binding on members, meaning that State Parties are obligated to review and revise national laws to ensure consistency with the standards set out in the treaties. By signing and ratifying several treaties that make explicit the standards of non-discrimination based on sex, Iran has lent legitimacy to the international framework for human rights and signalled its intention to promote and protect gender equality.<sup>27</sup> The women's movement seized upon this point and emphasised that the government has, by its own accord, obligated itself to ensure that gender equality is promoted and protected in national laws.

With this tactic central to its approach, the OMSC aimed to avoid the kind of severe and damaging reactions typically expressed by the regime towards civil actions deemed outside the boundaries of acceptability.

Campaign cofounder Sussan Tahmasebi made concerted efforts to stress that the aims of the campaign were ‘in no way in contradiction to Islam’ but rather relied on the ‘important role of religious scholars’ to facilitate their progress. She emphasised that the campaign was not a political opposition group but simply aimed to ‘express the demands of a major segment of the population to the government.’<sup>28</sup> Insisting on these points was crucial to the integrity of the campaign. If the initiative were at any point branded ‘un-Islamic’ or ‘un-Iranian’ it would have little hope of engaging with political figures to progress its agenda for legislative reform. In this sense, the campaign comprised elements of Islamic feminism (contained contention), in that proposals for legal reform would necessarily be couched within alternative readings of Islamic law.

There is some evidence indicating a degree of campaign success, particularly in terms of its sociocultural impact.<sup>29</sup> The spread and depth of the campaign was documented in an ad hoc manner in its early years, but for reasons explained below, monitoring trailed off as activists encountered internal disagreements and external pressures to cease their activities. Within the first few years, the campaign had spread to 15 different urban centres outside Tehran, including Amol, Esfahan, Gorgan, Hamadan, Marivan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Yazd, and Zanjan. In the first 18 months of the campaign, around 1000 men and women were trained as human rights advocates.<sup>30</sup> The personal accounts of activists provide a sense of the campaign’s success at grassroots awareness raising. The Change for Equality website hosts almost 300 reflective pieces by campaign members on their efforts to gather support for the petition. Many women document experiences of personal transformation through participation in the campaign.<sup>31</sup> Others record observations of profound shifts in the views of friends and family members after being versed in the aims of the campaign.<sup>32</sup>

Several prominent members of the women’s movement claim the campaign had an impact on ministerial debate in its early years, when the parliament was still dominated by progressive politicians who had been elected during Iran’s period of reform. Laws regarding the age of criminal responsibility, and unequal inheritance, for instance, were debated at length in the mid- to late 2000s. Both issues were on the agenda of the OMSC. Although the laws were not ultimately amended, campaign cofounders Ebadi,<sup>33</sup> Ahmadi Khorasani,<sup>34</sup> and Alikarami<sup>35</sup> say that women activists can claim some degree of attribution for the fact that the issues were even broached in parliament. The women’s movement also claims an

element of responsibility for stopping the passage of some of the more discriminatory aspects of the controversial Family Protection Bill introduced to parliament in 2008. The Family Protection Bill compromised women's reproductive rights and was widely criticised for promoting polygamy. One of the most provocative articles eased the conditions under which men are allowed to take second wives. In August 2008 around 100 women, including members of the campaign, met with members of parliament to express their opposition to the bill. Ultimately, the bill was approved in February 2013, but only after the polygamy article had been removed. According to Alikarami, 'this can be seen as a result of the Campaign's engagement with government on issues pertaining to women.'<sup>36</sup>

And yet the extent to which this experience progressed the goals of the OMSC is questionable. This was a case of women engaging with politicians to stop the passage of *more* discriminatory laws against women, not an example of success in alleviating discrimination or proposing new laws to better align Iran's legal code with the government's human rights commitments. In fact, the campaign never progressed systematically beyond the signature collection stage. The original timeframe anticipated for grassroots awareness raising was one to two years following the launch in August 2006, after which time the women's movement aimed to move the campaign into its second phase of engaging with the political class and proposing law reforms to parliament. However, in February 2008 Tahmasebi issued a statement on the Change for Equality website that suggested for the first time that the campaign was not on track: '[T]he process of signature collection has been slower than expected, because changing patriarchal cultures takes time and because activists have faced pressure and limitations from security forces. ... We will announce the number of signatures in the future and once petitions from around the country can be collected.'<sup>37</sup> But campaigners never announced the number of signatures collected and failed to mount a clear, sustained effort at advocating upwards for legislative reform.

The failure to launch can be attributed to the heavy response of the authorities to the campaign. The conservative Ahmadinejad government reacted negatively to the initiative and employed a variety of tactics to inhibit its progress. The Change for Equality website was consistently blocked from user access, and news sources throughout the country were instructed not to publish any material on the campaign.<sup>38</sup> Government authorities repeatedly refused permits to allow women to hold meetings

and conferences in public venues, forcing them to host meetings in private homes.<sup>39</sup> Several activists expressed great concern about authorities tapping their cell phones and hacking email accounts, and in the first 18 months alone over 50 women were arrested for involvement in the campaign.<sup>40</sup>

The top-down assault intensified following the mass unrest over the disputed presidential elections of 2009 and ultimately led to a premature demobilisation of the campaign. Under the banner of the Green Movement thousands of Iranians poured onto the streets of Tehran and other major cities protesting what they claimed was electoral fraud following the reinstatement of President Ahmadinejad. Women were highly visible in the uprising and many members of the OMSC found a ready voice in the Green Movement's calls for greater democratic freedoms. But the state's reaction was harsh and unforgiving. Over 100 people were killed and countless others were arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned.<sup>41</sup> Notable amongst those targeted was OMSC cofounder Bahareh Hedayat, a well-known activist for student rights, human rights, and gender equality in Iran. Bahareh was arrested in December 2009 and charged with several offences around disrupting public order and participating in illegal gatherings.

In the context of the uprising and its aftermath, campaign cofounder Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani revised the projects for signature collection to 2011. Ahmadi Khorasani openly described a feeling of fear within the women's movement over the prospects of failing to progress the campaign: 'This fear is warranted. We need to be seen as winning, because patriarchal critics ... will seize upon any weakness. ... [I] worry that if we take too long, our activists will lose heart and we will fall short of our goal, at considerable hazard to our face-to-face method's credibility along with much else.'<sup>42</sup> These apprehensions were vindicated. The campaign never fully recovered from the retreat that necessarily followed the state's crack-down on activists, which lasted for around nine months from mid-2009 through to early 2010.<sup>43</sup>

After 2009 many women identified by the regime as frontrunners of the OMSC were imprisoned or forced into voluntary exile. Campaign cofounder and human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was arrested and placed in solitary confinement in Evin Prison in September 2010, ostensibly for 'endangering national security' and 'spreading anti-government propaganda.'<sup>44</sup> She was released in 2013 but banned from practicing law for three years. Others were subjected to such intense harassment and

threats that they were effectively forced into voluntary exile. Ebadi, for instance, had travelled to Europe just prior to the 2009 elections and did not return to Iran after it became clear she would almost certainly face arrest or imprisonment on politically motivated charges.<sup>45</sup> After being subject to intense harassment and intimidation, Tahmasebi and fellow campaign cofounder Parvin Ardalan emigrated overseas.<sup>46</sup> Activist and author Jelveh Javaheri, who remains in Iran, argues that the women's movement continued to work on the campaign after 2009, but the looming threat of being apprehended forced them to work in smaller and smaller groups, run covert meetings in private homes, and actively avoid attracting further public attention to their activities.<sup>47</sup> The focus of the Change for Equality site, in fact, shifted from promoting campaign goals towards calling for the release of Hedayat and other political prisoners.

As a protective mechanism, founders of the campaign had exercised great caution in framing their activities within legal boundaries, stressing compatibility with Islamic principles, and asking that the government fulfil its existing obligations to human rights treaties by reforming discriminatory laws. But in reality, the women's movement was always facing a dominant political context that was at loggerheads with the motivating premise of the campaign, that is, establishing equality between men and women. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic makes women's rights an auxiliary function of the gender framework of the regime, which is based on a conservative interpretation of Islamic sources. The 'Islamic criteria' referred to in the Constitution as the standard by which all Iranian laws should comply is used as a category to limit the range of rights and protections to which women are privy, rather than to establish a basis for gender equality.

Although the women's movement had made repeated efforts to stress that their activities were not politically motivated, this is not the same as being able to claim that the campaign was altogether apolitical. Any attempt to depoliticise advocacy for gender equality in Iran is highly problematic, because women's deference to men is a key organising principle of the Islamic Republic's form of political Islam. By calling for an end to all discriminatory laws against women, the women's movement necessarily pitched itself against the dominant conservative political establishment. Iran's clerical elite has a long track record of refusing to recognise alternative interpretations of Islamic laws if those perspectives run counter to their own conservative views—this was starkly demonstrated during Iran's turn-of-the-century experiment with reform.

When moderate politician Hassan Rouhani was elected as President in 2013, there was reason to speculate the OMSC might be reignited. Rouhani came to power on a policy platform to promote greater cultural openness and reduce government interference in people's lives. Throughout his electoral campaign, Rouhani made regular reference to the need to improve the status of women by increasing their social and economic participation. But Rouhani's presidency has by and large been a disappointment for the women's movement. There have been no major reforms around women's status under his watch and no public discourse on his presidential promise to establish an independent ministry for women. One OMSC activist reported that throughout Rouhani's term as president, women have continued to 'feel afraid' of the reaction of security forces to activities couched within the discourse of 'women's rights.'<sup>48</sup> In June 2014 the Change for Equality website was revamped and relaunched following a period of relative inactivity. But by this time the campaign had lost its momentum and activists could not agree on how to move forward in terms of strategy and approach.<sup>49</sup> At the time of writing, the new website suggests that the women's movement is unclear and undecided on whether the OMSC is ongoing or a closed case.

### THE CAMPAIGN TO CHANGE THE MALE FACE OF PARLIAMENT

With the OMSC in a state of obscurity and impasse, in October 2015 the women's movement launched a new initiative: the Campaign to Change the Male Face of Parliament. Rather than aiming at the outset to impact legislation, the campaign aimed to change the balance of power amongst the very people who act as legislators and decision-makers. The overarching aim of the campaign was to achieve 50 seats for women in Iran's 290-seat parliament in the February 2016 elections. This represented a significant change in direction for the women's movement. The OMSC focused on public awareness raising in the hope that a groundswell of support for women's human rights would pressure existing legislators to enact changes around women's status. In contrast, the underlying premise of the Parliament Campaign was that to see greater gender sensitivity reflected in Iran's policymaking, it is the legislators themselves that need to be changed. According to one campaign cofounder:

Previously, the women's movement would announce women's needs and demand that figures already in power fulfil them. But this time, for the first time, we focused on giving women the self-confidence to go to the top levels of power so that they can advocate for women themselves. Instead of just announcing our needs, we said that it is women who should make women's demands happen.<sup>50</sup>

In this sense, the campaign strategy represented a combination of transgressive and contained contention: activists worked in informal spaces of governance—on the street and through social media—to critique conservative candidates and advocate for greater numbers of women in the parliament; achieving this goal would ultimately mean transitioning to a form of Islamic feminism like that employed by the Women's Faction in the reform years. On this point, a cofounder of the campaign said: 'Since we live in Iran we have to comply with some principles even if we do not believe them. ... As a lawyer and someone familiar with Sharia law I believe some regulation can be amended. So there can be no doubt that sending women to parliament is a good initiative.'<sup>51</sup>

The campaign did not come close to reaching its goal, and like the OMSC, demobilised under intense pressure from above. However, it is important to acknowledge that the election results ended a period of decline in the number of women candidates and the number of women elected as members of parliament (MPs). 17 women were elected, up from the previous record of 14 women in the reformist parliament of 1996–2000.<sup>52</sup> Eight of the women elected came from the List of Hope put forward by the reformist camp in the district of Tehran. Those women either campaigned on a platform that included improving women's status or at the very least spoke publicly during the elections of the need to combat discrimination against women.<sup>53</sup> Whilst it is not possible to trace attribution in complex interventions, one activist argued that the campaign can claim some degree of contribution to the election results:

The Campaign played a crucial role in increasing awareness and encouraging people to participate in the election and cast their vote. ... campaigners convinced many people who had no plan to vote to change their minds and participate. We helped them realize that even if they couldn't vote for their ideal candidate [i.e. those rejected in the vetting process] at least they could vote for someone who partially represented women's demands, and help stop conservative people entering like we had in the previous parliament.<sup>54</sup>

This is an important point: activists did not just focus on dry numbers. What they wanted was 50 women who, if elected, would bring the values of gender equality into their decision-making. Despite the consistent presence of at least some women in parliament since 1980, female parliamentarians have often represented conservative viewpoints and have failed to promote and protect women's rights, even sometimes working to actively undermine women's empowerment.<sup>55</sup>

At the outset, activists recognised the constraints of the campaign within a political system where power is concentrated in the hands of an elite few whose ideology is firmly rooted in clericalism and patriarchy. In November 2015 Ahmadi Khorasani predicted that the Guardian Council would disqualify most women candidates but maintained that the message of women making public claims to political participation was nevertheless an important one to send.<sup>56</sup> The campaign publicly acknowledged that securing 50 seats for equality-minded women was not likely to occur in the 2016 elections. Rather, activists hinted at an incremental approach to change that would necessarily take place over several election cycles. Campaigner Nahid Tavasoli said: 'Considering that right now women still have many unfulfilled demands and requests, it is likely that similar, additional campaigns will emerge [in the future] ... as long as women's demands regarding legislative reform are not being addressed in parliament, we will continue this fight.'<sup>57</sup> Another campaigner suggested the Campaign's influencing activities might even be extended and reformulated to focus on the municipal and presidential elections in May 2017.<sup>58</sup> These statements were significant because they indicated that activists were thinking about the long game: they anticipated pushbacks from clerical decision-makers and laid plans, albeit informal, to carry the agenda of the campaign into future election cycles.

To work towards the objective of 50 seats for women in the 2016 elections, the campaign was organised around three committees. The 'I Will Be a Candidate Committee' encouraged and supported equality-minded women to run for parliament through capacity-building workshops. The 'Fifty Seats for Women Committee' engaged in public awareness raising about the importance of women's representation in parliament through information sessions and promotional film clips. The 'Red Card Committee' monitored the track records of all parliamentary candidates and informed the public of candidates whose policy positions were adverse to women's empowerment. The campaign hosted a website,



a Facebook page, and a Twitter account to spread its messages and promote its goals.

Campaigners seized opportunities from above to advance their claims, and for some time they were able to conduct public influencing activities with a certain degree of freedom and safety. At a campaign conference on 8 December 2015 at Tehran University, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi shared her support for the initiative, saying worldwide experience showed increasing women's participation in politics has positive outcomes for women's status.<sup>59</sup> The late former president and popular public figure Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani also publicly supported the campaign, as did former president and leader of the reform movement Muhammad Khatami.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the campaign rode a wave of pre-election initiatives led by a reformist political bloc that strongly encouraged people to vote under the slogan of 'maximum participation.' One member of the Red Card Committee acknowledged the claim-making opportunities afforded to the campaign from above:

Khatami made a video encouraging everyone to vote and it was very influential. ... [People like him] and his consultant Azar Mansouri [deputy leader of the Islamic Iran Participation Front] who also reached out to the public to vote made it very easy for us [activists] ... I think we [activists] owe them [reformists] to some extent because they helped to improve the public acceptance of the presence of women in the elections. They spoke publicly about women's rights and reserved spaces on their candidates list exclusively for women. It was a win-win game.<sup>61</sup>

However, the campaign also experienced serious threats against claim making. Damaging accusations of foreign agendas and 'enemy infiltration' were issued by conservative MPs, leading clerics (including Supreme Leader Khamenei), and members of the Basij militia—a hard-line militant group under the command of the Revolutionary Guards (Centre for Human Rights in Iran 2015). In this context, and under the eye of security forces, the campaign experienced an early demobilisation process. Activists' social media activities lived a short life: the last campaign Tweet was sent on 14 December 2015; the last Facebook post on 29 February 2016—three months prior to the final round of run-off voting in April. In January 2016 several activists involved in the initiative were interrogated and harassed by security forces.<sup>62</sup> The backlash prompted activists to disable the

campaign website. The Feminist School—the intellectual wing of the women’s movement, which had supported and promoted the campaign—also heeded security warnings and suspended its online publications for several months.<sup>63</sup> Ahmadi Khorasani’s prediction that women candidates would be rejected in swathes came to fruition. The I will Be a Candidate Committee officially supported around 30 independent candidates to run for office based on their leadership aspirations and values and beliefs around gender equality.<sup>64</sup> All 30 candidates were rejected in the Guardian Council’s vetting process. Similarly, the Iranian newspaper Borna News Agency reported that 60 per cent of women reformist candidates were rejected in the vetting process.<sup>65</sup> One campaigner reflected: ‘It was a discouraging experience.’<sup>66</sup>

Despite the readiness of activists to claim a degree of responsibility for the record election results, in fact the ability and willingness of women to advance the campaign agenda announced in late 2015 had already waned significantly by the turn of the new year. Over the course of several weeks in February 2017, a number of activists closely involved in the campaign were interrogated by security forces; some were taken in for questioning at Evin Prison and warned to ‘stay silent’ in the lead up to the 2017 elections.<sup>67</sup> This was a stark display of the volatility of the Iranian landscape: an initiative that in its early days benefited from the support of public figures—even regime insiders—quickly fell victim to a strong state backlash. Doubt and anxiety arose within the women’s movement over whether or not to stick to plans to play the long game and further the campaign agenda in the lead up to the 2017 elections. Ahmadi Khorasani said: ‘Now [after the 2016 backlash] it’s much more difficult to have the kind of free and efficient discussions necessary to form a collective action amongst women’s rights activists ... the 2017 election atmosphere is not the atmosphere for change.’<sup>68</sup> Like the OMSC experience, influencing activities to increase women’s participation in politics reached a standstill: no grassroots campaign was launched in the lead up to the 2017 parliamentary and municipal elections.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has drawn on Tilly and Tarrow’s theory of Contentious Politics to examine the mechanisms employed by the Iranian women’s movement to progress claims for women’s rights. Iran fits within Tilly and Tarrow’s description of a hybrid regime in that the Constitution of the

Islamic Republic enshrines both popular sovereignty and clerical rule (to be sure, however, power is weighted in the hands of the clerics, and in this sense Iran's brand of hybridity falls more towards authoritarianism rather than democracy).<sup>69</sup> The Iranian case study supports Tilly and Tarrow's claims that (1) hybrid regimes tend to be volatile in nature, (2) such volatility produces combinations of contained and transgressive contention, and (3) the consequent permutations that characterise claim-making activities give rise to unstable and unpredictable outcomes.<sup>70</sup>

Iran's 'peculiar hybrid nature'<sup>71</sup> has produced constant cycles of relaxation followed by restrictions on civil society. In this environment, the women's movement has employed both Islamic feminism (contained contention) and secular feminism (transgressive contention) to advance its claims. Both the OMSC and the Campaign to Change the Male Face of Parliament comprised a preference for secular feminism. The bulk of campaign activities involved popular street politics and took place outside sanctioned spaces of governances. However, both campaigns necessarily referred to the resonance of their goals with Islam, and if successful, implied a transition to Islamic feminist techniques: the OMSC by working with parliament to reform laws on women's status and the Parliament Campaign by supporting women to run as official candidates and take public positions in a formal space of governance.

However, despite being allowed a degree of movement in the early weeks and months of campaigning, both initiatives experienced heavy state crackdowns after activists attracted the attention of security forces. As a result, the campaigns demobilised despite not having reached their overarching goals and before the opportunity to work within sanctioned spaces of governances was a reality. Despite efforts to continue working underground after the devastating events of 2009, the OMSC never recovered from the wider crackdown on civil society that followed the presidential elections of the same year. It is arguable that the recent memory and severity of that crackdown inhibited the enthusiasm of the 2016 parliament campaigners to carry their activities into the 2017 presidential (and municipal) elections after they experienced a backlash of their own. Although a formidable and complex task, the women's movement must move beyond short-term campaigns and devise long-term strategies for action that take into account a very predictable cycle of relative openness followed by backlash, incorporating mechanisms to survive pressure from above in a way that does not bring an entire initiative to an all-out end.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# Pulling and Gouging: The Sadrist Line's Adaptable and Evolving Repertoire of Contention

*Damian Doyle*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, international observers have been fascinated by the figure of Muqtada al-Sadr, his apparent volatility, and his strident and militant opposition to US occupation.<sup>1</sup> Journalists and commentators have tried to understand this previously unknown social and religious leader and his ability to mobilise Iraqis in the hundreds of thousands to participate in contentious politics, deliver social services, attend public religious festivals in the midst of war, and even take up arms—both to resist the occupation of Iraq by the overwhelmingly superior US military and to defend communities and holy sites against the so-called Islamic State group. Born into an influential Iraqi clerical family that suffered for its resistance to Ba’ath authoritarianism, al-Sadr represented resistance to US occupation and a danger to the post-2003 political settlement. During its operation between 2003 and 2008, analysts were likewise preoccupied with the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* or Mahdi Army, the movement’s armed group, which earned a reputation for brutal violence and

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predatory criminality. For all the attention its political leadership and armed group received, the large constituency of Iraqis that identifies with the al-Sadr family and refers to itself as *al-Khatt al-Sadri*, or the Sadrist Line,<sup>2</sup> remained an enigma to many. Is it a ‘mob’ of poor Iraqis blindly following the irrational direction of a scowling firebrand cleric, an Iranian proxy acting to frustrate Iraqi democracy and US interests, or a Machiavellian political movement seeking to control the fledgling Iraqi state for its own political and material gain? The symbolic infiltration of the Green Zone—Baghdad’s secure political and administrative district—by thousands of Sadrist Line participants and other politically active Iraqis in April 2016 again brought international attention to this movement and its ability to mobilise Iraqis to participate in contentious politics.

This chapter examines this civil society constituency, the Sadrist Line, by conceptualising it as a social movement that engages in contentious politics and collaborates with other civil society actors. It adopts Wiktorowicz’s position that Islamic activism—that is, ‘collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities’—can and should be examined within a social movement theoretical framework<sup>3</sup> and extends the small body of scholarship that has studied the Sadrist Line from a social movement perspective.<sup>4</sup> A social movement is a ‘highly dynamic entity’<sup>5</sup> that engages in contentious politics to bring about social or political change by making claims on the state and is generally characterised by a political agenda, a collective identity, and the use of informal networks or organisations to mobilise people.<sup>6</sup> The Sadrist Line is distinct from al-Sadr’s armed group, which projects Sadrist influence on the battlefield in the war against the Islamic State terrorist group. It is also separate from, but influenced by, the parliamentary bloc affiliated with al-Sadr, which engages in political contention through formal political processes and, at times, in concert with the civil society activities of the social movement.

This chapter draws on data collected through personal communication and semi-structured interviews conducted between April 2016 and September 2017 with research participants in Baghdad as part of an ongoing online research project regarding the worldview and motivations of Sadrist Line participants. Research participants were chosen on the basis of their organising and information-sharing role within the Sadrist Line and their willingness to enter dialogue with a foreign researcher. The identity of all correspondents is held in strict confidence and online communication, either text or spoken, is conducted using the participants’ preferred encrypted social media applications and a virtual private network. The first

section provides a framework for understanding the Sadrist Line as a social movement and examining its contemporary contentious politics with reference to the concepts of discursive opportunity structure and collective action frame. The second section explains the use of instrumental coalitions with other civil society actors during 2015 and 2016 to build legitimacy and develop a political programme. Detailed discussion of the Green Zone infiltration, presented in the third section, highlights the ability of the Sadrist Line and its civil society partners to develop their repertoire of contention and implement a series of increasingly impactful and public nonviolent performances designed to exert pressure on the state. This collaboratively designed escalation strategy, referred to by the colloquial Iraqi expression *shala' qala'* or 'pulling and gouging', distinguishes post-Arab Spring contentious politics in Iraq from past episodes and is a means by which the Sadrist Line and its coalition can test the boundaries of their position as a tolerated opposition.

### THE SADRIST LINE AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The Sadrist Line is a component of a broad and dynamic network of religious, social, political (including parliamentary), and paramilitary elements associated with the al-Sadr family in general and the figure of Muqtada al-Sadr in particular. While the full extent of this network is beyond the scope of this chapter, the simple generalised network diagram in Fig. 3.1 illustrates the relationship between the various elements of the wider Sadrist network at the time of the Green Zone infiltration in April 2016. It depicts the central office of al-Sadr, located in the Southern Iraqi holy city of Najaf, within a dynamic constellation of informally networked groups including its parliamentary bloc, armed group, charitable network, media node, and civil society constituency. The purpose of this diagram is to situate the Sadrist Line while acknowledging the diverse elements that comprise the entire network. It also illustrates the primary interfaces—denoted by dotted lines—which these elements have with other social and political processes in Iraq, including formal politics, the military battlespace, and civil society. Two points are important to stress: first, this is an informal network, not a formal organisation; second, this is a point in time depiction of a dynamic network that is constantly reconfigured to suit its environment.

The Sadrist Line operates with relative autonomy, without direct links to the parliamentary or armed elements of the network and receives political and moral guidance from al-Sadr. Its practice of street politics is

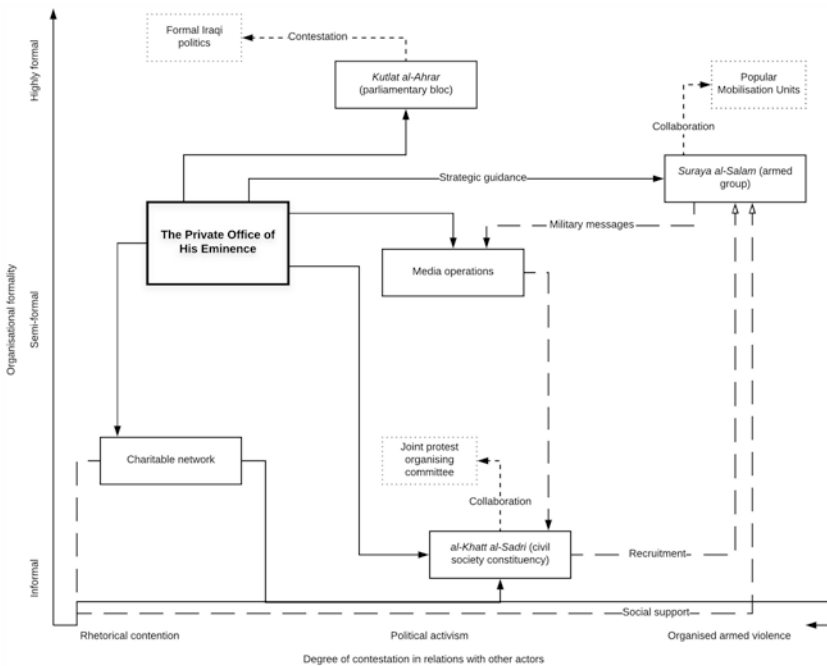


Fig. 3.1 Simple generalised map of the Sadrist network, April 2016

contentious in the sense that it represents collective claims on the Iraqi state—for political reform and improved government services, against corruption and foreign influence—that are made through public performances and pose a direct challenge to the interests of others,<sup>7</sup> specifically Iraq’s political elite, their patronage networks, and their international partners and sponsors. In this framework the Sadrist Line has the status of ‘tolerated opposition’, acting with relative freedom within Iraqi civil society until such time as its activities or messages are considered to represent too great a threat, either to the state or to its primary beneficiaries.

A social movement perspective enables the Sadrist Line to be conceptualised as an informally networked and complex social force that mobilises Iraqis to engage in contentious politics and make claims on the state. The Sadrist Line seeks to influence Iraqi politics and the formal mechanisms of government through a repertoire of contentious political action. It mobilises Iraqis to participate in this contentious action by employing an

adaptable and symbolic collective action frame configured to leverage openings in Iraq's discursive opportunity structure. Much as political opportunity structures constrain or expand the political space in which social movements act, for instance through the degree of openness in the political system, discursive opportunity structures determine the ideas that are socially and politically acceptable.<sup>8</sup> In contemporary Iraq, where political opportunities are restricted to a handful of dominant parties, the political space available to social movements and other civil society actors is instead largely determined by the relative weight of issues such as corruption, nationalism, terrorism, and security in the discursive opportunity structure. The Sadrist Line orientates itself and its political programme towards these dominant discursive themes by adapting its collective action frame in an attempt to demonstrate its enduring relevance in Iraqi society and politics.

The collective action frame is the conceptual product of activities undertaken by a social movement—its leaders, thinkers, activists, and participants—to make sense of the world, particularly in a difficult situation, and share this interpretation with others in order to mobilise them. Frames are articulated and elaborated using messages and symbols that may be derived from existing themes or constructed by combining old and new concepts. Collective action frames are used to legitimise and build support for a social movement's contentious political action and to delegitimise or demobilise potential rivals and therefore have both internal and external audiences.<sup>9</sup> The Sadrist Line's collective action frame is a dynamic and adaptable fusion of three interrelated themes: *religious symbolism* and the clerical authority of the al-Sadr family, symbols and language associated with *Iraqi nationalism* (as a counterpoint to sect-centric political language), and *social justice* including corruption, accountability, government services, and rights for Iraq's vulnerable classes.

Religious symbolism is communicated in two main ways which are closely linked: representations of Shi'i historical events, figures, and themes and representations of the clerical authority of the al-Sadr family, whose portraits are displayed in both private and public spaces. These symbols connect political action with faith and are used by Sadrist Line activists and participants in their daily interactions with each other and with other Iraqis, particularly during mobilisation for a contentious performance such as a mass demonstration. In the weeks surrounding the Ashura festival in 2016, Sadrist activists involved in anti-corruption protests used social media to share images of Imam Hussein that presented him as a

reformer who, like today's protest movement, struggled against entrenched corruption and injustice.<sup>10</sup> A striking example is a message shared on Twitter that invoked the martyrdom of Hussein to commemorate a deceased protester killed during repressive violence in May 2016, suggesting that both died in the same struggle against injustice.<sup>11</sup> Social movement participants who took part in the walk to Karbala for the festival of Arbæen in 2016 emphasised the symbolic and historical meaning of the event. One activist stressed that 'the main purpose behind walking to Karbala is the reform [agenda]' and explained that it was al-Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who had reintroduced the practice of walking to Karbala, prohibited by the Ba'ath Government, as a means of peaceful resistance to the regime of Saddam Hussein.<sup>12</sup> This was echoed by another participant who cited the reintroduction of the pilgrimage as one of several examples that demonstrated that Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr was 'the only and I repeat it the only cleric that faced [the] Saddam dictatorship'.<sup>13</sup> In semi-structured interviews regarding their motivation for taking part in Sadrist Line political action, participants demonstrate intimate familiarity with the lives, writings, and tragic deaths of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his sister, Bint al-Huda, Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr and his sons, and the 'vanished imam', Musa al-Sadr. Through religious symbols and ideas, the Sadrist Line frames its social and political programme as consistent with, and inspired and strengthened by, the faith of its participants and the wisdom and self-sacrifice of its leading family of scholars and activists.

Nationalism imbues Sadrist Line political communication with an 'Iraqi-first mindset'<sup>14</sup> as a means of distinguishing it from other political actors.<sup>15</sup> Sadrist Line participants self-identify as part of what they consider to be an authentic and legitimate Iraqi political movement distinct from 'the other currents that were in the arms of the United States and Iran, former and current'.<sup>16</sup> Nationalist symbolism, moreover, provides a countermeasure against accusations from other political actors that the Sadrist Line advances a sect-centric agenda that is a danger to national unity and a threat to the security of Sunni and minority communities. During the mass demonstrations of 2015 and 2016, messages promulgated by the office of al-Sadr and disseminated by activists advised protest participants that they should display only the Iraqi national flag, not symbols that could be interpreted as sect-centric or likely to inflame ethnonreligious relations, and that they should chant slogans of national unity.<sup>17</sup> Organisers of the symbolic funeral for protesters who were killed in February 2017 issued guidance that participants should '[c]heer the name of Iraq only,



and do not carry a banner or photo of any individual; carry only the Iraqi flag'.<sup>18</sup> This is consistent with instructions issued to participants in past mass demonstrations that 'no flags and no pictures should be raised but that of Iraqi national flags'.<sup>19</sup> In 2013, the Sadrist Line expressed solidarity with anti-government protests by Sunni communities in and around Fallujah<sup>20</sup> and protested in opposition to the Nouri al-Maliki government's repressive application of counter-terrorism laws against Sunni communities,<sup>21</sup> projecting an image of nationalist, non-sectarian solidarity with marginalised and oppressed communities, linking the themes of nationalism and social justice.

Social justice themes have been integral to the Sadrist collective action frame since the Ba'ath period when Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr appealed to vulnerable Iraqis, especially poor Shi'a communities that experienced or perceived marginalisation and deprivation. As the military role of the United States in Iraq has decreased, the social justice focus of Sadrist Line framing has shifted from military occupation to corruption and the political processes that entrench it. The failure of the government to effectively deliver services, including electricity and water during summer, is attributed to the corrupt behaviour of the political elite and its patronage networks within government departments. Terrorist attacks, particularly those targeting markets and places of worship in Baghdad, are framed as a product of poor governance and ineffective security forces, the root cause of which is corruption. The Sadrist Line's specific political demands emphasise social justice themes and are articulated in terms of democratic norms: Iraqi sovereignty and non-interference by external actors; non-sectarianism and national unity; effective delivery of government services; and political reform including specific institutional reforms that combat corruption and promote transparency, such as the relocation of anti-corruption authorities away from the direct control of the executive branch of government and electoral reform to promote fairness and open up the political system.<sup>22</sup>

The Sadrist Line deploys this collective action frame in the context of Iraqi civil society. Consistent with Hardig's typology<sup>23</sup> of civil society in the Middle East and North Africa, Iraqi civil society is a political space characterised by fluidity—collaboration and contention, formality and informality, and varying degrees of political and financial autonomy. A plurality of actors operates within boundaries established by the state. Sadrist framing, particularly its nationalist and social justice elements, is a mechanism not only for mobilisation but for legitimisation, collaboration,

and contention. Since the formalisation of a cooperative relationship with a grouping of Iraqi civil society actors in early 2016, the Sadrist Line's political program and repertoire of contentious performances has been jointly developed and implemented with its partners through representative committee processes. This was interpreted by some observers of Iraqi politics as the hijacking or undermining of the pro-reform protest movement by a religious movement.<sup>24</sup> This chapter makes the case that it should instead be considered a milestone in the reconfiguration of the Sadrist collective action frame to emphasise social justice and align with national discursive opportunities related to widespread concern about corruption, accountability, and government service delivery.

### COLLABORATION AND CONTENTION

In the period of this chapter's focus, from 2015 to 2017, Sadrist Line street politics was characterised by interaction and deepening collaboration with a coalition of civil society actors that have been politically active to varying degrees since 2003. This relationship developed through recognition of shared objectives related to the reform of the state was principally a rejection of the ethnosectarian quota system and the corrupt elite that it sustains.<sup>25</sup> The collaborative relationship between the Sadrist Line and civil society actors through this pro-reform protest movement resemble 'instrumental coalitions, in which collaboration neither relies on, nor generates larger identities',<sup>26</sup> based on perceived common values and a shared vision for a future 'civic state' in Iraq. This relationship has its origins in mid-2015 when protests that had been conducted by civil society actors episodically for several years grew in scale and profile as Iraqis responded angrily to summer electricity and water shortages.<sup>27</sup> The relationship between the Sadrist Line and the pro-reform groups began to deepen at this time through joint participation in protests and by early 2016 had been formalised through the establishment of an elected committee with representation from the groups that form the coalition, including human rights activists, trade unions, journalist associations, and the Sadrist Line. The 'Central committee supervising the popular protests' is responsible for overseeing the development of the pro-reform protest movement's political demands—its claims—and planning and coordinating mass demonstrations and social media campaigns—its contentious performances.

Informal interaction was also strengthened during this period through workshops hosted by universities and civil society events such as the annual Iraqi Social Forum<sup>28</sup> which brings diverse groups together to facilitate knowledge sharing, network building, and training in nonviolent protest methods. Following the Green Zone infiltration in April 2016, discussed in detail below, a diverse group of civil society actors convened a workshop<sup>29</sup> to discuss lessons learned, refine their political demands, and plan future actions. At this meeting a Sadrist Line participant provided an overview of the methods used to infiltrate the Green Zone, a contentious performance that required the establishment of relationships with the security personnel who ostensibly protect the Green Zone, the scaling of concrete blast walls by a large number of people, and a social media strategy. In the months that followed there were several other conferences, workshops, and meetings in which Sadrist Line activists and other civil society actors discussed how to mature the pro-reform movement's political demands and effectively escalate its street politics.<sup>30</sup> A September 2016 conversation with a Sadrist Line activist provides a glimpse of the Sadrist perspective on collaboration and knowledge sharing within the coalition. The activist is a regular participant in joint activities and discussions with other groups and describes 'close relations with [the] civil trend' based on shared values. The most important of these shared values is a belief in 'the right to equal opportunities and the need for social justice and prosperity for the people', including a shared view that government should be 'a servant of the people' and that the current political system requires urgent and comprehensive reform. Further, civil society activists 'are, as we are, willing to self-sacrifice to build Iraq in all sincerity'.<sup>31</sup> In common with its civil society partners, the Sadrist Line's critique of the Iraqi political system draws connections between the legacy of US occupation, the ethnosectarian quota system, entrenched corruption, and the country's vulnerability to terrorism. Its messaging—consistent with its framing themes of nationalism and social justice—emphasises a need to reform the electoral system, eliminate sect-centric politics that deepen corrupt and patriarchal practices within government, and unite Iraq against terrorism.

There remain points of contention. Some civil society actors who seek to establish a new or reformed secular Iraqi state are reluctant to align themselves with the Sadrist Line on the basis that it is an Islamist movement, while others are distrustful of the movement's armed group, sometimes popularly associated with the worst excesses of the Mahdi Army. Criticisms of the Sadrist parliamentary bloc argue that it is a participant in,

and beneficiary of, the political system that it hypocritically protests against. Tactics and strategy are also debated, including the question of forming a new political party to engage in elections.<sup>32</sup> Internal debate and disagreement is acknowledged, however care is taken at events and media appearances to project an image of close cooperation and good relations. Regular meetings between al-Sadr and the central committee are publicised by both Sadrists and other groups to emphasise cooperation.<sup>33</sup> The instrumental coalition benefits both the civil society groups and the Sadrist Line. The former benefits from the organising ability, mobilising capability, and resources of the Sadrist Line. It may also help some civil society actors shift from a status of anti-system outsider to tolerated opposition, although this also creates risks which are discussed later in the chapter. The Sadrist Line benefits from collaboration in terms of social movement diffusion (knowledge sharing) and an opportunity to enhance its credentials as an active and nonviolent participant in Iraqi civil society that respects and operates within democratic norms. Furthermore, the instrumental coalition, particularly knowledge sharing and joint organising, has provided a vehicle for the evolution of the Sadrist Line's repertoire of contention; that is, the types of contentious performances that a social movement has at its disposal in making its claims, communicating its messages, and pursuing its social and political objectives. The Sadrist Line's repertoire of street politics—as distinct from its use of organised violence on the battlefield, first during the insurgency and today in the fight against the Islamic State group—has since 2003 been characterised by the globally recognised tactic of mass demonstrations mobilised around the issues of US occupation, corruption, terrorism and insecurity, and ineffective government service delivery.<sup>34</sup> In the past several years, and particularly since collaboration within the pro-reform protest movement deepened, the repertoire has evolved and is today defined by a diversity of actions, flexibility, and escalating intensity over time.

Mass demonstrations continue to play a major role in the Sadrist Line's repertoire of contestation, with a focus on Tahrir Square in Baghdad. Participants in these events are asked by organisers to avoid sect-centric religious symbols and to display only the Iraqi national flag. Hand-held signs and banners display messages in Arabic; some simple ('yes, yes, reform',<sup>35</sup> 'yes, yes, Iraq',<sup>36</sup> 'the corrupt government does not represent me'<sup>37</sup>), others more complex or specific ('the blood of those killed by terrorists is in the necks of the corrupt elite'<sup>38</sup>). Social media, most commonly Facebook, is used to promulgate logistical information about

upcoming protests and then share images of the event, principally through the Facebook page of the central committee.<sup>39</sup> Images include participants walking through streets towards the protest site,<sup>40</sup> banners and hand-held signs,<sup>41</sup> children waving Iraqi flags,<sup>42</sup> and aerial photographs that show the scale of attendance.<sup>43</sup> Echoing images associated with the Arab Spring events elsewhere in the region, images of security forces personnel supporting a protest event are framed as further evidence of the legitimacy of the pro-reform protest movement's claims; a significant example of which is images of security forces personnel showing their respects to deceased protesters during the symbolic funeral event in February 2017.<sup>44</sup> Centralised coordination and digital communication provides the capability to flexibly adjust the focus and site of a planned protest at relatively short notice to achieve maximum impact. Mass demonstrations on the general theme of political reform in late 2016 and early 2017 were re-focused to amplify messages concerning, for instance, the presence of Turkish military forces on Iraqi soil<sup>45</sup> (involving a change of venue from Tahrir Square to the Turkish embassy), support for the Iraqi armed forces as the campaign to liberate Mosul from the Islamic State group commenced, accountability following terrorist attacks in Baghdad, and reform of the national electoral commission as a specific step in a broader reform programme. Each of these foci is consistent with the collective action frame of the Sadrist Line in particular and the claims of the pro-reform protest movement in general, reflecting a deliberate strategy of leveraging discursive opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of claim making and demonstrate political relevance.

A diversity of complimentary contentious actions support the public spectacle of mass demonstrations: sit-ins and pickets with a range of messages and targets, strikes, and hunger strikes<sup>46</sup> designed to demonstrate a commitment to nonviolence and influence popular Iraqi attitudes toward the Sadrist Line, 'million signature' petitions,<sup>47</sup> and symbolic funeral re-enactments to honour victims of terrorism and demand accountability for security failures.<sup>48</sup> Following the death of protesters as a result of violent repression, activists have hacked government websites to display memorials to the deceased.<sup>49</sup> Tactics change if they prove counterproductive; when sit-ins outside political offices in several Iraqi cities threatened to turn violent and cause reputational harm, the tactic was abandoned and new methods were adopted.<sup>50</sup>

Since late 2015, civic-Sadrist collaboration has deepened. Activists within the pro-reform protest movement have articulated an escalation

strategy by which pressure on the government will increase over time. The colloquial Iraqi expression, *shala' qala'* refers to the treatment that a dentist might subject you to: pulling firmly from above and then, if the rotten tooth proves stubborn, gouging from the bottom to strike at its root.<sup>51</sup> In early 2016, in the lead up to the infiltration of the Green Zone, Sadrist Line activists referred to pulling and gouging when describing plans to escalate their campaign of street politics.<sup>52</sup> The expression offers multiple levels of meaning. First, the rotten tooth symbolises the political elite, which sickens the body of the nation and must be removed. Second, the imagery of pulling and gouging clearly expresses the frustration of the pro-reform movement: it has tried applying firm pressure to remove the tooth but it remains in place, necessitating more serious action. Finally, there is an underlying message that pain—and by implication, violence—might be unavoidable if the longer-term health of the nation is to be restored.

The escalation strategy is the responsibility of the central committee and, while Sadrist Line participants occasionally speak to the Iraqi media about the possible form of future action, planned activities are publicly revealed only when events are imminent. During early 2016 the escalation strategy manifested in a co-designed campaign of contentious performances intended to strengthen the pro-reform protest movement's collective political identity, raise the profile of the coalition's reform demands, deliver political messages to non-participating Iraqis, and exert political pressure on the al-Abadi government to carry out its promised package of reforms.<sup>53</sup>

### RED LINES AROUND THE GREEN ZONE

On 30 April 2016, the civil-Sadrist pro-reform protest movement captured international news headlines by executing a carefully planned contentious performance that involved the symbolic infiltration of Baghdad's Green Zone and occupation of the country's parliament.<sup>54</sup> As frustration at the slow pace of reform intensified, weekly protests had coalesced into a sit-in outside the Green Zone gates and culminated in the infiltration of the symbolic seat of political authority in Iraq. This final section is a case study of this contentious performance. It presents the Green Zone infiltration as a defining milestone in the development of the Sadrist repertoire of contention and situates it at the peak of the pro-reform protest movement's escalation strategy.

The protesters had initially welcomed the government's August 2015 announcement of a reform plan<sup>55</sup> that appeared to address their primary demand—the establishment of a cabinet of 'technocrats' to replace ministers appointed on the basis of ethnosectarian quotas, as well as a series of anti-corruption measures—yet identified the need to maintain pressure on the government to ensure that the plan was carried out. Escalation initially took the form of mass attendance at demonstrations: the Sadrist Line's size and mobilising capacity enabled it to bolster the regular Friday pro-reform protests that civil society groups had staged for several years. Six months after the announcement of the al-Abadi reform plan, the escalation of contentious performances was considered an appropriate means for expressing frustration at the slow pace of change and attempting to build greater public pressure for the government to act. In early 2016 when the reform plan encountered political resistance that led to parliamentary paralysis, escalation was manifest in a tactical shift from one-off demonstration in Baghdad's Tahrir Square to a semi-permanent sit-in at the entrance to the Green Zone, the highly protected district housing the government and the diplomatic community that for many Iraqis symbolises the detachment and decadence of the political elite. The sit-in lasted for two weeks and was focused on the finalisation of a list of cabinet appointments. Its purpose was framed as both support for al-Abadi and his reform plan and pressure on other parliamentary actors to cease their opposition to the reform initiative. A deadline was set and al-Sadr stated that, should the deadline pass without a new cabinet being formed, the sit-in would end and a vote of no confidence would take place in the parliament, indicating that the Sadrist Line's parliamentary bloc, *al-Ahrar*, would also contribute to the escalation campaign through formal mechanisms.<sup>56</sup>

The next step in the escalation was a threat by al-Sadr that he would instruct the protesters to enter the Green Zone should a technocratic cabinet not be announced by a deadline.<sup>57</sup> This can be interpreted as an expression of frustration and exhausted patience, given that weekly protests and the subsequent sit-in had yet to compel the parliamentary blocs to reach a compromise in support of reform, and a symbolic demonstration of the protesters' willingness—and ability—to take matters into their own collective hands. When the deadline passed, al-Sadr instead entered the Green Zone himself, receiving a personal welcome from security personnel and pitching a tent where he remained for five days, accompanied by a small group.<sup>58</sup> This stage of the escalation was again deeply symbolic: a single

man, representing the thousands gathered outside, entered the Green Zone with seeming impunity and brought the claims of the protest movement to the physical seat of Iraqi political power. Al-Abadi announced a list of cabinet nominees and thanked al-Sadr and the protesters for their support, and al-Sadr packed up his tent and went home. The sit-in was disassembled.<sup>59</sup>

Within weeks the escalation had recommenced, prompted by the inability of al-Abadi to obtain parliamentary confirmation for the proposed new cabinet. The sit-in resumed and on 30 April 2016 the protesters themselves infiltrated the Green Zone in a dramatic and richly symbolic contentious performance intended, in this analysis, to demonstrate the protesters' commitment, their willingness to risk harm to themselves, and to embarrass a government already in crisis owing to parliamentary deadlock. Sadrist Line activists were pivotal in framing the event through images, videos, and messages shared on social media. Messaging emphasised the nonviolent character of the event and depicted protesters discovering the decadent lifestyle enjoyed by the political elite within the privileged and secure Baghdad district. The protesters presented their claim for genuinely representative government by first 'invading' the Green Zone, a symbol of the US invasion of Iraq, and then 'occupying' their own parliament—complete with selfies and Facebook check-ins—to replace a government seemingly unable to govern in the interests of the nation. Before withdrawing after a 24-hour occupation, activists shared photos of protesters sweeping halls and courtyards, ensuring that they left the parliamentary building in a fit state. These efforts to portray nonviolence and restraint are part of a wider strategy to earn respect from other Iraqis and counter negative perceptions of the Sadrists that are based on the reputation of the Mahdi Army during the peak years of insurgent violence.

The Green Zone infiltration, and the sit-in that preceded it, can be understood as a high point in the escalation of the Sadrist Line contention and claim making. The images projected by the sit-in were, perhaps intentionally, reminiscent of the distinctive tented communities at the heart of many Arab Spring protests, suggesting legitimate democratic aims and a commitment to nonviolence. Occupying the parliament represents a new form of contentious performance, expanding the movement's repertoire of contention beyond the widely recognised set of protest actions typified by street demonstrations and petitions. It also provided a public representation of the movement's commitment to its stated political goals, including the personal bravery required to confront security personnel and climb



atop concrete blast walls, at the risk of detention or violence. The March–April 2016 escalation can also be viewed as a deliberate strategy to test the boundaries of political toleration. Since its instrumental coalition with civil society groups began to formalise in 2015, the Sadrist Line and its partners have debated the effectiveness of the tactics in their repertoire and given lengthy consideration to the most appropriate tactics that might comprise an escalation strategy. The dilemma that the civil-Sadrist coalition faces is how to place pressure on the government through an escalating campaign of nonviolent contentious action without provoking repression or alienating the wider Iraqi public. As tolerated opposition groups, the Sadrist Line and its partners operate within red lines that are determined by the government and, at times, are also subject to criticism and attack by political actors that directly or indirectly operate armed groups. They must therefore make constant assessments of where those red lines are drawn and who is drawing them.

The Green Zone infiltration represented the crossing of a red line—the protesters had pushed up against a boundary of toleration. An attack on the Green Zone, symbolic or actual, represents an unacceptable threat to the political elite and to actors whose interests are protected through preservation of the political status quo. The government, however, was either slow to react, internally split about how to respond, or simply too surprised to act. Outside observers rapidly recognised that a red line had been crossed, characterising the event as a ‘Sadrist blitzkrieg on the Green Zone’<sup>60</sup> carried out by a ‘mob’.<sup>61</sup> An Iraqi political analyst went so far as to suggest that ‘protesters lost their rights when they invaded the parliament and attacked the MPs’.<sup>62</sup> This framing perpetuates a narrative that developed within the international media and grey literature during the US occupation in order to delegitimise and marginalise the Sadrist Line and to neutralise the threat that it was believed to pose to Iraq’s new democratic government. The initial government response to the Green Zone infiltration was to reassert the rule of law by pursuing the prosecution of protesters accused of violence against people or property.

A more fulsome government response was delivered on 20 May 2016 when a subsequent effort was made to infiltrate the Green Zone. Activists explained how they had planned to perform a symbolic funeral inside the Green Zone, simultaneously honouring the victims of a recent terrorist attack in Baghdad’s Sadr City and demanding government accountability for inadequate security. Family members of some of those killed in the bombing were to take part in the ceremony.<sup>63</sup> In anticipation of the event,

the government deployed special anti-riot forces leading to the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and live fire, and a number of fatalities among the protesters,<sup>64</sup> to which some activists responded by equipping themselves with gas masks for future demonstrations.<sup>65</sup> The protest was dispersed before the symbolic funeral could be performed. Internal debates about the costs and benefits of escalation recommenced and during mid-2016 the level of protest activity declined, punctuated by relatively small but regular protests in Tahrir Square on Fridays and by issue-specific civil society mobilisations. When activity resumed in August and September of 2016, the Sadrist Line organised strike action<sup>66</sup> and a petition<sup>67</sup> to demand government action on its reform plan. Repression, it seemed, had reinforced the red lines around civil society contention, reminded the Sadrist Line of the limits of toleration, and compelled the pro-reform protest movement to reconsider its tactics and strategy. Less than a year later, violence was again deployed to reinforce the limits of contention.

By January 2017, months of intra-coalition discussions about the escalation strategy had resulted in agreement that the campaign would be renewed and that the general pro-reform message would be tightened to focus on specific and immediate demands regarding reform of the electoral commission. The pro-reform protest movement depicts the electoral commission as corrupt and as an impediment to genuine political reform; urgent changes are a first step toward allowing new voices to enter the political process. In early February 2017, a series of three mass demonstrations were staged in Baghdad in the space of a week. Sadrist Line participants were mobilised from beyond Baghdad and brought to the capital in buses. The Saturday event involved a gathering at Tahrir Square followed by a march towards the Green Zone and resulted in violence that killed up to ten protesters and a police officer and caused hundreds of injuries.<sup>68</sup> Leveraging the mobilising capability and resources of the Sadrist Line, the protesters rapidly reorganised to hold a symbolic funeral for those killed, the ‘reform martyrs’, the following Tuesday.<sup>69</sup> The central committee issued guidance to those participating—cooperate with security personnel, avoid provocations, carry only the national flag, and honour the memories of those who were killed,<sup>70</sup> which activists subsequently shared on social media, principally Facebook. The funeral proceeded without further violence and photos circulated on social media showing security personnel paying their respects to the deceased. Days later, the movement was back on the streets staging a ‘silent protest’, mouths symbolically taped shut.<sup>71</sup>

The violent reinforcement of the boundaries of toleration—whether by state or non-state actors<sup>72</sup>—prompted a short period in which the protesters de-escalated their contentious performances and avoided actions that might be interpreted as posing a direct physical challenge to the government. Protests did not cease, however, and small gatherings continued to take place every Friday in Baghdad and other cities in the south of the country. In March 2017 a mass demonstration was staged in Baghdad at which al-Sadr spoke of threats to his life and the need for the reform movement to carry on after his death.<sup>73</sup> By May 2017, activists were again discussing an escalation of the regular Friday protests, this time in the form of a sit-in, should the government fail to meet its demands for electoral reform.<sup>74</sup> Pulling and gouging—and its associated risks—remain central to the strategy of the civil-Sadrism instrumental coalition. It is important for the framing of the Sadrism Line's political and social objectives as the movement aims to demonstrate a commitment to a political programme underpinned by shared values and to nonviolence as a means of making claims on the state.

### THE DILEMMA (AND LIMITS) OF TOLERATION

As a tolerated opposition group within a constrained political environment, the Sadrism Line, and by extension its pro-reform coalition of civil society actors, faces a strategic challenge to its aim of influencing the reform of the Iraqi state. Opposition activity is tolerated by the government—and by actors that benefit from the ethnosectarian quota system and associated patronage networks—to the extent that it is not perceived to represent a threat. The Sadrism Line seeks to overcome this challenge through a strategy that involves its collective action frame, which leverages discursive opportunities to achieve mass mobilisation for contentious performances and build its political legitimacy, its instrumental coalition, demonstrating its civil society credentials and supporting the nationalist and social justice themes of its framing, and testing the boundaries of toleration through pulling and gouging. The dilemma of toleration is starkly illustrated by the debate about the escalation strategy. Relatively small Friday protests in Tahrir Square have occurred for many years and can conceivably continue forever. Likewise, while the political system remains closed and efforts at reform are stymied, online discussions and civil society workshops pose no real danger to the status quo and can be tolerated indefinitely.

Yet a deliberate and escalating campaign of contentious performances—drawing on the evolving repertoire developed jointly by the Sadrist Line and its partners—has both the potential to compel government action (as its proponents believe it did in the development of al-Abadi’s reform plan) and, should it venture too close to a red line, provoke state repression or paramilitary violence by another political actor. This dilemma will preoccupy the central committee and activists from all members of the pro-reform coalition for some time, creating tension and disagreement, particularly as the al-Abadi government shifts its focus from the war against the Islamic State group to the war on corruption. The mixed lessons of the Green Zone infiltration for the Sadrist Line and its civil society partners are that instrumental coalitions enable large scale and high profile contentious performances and that these actions risk pushing—and crossing—the red lines of tolerated opposition behaviour.

This chapter has offered a social movement perspective on the Sadrist Line which conceptualises its recent campaign of escalating contentious performances—its ‘pulling and gouging’—as the strategy of a tolerated opposition that intentionally and systematically tests the boundaries of government toleration. The Sadrist Line mobilises Iraqis to participate in contentious performances and make claims on the state by adapting the symbolic elements of its collective action frame to leverage discursive opportunities, concurrently seeking to strengthen its broader appeal by portraying the Sadrist Line as a credible, nonviolent participant in Iraqi civil society. In practical terms, this involves the development of instrumental coalitions with other civil society actors and the broadening of the Sadrist Line’s repertoire of contention to include diverse and collaborative forms of political action. When gentle pulling becomes more vigorous gouging, as it did during the Green Zone infiltration of April 2016, state responses tend to make a corresponding shift from toleration to containment or even repression.

## NOTES

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# Opposition Party Political Dynamics in Egypt from the 2011 Revolution to Sisi

*Vincent Durac*

## INTRODUCTION

Until recently, political parties have been largely ignored in analyses of the politics of the Middle East. Parties were seen as irrelevant to an understanding of political dynamics under authoritarian conditions. The Arab uprisings of 2011 initiated a shift in perceptions, particularly, as electoral politics appeared to have assumed a newfound significance. The uprising in Egypt saw a remarkable transformation in its political dynamics—a formerly controlled political system witnessed a brief flourishing of political parties on a scale unimaginable a few years previously. Political parties, new and old, secular and religious in orientation, entered or re-entered the political arena. Yet, within two years, everything had changed, as secular opposition actors forged an opportunistic alliance with the Egyptian military to unseat the country's first elected president and ultimately put an end to Egypt's experiment with multiparty politics.

This chapter examines the literature on party politics and democratisation before briefly exploring the role played by political parties in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) prior to the uprisings of 2011. This is followed by an account of the background to party political activity

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in Egypt before and after the uprising of 2011. The chapter then analyses shifts in oppositional activity from the unseating of Hosni Mubarak to the overthrow by the military of Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, followed by an examination of the role of opposition parties in the period after the coup of 2013. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the factors that explain opposition party dynamics and the broader implications of this for the prospects for Egypt's political future.

### POLITICAL PARTIES, DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATISATION

As Siavush et al. point out, political parties are a staple of any modern state system, having long been regarded as an essential ingredient of representative parliamentary democracy. In the West, parties were:

The locus of organized political activity for antagonistic elites, and more recently, the middle and working classes, coalescing around the defining political struggles of the day, confessional identities and convergent socio-economic interests.<sup>1</sup>

Ware has defined a political party as 'an institution that (a) seeks influence in a state, often by attempting to occupy positions in government, and (b) usually consists of more than a single interest in society and to some degree attempts to aggregate interests.'<sup>2</sup> No fully fledged democracy exists today without political parties. Parties act as vehicles through which voters are mobilised behind a cause. They aggregate and articulate the interests of citizens and formulate political programmes and are, it is claimed, superior to other institutions in aggregating interests, coordinating decision-making in parliament and ensuring vertical accountability when power is, necessarily, delegated from citizens to their representatives. Furthermore, political parties enable citizens not only to participate but also to hold their elected representatives accountable. In government, party leaders are involved in implementing collective goals for society. Parties function as agents of elite recruitment and socialisation. Finally, parties are often the objects of powerful emotional attachment or antagonism, exerting a strong influence on the opinions and behaviour of their supporters.<sup>3</sup>

Parties play three major roles in the process of democratisation: they reduce the level of uncertainty by negotiating an agreement that defines the rules of the political game and clarifies key issues such as who should

be included in the political process, the role of the military and the nature of the institutions to be created; they help to stabilise democratic transition by channelling street politics into institutionalised patterns; finally, the interaction between parties contributes to the emergence of norms of tolerance and the institutionalisation of democratic rights.<sup>4</sup>

## POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE MENA BEFORE 2011

The MENA has a much longer history of party politics than is generally acknowledged to be the case. After World War I, political parties increasingly became the means of channelling political action, dispensing patronage and giving voice to political demands—functions that had previously been discharged by traditional associations such as guilds, village elders, urban notables and the clergy.<sup>5</sup>

Hinnebusch identifies a number of broad trends in the development of political parties in the region. Firstly, they enabled mass mobilisation against colonial rulers, helping many countries to win independence. Later, in the 1960s, ‘populist-authoritarian’ regimes used single parties to carry out ‘revolution from above’ and to mobilise constituencies against old oligarchies. In the 1980s, with a shift from populist to post-populist forms of authoritarianism pursuing neo-liberal policies, elites turned single parties from instruments of mobilisation to ‘mechanisms of clientelism and demobilization’ in order to contain resistance to neo-liberalism. Then, in the 1990s, regimes sought to use liberalisation of party systems, as part of strategies of authoritarian upgrading, in order to co-opt increasing opposition, both liberal and Islamist.<sup>6</sup> Elections gave regimes the opportunity to ‘legitimise’ their rule and to employ the language of democracy for authoritarian ends. Opposition parties used elections to ‘negotiate the boundaries of political contestation.’<sup>7</sup>

By the late 1990s there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of parties across the region. According to one account, there were some 23 legal political parties in Jordan, 10 in Morocco, 14 in Egypt and over 100 legal and underground parties in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> However, as Hinnebusch points out, for this to lead to democratisation, opposition parties had to become mass organisations, which did not happen.<sup>9</sup> Hamid points out that on the eve of the 2011 uprising, Egypt’s legal political parties had memberships in the mere hundreds or thousands and were derided as ‘cardboard parties’ (*abzab cartoniyā*).<sup>10</sup> In general, political parties in the MENA remained organisationally weak, often functioning as personal vehicles of

political entrepreneurs and dominated by a core that was not really interested in building a party along the lines of citizen representation and interest aggregation. Parties were often top-heavy and undemocratic internally. Indeed, in many countries, ‘the notion of what constitutes a party is very much contested.’<sup>11</sup>

Following the Arab Uprisings of 2011, dramatic changes took place in the party landscape in the MENA. Storm and Cavatorta identify different levels of political party pluralism across the region from ‘moderate pluralism’ (three to five parties) to ‘extreme pluralism’ (six to eight-plus parties).<sup>12</sup> However, in the aftermath of the uprisings, few new sizeable and durable parties emerged. Most new parties were loose political alliances based on local interests and militia or tribal allegiances, which never came close to resembling genuine political parties. The great majority did not last. The reality is that traditionally dominant parties remained the central actors in Arab political systems and these are not necessarily forces for democracy nor do they play the same roles or have the same functions as parties do in the West.<sup>13</sup>

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE STATE IN EGYPT BEFORE 2011

Egypt is home to one of the world’s first legislative assemblies, founded by the Khedive Ismail in 1866. The parliament played an important role in the establishment of state structures, acting in a manner similar to that of many European powers at the time. It also took a leading role in the resistance against British occupation from 1882 until the military coup of 1952.<sup>14</sup> During the period from 1922 to 1952, in particular, the country had a lively and diverse, if sometimes chaotic, experience of party political life. This was far from a democracy—Britain and its ‘client monarchy’ routinely intervened in domestic politics.<sup>15</sup> However, parliament was suspended following the assumption of power by the Free Officers in Egypt in 1952, while in 1953 pre-revolutionary parties were banned. A single party system was adopted and a succession of organisations was created to enjoy a monopoly of legitimate political activity.<sup>16</sup> A limited form of multiparty political system was restored in November 1976 when president Sadat initiated the breakup of the Arab Socialist Union into three ‘platforms’ representing the ideological orientations of left, right and centre. Under these reforms, the previously dominant Arab Socialist Union was replaced by three new parties: the centrist Arab Socialist Egypt Party (subsequently the National Democratic Party [NDP]), the leftist Unionist

(Tagammu) Party and, on the right, the Liberal (Ahrar) Party.<sup>17</sup> Later on, the establishment of three more opposition parties was permitted: the New Wafd Party, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the Umma Party. The New Wafd represented the liberal right, the SLP represented an alliance between certain leftists and Islamists and the Umma Party was an Islamist party. However, the last two by no means represented all of the diverse Islamic trends in Egypt. The SLP was constantly torn between its socialist and Islamist wings, while the Umma Party, dominated by a single family, was unable to mobilise other elements in the Islamic movement.<sup>18</sup> Despite this apparent political liberalisation, the freedom to form political parties and societies remained severely restricted by law. Some constituencies, notably the communists, and the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, were expressly forbidden to form parties and were subjected to harassment, in various forms, by state security courts, emergency courts and military courts.

The most significant restrictions on the right to form political parties were set out in the 1977 Law Number 40 on Political Parties. This affirmed that Egyptians had the right to form political parties and that every Egyptian had the right to be a member of a political party, but then imposed a number of limitations on party formation. The first of these was the requirement that parties should have a specific programme distinguishable from that of other parties. On the basis of this provision, a number of parties were initially denied recognition and had to resort to the courts to gain official recognition. Furthermore, no party could be formed on a class, religious or geographical basis. This has served as the justification for rejecting any attempt by the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood to establish a party. Under Law 40, the Political Parties Committee (PPC) had the power to approve or reject the formation of a new political party. This committee included the Ministers of Justice and the Interior as well as a number of judges. It owed its loyalty to the executive. Therefore the formation of new parties effectively took place at the discretion of the government.<sup>19</sup>

The first multiparty elections of the Mubarak era took place in 1984 and were notable for an alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood, which remained a proscribed organisation, and the Wafd party. The Wafd won 42 seats and the Brotherhood 8, while the ruling NDP won an 87 per cent majority (394 seats).<sup>20</sup> Opposition representation in parliament rose to 20 per cent in elections held in 1987 as Mubarak began to adopt the language of democratic reform. The parliamentary elections of 1990, which were

triggered by the early dissolution of parliament following a court ruling that the 1987 elections were unconstitutional, were boycotted by most opposition parties. This resulted in an overwhelming victory for the NDP and independents affiliated with it. The next elections, in 1995, were marked by widespread violence and fraud, with the ruling party winning a record 94 per cent of seats in parliament. However, an unexpected judicial decision, that elections should be supervised by judges, reintroduced meaningful political contestation to elections held in 2000.<sup>21</sup> Two-thirds of incumbents were defeated and only 172 (39 per cent) of the NDP's official candidates were elected. However, the effect of this was mitigated by the fact that another 181 successful candidates were NDP members who ran as 'independents,' having failed to secure an official nomination. These independents subsequently rejoined the party. Thus, the NDP secured 88 per cent of seats in parliament overall. While the elections embarrassed the ruling party, in Brownlee's words, they 'disgraced the official opposition.' The Liberal, Nasserist, National Gatherine and Wafd parties ran 352 candidates but won only 16 seats, the same number as the Muslim Brotherhood, which ran just 63 candidates. The 2005 elections saw an even greater level of success for the Brotherhood, which won 88 seats in parliament. Secular parties lost seats while more than half of the NDP candidates were defeated. However, the government majority in parliament was saved, once more, by former party members who, having successfully run as independents, returned to the party fold.<sup>22</sup> The last elections held before the 2011 uprising saw the restoration of NDP dominance as regime manipulation and fraud resulted in Muslim Brotherhood representation in parliament reduced to 1 seat while the NDP won 420 of 514 seats.

By late 2010, there were approximately 20 officially licenced parties in Egypt. However, opposition parties were weak and inefficient and lacking legitimacy, not least because of their ambiguous relationship with the regime. Collombier suggests that pre-2011 opposition parties could be classified into three categories, according to their level of dependence on the regime. The first included small parties that had been granted a licence by the PPC, but most of which existed on paper only, unknown to most Egyptians, lacking members or resources and without political influence. These parties did however enjoy certain privileges and could access parliament in return for their willingness 'to play the game.' A second category was made up of parties that had been deprived of an official licence (such as Dignity, Tomorrow and the Democratic Front) and were therefore

excluded from the political game, but which could rely on their own resources, such as private funding, activists or notoriety. The third category included parties (such as Wafd and Tagammu) that were licensed (and hence part of the system) and could rely on their own resources and support network, but which were also partly dependent on the regime to the extent that it could withdraw their licence and controlled access to parliament.<sup>23</sup>

### POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE STATE AFTER 2011

The resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February left a political vacuum which was quickly filled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Roll argues that while it is unlikely that the SCAF had a ‘master plan’ to resolve the challenges of Egypt’s political transformation, it is even more unlikely that the generals had not systematically analysed the challenges that lay ahead. What is clear is that the SCAF assumed a central role in shaping the transition from the earliest point, opting to work in the first instance with the existing constitution by amending just nine articles through an appointed technical committee which met in closed sessions.<sup>24</sup> The revised constitution was given popular approval in a referendum on 19 March 2011. The interim constitution provided that the president or half of all members of parliament could call for the drafting of a new constitution. However, within 11 days of the referendum, the SCAF issued a constitutional declaration in which it assumed all legislative power until a new parliament was elected.<sup>25</sup> On 28 March, the SCAF amended the Political Parties Law 50 of 1977. Under the amended law, membership of the Political Parties Committee was now limited to independent members of the judiciary where previously it had been dominated by members of the NDP. Furthermore, the power of the committee to refuse the establishment of a new party was restricted and the committee could only object to the formation of a new party by raising the matter with the Supreme Administrative Court. Political parties could be established 30 days after sending their notice to the committee if there was no objection.<sup>26</sup> More than 80 new parties were created although most of these failed to make any serious political impact. Despite these changes, the SCAF left much of the electoral system intact. It retained the rule that reserved half the seats in the lower house for workers and farmers which dated back to the Nasser era. It also retained the priority accorded to independent candidates—a declaration on 30 May 2011 provided that

one-third of deputies should be elected from party or group lists while the remaining two-thirds should be independent candidates. This provision was later amended so that the ratio was reversed to allow for two-thirds of candidates to be elected from party lists and the remaining one-third from those running as independents.<sup>27</sup>

The first fully democratic elections to be held in Egypt took place over three rounds between 28 November 2011 and 10 January 2012. Despite the proliferation of parties, a number of significant blocs developed. Two weeks after Mubarak's resignation, the Muslim Brotherhood had announced the formation of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). In advance of the elections, the Brotherhood announced that it would compete in a plurality but not a majority of seats in order to allay fears of Islamist electoral domination. It also promoted the formation of the Democratic Alliance, an electoral coalition of pro-revolutionary parties that would run under a single national electoral list and aim to produce a 'national revolutionary majority.'<sup>28</sup> The Democratic Alliance initially included the Wafd Party, the Nasserist Dignity (Karama) Party, the Tomorrow of the Revolution Party (Ghad al-Thawra) as well as several smaller Islamist parties. However, differences emerged between the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood regarding the number of seats each would contest and the role of religion in the electoral platform of the alliance. This led to the withdrawal of the Wafd, which opted to run its candidates independently.<sup>29</sup> Many other parties joined one of three other electoral alliances, two of which were grouped around one core party. These were the Islamist Alliance, with the Salafi Light (Al-Nour) party at its centre; the Egyptian Bloc which included most liberal parties such as the Free Egyptians Party and the leftist Tagammu; and The Revolution Continues (al-Thawra Mustamira), a rather loose assembly of revolutionary parties and initiatives.<sup>30</sup>

The FJP-led Democratic Alliance won the election with 37.5 per cent of the vote, winning 235 seats out of the total of 508. The surprise of the election was the performance of the Salafi-led Islamist Bloc which won 27.8 per cent of the vote and 123 seats. The Wafd was the most successful non-Islamist party, winning 41 seats with just 9.2 per cent of the vote, followed by the Egyptian Bloc with 34 seats and 8.9 per cent of the vote. The Revolution Continues won a mere 2.9 per cent of the vote and nine seats. The Muslim Brotherhood's FJP and the Salafi parties dominated the new parliament as political and religious polarisation deepened in the post-revolutionary setting. To begin with, the Wafd Party adopted a cooperative

approach towards the Islamists in a strategy that drew on the party's experience of the Mubarak era. The Islamists appeared to have the blessing of the military establishment and the Wafd accommodated itself to the new political reality as it had done in the past.<sup>31</sup> However, other secular parties were disinclined to collaborate with the Islamists and adopted an oppositional stance in parliament.

Polarisation between Islamist and secular parties deepened with a series of initiatives on the part of the FJP, which raised concern that the Muslim Brotherhood was pursuing the broad objective of Islamification in Egypt. The interim constitution that had been adopted in early 2011 stipulated that parliament should form a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. The Muslim Brotherhood members of parliament reached out initially to secular politicians to agree on the details of the assembly. However, differences emerged on the allocation of seats and no agreement was reached. The Assembly was formed with an Islamist majority and a very small minority of secular MPs who withdrew from the process. In April 2012, the assembly was struck down by an administrative court. A second Constituent Assembly was formed with greater levels of secular representation from inside and outside parliament as well as representation from Islamic and Christian religious institutions. Nevertheless, trust between Islamist and secular parties was undermined.<sup>32</sup>

A second major factor in secular-Islamist polarisation was the announcement by the Muslim Brotherhood in the spring of 2012 that it would field a candidate in the June presidential elections. This was in breach of an undertaking given several times in 2011 that the Brotherhood would not seek to monopolise both legislative and executive branches of government. The decision not only shocked secular parties, it alarmed the military establishment, and the relationship between the military and the Brotherhood became more antagonistic. The SCAF relied more and more on the judiciary in its efforts to shape the transitional process. First, several presidential candidates were disqualified by the Supreme Presidential Electoral Commission, a body of judges appointed by the SCAF. These included Khairat al-Shater, a prominent Muslim Brother, forcing the organisation to back the much less well-known Mohammed Morsi. Then on 14 June, two days before the second, and decisive, round of voting in the presidential elections, the Supreme Constitutional Court announced that the law regulating the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections was unconstitutional. The lower house of parliament was dissolved only six months into its session. Legislative duties were now taken over by the Shura



Council but far-reaching powers remained with the SCAF. The Shura Council suffered from low levels of legitimacy, not least because only 12 per cent of eligible voters had participated in its elections. As a result of these changes, legislative functions were all but frozen.<sup>33</sup>

These events were followed by three initiatives that further alienated secular opinion. In August 2012, Morsi replaced the serving Minister of Defence and the army Chief of Staff, Field-Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and Lieutenant General Sami Hafez Anan, respectively, with generals Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Sedki Sobhy. The move received some support from young revolutionaries who saw it as part of a process of holding the old army leadership to account. However, Sisi was widely viewed as close to the Muslim Brotherhood and most secular parties saw the move as an attempt to extend Islamist control over the military. Later, in November, Morsi issued a constitutional declaration that effectively put him above the law. The decree granted Morsi the power to issue any decision of law without any alternative authority having the power to oppose or revoke it. It also granted him the right to use ‘all necessary procedures and measures’ to confront ‘a danger threatening the January 25 revolution.’<sup>34</sup> The next day the National Salvation Front (NSF) was established by a group of prominent secular leaders including Mohammed El Baradei, the veteran diplomat and founder of the Constitution Party, and Amr Moussa, former secretary-general of the Arab League. The NSF brought together a wide range of non-Islamist parties, including the Wafd, Unionist, Free Egyptians, Social Democrats, Democratic Front and others. It organised rallies in Cairo and Alexandria demanding that Morsi rescind the constitutional declaration and launch a national dialogue. Morsi repealed some elements of the declaration and annulled the immunity of presidential decrees and decisions. However, the episode led to accusations of dictatorial intent on Morsi’s part.<sup>35</sup>

The newly formed NSF led opposition to the constitution that was now being proposed by the Muslim Brotherhood. A second Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution had been formed. However, deepening Islamist-secularist polarisation and especially the increased influence of Salafis on the draft constitution led to the resignation of secular representatives as well as those of the Egyptian churches. Despite this, the Brotherhood pushed the draft through the Constituent Assembly and the new constitution was approved in a referendum held in December 2012 with 63.8 per cent of those voting in favour.<sup>36</sup> In the months that followed, Islamist offers of consultation and dialogue were rejected by almost

all NSF politicians, some of whom began to advocate military intervention to remove Morsi.

The establishment of the NSF was followed by the launch of the Tamarrod (Rebellion) movement in downtown Cairo in May 2013. Tamarrod aimed to force Morsi from power and had the support of elite figures from the Mubarak era, including the Egyptian billionaire, Neguib Sawaris. Indeed, Roll cites reports that the mass mobilisation had the support of state institutions—first and foremost the Ministry of the Interior and the General Intelligence Service.<sup>37</sup> Tamarrod aimed to collect 15 million signatures on a petition that demanded early presidential elections—more than the number of votes cast for Morsi in the second round of the presidential election of 2012. However, while the organisers of the petition claimed to have reached that target, there is no way independently to verify the claim. Both Tamarrod's leadership and Egyptian state officials claimed that up to 17 million people protested against the Morsi regime on 30 June. Others propose much lower figures closer to one million, while hundreds of thousands of Morsi supporters mobilised also.<sup>38</sup> On 3 July 2013, the SCAF intervened, as Defence Minister Sisi announced the resignation of Morsi and the suspension of the 2012 constitution on state television. The head of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, was appointed interim president. Shortly afterwards, Mohamed ElBaradei became Vice President.

The military coup which removed Morsi from power ended Egypt's short-lived and highly uneven experiment with multiparty politics. In turn, the coup inaugurated a new authoritarian phase in the country's political life. Morsi's detention provoked protests by his supporters. At one of these on 8 July 2013, 51 people were killed in the early hours of the morning. On 27 July, another 65 Muslim Brotherhood protesters were shot and killed on the fringes of a sit-in protest at a Cairo mosque demanding Morsi's release. The anti-Muslim Brotherhood violence culminated on the morning of 14 August when the security forces attacked a large pro-Morsi sit-in at Rabaa Square in Cairo. Between 800 and 1000 people were killed in what has been described as 'one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history.'<sup>39</sup> This was followed by a major clampdown on the Brotherhood as national, governorate and district leaders were arrested.<sup>40</sup> Tens of thousands of Islamists and non-Islamists were arrested as the security forces cracked down on any sign of resistance, opposition or criticism.<sup>41</sup>

In the aftermath of the coup, the military drew on the support of secular, particularly, leftist political leaders. Indeed, Sisi announced the removal of Morsi during a press conference attended by Christian and Muslim religious leaders and by the most prominent figure in the NSF, Mohamed El Baradei. In Dunne and Hamzawy's phrase: 'secular approval of the coup and betrayal of democratic principles could no longer be doubted.'<sup>42</sup> The new Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi was a member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party and appointed ministers from a similar background—the new Labour minister was a Nasserist leader of independent trade unions, the minister of Social Solidarity was also a strong union supporter. However, the new left-leaning government failed to resolve long-standing labour unrest and ultimately resigned to be replaced by a cabinet of technocrats and liberals.<sup>43</sup>

The interim government established a committee of 50 members of parliament (MPs) to draft a new constitution that was passed by referendum in January 2014 by 98.1 per cent on a turnout of 38.4 per cent. The new constitution provided for a unicameral parliament with a minimum of 450 members, which could be dissolved immediately after election, and granted the president the power to do so without restriction. This is in contrast with its 2012 predecessor which provided that parliament could not be dissolved within the first year of its existence. Similarly, restrictions in the 2012 constitution on the power of the Supreme Constitutional Court to dissolve parliament on procedural grounds were removed from the 2014 document. The most significant change in the new constitution was the dissolution of the upper house of parliament—the Shura Council. In June 2014 the electoral law was revised. This dramatically increased the representation of independent, as opposed to party candidates, in parliament, stipulating that the unicameral parliament should consist of 567 seats, 420 of which should be held by independent candidates elected in a first-past-the-post vote. The president was granted the right to appoint another 27 members, while 120 were to come from closed party lists. In a further revision of the law in March 2015, the number of independent candidates was increased to 448, with the state president appointing 28 deputies. As a result, parliament would now have 596 members—79.9 per cent of them independents.<sup>44</sup>

Presidential elections were held in May 2014 in which Sisi won an overwhelming 95 per cent of the vote. By comparison, Hosni Mubarak had won 88.6 per cent of the vote in the first competitive presidential elections held in Egypt in 2005. Parliamentary elections were held the following

year. Dunne and Hamzawy identify three broad types of parties in the aftermath of the 2013 coup—new parties supporting the state, parties attempting to preserve some independence and parties opposed to the state. The first group includes parties established since the coup, which, essentially, offer blind support to the state. Since Sisi chose not to establish a political party to replace the NDP, many of the new parties have links to former NDP members and their allies. Parties such as Nation’s Future (Mustaqbal Watan), We are the People (Ehna al-Sha’b) and Egypt My Homeland (Masr Belady) echo regime rhetoric and offer no meaningful competition. A second group includes Wafd, the Social Democrats and Free Egypt. These have opted to collaborate with the military to secure their positions in the legislative and executive branches of government and attempt to carve out space for some degree of independent activism at the margins of military control. The third group of secular parties, which includes the Constitution, Dignity, Strong Egypt, Bread and Freedom parties and the Popular Alliance, has taken an oppositional stance towards military control of political life and is openly critical of Sisi and his government.<sup>45</sup>

Parliamentary elections were held in two stages from 17 October to 2 December 2015. Pro-regime parties were the clear winners. The Free Egyptians won 65 seats, the Nation’s Future won 53 seats and Wafd won 35. Smaller pro-regime parties also won seats with 12 for the Congress party, 4 for the Social Democrats and 1 for the Unionist party. The Salafi Nur party had assisted the military establishment in preparing for the coup and supported Sisi’s candidacy for the presidency in 2014. However, it won only 11 of the ‘independent’ seats after a campaign to discredit the party.<sup>46</sup>

### EGYPT’S OPPOSITION PARTIES SINCE 2011: AN APPRAISAL

By 2016, Egypt’s experiment with a return to multiparty politics had been reduced to little more than a travesty. While some smaller parties voiced opposition to regime excesses, its sweeping majority in parliament ensured that parties are largely marginalised and many Egyptians have lost trust in parties and party politics once more. The demise of the multiparty system and the consequent marginalisation of opposition politics in Egypt are attributable to a number of factors. These have to do, firstly, with the nature of political parties, old and new, in Egypt and, in particular, divisions between Islamist and secular parties as well as within the secular

sector. The weakness of the political parties and their tendency towards fragmentation rendered them vulnerable to manipulation by a powerful military that had positioned itself both as guardians of the 2011 revolution and as stewards of the political transition that followed. However, the restoration of military power in Egypt, the marginalisation of opposition parties and the ultimate failure of the 2011 revolution are also due to the impact of external actors whose role in underpinning the restoration of military power was also crucial.

### *The Weakness of Secular Political Parties*

Prior to 2011, secular opposition parties were handicapped by the restrictions imposed on them by the authorities and by their own organisational inefficiencies. Many had been established late in the Mubarak era. By 2010, more than 20 parties, most non-Islamist, had appeared. Although the law banned only religious parties, secular parties encountered restrictions when they attempted to register, and even registered parties were unable to organise and campaign freely.<sup>47</sup> Unlike Islamist parties, they did not enjoy resources associated with religious institutions; unlike parties affiliated to the state, they did not enjoy access to state-owned facilities or the capacity to mobilise bureaucrats.<sup>48</sup> They were also tainted by their ambiguous relationship to the regime, which contributed to their perceived lack of legitimacy and the view that they were not only part of the regime but played a role in its durability.<sup>49</sup>

After Mubarak's resignation, the SCAF introduced changes to the law which eased restrictions on the establishment of political parties on 28 March 2011. However, elections were then scheduled for November and December 2011, giving new parties very limited time in which to attract potential members, develop and agree on organisational structures, create a political platform, define an electoral strategy, select candidates and campaign. These were huge challenges for groups that had in many cases just come into existence. Few non-Islamist parties managed to develop significantly in such a context.<sup>50</sup>

Some within the opposition eschewed the option of party formation altogether. Some elements in the youth movements that were at the heart of the uprising rejected party politics outright, although others criticised this stance as counterproductive. However, the revolutionary spectrum became increasingly fragmented, 'a myriad of tiny—often radicalized groups' with neither leadership nor organisational structures.<sup>51</sup>

In organisational terms, the youth groups that had led the protests in January 2011 were small in size, relatively new, had little or no political experience, were scattered across many independent organisations and had weak links with social strata beyond the middle-class. Beyond the organisational level, they lacked resources in terms of leadership at the national level and funding.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, while many Egyptian opposition parties called for democratic reform in the country, they faced the charge of being themselves undemocratic in orientation and internal organisation. This is a characterisation that long predates the 2011 uprising. Boduszyński et al. argue that secular parties have never been ‘democratic champions’ in Egypt. From its foundation in 1919, the oldest Egyptian party, the Wafd, was liberal in terms of its secularism and opposition to British colonial control. But it was also a party of Cairo-based elites and not a democratic organisation with a broad based membership. When Sadat reintroduced multiparty politics, the restored parties were essentially part of a ‘window dressing’ scheme by the regime. In the Mubarak era, secular parties vied with each other and with Muslim Brotherhood candidates running as independents for minimal parliamentary representation. However, their ageing leaders and ‘decaying structures’ held little appeal for younger Egyptians. Most remained Cairo-based groups of older men willing to strike deals with the regime in exchange for very limited parliamentary representation, and were seen as no more than a fig-leaf for rigged elections. Following the fall of Mubarak, older opposition parties missed the opportunity to strengthen their organisations and expand their reach. As a result, secular parties like Wafd did poorly in the elections of 2011–2012 while Islamists won 75 per cent of the seats.<sup>53</sup> The willingness of secular parties to support the 2013 coup and the post-coup political order underpins the challenge to their democratic credentials.

### *Secular-Islamist Polarisation*

The weakness of the country’s political parties in early 2011 placed the Muslim Brotherhood in an advantageous position. However, over the course of the following two years, the organisation made a series of strategic miscalculations that alienated former allies in the 2011 revolutionary coalition, invited the hostility of Egypt’s powerful security apparatus and ultimately paved the way for the undoing of any prospect of democratic transition in the country.

After Mubarak's resignation, the Brotherhood emerged as the key player in Egypt's emerging political order. In turn, it persistently sought to consolidate its gains, driven by an instinct for power fuelled by the vacuum left in Mubarak's wake and reinforced by the weakness of other political parties and the fragmentation of the youth movements. In doing so, the Brotherhood failed to adapt to the rapidly changing environment. Its innate conservatism drove it to deal and bargain with the 'deep state' through traditional channels such as the military and the Ministry of the Interior rather than by accommodating and allying with the young revolutionaries and activists who initiated the uprising. It also alienated others with which it cooperated during the uprising—liberals, leftists and secularists—by allying with Salafis and former jihadis.<sup>54</sup>

Conflict over the membership of the Constituent Assembly that was to draft a new constitution, the stance of the Brotherhood in relation to the 2012 constitution and its breach of a promise not to run a candidate in the first democratic presidential elections held in Egypt all contributed to the undermining of trust between Islamist and secular parties and increased polarisation in the country. Morsi's constitutional declaration of November 2012 deepened non-Islamist suspicion regarding the movement's intentions and further alienated secular opposition parties, which having failed to win significant support at the ballot box, moved closer to the military in calling for intervention to overthrow Morsi and his government.

Increasing Islamist-secular polarisation was manifest throughout the period before the 2013 coup. By the time Morsi became president, most secular parties refused to collaborate with his government. The Wafd, Free Egyptians and Unionist parties lent their support to the dissolution of the lower chamber of parliament by the SCAF and to its subsequent constitutional declaration in which it positioned itself as the guardian of the constitutional order. Finally, secular alienation from Morsi and the Brotherhood led to active support for the military overthrow of Egypt's first, and so far, only, democratically elected president.

### *Divisions Within the Secular Party Spectrum*

Crucial as polarisation between Islamist and secular parties was to the fate of Egypt's democratic experiment, it was not the only expression of the weakness of the country's political parties. Ideological and strategic divisions characterised the secular spectrum of parties both before and after the coup, thus limiting their capacity to act as effective counterweight either to increasing Islamist influence before July 2013 or to the power of

the security apparatus after military intervention. In the run up to the elections of 2011–2012, the best organised and resourced secular party, Wafd, initially sought to ally with the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated FJP before contesting the elections on its own. Other secular parties effectively split into two blocs. The Egyptian Bloc emerged as an anti-Muslim Brotherhood electoral coalition, increasingly identifying with Egypt's Coptic Christian community, while The Revolution Continues, consisting of mostly newly established parties, sought to avoid religious polarisation but was widely perceived as comprising small, idealistic parties that were not electable.<sup>55</sup> The divisions among secular opposition parties continued up to the 2012 presidential elections as different parties supported a variety of candidates other than Morsi. Secular fragmentation led to a heavy loss for secular candidates in the first round of voting and produced a second round choice between Morsi and Mubarak's former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik for the Egyptian electorate.

### *The Role of the Military*

The combination of the structural weakness of opposition parties and ideological and strategic divisions across the party sector facilitated both the assumption of stewardship of the post-Mubarak transition by Egypt's security apparatus and its re-establishment of control over the political system from July 2013 onwards. After Mubarak's departure, the SCAF, led by Field Marshall Hussein al-Tantawi took control of the country and promised a quick transition to civilian rule. Rather than cracking down on the protest movement of 2011, they succeeded in positioning themselves as guardians of the revolution and therefore as the managers of political change. It is worth noting, however, that hundreds of people were killed and thousands injured during the 17 months of SCAF rule.<sup>56</sup> Initially, SCAF entered into a marriage of convenience with the Muslim Brotherhood, which granted the military a semi-autonomous status in the constitution they hastily drafted and passed by popular vote in 2012. In doing so, the military did not merely preserve the established ruling system in the period since 2011—rather a new power configuration emerged that was even more favourable to the military than was the case under Mubarak. The military expanded its control over the country's core elite and reversed the loss of influence that it suffered during the Mubarak era. The military's status as a 'state within a state' was enshrined in both the 2012 and 2014 constitutions, reflecting its dominance not only over the political opposition but over other members of the elite and, finally, when



the military came to see the Brotherhood as a threat to national security, prompting its overthrow.<sup>57</sup>

In the post-coup period, regime repression has reached a level without parallel since the Nasser era. By 2014, more than 40,000 Egyptians had been imprisoned, the majority of them members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is twice as many as were imprisoned by Nasser in his 1954 purge of the organisation.<sup>58</sup> By 2016, estimates of the numbers of those detained and imprisoned were as high as 60,000.<sup>59</sup> There have been 7400 military trials of civilians, while in the 12 month period between August 2015 and August 2016, there were 912 enforced ‘disappearances.’<sup>60</sup> According to local human rights organisations, 326 extrajudicial killings were carried out by the security and intelligence services in 2015—a number that rose to 754 cases in the first half of 2016 alone.<sup>61</sup>

However, repression of opposition is not the only tool adopted by the security apparatus to secure political control. The Sisi regime has enacted a set of new laws that constrain the political arena and limit the potential for opposition, in a stratagem characterised by Hamzawy as ‘legislating authoritarianism.’ A 2016 amendment to the Protest Law gives the security forces the right to prohibit, cancel, postpone or move a demonstration based on undefined security threats; bans any activities that are ‘disturbing the peace’; and outlaws peaceful rallies, strikes and sit-ins that could damage state-owned means of production or individual businesses. The 2015 law on terrorism systematically ‘conflates crimes committed by violent groups with citizens and non-governmental organisation (NGO) activities when their use of freedom of expression and association collide with official policies.’ A September 2014 amendment to the Penal Code criminalises, without definition, individual and organisational acts of hostility, acts that could harm the nation’s interest and acts that breach public peace and order and criminalises the receipt of funds, equipment and ‘other things’ if there is intent to harm the country’s security.<sup>62</sup>

### *External Support*

The success of the security apparatus in restoring its control was crucially dependent on the support of external players. As Bellin has pointed out, the ‘robustness’ of the coercive apparatus is directly linked to fiscal health and the successful maintenance of international support networks.<sup>63</sup> In the case of Egypt after 2013, these two factors are interlinked since the fiscal health of the coercive apparatus is directly linked to external support. In

the aftermath of the coup, the new regime is reported to have received up to US \$20 billion from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Not only were the Saudis the first to back the coup, it was widely rumoured that Saudi intelligence provided funding and support for efforts to bring down Morsi's government, and encouraged popular opposition to his rule.<sup>64</sup> For the US, the military takeover presented a dilemma. After Mubarak's resignation it sought to follow a policy based on the espousal of democratic values. However, this clashed with its security interests. Faced with this choice, the Obama administration opted for ambiguity. US law required the suspension of aid to Egypt if it determined that a coup had taken place. However, there was no legal obligation to make such a determination so none was made. The US did suspend joint military manoeuvres scheduled for September 2013 and halted the transfer of US \$260 million in cash assistance. However, by 2014 military and civilian aid had been restored as security concerns trumped commitment to democratic norms.<sup>65</sup> The response of the European Union (EU) to the coup was similarly ambiguous, at best. While Catherine Ashton issued a statement calling for a rapid 'return to the democratic process ... so as to permit the country to resume and complete its democratic transition,' at no point did the statement explicitly refer to the military coup that deposed Morsi nor did it call for his restoration to office. Above all, there was no reference to any possible consequence in terms of Egypt's relations with the EU following the military overthrow of Egypt's first democratically elected president.<sup>66</sup> As Springborg notes, almost all significant actors have chosen to ignore the military's human rights violations and contempt for democratisation.

Many have increased their assistance to the military while reducing their support for Egyptian civil society and for broader democratization and good governance. Each has its own strategic interests and calculations which they believe will be better served by a 'strong' military rather than 'weak' civilian government in Egypt.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The post-Mubarak transitional period in Egypt saw the re-emergence of multiparty politics and the flourishing of political pluralism for a short period. However, the period between the fall of the old regime and the restoration of military control was too brief to allow Egypt's political parties

to overcome crucial challenges. Some of these, such as the weakness of secular parties and the mistrust between secularists and Islamists pre-existed the 2011 uprising. Others emerged during the transition—the challenge for new political actors to mobilise and stake a claim in the new political environment that was developing. All of this was rendered even more problematic by the fact that the very weakness of opposition political actors facilitated the security apparatus in taking control of the transitional process.

When the relative strength of the Muslim Brotherhood and the organisation's quest for power drew it to engage with the security apparatus, polarisation between the secular and Islamist elements in Egypt's political arena deepened. When the miscalculations of the Brotherhood prompted the security apparatus to intervene, the Islamists had few friends in Egyptian political life. However, in making their own compromise with the security apparatus and assisting the coming to power of a new regime that is repressive of political opposition, intolerant of dissent and buoyed by the support of crucial external actors, Egypt's secular parties played a key role in rendering multiparty politics superfluous in the country for the foreseeable future.

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# The Rise and Fall of Bahrain's Al-Wefaq Society: De-democratisation and Crackdown in a Troubled Gulf State

*Kylie Moore-Gilbert*

In the seven years following the eruption of Arab Spring-inspired pro-democracy protests, Bahrain's government has set itself on course to roll back the much-lauded political freedoms it had introduced a decade prior and retreat instead into authoritarianism. Hardliners within the Al Khalifa monarchy and their backers in neighbouring Saudi Arabia had long viewed liberalising reforms introduced by King Hamad in 2001 as a step too far and blamed the narrative of democratisation promoted by the monarchy's moderate wing for creating space for the emergence of Bahrain's Arab Spring-inspired protest movement in 2011.<sup>1</sup> Bahrain's largest opposition political society al-Wefaq, which had formed in response to King Hamad's reform programme, was unable to prevent many in the protest movement from escalating their demands, which quickly shifted from calling for revisions to the constitution and electoral reform to demanding the overthrow of the monarchy itself. This implicit threat to the survival of the Al Khalifa, and monarchical stability in the Gulf more broadly, ultimately strengthened hardliners at the expense of moderates and precipitated a Saudi-led military intervention, which ultimately quashed Bahrain's attempted revolution.<sup>2</sup>

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In the post-Arab Spring period, Bahrain's government has sought to consolidate its grip on power by reasserting control over the restive, Shi'a-dominated parts of Bahrain that saw the most civil unrest, and promoting itself on the world stage as a moderate Western ally, and a safe and progressive financial hub for international business. Its success in both regards has been mixed. Many Shi'a-majority neighbourhoods and villages continued to stage illegal protests at the time of writing, with groups of masked youths regularly engaging in violent clashes with security forces. The government has pursued a military solution to what is essentially a political crisis, and a fresh crackdown from mid-2016 has seen entire villages forced into lockdown, with hundreds arrested including prominent politicians, clerics and human rights activists.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on Tilly and Tarrow's 'hybrid regime' model,<sup>4</sup> this chapter examines the cycle of contention that began with Bahrain's decade of political liberalisation prior to the 2011 uprising and ended with measures to dissolve Bahrain's last remaining legal political societies in 2017. In seeking to explain why Bahrain has abandoned its much-heralded reform process in favour of a return to authoritarianism, this chapter examines the fate of the al-Wefaq Society, Bahrain's largest legal opposition group and the most popular political organisation within the country's Shi'a community.<sup>5</sup> It begins with an overview of King Hamad's 2001 political reforms and discusses al-Wefaq's participation in parliament prior to Bahrain's Arab Spring-inspired uprising. In examining the regime's post-2011 crackdown on moderate, 'tolerated' opposition groups such as al-Wefaq, this chapter asserts that Bahrain's liberalising reforms were never intended to situate the country on a path to democratisation and rather should be viewed as an attempt to secure the Al Khalifa's grip on power. This chapter argues that the reforms' failure to inoculate the regime against Arab Spring-inspired unrest led to their abandonment in favour of tried-and-tested authoritarian strategies such as repression and military intervention.

### THE NATIONAL ACTION CHARTER REFORMS: DEMOCRATISATION OR SELF-PRESERVATION?

Following his ascent to the throne in 1999, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa sought to depict himself as an open-minded and progressive ruler, who along with the then Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (r.1995–2013) represented a new generation of Gulf monarchs who

valued consultation and dialogue. Bahrain had experienced a prolonged period of civil unrest in the 1990s, known as the *Intifada*, and King Hamad adopted a more conciliatory approach to that of his father by seeking to engage with some of the more moderate, largely Shi'a opposition groups that were involved in the unrest. This engagement led the government to soften its stance on some of the opposition's demands, including permitting the return of political exiles and releasing political prisoners.<sup>6</sup> This new spirit of consultation led to the development of a package of reforms called the National Action Charter (*Mithāq al-ʿAmal al-Waṭanī* or NAC), which was endorsed by the public in a referendum held in 2001, with 98.4 per cent voting in favour.<sup>7</sup> The NAC provided for the creation of a bicameral legislature with an elected Council of Representatives (*Majlis al-Nuwāb*) and an appointed Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shūrā*), removed some restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly and allowed for the development of legal civil society organisations. As Bahrain had experienced neither elections nor a functioning parliament since 1975, the reforms were cautiously welcomed by most opposition groups.

Sadiki characterises the Middle East from the late-1990s as being captured by 'election fetishism,'<sup>8</sup> wherein hitherto-authoritarian regimes, aware of US efforts at democracy promotion in the region, adopted a 'veneer of democracy without having to be democratic.'<sup>9</sup> Bahrain's NAC reforms mirror the efforts of other Arab states, which had introduced parliamentary elections and lessened restrictions on opposition and civil society bodies but were unwilling to engage in a meaningful redistribution of power, which remained in the hands of unelected executives. This was borne out in the year following the NAC referendum, when the King unexpectedly promulgated a new constitution, which had been drafted without opposition input or consultation. Reneging on previous assurances that the unelected Consultative Council would serve in an advisory capacity, with legislative powers vested in the elected Council of Representatives, the new constitution granted the President of the Consultative Council the deciding vote in cases of legislative deadlock. In addition, the constitution declared Bahrain to be a Kingdom, rather than an Emirate, and preserved the King's powers to veto legislation and appoint ministers by decree.<sup>10</sup>

Bahrain's controversial 2002 constitution, the centrepiece of King Hamad's efforts to remodel the country, revealed the NAC's liberalising reforms to be more concerned with regime preservation than with

promoting democratisation or popular consultation. While the reforms did introduce significant changes, including liberalising the economy and creating space for civil society and an independent media, Bahrain was arguably transformed into what Tilly and Tarrow term a ‘hybrid regime’—a model of government which combines elements of both democracy and authoritarianism.<sup>11</sup> Such regimes have alternatively been referred to as examples of ‘competitive authoritarianism’<sup>12</sup> or ‘liberalised autocracy’<sup>13</sup> and are characterised by their managed parliamentary elections, structured to benefit an unelected executive. Bahrain’s various opposition groups, most of which had initially supported the NAC, recognised that the political system set out in the 2002 constitution fell far short of what was promised to them in 2001, in spite of the rhetoric of democratisation. Some of them however ultimately decided that they were best served trying to change the system from within and reluctantly agreed to contest elections according to the regime’s rules of the game.

#### AL-WEFAQ: FROM BOYCOTT TO PARLIAMENT

The largest opposition group to emerge out of the NAC reforms was the National Islamic Accord Society (*Jama’iyyat al-Wifāq al-Waṭanī al-Islāmiyya*), known as al-Wefaq. Set up with the support of the Shi’a religious establishment, al-Wefaq was founded by *Intifada*-era political exiles who had returned to Bahrain following King Hamad’s amnesty. Al-Wefaq was led by the mid-tier cleric Sheikh Ali Salman, who acted as the group’s Secretary General, with fellow *Intifada* veteran Hassan Mushaima elected as his deputy. A significant measure of al-Wefaq’s legitimacy is linked to the support of Bahrain’s most senior Shi’a cleric Sheikh Isa al-Qasim, who is thought to act as al-Wefaq’s spiritual advisor, despite a lack of formal affiliation with the group.<sup>14</sup> Isa al-Qasim was a member of Bahrain’s ill-fated 1973 parliament and is considered to have achieved the rank of Ayatollah by some of his supporters. Both Isa al-Qasim and Qom-educated Ali Salman refer to the religious establishment in Najaf. Much of al-Wefaq’s membership, which was estimated at between 65,000 and 75,000 active members,<sup>15</sup> comprised laypeople and grassroots activists unaffiliated with Bahrain’s clerical elites, who have tended to emphasise the group’s democratic credentials over its Shi’a religious orientation. Some scholars have described al-Wefaq as principally a ‘Shia identity movement,’<sup>16</sup> whereas others have asserted that the group’s ‘Islamic vision

... comes second to its political goals,<sup>17</sup> which are rooted in Bahraini nationalism. Al-Wefaq's commitment to Islamism and democracy has been called into question at various junctures throughout its involvement in Bahraini politics by both its supporters and detractors.

Following King Hamad's unexpected revision of the constitution, al-Wefaq announced a boycott of the 2002 parliamentary elections, in coalition with a number of other newly formed opposition societies.<sup>18</sup> Al-Wefaq objected to the decision to grant the unelected Consultative Council legislative powers and also opposed the division of electoral districts, which it asserted were jerrymandered to ensure that the Shi'a societies would be unable to win a majority of seats in the Council of Representatives, despite the Shi'a's demographic majority within Bahrain.<sup>19</sup> Valeri claims that much of the Shi'a clerical establishment, including Isa al-Qasim, actually favoured participating in the elections; however, widespread anger within Bahrain's Shi'a community at the time led al-Wefaq's grassroots to vote in favour of a boycott.<sup>20</sup>

One of the key features of hybrid regimes, which sets them apart from fully authoritarian polities, is the presence of legal opposition groups whose political participation is tolerated by the government, providing they refrain from challenging the structure of the political system itself.<sup>21</sup> According to Tilly and Tarrow, hybrid regimes display 'particular combinations of contention'<sup>22</sup> distinct from both autocracies and democracies and typically feature 'an exceptionally wide range of ritualised performances'<sup>23</sup> including managed yet freely contested elections and relatively open parliamentary debate. The participation of non-loyalist opposition groups in parliament was therefore crucial to the success of King Hamad's efforts to construct a hybrid political system in Bahrain, providing they agreed to play by the government's rules of the game. As such, the government responded to al-Wefaq's boycott by applying a number of persuasive and coercive measures to convince the group to stand for election.

During the boycott, al-Wefaq's leadership had maintained that the group was not opposed to the parliamentary elections per se but objected to the way in which they were structured. The government continued to emphasise its interest in consultation, and King Hamad even met with Ali Salman in person to persuade him to drop al-Wefaq's boycott and stand in the 2006 elections. According to a senior al-Wefaq leader,<sup>24</sup> the King assured Ali Salman that 'the constitution was not set in stone' and suggested that the government would be willing to negotiate should al-Wefaq enter parliament.<sup>25</sup> In addition to these persuasive tactics, the government

sought to force al-Wefaq's hand through legislation. The 2005 Political Societies Act regulated the activities of Bahrain's newly formed opposition groups and crucially committed all societies which registered with the Ministry of Justice to standing for parliament.<sup>26</sup> If al-Wefaq failed to register it would be considered an illegal organisation—according to one al-Wefaq member, this would mean 'dismantling ourselves.'<sup>27</sup>

Another factor which contributed to al-Wefaq's decision to stand for election in 2006 was the intervention of the Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who revealed a preference for al-Wefaq's participation, which he was later forced to clarify was a non-binding opinion rather than a religious judgement.<sup>28</sup> Those within al-Wefaq who sought to rescind the boycott used the Ayatollah's preference to legitimise their position and ultimately succeeded in convincing 88 per cent of al-Wefaq delegates to vote in favour of formally registering as a political society and standing for the 2006 elections.<sup>29</sup>

A number of leading al-Wefaq members however fiercely opposed the decision to, in the words of Valeri, 'ratify their capitulation to the regime's rules of the game.'<sup>30</sup> Al-Wefaq deputy leader Hassan Mushaima led a breakaway faction which formed a new, unauthorised political society called the Movement for Liberty and Democracy (*Ḥarakat al-Ḥuriyya wal-Dīmuqrāṭīyya*), known as Haqq. Haqq would act as a thorn in al-Wefaq's side for the duration of the latter's participation in Bahrain's hybrid political system, as its 'entire raison d'être was its continued rejection of the parliament and electoral process.'<sup>31</sup> Haqq actively campaigned against al-Wefaq, amassing support in the economically marginalised Shi'a villages and adopting increasingly radical tactics, uninhibited by the need to observe the government's red lines. When the Arab Spring arrived in Bahrain in February 2011, it was Haqq and fellow underground group Wafa that linked up with the unaffiliated youths driving the protests rather than al-Wefaq.

Al-Wefaq emerged as the largest society in Bahrain's parliament following the 2006 elections, capturing 17 out of a total of 40 seats. Al-Wefaq's supporters held high hopes that the group would be able to make a positive impact on issues such as corruption, sectarian discrimination in the workforce and improving public services in the Shi'a-majority parts of the country. However, the jerrymandering of electoral districts had ensured that regime-loyal political societies retained their majority in parliament, and al-Wefaq 'faced consistent and intransigent opposition by tribal and Islamist Sunnis' who appeared determined to obstruct al-Wefaq's policy agenda.<sup>32</sup> According to one former al-Wefaq MP:

We wanted parliament to achieve something tangible for the people, but it was almost impossible to get legislation through if the government opposes it. We were seventeen MPs, versus twenty-three loyalists. We couldn't get the backing of our loyalist colleagues to vote against the government.<sup>33</sup>

One of al-Wefaq's core priorities upon entering parliament was to change the constitution to elevate the Council of Representatives above the appointed Consultative Council; however, they were unable to overcome opposition from the regime-loyal bloc.<sup>34</sup> Al-Wefaq also attempted to address the issue of sectarian discrimination in the public sector, adopting the rhetoric of equal opportunity and focusing its efforts on some of the smaller ministries with large numbers of Shi'a employees to avoid accusations of sectarianism.<sup>35</sup> Al-Wefaq was again stonewalled and prevented from addressing the issue. Al-Wefaq members often list the group's efforts to introduce socio-economic reforms as examples of its success in parliament, including negotiating pension increases for Bahrainis from low-income backgrounds and salary increases for teachers. Al-Wefaq also achieved a measure of success in exposing corruption in both the public and private sectors, for which it won widespread praise from both Bahrain's Sunni and Shi'a constituencies, in spite of a lack of prosecutions.<sup>36</sup>

A number of former al-Wefaq MPs interviewed by the researcher expressed frustration with the public perception that the group's participation in parliament was ultimately ineffective. One former MP complained that 'there was some achievement' but that 'people didn't feel it,' lamenting that 'all our efforts to address the issue of discrimination were in vain. We got nothing.'<sup>37</sup> Another former MP, speaking during a period of government crackdown on the legal opposition societies, accused the public of 'not being appreciative enough of what al-Wefaq has done':

I think now some people are slowly realising 'wow, what a difference al-Wefaq was in the parliament.' Now they hardly have access to these people [government officials]. ... We would meet people, have office hours, we tried very hard, and a number of people were satisfied.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Wefaq's five years in parliament closely resembled the experience of a 'tolerated' authoritarian opposition, whose inclusion is designed to ease pressure on hybrid regimes to enact genuine democratic reforms, without fundamentally challenging the structure of a political system that favours an unelected executive. The existence of groups such as al-Wefaq, which cannot be conceived of as a loyalist opposition, offers 'a higher degree of



legitimacy to the polity compared to hegemonic, mainly coercive forms of dictatorship.<sup>39</sup> However, given the events of 2011, it is possible that the government overplayed its hand in blocking much of al-Wefaq's legislative agenda, which prevented the group from presenting its constituents with a sufficient number of concessions to justify its participation in parliament. As Albrecht notes, authoritarian oppositions are typically caught 'between contestation and complicity'<sup>40</sup>—they need to be perceived of as maintaining their independence in order to avoid accusations of co-optation, which would threaten the underlying premise of a hybrid regime in the first place. This inevitably requires 'contentious performances'<sup>41</sup> involving moderate opposition to government policy, with the 'tolerated' group putting forward an alternative policy platform to that of the government, yet not so contentious that it crosses key red lines such as challenging the structure or legitimacy of the political system itself. Hybrid regimes need to allow the 'tolerated' opposition a certain number of victories so that its constituents feel they are benefiting from the hybrid system and perhaps develop a stake in maintaining it. As one al-Wefaq member commented in 2015, 'fourteen years ago we got a form of democracy. If it was a real democracy we wouldn't have had an Arab Spring.'<sup>42</sup> The Bahraini government's failure to construct a hybrid system capable of living up to the expectations of openness and consultation fostered by its own NAC reforms arguably led to the eruption of mass pro-democracy protests in February 2011.

### A FOOT IN BOTH CAMPS: AL-WEFAQ AND THE PEARL ROUNABOUT UPRISING

Al-Wefaq, having been re-elected to parliament a year earlier and increasing its number of seats to 18, was reluctant to lend its support to the youth-driven protest movement which planned to stage Arab Spring demonstrations in Bahrain on 14 February 2011.<sup>43</sup> The government had approached al-Wefaq in advance of the demonstrations but was unwilling to meet al-Wefaq's demand that it dismiss the unpopular prime minister, the King's uncle and a prominent hardliner, in exchange for calling off the protests.<sup>44</sup> In any case, given that al-Wefaq was not actually involved in the protest movement in the first place, its ability to exert influence over the politically unaffiliated youths plotting a Bahraini 'Day of Rage' online was highly questionable. Louër argues that al-Wefaq viewed the protests as 'pointless,'<sup>45</sup> given the personal loyalty of the Sunni-dominated security

services (whose rank and file is largely made up of foreign recruits) to the Al Khalifa family. Bahrain has maintained a policy of excluding its Shi'a citizens from the armed services from at least the 1980s, a prominent source of grievance within the Shi'a community designed to prevent insubordination of the kind which led Tunisian and Egyptian conscripts to abandon their posts and join their countries' respective revolutions.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, as expected, Bahrain's security services followed their orders and did not hesitate to employ violence in clearing the Pearl Roundabout protest site on several occasions, including the infamous 'Bloody Thursday' of 17 February when a number of peaceful protesters were killed.<sup>47</sup>

There is however more to al-Wefaq's reluctance to support the pro-democracy movement than its pragmatic assessment of the protesters' chances of achieving change. Having contested two elections, al-Wefaq had a stake in the system and understood implicitly that joining an unauthorised protest movement amounted to challenging the regime's rules of the game, imperilling the group's 'tolerated' status and political influence. In the words of one former al-Wefaq MP:

A lot of people said to us 'why did you refuse to start [protesting] on 14 February as the opposition?' First of all, we are sharing the policy of the authorities, we are a part of the legislative council, we were MPs at that time. On the other hand, we are a party ... some people are for [participating], some people are against it. We need a consensus.<sup>48</sup>

This clearly illustrates al-Wefaq's conundrum. The group felt a responsibility as parliamentarians to cooperate with the government and their parliamentary colleagues rather than joining an extra-legal protest movement whose very existence suggested that parliament was not doing its job in representing the demands of Bahrain's citizens. However, al-Wefaq's membership was clearly divided as to whether or not to participate, likely driven by the widespread support for the Arab Spring protests among al-Wefaq's base in the Shi'a community. Al-Wefaq attempted to resolve this lack of consensus by sitting on the fence. It 'did not publicly sanction the demonstrations, but neither did it prevent its own members from joining them.'<sup>49</sup>

Al-Wefaq's hand was forced, however, following the bloody scenes of security forces clearing the Pearl Roundabout protest camp on 17 February, which were broadcast around the world by channels such as *Al Jazeera*, garnering significant international attention.<sup>50</sup> Had al-Wefaq

remained on the sidelines, its supporters would have accused it of being co-opted by the government, a charge already levelled at al-Wefaq by the leaders of Haqq and Wafa, which had joined the protest movement from day one and were vocal in their denunciation of the government's violent response.<sup>51</sup> Al-Wefaq ultimately decided to resign from parliament and formally join the protest movement.

While in retrospect it appears that al-Wefaq was in this moment forced to choose between its status as a legal 'tolerated' opposition society and its legitimacy as a genuine opposition group representing the interests of its Shi'a constituents, it is possible that al-Wefaq felt it could keep its options open and return to parliament at a later date. Interviews conducted with the group's leadership revealed that al-Wefaq was secretly negotiating with the government behind the scenes, both prior to and following its decision to join the protests. One al-Wefaq leader claimed that the Al Khalifa approached al-Wefaq in the early days of the uprising and offered them a number of important government ministries,<sup>52</sup> and another told the researcher that al-Wefaq was in almost daily contact with the Crown Prince, who was tasked with negotiating an end to the protests.<sup>53</sup>

Al-Wefaq sought to portray itself as a moderate voice within the protest movement, stating that its aim was to install constitutional monarchy and achieve equality for Bahrainis of all backgrounds and sects. The government's violent response to the protests however had radicalised the demands of groups such as Haqq and many of the youth activists, who began to call for the overthrow of the monarchy.<sup>54</sup> Protest slogans such as the popular *yasquṭ Ḥamad* (down with Hamad) amounted to the crossing of a significant red line in Bahrain, where insulting the King is an imprisonable offence. The strength of the radical bloc at the Pearl Roundabout, which formed a new grouping called the Alliance for a Republic (*al-Taḥāluf min 'ajl Jumhūrīyya*) acted to constrain al-Wefaq in its negotiations with the Al Khalifa's moderate faction led by the Crown Prince.<sup>55</sup>

At this point Bahrain's uprising was teetering on the brink of what Tilly and Tarrow refer to as a 'revolutionary situation,' wherein coordinated collective action undergoes a process of 'upward scale shift,' and becomes a direct threat to regime stability.<sup>56</sup> At the same time that the Crown Prince was reaching out to al-Wefaq to negotiate a reform package to bring an end to the protests, the hard-line wing of the royal family gave the green light to neighbouring Saudi Arabia to enter Bahrain under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) to put down the uprising militarily.<sup>57</sup> In light of this, al-Wefaq's

demand that the Crown Prince force the resignation of the entire government in exchange for their participation in negotiations<sup>58</sup> appears foolhardy indeed. A Bahraini politician interviewed by the researcher claimed that he had heard the Crown Prince lamenting al-Wefaq's inflexibility during a private gathering in 2017:

He said 'we offered something to settle the problem, but the opposition turned it down because this group [al-Wefaq] felt wrongly that they are the only important people in the country.' The Crown Prince said he tried his best, but failed.<sup>59</sup>

Al-Wefaq likely expected that the radical bloc at the Pearl Roundabout would accept nothing short of fundamental reforms to the political system and as such was reluctant to enter into negotiations with the government without the promise of significant concessions. The radicals' call for the fall of the Al Khalifa monarchy however sent shock waves through the GCC and combined with the spill over of Bahrain's protests into Saudi Arabia's Eastern province 'buttressed the case for the intervention of Saudi and GCC forces into Bahrain on March 14.'<sup>60</sup>

### THE POST-2011 CRACKDOWN AND THE MARGINALISATION OF AL-WEFAQ

The entry of the PSF into Bahrain brought an end to any meaningful attempts at negotiating a solution to the crisis and led to the ascendance of a hard-line faction within the Al Khalifa monarchy which saw little utility in a hybrid political system that had failed to prevent the emergence of such a significant threat to the regime's grip on power.<sup>61</sup> King Hamad declared a three-month state of emergency, which provided legal sanction for the actions of the PSF and Bahraini security forces, whose brutal suppression of the protest movement led to the deaths of scores of protesters and the arrest of thousands.<sup>62</sup> During the crackdown, entire villages were blockaded, hospital staff were arrested for treating the wounded and accusations of torture in military prisons were widespread. Security forces destroyed the Pearl Roundabout's central monument and a number of Shi'a religious sites including historic mosques and ma'tams.<sup>63</sup>

Al-Wefaq managed to avoid being directly targeted during the initial crackdown; however, its position remained precarious. The government had swiftly rounded up the leadership of all of Bahrain's political societies,

including al-Wefaq's ally Wa'ad, which had also participated in parliamentary elections. Al-Wefaq's leaders, however, were initially spared.<sup>64</sup> Bahrain at this point continued to be the focus of significant media attention, and Western allies such as the US were applying pressure on the government to negotiate with the opposition. The US Senate had suspended weapons sales to Bahrain, and President Obama had taken the unusual step of publicly criticising the Al Khalifa regime's human rights violations during the crackdown.<sup>65</sup> Al-Wefaq had therefore not entirely exhausted its usefulness, in spite of the breakdown of the hybrid system. The government had to be seen to be taking reasonable steps to engage with the moderate opposition in an effort to repair its international image.

Al-Wefaq however, aware of the considerable anger towards the government within the Shi'a community, was reluctant to participate in negotiations while the crackdown was ongoing. The King established a 'National Dialogue' with great fanfare in May 2011 and invited al-Wefaq and other legal opposition groups to participate alongside hundreds of regime-loyal societies and pro-government charities and civil society organisations.<sup>66</sup> According to Matthiesen, 'it quickly became apparent that this was nothing more than an attempt at a public relations exercise.'<sup>67</sup> Genuine opposition groups were vastly outnumbered by loyalist organisations, and the government was unwilling to discuss key opposition demands such as amending the constitution and addressing the issue of electoral district gerrymandering. As Coates Ulrichsen asserts, 'far from drawing a line under the unrest, the flawed process reinforced existing divisions and signalled that critical issues of political contention were simply not open to debate.'<sup>68</sup> Al-Wefaq withdrew from the dialogue on 17 July, followed shortly after by the other 'tolerated' opposition groups. Subsequent attempts at dialogue in 2013 and 2014 yielded similar results, with al-Wefaq accusing the government of lacking a genuine commitment to negotiations.<sup>69</sup>

The diplomatic pressure applied to Bahrain from its allies in the US and Europe prevented the government from taking immediate steps to sanction al-Wefaq, which was the largest and most well-known opposition group in Bahrain, and maintained channels of communication with Bahrain's democratic allies via embassy representatives.<sup>70</sup> However, Bahrain's political opportunity structure had shifted dramatically, and unlike al-Wefaq's negotiations with the Crown Prince in March 2011, there was no longer any meaningful incentive for the regime to make concessions to the opposition. The success of the PSF-led crackdown and the

three-month state of emergency had removed al-Wefaq's trump card—the government did not need al-Wefaq to exert its influence over the protesters to diffuse the unrest. The mere pretence of negotiations with the opposition was enough for the government to address the concerns of its international backers, which coupled with the release of an independent report into the events of 2011 allowed the government to claim that it was making progress.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout 2012–2013, al-Wefaq continued to operate as a legal political society whilst maintaining its resolve to boycott parliament until the government agreed to meaningful reforms. Together with Wa'ad, it released the 'Manama Document,' which set out its demands for a constitutional monarchy and a fully elected parliament.<sup>72</sup> Fast-paced events in the region however, including the Syrian war and the rise of the Islamic State, underscored Bahrain's strategic importance to its Western allies as home to the US navy's Fifth Fleet, and the future home of a new British military base.<sup>73</sup> With international attention focused elsewhere, the government's patience with al-Wefaq began to wear thin, in particular following the group's announcement that it would boycott the 2014 parliamentary elections, in spite of considerable pressure from the government to secure its participation.<sup>74</sup> A former al-Wefaq MP told the researcher that, given the government's failure to accommodate any of the group's demands, al-Wefaq did not want to risk being seen as a co-opted opposition. 'We couldn't justify it to our people. Why waste everybody's time?'<sup>75</sup>

The lead-up to the 2014 elections provided a strong indication that the government intended to crack down on al-Wefaq if the group maintained its boycott. While the parliament had continued to meet following the 2011 uprising, it was dominated by loyalists and resembled little more than a means for the government to rubber stamp legislation. Had al-Wefaq stood for election in 2014, it is doubtful its participation would have revived the hybrid system of the NAC years—the government's moves to restrict freedom of assembly and association, and its attacks on freedom of the press, had severely constrained the space for political debate and would have heavily restricted al-Wefaq's ability to campaign for re-election.<sup>76</sup> Highly sectarian rhetoric in the state-run media and widely publicised attacks on the Shi'a community by some Sunni politicians had polarised society and enhanced the mistrust between al-Wefaq and the loyalist political societies.<sup>77</sup> It is likely that al-Wefaq's participation would have achieved little other than to legitimise the regime's attempts to depict itself as committed to superficial democratisation. In addition, joining the parliament

would have further compromised al-Wefaq's standing in the Shi'a community, which was threatened by more proactive underground groups eager to position themselves as defenders of Shi'a rights.<sup>78</sup>

In June 2014 Bahrain unexpectedly expelled the visiting US Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Tom Malinowski, accusing him of breaking diplomatic protocol by attending an unauthorised meeting with the leaders of al-Wefaq, including Sheikh Ali Salman.<sup>79</sup> While al-Wefaq representatives had regularly met with US officials in the past, it appears that Malinowski's expulsion, and the US's muted response, was designed to warn al-Wefaq against continuing to challenge the government's increasingly restrictive rules of the game. Their registration as a legal political society in 2005 was, after all, conditional upon al-Wefaq's recognition of the 2002 constitution and agreement to stand for election.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps in retaliation for the Malinowski incident, in July 2014 Bahrain's Supreme Court suspended al-Wefaq's operations for three months, ostensibly due to administrative irregularities, only to have the ban later reversed. The government also shut down the Shi'a Ulama Council, headed by al-Wefaq spiritual advisor Sheikh Isa al-Qasim, accusing it of illegal involvement in political activism.<sup>81</sup> It appears that al-Wefaq's refusal to contest the 2014 elections triggered the Al Khalifa regime's decision to eliminate Bahrain's last remaining legal opposition groups. As the government dismantled the hybrid system of the NAC era, it had little need for a 'tolerated' opposition, which declined to play by the rules of what Louër refers to as 'the co-optation game.'<sup>82</sup>

The crackdown on al-Wefaq was swift following the 2014 elections. The group's Secretary General Sheikh Ali Salman was arrested in December 2014 and was sentenced to four years in prison for 'inciting hatred, promoting disobedience and insulting public institutions.'<sup>83</sup> Salman's sentence was inexplicably increased to nine years on appeal in May 2016.<sup>84</sup> In February 2015 al-Wefaq was charged with anti-government incitement and 'circulating false news to undermine civil peace and national security' via its Twitter account.<sup>85</sup> A court again ordered the suspension of al-Wefaq in June 2016, and the group was formally dissolved the following month on charges of supporting terrorism, a decision which was upheld on appeal in February 2017.<sup>86</sup> In July 2016, 79-year-old Sheikh Isa al-Qasim, Bahrain's most revered Shi'a cleric, was charged with corruption and received a one-year suspended jail sentence in May 2017. Al-Qasim was also accused of inciting sectarian tensions, and the government revoked his Bahraini citizenship, rendering him stateless.<sup>87</sup> Al-Wasat, Bahrain's last

remaining independent newspaper, was shut down in June 2017, shortly after al-Wefaq's ally Wa'ad was dissolved on terror charges also related to its Twitter account.<sup>88</sup> Asked in late 2015 about whether the government will ban al-Wefaq, an al-Wefaq member told the researcher:

No, if they do that it means all their talking about democracy, it will be no use. If the biggest society in Bahrain, who most of the time are talking about peace, is banned every democratic thing in Bahrain will stop.<sup>89</sup>

It appears that in dissolving al-Wefaq, Bahrain's government has completed its dismantling of the hybrid model, which it had used during the 2000s to promote Bahrain as an open society on the path to democratisation. As Tilly and Tarrow note, when encountering 'revolutionary situations' such as that presented by the 2011 Arab Spring, 'the state, at first thrown off balance by new forms of contention, eventually reacts and in some cases turns to repression.'<sup>90</sup> If the state's repressive response to political contention is effective, 'overall levels of contention usually decline after the new regime overcomes resistance to its rule.'<sup>91</sup> This explains the fate of al-Wefaq and the other 'tolerated' opposition groups—having given up on its NAC-era liberalising reforms, Bahrain's government calculated that repression, rather than negotiation, was the best means of reducing contention and securing its grip on power.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has drawn on Tilly and Tarrow's hybrid regime model to account for the cycle of contention, which led Bahrain's government to adopt liberalising reforms in the early 2000s, allowing for the formation of legal political societies such as al-Wefaq, only to dismantle them and retreat back into full authoritarianism in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests. This chapter has traced the rise and fall of al-Wefaq, Bahrain's largest opposition group, to suggest that, rather than demonstrating the Al Khalifa monarchy's commitment to democratisation, the NAC reforms were designed to bolster regime security. As Albrecht notes, the Arab Spring uprisings served as a glaring example of the risks inherent in the establishment of hybrid regimes, as authoritarian governments must 'prevent liberalisation from turning into democratisation'<sup>92</sup> by incentivising the participation of 'tolerated' opposition groups such as al-Wefaq within the existing political system. In retrospect, it seems that Bahrain's government



did not make sufficient concessions to the policy demands of groups like al-Wefaq, enabling them to benefit from a stake in the hybrid system that may have discouraged their constituents from joining the protest movement of February 2011.

As Tilly and Tarrow have noted, an opposition group's past experiences of contentious politics are often drawn on to inform participation in future cycles of contention.<sup>93</sup> While repression is an effective means of minimising political opposition in the short term, such an approach will likely spark a radicalisation of the opposition's demands and ultimately risk rendering marginalised opposition groups 'determined to overthrow the regime rather than negotiate with it.'<sup>94</sup> Bahrain's experiment with democratisation may have ended in repression and authoritarian reassertion; however, it will be difficult indeed for the Al Khalifa -led government to undo the societal expectations of political participation engendered by its pre-Arab Spring liberalising reforms. It is therefore likely that Bahrain will face further cycles of contention in the years to come.

## NOTES

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2. Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 51.
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7. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright, 'Political Change in the Arab Oil Monarchies: From Liberalization to Enfranchisement,' *International Affairs* 83:5 (2007): 919.
8. Larbi Sadiki, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ix.
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11. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 75.

12. Mary Ann Tetreault, Gwenn Okruhlik and Andrzej Kapiszewski, 'Twenty-First-Century Politics in the Arab Gulf States,' in *Political Change in the Arab Gulf States: Stuck in Transition*, ed. Mary Ann Tetreault et al. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2011), 6.
13. Daniel Brumberg, 'Transforming the Arab World's Protection-Racket Politics,' *Journal of Democracy* 24:2 (2013): 90.
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15. Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 43.
16. Laurence Louër, 'Activism in Bahrain: Between Sectarianism and Issue Politics,' in *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, ed. Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 175.
17. Elisheva Machlis, 'Al-Wefaq and the February 14 Uprising: Islam, Nationalism and Democracy- The Shi'i-Bahraini Discourse,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 52:6 (2016): 991.
18. Bahrain's political parties are referred to as 'societies' however the difference is little more than semantic.
19. Ehteshami and Wright, 'Political Change,' 920.
20. Valeri, 'Contentious Politics,' 140.
21. Tetreault et al., 'Twenty-First-Century Politics,' 6.
22. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 75.
23. *Ibid.*, 62.
24. This chapter incorporates material from interviews with al-Wefaq members conducted in Bahrain and Australia from 2015 to 2017. The names of all interview respondents have been withheld to protect their identities and personal safety.
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27. Interview 20 December 2015.
28. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics*, 208.
29. Gengler, *Group Conflict*, 77.
30. Valeri, 'Contentious Politics,' 142.
31. Gengler, *Group Conflict*, 77.
32. *Ibid.*, 23.
33. Interview 15 December 2015.
34. Interview 17 December 2015.

35. Interview 21 December 2015.
36. Interview 20 December 2015.
37. Interview 21 December 2015.
38. Interview 16 May 2016.
39. Holger Albrecht, *Raging Against the Machine: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism in Egypt* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), xxiii.
40. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
41. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 16.
42. Interview 25 December 2015.
43. 14 February 2011 was a highly symbolic day in Bahrain, as it marked the ten year anniversary of King Hamad's National Action Charter (NAC) reforms.
44. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics*, 76.
45. Louër, 'Activism in Bahrain,' 183.
46. Husayn, 'Mechanisms of Authoritarian Rule,' 41.
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50. Zainab Abdul-Nabi, 'Al-Jazeera's Relationship with Qatar Before and after the Arab Spring: Effective Public Diplomacy or Blatant Propaganda?' *Arab Media & Society*, 24 (2017): 8.
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64. Gengler, *Group Conflict*, 142.
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66. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics*, 89.

67. Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 68.
68. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences,' *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2:1 (2013): 5.
69. Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 69.
70. Interview 16 May 2016.
71. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics*, 91.
72. Meijer and Danckaert, 'Bahrain,' 228.
73. BBC News, 'UK Builds First Permanent Middle East Base for 40 Years,' 1 November 2015, [www.bbc.com/news/uk-34690895](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34690895)
74. Gengler, *Group Conflict*, 23.
75. Interview 21 December 2015.
76. Meijer and Danckaert, 'Bahrain,' 233.
77. Husayn, 'Mechanisms of Authoritarian Rule,' 41.
78. Moore-Gilbert, 'Putting the Genie Back in the Bottle.'
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# The Iranian Reform Movement Since 2009

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## INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran ranks poorly on almost every measure of freedom and democracy, owing to a political system that limits the scope for governance by directly elected officials by constitutionally combining ‘divine rule and popular mandate.’<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Iran was ranked by Freedom House’s ‘Freedom of the World’ index as ‘Not Free,’ and the country regularly receives censure from the United Nations and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for its human rights record, including its treatment of regime opponents.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Iran has since the Islamic revolution in 1979 been the site of often-vigorous political contestation, seen in the ceaseless jostling between the country’s formal political blocs, in the campaigns of broad-ranging civil society groups and by the informal mobilisations launched by groups of women, lawyers, students and environmentalists.

The Reform movement is arguably the most successful of Iran’s opposition groupings because it has successfully fielded presidents, controlled the parliament and exerted significant influence over the Iranian policy landscape. It reached its peak when the Reformist candidate Mohammad

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Khatami was elected to two presidential terms between 1997 and 2005, during which time Khatami oversaw broad human rights reforms that enabled the opening up of civil society, the proliferation of independent news outlets and unprecedented levels of activism by student and women's groups. The Reform movement was also central in the sparking of the 2009 Green Movement protests, after Reformist Presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi accused the authorities of rigging the ballot. Although the protest movement quickly became much larger than the Reform movement itself, Reformists paid a high price for their involvement, and Mousavi and Karroubi remained under house arrest at the time of writing nearly a decade after the protests.

This chapter looks to the contentious politics literature to examine the cycles of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation that have taken place between the Iranian Reform movement and the Iranian regime. Viewing the 2009 election as a watershed moment in the history of the movement, the chapter argues that the Reformists' sensitivity to changes in Iran's political opportunity structure led them to a fatal escalation of their repertoire of political action in 2009. Although such miscalculations are not unusual in authoritarian climates, they can have disastrous consequences. This chapter therefore first looks briefly at the contentious politics literature, before observing its main repertoires of political contestation prior to the 2009 Green Movement protests. The chapter then turns to the Green Movement protests and their aftermath, noting the significant narrowing of political opportunity structures after 2009 and the diminishing of the Reform movement's scope to operate as a tolerated opposition.

## CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND IRAN

Iran is an important case study of contentious politics because although its political system is dominated by a rigid authoritarian regime, it also displays an element of pluralism through the relatively competitive electoral processes that take place for the seat of president, the parliament and city councils every four years. This produces an element of democratic alternance within the otherwise authoritarian state. Since these electoral outcomes heavily colour the political environment, Iran's electoral system offers a formal but limited political opportunity structure that motivates oppositions to endure and persist. In this regard, significant effort has been made to characterise Iran's mixed authoritarian-pluralist political system, with Ghobadzadeh and Zubaidah Rahim declaring it an 'electoral



authoritarian regime,' while Letivsky dubs it a 'hybrid' or 'tutelary' regime 'in which elections are competitive but the power of elected governments is constrained by nonelected religious ... authorities.'<sup>3</sup> Abdolmohammadi and Cama went so far as to declare it a 'peculiar hybrid regime.'<sup>4</sup> Although engaging in such debates falls beyond this chapter's scope, it is important to note that all efforts to characterise the Iranian political system have rested on the premise that contentious politics remains a significant feature of Iranian political life. It is these electoral processes that have proven critical for political mobilisation.

Within the Iranian authoritarian political landscape, all three of Albrecht's proposed opposition typologies exist, including the 'regime-loyal' oppositions, which are formally tolerated groups that enjoy privileged legal status within an authoritarian state in return for their fealty to the regime.<sup>5</sup> In Iran, organisations such as The Society of Islamic Coalition and the Society of Islamic Associations of Guilds and Bazaars of Tehran, whose 'primary objective ... [after 1979] was for the regime to be consolidated,' fit such a categorisation.<sup>6</sup> Anti-system oppositions also exist in the Iranian political milieu, refusing to accept regime attempts at co-optation. Such groups often use radical tactics to gain momentum, such as encouraging large-scale protests and riots.<sup>7</sup> The Iranian Reform movement by contrast fits the criteria of a 'tolerated opposition,' which is a group that emerges independently in a country, but is controlled through a combination of co-optation and coercion.<sup>8</sup> Tolerated oppositions face challenges in shaping their political programmes and have to balance a policy programme that will appeal to voters, while appearing moderate and unthreatening so as not to attract negative attention from the regime. The Reform movement has for decades walked this careful tightrope, at times being accused by the regime of seditious activity,<sup>9</sup> while simultaneously charged by observers as having 'sided with the hardliners—and doomed their cause.'<sup>10</sup>

The utility of the contentious politics literature stems from its focus on the interaction between 'makers of claims' and the objects of those claims,<sup>11</sup> which are often oppositions and their governments. Although the two sets of actors are ostensibly independent, they look to one another to identify opportunities and the boundaries of acceptable potential action, in order to maximise their chances of success. Acknowledging this, the contentious politics literature views all parties under the one analytical umbrella in order to understand the often-symbiotic nature of government-opposition relations.

Indeed, as noted in the introductory chapter of this volume, governments and oppositions leave a clear imprint on one another. Tilly and Tarrow identified three specific ways that regimes limit and shape claim making by oppositions:

First, every regime's political opportunity structure affects what claims resonate with people. ... Second, every regime divides known claim-making performances into prescribed, tolerated, and forbidden. ... Third, from the bottom up, the available repertoire strongly limits the kinds of claims people can make in any particular regime.<sup>12</sup>

Oppositions, no matter how independent they are of regimes, are inevitably forced to submit to some level of regime-mandated rules if they are to survive. This might mean contesting elections in a limited way or undertaking all political activity underground. Either way, oppositions' repertoires of political contestation are clearly shaped by the regime and the restrictions that they face and also the small opportunities that come their way. Such opportunities are interpreted by oppositions to determine the most effective response, but such interpretations are imperfect and subject to miscalculation, meaning that the relationship between opportunity and response is rarely clear cut. Oppositions in Iran have proven closely attuned to both opportunities and threats that shape their ability to operate—Kamrava noted that the brief widening of pluralism in Iran in 1997 started 'an intellectual wildfire' among Iran's dissident Reformist intellectuals that the state has since struggled to close.<sup>13</sup> In this case, Iran's intellectuals seized a brief political opening in order to foment their challenge to the ideational principles that underwrite the Iranian state.

Regimes are also shaped by the opponents that they face. Although the balance of power in authoritarian regimes undoubtedly rests with governments, they too must calibrate their positions towards opposition in line with what is popularly acceptable. This does not mean that regimes always act in ways consistent with constituent expectations, but that there is also a red line that regimes cannot cross. This was seen in Iran in 2009 when the regime cracked down fiercely on the Green Movement protests. Although the crackdown was ultimately successful, it took more than six months to fully quell the protests, causing immense damage to the legitimacy of the regime and the usually off-limits Supreme Leader. Eight years later, its response to the 2017–2018 protests was noticeably muted, relying mostly on low-profile arrests rather than a large-scale violent public

crackdown on the streets. The regime too learnt from its interaction with its opponents.

It is this pattern of interaction between state and opposition in which this chapter is interested, and in particular the way that the Reform movement and the Iranian regime interact, pushing one another's boundaries in order to incrementally achieve their goals. Tilly noted patterns in such interactions in Great Britain from 1758 to 1834, observing the 'short rhythms' of protest cycles, as well as 'long rhythms' of historical change in political strategies and opportunities over the course of decades.<sup>14</sup> This chapter examines these cycles of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation, of push and pull, and of change over time that characterise the relationship between the Reform movement and the Iranian regime.

### BACKGROUND: THE REFORM MOVEMENT

The Iranian Reform movement is not a single political party but rather a diverse movement that spans a formal coalition of political parties under the banner of the Council for Coordinating the Reforms Front, as well as many associated groups, intellectuals and individuals. The movement came to prominence during President Mohammed Khatami's two presidential terms from 1997 to 2005, but the intellectual ideas underpinning the movement had existed in the country since the moment of the Islamic Republic's 1979 founding, exemplified in thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, a member of the Commission for Cultural Revolution, and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, a member of the Republic's first parliament. Although these extra-political groups and individuals form an integral part of the Reform movement, this section focuses on the Reform movement's direct engagement in politics from 1997 to 2009.

On May 23, 1997, Mohammed Khatami was elected to the presidency with nearly 70 per cent of the vote. Khatami's main opponent—the favourite in the presidential race—was Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, a loyal ally of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Khatami, who was supported by the Reformist Association of Combatant Clerics Party, had campaigned on a platform of reform, promising in a document released a week before the poll his commitment to 'countering superstition and fanaticism' and 'assuring civil rights and freedoms of citizens.' He further promised to curb censorship, to respect the 'variety and diversity of attitudes' inside Iran and to challenge the idea 'that politics should be monopolized by a

specific group.’<sup>15</sup> After his election, he told reporters: ‘Our country emerged twenty years ago from the heavy weight of dictatorship, but unfortunately we are not yet completely delivered from it, and dictatorship continues to haunt us all.’<sup>16</sup>

To succeed, Khatami had harnessed a broad popular coalition to support his campaign, including youth and women. The poll garnered a high voter turnout of 80 per cent, one of the highest rates in the country’s post-revolutionary history. Khatami leaned heavily on this popular mandate to guide his repertoire of political action, using populist appeals to mobilise the population against the regime’s many instruments of coercion. As Scilano noted, Khatami ‘charmed the people of Iran. He charmed them with his personality, with his good looks, and with his promises.’<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the date of Khatami’s election, the 2nd of Khordad (the second day of the third month of the Persian calendar), quickly became the name of the popular movement that surrounded him. The movement consolidated its position through the subsequent 1999 city council elections and the 2000 parliamentary election.

The nature of the Iranian political system meant that the success of President Khatami’s tenure would be in large-part determined by other regime officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The office of the president has some power, including the ability to appoint ambassadors and governors, recommend cabinet appointees and control many state resources. But this power is constrained significantly by the Supreme Leader, who appoints members of the judiciary, half of the Guardian Council and dictates many policy directions, including on foreign and domestic security. Presidential power is also limited by the Guardian Council, which is responsible for approving all legislation passed by the parliament, and for using its power of approbatory supervision (*nizarat-e estisvabi*) to vet candidates for election. It was within these confines—the narrow window of presidential political opportunity versus the myriad instruments of the state—that Khatami would have to build his repertoire of political contestation. Quickly, the Reformists and the regime settled into a tense political tug of war.

The regime achieved some early wins, using judicial and constitutional strategies to curtail the Reformist political opportunity. In June 1998, the Iranian parliament forced Khatami’s Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri to resign. Nouri had removed many conservative-linked officials from his ministry soon after his appointment, making himself one of the earliest targets of the regime. Although the Reformists reappointed him

immediately as Vice President, he was jailed in 1999 for political and religious dissent. Nouri was one of many Khatami allies who fell victim to the regime's judicial might. The popular Mayor of Tehran Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi was another early target, imprisoned for embezzlement in July 1998. The regime was also implicated in extrajudicial killings of a number of key Reformists, including two pro-Reformist journalists and a close friend and neighbour of President Khatami. The Ministry of Intelligence and Security later confirmed that 'rogue elements' within its organisation were responsible for the killings.<sup>18</sup>

The regime used its instruments of coercion to curb Reformist prospects in the October 1998 Assembly of Experts election, for which the Guardian Council changed the qualification criteria. Candidates had previously been required to pass an exam to prove their *ijtihad* credentials but now also needed to demonstrate a 'proper political inclination.'<sup>19</sup> The Guardian Council approved less than half of the nominees, disqualifying many prominent Khatami supporters,<sup>20</sup> but approving several incumbents who had failed the *ijtihad* examination.<sup>21</sup> Reformist groups such as the Association of Combatant Clerics and the Assembly of Qom Seminary Scholars and Researchers boycotted the election to protest the disqualification of their candidates. Boycotts would soon become a common Reformist strategy to protest against regime control. Nonetheless, Conservatives won 54 of the 86 seats in the Assembly, despite that the presidential election the year prior and the municipal elections months later returned significant majorities for Reformists.<sup>22</sup>

Although the balance of power lay squarely with the regime, Khatami achieved some significant reform victories by leveraging the political opportunity endowed to him by his significant popular mandate. Indeed, the Reformists would demonstrate repeatedly that they viewed elections to be a key tool in the country's political opportunity structures. Khatami's achievements were seen most notably in the institution of elections for seats in city and village councils, which was a process described in Iran's 1979 constitution but never implemented. The elections were significant because they marked a substantial decentralisation of power in the Iranian state. Khatami declared that: 'With the implementation of the provision on municipal councils, the people will be given the opportunity to restore their rights. ... [This] will help remove the chronic mentality of law breaking.'<sup>23</sup>

The first city and village council elections were scheduled for February 1999, with 200,000 seats to contest. The contest quickly highlighted the

limits of the regime's own repertoires of coercion in the face of Khatami's popular mandate. First, the size of the election and the short time frame of its implementation limited the Guardian Council's ability to vet all candidates. Many of the 334,000 candidates who were nominated across the country were little-known local figures who the Council simply could not profile. In this case, the popularity of the political opportunity diminished the regime's political apparatus. Second, the regime was seen to have overplayed its hand in its vetting of the earlier Assembly of Experts election. Candidate vetting had become politically sensitive. As one Iranian official argued, this made it 'much more difficult for [the clerical elite] to get away with such an operation again.'<sup>24</sup>

The regime's limitations were particularly evident in the case of the beleaguered former Interior Minister (and by this time Vice President) Abdollah Nouri, whose candidacy for the Assembly of Experts election had been blocked by the Guardian Council just months earlier. Although all of Khatami's candidates for Tehran City Council were initially rejected, Khatami and the Reformists were able to leverage their popular mandate to protect their own candidates, including Nouri. Khatami told a meeting of provincial governors that 'these elections are among the most sensitive events relating to the lives of the people. ... In assessing the qualifications of the candidates we should not rely on guesswork and suspicion.'<sup>25</sup> These sentiments were echoed by Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari, who declared that: 'If some candidates are prevented from running without plausible reasons, we will have no alternative but to enforce the law.'<sup>26</sup> At the time, the situation was so tense that Tehran University Professor Sadegh Zibakalam observed 'There is no doubt about it, there is a potential for civil war here. ... So far the President has persuaded his followers to keep off the streets. ... But this might not last for ever.'<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the Reformists were successfully leveraging their popular mandate to shield themselves from the instruments of the state.

Reformists gave rousing speeches to mobilise this audience—Abdollah Nouri told a university audience the week before the election:

Our Islam is the Islam of love and friendship, not the Islam of suspicion. That is not our Islam ... Islam and a supreme clerical leadership that supports breaking up public meetings and violence and opposes its critics, we do not believe in that Islam. If that is your conception of Islam, then you are wrong. If that is religion, then we do not accept it.<sup>28</sup>

With students a key part of the Reform movement, the speech demonstrated the Reformists' willingness to harness the ideas that were popular within their base for political gain. Indeed, while Khamenei and his supporters had control of many of the country's institutions, the Reformists had popular support. Reformists subsequently won control of the Tehran City Council, with Nouri receiving the highest number of votes and becoming Chairman. Across the country, President Khatami's supporters seized an estimated 80 per cent of seats.<sup>29</sup> Khatami declared that 'The councils should play a leading role in establishing a civil society and allow the population to play a role in decisions affecting their destiny.'<sup>30</sup> To Haghghatjoo, the elections were significant in beginning 'a process of decentralization of power and the introduction of electoral accountability.'<sup>31</sup> City council elections have remained the freest and perhaps most democratic of all of Iran's electoral processes—in 2017, women claimed 30 per cent of Tehran's city council elections.<sup>32</sup> Although the city council elections represented a significant victory for the Reformists, the regime was not deterred. The day after the February election, the special court for the clergy ordered the arrest of the key Reformist Mohsen Kadivar, restarting the cycle of push and pull between the regime and its opposition. In the years following to 2004, more than 100 newspapers and magazines were shut down<sup>33</sup>—Reformists would continue to mobilise popular support, while the regime used its control of the instruments of the state to diminish their scope for political success.

Buoyed by the 1999 election success, Reformists threatened to nominate hundreds of candidates for the 2000 legislative election in order to reduce the Guardian Council's ability to vet candidates. However, the regime too was responsive to opposition strategy, and in the 2000 election the Guardian Council vetted only 8 per cent of candidates. This may indicate awareness of the controversy that their earlier election vetting had caused, or it could have been an innovation in the regime's approach to controlling elections. Namazi argued that instead of vetting candidates *en masse* in the 2000 election, the Guardian Council allowed large numbers of Reformists onto the ballot in order to split the Reformist vote.<sup>34</sup> Although Reformists were ultimately successful in winning control of the parliament, the elections highlighted the extent to which regime strategies were responsive to opposition moves, even though on paper the balance of power was clearly in its favour.

The push and pull of government-opposition dynamics were also visible in the student protests of 1999, in which parts of the Reformist base

demonstrated their willingness to use protests as another repertoire of political action. Although protests were consistent with the Reformists' previous populist strategies, the events demonstrated both the tightrope that Khatami was walking in relation to leveraging his popular mandate, as well as his reticence at escalating his strategies in a way that might compromise the Reformists' status as a tolerated opposition. In July 1999, Iranian authorities closed the pro-Khatami *Salaam* newspaper after it printed accusations of the Ministry of Intelligence's involvement in the killing of Iranian dissidents and intellectuals, briefly mentioned earlier. The conservative majority parliament had passed media laws in the preceding days, and the newspaper was one of the first casualties of the new legislation. Iranian students took to the streets to protest *Salaam's* closure. After days of protests, police and militias stormed a Tehran University dormitory where many of the protesting students were sleeping in the middle of the night. The dormitory was sacked, at least five students were killed and many others were injured, spurring days of student riots. It was the most significant case of public unrest since the 1979 revolution.

President Khatami's response to the crisis was notably muted. Although the Minister of Science and Higher Education Mostafa Moeen resigned in protest to the crackdown, Khatami sympathised with the protesters but criticised the rioters as people with 'evil aims' and promised that 'we shall stand in their way.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the protests revealed the challenges that the Reform movement faced as a tolerated opposition. While they were willing to use populist tactics, they were aware of the precarity of their tolerated status. Strongly supporting the students may have risked the movement's fragile, but permitted position in society. This served as a reminder of just how much regime structures shaped the Reformist response to the crisis. However, Maloney argued that Khatami's response also influenced the regime's next move:

For the hard-liners, the events of July 1999 revealed that the reformists' moderation represented their Achilles' heel, which encouraged the increasing forcefulness of their repression.<sup>36</sup>

In demonstrating caution, Khatami gave the regime greater confidence in the efficacy of its coercive instruments. This also led to the disenfranchisement of the Reformists' supporters—in the February 2003 municipal elections, only 10–15 per cent of voters turned out in cities.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, while the Reform movement had always been divided between those



advocating an incremental approach to change and those who wanted to challenge the regime head-on, it became clear that Khatami's incremental approach was failing.<sup>38</sup> To Maloney, the events:

Confirmed for many of Iran's highly politicized youth the fundamental inadequacy of the reform movement itself and the sheer impossibility of advancing gradual moderation of an absolutist system. This sense of despair left a lasting rift among reformist activists themselves, as well as between the population and the movement's leadership.<sup>39</sup>

This weakening of the link between the Reform movement's senior officials and their base would later prove catastrophic for Reformist political prospects because it had been a key insulating factor against the regime's relentless use of its instruments of coercion.

One of the final strategies used by the Reform movement during this period was the resignation of representatives of the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF) from the parliament in February 2004. Reformist groups had previously used electoral boycotts to protest regime coercion, but this marked an escalation of the strategy in which 120 members of the Front resigned their parliamentary seats in frustration at their inability to pass legislation and constant defeat by Iran's non-elected officials. The resignations took place symbolically 25 years to the day since Ayatollah Khomeini had returned to Iran. In a statement to the Reformist Parliamentary Speaker Mehdi Karroubi, the parliamentarians explained that they were no longer willing 'to be present in a parliament that is not capable of defending the rights of the people and which is unable to prevent elections in which the people cannot choose their representatives.'<sup>40</sup> This was one of the last efforts by the Reform movement to appeal to its constituency and to the pluralist elements of Iran's unique political system during the Khatami era. However, like its restrained response to the student protests, the Reform movement's moderate and principled strategies merely encouraged the regime's coercive apparatus. It became clear to the regime that the Reformists would not take their fight to the streets, with Adib-Moghaddam noting that:

The election boycott turned out to be self-defeating. Without the parliamentary mandate, the reformers failed to solicit piecemeal compromises from the ruling clergy. ... As a result, [the regime] won the chaperones of Iranian conservatism took over and the majlis lost its popular mandate for political and socioeconomic change.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the subsequent 2004 legislative election became symbolic of the Iranian political landscape in the years to come. The regime banned 2530 Reformist nominees, including 80 sitting members of parliament and President Khatami's brother Reza Khatami. This left the race wide open to conservatives, who won nearly 70 per cent of seats, marginalising the Reformists and leaving them without the limited but authoritative position from which they had previously been able to influence Iranian politics.

Reformists continued to mobilise for electoral cycles in subsequent years. In the 2005 elections, Reformists were linked to four candidates, suggesting that the regime was continuing to use its strategy of allowing multiple Reformists to run in order to dilute their vote. The regime strategy appeared to pay off—the four candidates received more than 55 per cent of the vote in total, but none received the absolute majority required to be elected. Former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who received the most votes, subsequently lost the second round of the poll to the hard-line Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, solidifying the conservative ascent and marking the victory of the regime's coercive apparatus over the Reformists. By the time the 2008 parliamentary election took place, the Reformist IIPF claimed that 95 per cent of its candidates had been blocked from contesting the ballot.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the regime's coercive apparatus had proven too strong for the popular but increasingly divided Reform movement. In a context in which the Reformists' support base was also bitterly disappointed with the movement's political performance, elections would no longer represent a clear opportunity for the Reformists' political salvation.

### THE 2009 ELECTION AND THE ESCALATION OF REFORMIST STRATEGY

The 2009 Iranian presidential elections represented a new opportunity for the Reform movement. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been in power for four years and was unpopular amongst the Reformist base. Iran's economy was buckling under the weight of economic sanctions, while Ahmadinejad's provocative international posturing appeared to be putting Iran on a collision course with the US.<sup>43</sup> Reformists signalled in the lead-up to the election that they remained hopeful about their ability to regain power and mobilise the people, consistent with their long-held

view of elections as their key vehicle for political influence. However, subsequent encounters with the regime would force the Reform movement to shift its tactics significantly.

The election took place on June 12, 2009, with four candidates including the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad contesting the final ballot. Two candidates from the Reform movement were nominated (and approved) to run: former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and former Parliamentary Speaker Mehdi Karroubi. Former President Khatami had initially also indicated his intention to run but later endorsed Mousavi. Mousavi, the frontrunner, pledged to challenge Iran's 'extremist' international image and to 'reform laws that are unfair to women.'<sup>44</sup> The campaign was closely contested, with fierce debates taking place between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi. Both candidates had a significant support base, with each holding large public campaign rallies in Tehran on the eve of the election.<sup>45</sup>

The crisis began late on election night just before polls closed, when Mousavi began alleging irregularities, claiming that he was 'definitely the winner ... [according to] indications from all over Iran.'<sup>46</sup> He accused the regime of 'manipulating the people's vote' to manufacture an Ahmadinejad victory and declared that: 'It is our duty to defend people's votes. There is no turning back.'<sup>47</sup> An hour later, Iranian authorities announced that President Ahmadinejad had been re-elected with nearly 63 per cent of the vote.<sup>48</sup> Protests broke out on the streets of Tehran overnight.

On June 14, Mousavi submitted a formal complaint against the result to the Guardian Council, although in an online statement declared: 'I'm not very optimistic about their judgment. Many of its (the Guardian Council's) members during the election were not impartial and supported the government candidate.'<sup>49</sup> Subsequent polls have suggested that Ahmadinejad may have won the poll in his own right, but it was too late.<sup>50</sup> Hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets. To the Reformists, the scale of the perceived electoral fraud represented a nadir in government-opposition relations. Reformists had long viewed their popular base and the electoral process as the key vehicles for reform and as an insulating mechanism against regime meddling. Although the regime had previously controlled the pre-election vetting process, Reformists viewed the 2009 election count as a hardening of the regime's repertoires that closed one of their few avenues for political elevation.

This shifting landscape of political opportunities led to the Reformists combining their conventional repertoires of action—that is using populist

tactics to mobilise support—with something more challenging: large-scale protest. In 1999, Reformist leaders had rejected the student protests as too dangerous a tactic. Yet, one decade later Reformist leaders led the calls for the Iranian people to take to the streets, marking a significant escalation of the movement's repertoires of political action and the adoption of tactics more commonly associated with that of an 'anti-system' opposition. This is consistent with McAdam and Sewell's findings on 'transformative events,' in which extreme coercion can create outcomes such as an escalation of an opposition's contentious repertoire or a spontaneous mass mobilisation.<sup>51</sup> The events surrounding Iran's 2009 elections fomented both outcomes.

The day after the election results were announced, Mousavi called for the Guardian Council to cancel the vote and for Iran's clergy to join the protests, while the Reformist Association of Combatant Clergy issued a statement on its website calling for the annulment of the vote. It warned: 'If this process becomes the norm, the republican aspect of the regime will be damaged and people will lose confidence in the system.'<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Mehdi Karroubi declared: 'I am announcing again that the elections should not be allowed and the results have no legitimacy or social standing. ... Therefore, I do not consider Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of the republic.'<sup>53</sup> As the protest cycle escalated, peaking with millions on the street in Tehran, Reformists continued to make bold statements. On June 21, Mousavi said: 'Protesting against lies and fraud (in the election) is your right. ... In your protests, continue to show restraint. I am expecting armed forces to avoid irreversible damage.'<sup>54</sup> By July 2, his position had hardened:

It is our historical responsibility to continue our protests and not to abandon our efforts to preserve the nation's rights. ... From now on we will have a government which, from the point of view of ties with the public, is in the weakest of positions. ... A majority of society, of which I personally am a member, do not accept the legitimacy of this government.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, in line with their historical repertoires of contestation, the Reformists' appealed to the public to shield themselves from regime backlash.

The post-election protests quickly became much larger than the Reform movement, attracting a broad cross-section of society, with Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi as their *de facto* leaders. Protesters

borrowed from repertoires of Iranian protest that had been popularised during the Iranian revolution, including marking the high-profile deaths of protesters such as 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan at the end of the 40-day Shi'a period of mourning.<sup>56</sup> The Green Movement also mobilised on the dates that had in recent decades been the site of pro-government protests, such as Qods Day (September 18) and the anniversary of the US Embassy crisis (November 4). However, protesters morphed their protest behaviour. While Qods Day had long been associated with the government-sanctioned slogan 'Death to Israel,' Green Movement protesters shouted 'Death to Russia,' which was the first state that recognised the election result. In the protest to mark the US Embassy crisis, protesters shouted 'Death to No One' or 'Death to the Dictator' instead of the traditional 'Death to America.'<sup>57</sup> This marked a significant intensification of opposition tactics.

The Green Movement protests also led to a hardening of the regime's repertoires of political action, where it began using public violence in order to subdue dissent. Although the regime had always used violence against its detractors, this had mostly taken place behind closed doors to maintain a level of plausible deniability. By contrast, the 2009 response was more overt than previous, characterised by the mass mobilisation of police on the streets, the use of water cannons and riot vehicles and violent crackdowns on the streets by government and pro-government militias. Over the course of the protest cycle, thousands were arrested and dozens killed. The regime also used public show trials to broadcast live confessions by more than 100 Reformist and Green Movement leaders on television.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the regime had responded to the opposition's new strategies by escalating their own repertoire, highlighting the cyclical nature of regime-opposition relations in Iran.

The events of 2009 therefore represented a watershed moment in government-Reform movement relations, marking a significant increase in conflict between the two opposing parties, as well as the adoption of strategies that had previously been considered inconceivable. The Reform movement quickly adopted protest strategies more commonly associated with anti-system oppositions, breaking with their long-held reticence to take to the streets in a way that could threaten their coveted status as a tolerated entity. However, presidential elections—once the key tool in their repertoire—had now twice failed to provide the political opportunity that the Reformists had come to rely on for their political fortune. Now that the regime was seen to have meddled with both pre- and post-election

processes, effectively closing all political opportunity structures, escalation was seen as a necessity. Indeed, as Maloney noted, after 2009 ‘elections inevitably serve a more constrained function in facilitating the shadow-boxing among the elite and offering a mere veneer of popular consent.’<sup>59</sup> Elections no longer represented a clear political opportunity for the Reform movement. Although the Reformists’ response in 2009 was successful in discrediting the regime’s handling of electoral processes, in the long term the Reform movement would pay a significant price for its actions. At the same time, the regime too had overestimated its capacity to quickly subdue the popular opposition. Regime strategies led to a further diffusion of the protests, underlining that regimes too are vulnerable to misreading political opportunities, and do not enjoy *carte blanche* when formulating their response to opposition. Indeed, the protests would not be fully quelled until 2010, and in the process the regime sustained significant damage to its own credibility.

#### EXISTING ON THE MARGINS OF REGIME TOLERATION AFTER 2009

As the protest movement wound down and the regime wrested back control of the country in early 2010, it became clear that the Iranian political landscape had changed significantly. The events of the 2009 election led to a significant narrowing of political opportunities in Iran for opposition groups, including the Reformists. In the years following the protests, the regime de-escalated its strategies of political action, returning to its business-as-usual use of the judiciary and organs of the state to subdue opponents. In 2010, two key Reformist political parties, the IIPF and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution of Iran Organisation, were banned and subsequently prevented from contesting the 2012 parliamentary elections.<sup>60</sup> In 2011, the Reform movement’s *de facto* leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi and their wives were put under house arrest after calling for protests in Iran to support the emerging Arab Uprisings. In 2015, the regime banned Iranian media outlets from publishing former President Khatami’s name or image in order to further marginalise his followers.<sup>61</sup> This deprived the Reform movement of its highest-profile leaders and gradually prevented it from leveraging what was left of the country’s electoral opportunities.

The diminished value of Iran's electoral cycles was evident in the 2012 parliamentary elections, which became a battle within regime loyalist ranks, pitting those close to the controversial President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against those linked to Supreme Leader Khamenei. With many Green Movement leaders and protesters still in jail, the Reform movement's de facto leaders under house arrest and key Reformist parties banned from participating, the Reformists were conspicuously absent from the event, which witnessed the lowest number of registered candidates since 1996.<sup>62</sup> Although some low-profile Reformists were ultimately elected, they were not the political force that they had previously been. In fact, as Alem observed, the Reformist candidates elected were more likely to be 'aligned with third- or fourth-tier reformist groups' rather than its dominant factions.<sup>63</sup> In this regard, while the Reform movement had survived to partially contest another election, its capacity to seriously influence the parliament or elevate its key players had significantly diminished. Given the substantial damage done to its base through its failure to achieve lasting change under President Khatami and in the 2009 disaster, even if it had fielded candidates, it could also no longer rely on a massive support base to circumvent regime coercion.

Responding to its changed political environment, the Reform movement enacted a new strategy in the lead-up to the 2013 presidential election. Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had become increasingly associated with Reformists nominated for the ballot, had his candidacy rejected by the Guardian Council. The only Reformist that survived the vetting process was Mohammed Aref, who was a low-profile candidate.<sup>64</sup> Under these conditions, the Reformists developed a new strategy in which it partnered with moderates in order to maintain political influence. If the movement could no longer successfully elect its own candidates, it would ally those who could. This was a response to the closure of its political opportunity structures post-2009 but also reflected the political learning that the Reformists had undergone since the previous polls in which the nomination of multiple Reformist candidates had split the potent reform vote.

Mohammed Aref's polling in the lead-up to the election suggested that he would receive no more than seven per cent of the vote, meaning that he would likely be knocked out of the race in the first round of voting.<sup>65</sup> Three days before the poll, Aref withdrew his candidature at Khatami's request,<sup>66</sup> after which Khatami announced his support for the moderate candidate Hassan Rouhani:

Bearing in mind my duty to the country and the fate of our honourable nation, I will give my vote to my esteemed brother Dr Rouhani. ... I ask all, in particular the reformists and those who seek the dignity and elevation of the nation ... to see Dr Rouhani's candidacy as a suitable chance for their demands to be met.<sup>67</sup>

The Reformists had decided that it was more efficacious to back a regime-palatable moderate than a Reformist who stood no chance of winning. This was significant because Rouhani was by no means a Reformist and in fact was a 'regime insider' who had been one of the regime's most public advocates during the 1999 protests, declaring that 'our revolution needs a thorough cleanup, and this (the regime crackdown on students) will help advance will help advance the cause of the regime and the revolution.'<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, in 2013 Rouhani had campaigned on a platform of 'moderation and hope,' declaring his support for ending the nuclear crisis, opening Iran's economy to the world and achieving civil liberty reform in areas including the Internet.<sup>69</sup> He was the closest candidate on the ballot to Reformist principles and was electable. Indeed, the 2013 election represented a turning point for the Reform movement. Although it had endured, the combination of regime repression and movement division meant that it could no longer nominate the high-profile charismatic candidates who had characterised its previous political life. A compromise in its political repertoire would be necessary to prevent further losses. The strategy however was not without controversy. One observer declared that 'celebrating Rouhani's victory in Iran makes a mockery of green movement.'<sup>70</sup>

The regime too had been changed by the events of 2009, which left it with a more limited repertoire of coercion to employ against its opponents. Although it had succeeded in subduing the protest movement, it suffered a significant reputational loss from its brutal treatment of the protesters and in ongoing suspicion on the fairness of elections. Supreme Leader Khamenei, who had previously been seen as above day-to-day politics in Iran, also endured a significant blow to his legitimacy. By weighing into the debate in favour of the regime and President Ahmadinejad, he could no longer claim to be apolitical. These considerations strongly shaped the regime's subsequent repertoires of action: in all elections since, the regime has gone to significant lengths to avoid accusations of ballot rigging. In the 2012 elections, regime officials loudly touted the high voter turnout.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the regime now needed to demonstrate a vibrant



pluralist process in Iran because 2009 had shown that the population was willing to take to the street to protest electoral irregularities. This revealed a second strategy, which Alem described:

In an attempt to portray the upcoming elections as pluralistic, the Ministry of Interior announced that 14 percent of registered candidates are associated with the reformist camp. Yet, two of the most prominent reformist parties have announced that they will not register for the vote.<sup>72</sup>

The regime made a low-risk concession in which it was willing to allow lesser-known Reformists to win. This way, the electoral process would attract the veneer of democratic process, without posing a significant threat. The regime understood full well that such low-profile Reformists would have little chance of uniting the population behind them or of exercising significant influence once within the corridors of the parliament. Indeed, while the regime is undoubtedly more powerful than its opponents, its strategies of political contestation are also shaped by its challengers. It does not have *carte blanche* to do as it pleases. The regime too had learned.

The situation for Reformists improved somewhat in Iran after the election of President Rouhani, although the movement continued to endure substantial pressure from the regime's coercive apparatus, and Mousavi and Karroubi remained under house arrest. In the lead-up to the 2016 legislative elections, a Paris-based spokesman for Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi signalled the movement's ongoing hope in the electoral process:

The Green Movement is still alive and it manifests in the Iranian nation's demands for freedom of expression, justice and respecting human rights. ... The Green Movement does not only mean holding street protests. People will continue to fight for their rights at the ballot box. ... The movement cannot be silenced.<sup>73</sup>

However, the Guardian Council approved only one per cent of Reformist candidates, disqualifying candidates including two of former President Rafsanjani's children and the grandson of the country's founding leader Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>74</sup> In addition, only four Reformists were approved to contest seats in Tehran. This prompted the Reformists to turn to their previous strategy, with former President Khatami becoming the 'architect' of

a coalition electoral list called the List of Hope, which combined lesser-known Reformists with many regime-palatable moderates and some conservatives.<sup>75</sup> Once again, allying with electable moderates was deemed an efficacious strategy to ensure that some Reformist ideas were represented in the Iranian parliament. The strategy bore fruit: The List of Hope became the largest faction in the parliament, winning 42 seats, including all Tehran seats.<sup>76</sup> It is led in the parliament by the Reformist former Presidential Candidate Mohammed Aref. The pattern continued in the 2017 presidential and city council elections, in which Reformists backed President Rouhani for the presidency, while focusing on the less restricted city council elections in which they won a majority of Tehran seats. Indeed, it was the city councils—the creation of the Reform movement itself—that now offered the Reformists their greatest opportunity. Long the domain of little-known local candidates and an area difficult for the regime to fully vet, city council elections fit closely with the Reform movement's more limited strategy.

Nonetheless, by the time the 2017 electoral cycle was complete, it was difficult to ignore the diminishment of the Reformist movement. No longer able to field high-profile candidates for election and with its most recognisable leaders either under house arrest or facing a media blackout, the regime continued to wield its institutional power to prevent the Reformists from regrouping. However, in a pattern similar to what Hanlie Booysen observed in Chap. 7 of this volume on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Reform movement had become one of the great survivors of Iranian politics. As an organisation that had long protected its status as a tolerated opposition, the group had since 2009 demonstrated cognisance of its changed political environment. Not only was it sensitive to new political opportunities such as the potential for moderate-Reformist coalitions, it also went to significant lengths to convince the regime that it no longer posed a threat. This strategy was confirmed when large-scale protests broke out across Iran in the winter of 2017–2018. The Reformist response was muted, with former President Khatami calling on the regime to 'try to identify people's problems and hardships,' but noting that 'the enemy seizes any opportunity' to harm the country.<sup>77</sup> For the Reformists, it seemed that the lure of tolerance remained strong. Indeed, perhaps their greatest strength over more than two decades of political life is that they have endured.

## CONCLUSION

The Reform movement is one of Iran's few successful opposition political movements, having participated at the highest echelons of government for more than two decades. From the position of tolerated opposition, it has posed a significant threat to the regime by mobilising the population around the principles of reform and democracy. Using Iran's inbuilt electoral processes as the key site of political contestation, the movement was able to at times shield itself from the regime's coercive apparatus by leveraging Iran's pluralist structures and their own popular support base. However, like other tolerated oppositions operating in an authoritarian climate, it has been forced to make concessions in order to protect its precarious political status. This has seen the Reform movement turn its back on its own supporters and tolerate some of the indignities of regime coercion in return for the promise of achieving incremental political change. Yet after 2009, its space to move had become so limited that it was not clear whether it still even fit the criteria of a 'tolerated' opposition. Although it remained the country's most progressive political faction and a favourite among youth and women, the Reformists as a movement with ambitious goals had been almost completely sidelined.

Nonetheless, both Reformists and the regime demonstrated themselves to be closely shaped by their encounters with one another. The regime had always dictated the political opportunities that the Reform movement could contest by imprisoning and sidelining its leaders and controlling the electoral nomination process. The Reformists consistently morphed their political strategies in response to changes by mobilising their base, flooding ballots with large numbers of candidates to undermine the efficacy of vetting and later by forming coalitions with less threatening but sympathetic candidates who had survived the nomination process. Although this demonstrated the scope of the movement's responsiveness to political opportunities, flexibility and resilience, the movement ultimately struggled to circumvent the almost complete closure of the political space in the aftermath of the 2009 protests. But the regime too was shaped by its interactions with the Reformist opposition. The Reform movement had long been able to leverage popular support to blunt the regime's coercive instruments, even during the regime's brutal 2009 crackdown in which Reformist and Green Movement mobilisa-

tion would shape subsequent regime strategies, leading to a softer response to future protests and more emphasis on electoral mechanics. Indeed, although Iran remained a rigidly authoritarian regime with a significant power imbalance between the regime and its opposition, it was clear that each party's strategies of political contestation were developed with close consideration of their opponents. It was this symbiotic pattern that will continue to define the relationship between the regime and its opposition in Iran into the future.

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## CHAPTER 7

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# Surviving the Syrian Uprising: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

*Hanlie Booyesen*

*‘Over the last 50 years Assad’s family was black and the Muslim Brotherhood white.’<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

The 2011 Syrian uprising offered the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) an opportunity to re-enter the Syrian political arena. Exile, the SMB’s status as a banned organisation,<sup>2</sup> and its weak support base inside Syria prevented the Brotherhood from participating in the emerging social movement on the ground. Nonetheless, the SMB remained relevant throughout the metamorphosis of the Syrian contention, and in its transition from a peaceful protest movement to an insurgency, and then into a civil war. This chapter shows that the Brotherhood survived the transformation of the Syrian uprising due to its sophisticated ability to modify its repertoires of contention.

No study to date has focused on the SMB in a contentious politics framework. This is not surprising, as studies of contentious politics tend to focus on social movements, while political parties and interest groups

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remain ‘invisible in the wings’.<sup>3</sup> For example, Leenders and Heydemann investigated the ‘early risers’ in Dara’,<sup>4</sup> while Gani studied the failure of the social movement in Syria.<sup>5</sup> The SMB does not feature as a primary political actor in either of these studies, because the Brotherhood did not instigate the Syrian uprising, and neither did the SMB participate in the 2011 social movement.

A narrow focus on the 2011 social movement in Syria therefore neglects the SMB as a significant political actor, even though the SMB’s contentious relationship with the Syrian state is well documented.<sup>6</sup> A contentious relationship occurs when ‘actors make claims that bear on someone else’s interests’.<sup>7</sup> In using a contentious politics framework, this chapter therefore offers a new perspective on the relationship between the SMB and the Syrian government. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part shows the SMB’s revivalist origin, its early parliamentary experience, and its subsequent political exclusion by the Ba’th one-party state. The second section demonstrates the SMB’s ability to modify its claims during two pre-2011 episodes of contention, namely (1) the Damascus Spring (2001) and (2) the Damascus Declaration (2005). The third section shows the SMB’s political survival in the wake of the 2011 Syrian uprising, based on the Brotherhood’s ability to modify its repertoires of contention.

### THE SYRIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: REFORMERS, POLITICIANS, AND EXILES

In this chapter, the word ‘moderate’ relates to the SMB’s objectives and tactics,<sup>8</sup> which are underpinned by a ‘centrist’ or ‘moderate’ Islamist world view.<sup>9</sup> For example, the SMB supports the notion of a nation-state, while Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda reject the nation-state in favour of trans-national political objectives. The SMB further supports domestic political change through parliamentary processes, as opposed to violence, and uses *ijtihad* or independent reasoning to make the example of the *salaf al-salih* or early Muslim community relevant to a contemporary world.<sup>10</sup> Islamic revivalism is part of Muslim history and was also central to the SMB’s founding years. Revivalism or renewal entails a return to Islam as practised by the Prophet Muhammad and early Muslim community or *salaf al-salih*. However, Muslims of different orientations have different interpretations of renewal. The SMB’s revivalism fits in a tradition that supports ‘social

and political activism', as opposed to 'withdrawal and quietism'.<sup>11</sup> For example, the Brotherhood under its first leader (*al-muraqib al-'amm*) Mustafā al-Siba'i actively lobbied against the partition of Palestine with its National Charter or *al-mithaq al-watany* (September 1947),<sup>12</sup> and also called for jihad to liberate Palestine.<sup>13</sup> The SMB's understanding of a return to Islam is further reinforced by the notion that Islam provides a comprehensive system of values.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of Islam as representing religion and state (*din wa-dawla*) is what makes the SMB Islamist.

The SMB participated in parliamentary politics from its inception. In May 1946,<sup>15</sup> a month after the last French soldiers left Syria,<sup>16</sup> Mustafā al-Siba'i unified a number of local *jam'iyyat* (societies) and *halqa* (study circles) to establish the SMB.<sup>17</sup> As an astute political actor, the Brotherhood partook in the 1947 Constituent Assembly elections as part of the Islamic Socialist Front (*al-jabha al-Islamiyya al-ishtirakiyya*). Though the SMB traditionally appealed to an urban middle and lower middle class that valued private property,<sup>18</sup> in 1949, socialism had become a significant trend.<sup>19</sup> The SMB further appealed to the same constituency as the Ba'th and Communist parties,<sup>20</sup> which meant that the Brotherhood's identification with socialism served it on not one but two political fronts. Electoral laws in 1947 and in 1949 further guaranteed proportional representation for minorities,<sup>21</sup> which, following the same manner, witnessed the SMB cooperating with Christian and/or Jewish candidates in both elections.<sup>22</sup>

The SMB valued its parliamentary representation,<sup>23</sup> even though it remained modest with three members elected in 1947, and three members elected in 1949.<sup>24</sup> After the 1947 elections, Al-Siba'i wrote to Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: 'This marks the first time official representatives of the Islamic idea were elected to parliament in any Islamic or Arab state'.<sup>25</sup> The importance of the SMB's political objectives was further underscored by the manner in which the Brotherhood guarded its parliamentary representation in 1950. Before the 1949 Constituent Assembly elections, the League of Ulama promised to support anyone who would work towards the inclusion of Islam as the state religion (*din al-dawla*) in the new constitution.<sup>26</sup> As a member of the Preparatory Committee, Mustafā al-Siba'i succeeded in gaining the Committee's support for the inclusion of this clause in the 1950 draft constitution.<sup>27</sup> However, fierce opposition from secular parties and churches convinced Siba'i to compromise, in contrast with the League of Ulama, which rejected the constitutional compromise.<sup>28</sup> Reissner ascribed



this shift to political considerations, as the SMB's compromise prevented new elections, which might have cost the Brotherhood its cabinet minister.<sup>29</sup>

The Ba`th party coup in 1963 ended the SMB's parliamentary experience,<sup>30</sup> which triggered the Brotherhood's entry into transgressive contention.<sup>31</sup> In the wake of the Ba`th takeover, most of the SMB's leading figures went into exile,<sup>32</sup> while the government progressively excluded the SMB from Syria's institutional politics.<sup>33</sup> In the late 1970s, the Hafez al-Assad government targeted the SMB in its crackdown on an Islamic insurgency turned uprising.<sup>34</sup> In response,<sup>35</sup> the SMB broke with tradition and adopted armed jihad in October 1979.<sup>36</sup> In July 1980, membership of the SMB became a capital offence (Law no. 49 of 1980), while later the same year the SMB published a political platform that called for an Islamic revolution to overthrow the Hafez al-Assad government.<sup>37</sup> The growing contention between the SMB and the Syrian government reached a peak in the city of Hama in February 1982. A violent standoff between the Syrian military and Islamists in Hama resulted in between 10,000 and 30,000 dead, inclusive of 1000 soldiers.<sup>38</sup> After Hama,<sup>39</sup> members of the SMB were either in exile, in prison, or dead, sending the group into disarray.<sup>40</sup> In exile, the SMB became hostage to the whims of its different patrons, that is, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. The Hafez al-Assad government further used the large number of SMB members in prison to lure the Brotherhood into disingenuous negotiations.<sup>41</sup> The failure of these negotiations increased tensions within the Brotherhood, which caused an official split in 1986.<sup>42</sup>

The SMB's early history therefore reflected its revivalist world view, and pursuit of political influence within institutional boundaries. After 1963, the SMB's history was largely determined by Ba`th one-party rule, as reflected in its members' exile, and the Brotherhood's decision in 1979 to adopt armed jihad. The SMB's progressive political exclusion and exile from Syria therefore drove the Brotherhood to transgressive contention, which is further investigated in the remainder of this chapter.

### THE BASHAR AL-ASSAD GOVERNMENT (2000–)

The SMB perceived the ascent of Bashar al-Assad to the presidency in 2000 as an opportunity to escape its political obscurity that followed the Hama debacle. Bashar's political succession also opened up new opportunities to the SMB for claim making. This section surveys SMB claims mak-

ing in two episodes of contention, namely the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration. It also shows that the Bashar al-Assad government was both the recipient of claims, and made the rules that governed the contention, based on its control over the 'principal concentrated means of coercion'.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Damascus Spring*

The secularist opposition perceived Hafez al-Assad's death and Bashar al-Assad's succession as an opportunity for new contentious politics. In fact, the grooming of Bashar from 1994 onwards created significant expectations for change. However, the two most important state structures, the security apparatus and the Ba`th party facilitated Bashar's assumption of power, and therefore Hafez al-Assad's legacy.<sup>44</sup> Still, Bashar's rule was different from that of his father, at least for a period between July 2000 and February 2001, which became known as the Damascus Spring. Though there was no change in the actual access to power in 2000, the secularist opposition wrongly perceived an opening of the political space, which moved them to act.

The Damascus Spring allowed the secularist opposition limited access to the public sphere. In contrast to the personality cult that Hafez al-Assad cultivated during his 30-year rule, Bashar initially objected to the public display of his picture.<sup>45</sup> He also announced that a presidential election would be held at the end of his seven-year term, as opposed to a referendum, which was the norm under Hafez al-Assad.<sup>46</sup> Though these changes might have been symbolic, Bashar also relaxed some restrictions on press freedom, closed down the notorious Mezze Military Prison, and offered amnesty to a number of political prisoners.<sup>47</sup> The Damascus Spring therefore signalled to the opposition 'the potential ... for greater institutional access and a more productive repertoire of contention'.<sup>48</sup>

The secularist opposition seized the Damascus Spring, and in doing so, created an opportunity for the SMB. They responded to Bashar's apparent increased political tolerance with discussion forums and petitions demanding political reforms.<sup>49</sup> The Bashar al-Assad government initially tolerated the debate, which further reinforced expectations for political change.<sup>50</sup> Such leniency, which was in stark contrast to Hafez al-Assad's Syria, strengthened the Damascus Spring, and thus created an opportunity for the SMB.

The SMB responded to the Damascus Spring with its own claims. An Arab head of state who attended Hafez al-Assad's funeral carried a conciliatory message from the SMB to Bashar al-Assad.<sup>51</sup> Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, the head of the SMB at the time, stated in a telephone interview with Al-Jazeera on 17 July 2000 that Bashar 'is not responsible for the past. His responsibility begins after he is sworn in'.<sup>52</sup> The same conciliatory message was repeated in May 2001, when the SMB published its draft Charter of National Honour for Political Activity.<sup>53</sup> Al-Bayanouni also wrote elsewhere at the time: 'We believe the distance between us [and the other] is no longer what it used to be. We are now capable of accepting those with whom we may disagree'.<sup>54</sup>

The SMB's 2001 draft Charter showed that the Brotherhood was ready to re-enter the Syrian political arena by reaching an agreement with the Bashar al-Assad government. But the draft Charter also flagged the SMB's support for political pluralism. Though the purpose of the 2001 draft Charter was said to stimulate political debate, that is, 'to open up to Syrians, including to the [new] President', it also posed a challenge to the Bashar al-Assad government. Two of the Charter's stated goals were not in conflict with the Ba'ath party's ideology. They were: to confront and defy the Zionist project, and to achieve Arab unity. However, the third, to build a 'modern state', as understood by the SMB,<sup>55</sup> challenged the Ba'ath party's antipathy to political pluralism.

The Bashar al-Assad government boldly rejected the SMB's rapprochement.<sup>56</sup> It dismissed the draft Charter as opportunistic and based on a perception that a 'political and organisational vacuum exists in Syria'.<sup>57</sup> The government also reverted to Hafez al-Assad's rhetoric by calling the SMB a terrorist organisation,<sup>58</sup> and later, by accusing the Brotherhood of being manipulated by the United Kingdom (where al-Bayanouni lived in exile).<sup>59</sup> The Damascus Spring therefore offered the SMB an opportunity to make claims on the Bashar al-Assad government, but the government remained in control of the contention by opening up the public space, regulating the participants, and closing it down. When the contention ended, the Bashar al-Assad government remained in place.

### *Damascus Declaration*

In contrast to the Damascus Spring, events outside Syria prompted the second episode of contention. The Israeli withdrawal from the south of Lebanon in May 2000 was the first link in a chain of events that led to

significant international pressure on Syria in 2005.<sup>60</sup> Israel's unilateral withdrawal changed the balance of power in Lebanon, which allowed Syria's detractors to demand that Damascus withdraw its remaining troops from Lebanon.<sup>61</sup> The demand gained international currency because of a fundamental shift in regional politics, namely the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the resulting confrontation between the US and Syria.

In December 2003, the US Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SAA) in response to Syria's covert support for the Iraqi insurgency.<sup>62</sup> The US also used the SAA to link developments in Iraq and weapons of mass destruction with Syria's presence in Lebanon. This enforced a Syrian perception that the al-Assad government could become a target of the so-called War on Terror.<sup>63</sup> Next came United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1559 of 2 September 2004,<sup>64</sup> which was a thinly veiled demand on Syria to withdraw its military forces from Lebanon.<sup>65</sup> To the Syrian government, UNSC Resolution 1559 confirmed its suspicion that there was a Western strategy to undermine Syria's geostrategic influence, and threaten Bashar al-Assad's domestic survival.<sup>66</sup>

This growing international pressure on Syria offered the SMB and the secularist opposition a new opportunity for claim making. Though both political actors used known repertoires of contention, that is, petitions, statements, and political platforms, the SMB went further in adapting its claims. Thus, while Syrian intellectuals circulated a petition on the Internet in February 2004 with demands similar to the statements issued during the Damascus Spring,<sup>67</sup> the SMB published a new political platform in June 2004, entitled: *The Political Project for a Future Syria*.<sup>68</sup> This document, which was the result of a lengthy review process,<sup>69</sup> allowed the SMB to reposition the movement politically. In contrast to the reconciliatory tone of the 2001 draft Charter, the 2004 platform both offered a detailed plan for an alternative political system to that of the ruling Ba'th party and emphasised the Brotherhood's commitment to political reforms.

The assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri on 14 February 2005 was the final link in this chain of international events. In October 2005, the UN published a report authored by Detlev Mehlis, which incriminated the Syrian government in the assassination. Many Syrians and foreign observers expected the UN report to spell the end of the Bashar al-Assad government.<sup>70</sup> In the same month, the secularist

opposition and the SMB published the Damascus Declaration as a joint project to unseat the Bashar al-Assad government.<sup>71</sup>

The Damascus Declaration represented a new repertoire of contention for both the SMB and the secularist opposition. Though the SMB cooperated with secularists to form the Baghdad-based National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria (NALS) in 1982, the secularists in NALS were all living in exile.<sup>72</sup> The Damascus Declaration in contrast witnessed the SMB joining forces with the domestic secularist opposition. This innovation in the SMB's (and secularists) repertoire of contention followed the SMB's political revision, as captured in the 2004 Political Project for a Future Syria.

However, the SMB's new repertoire of contention ultimately failed, as international pressure on Syria weakened. In March 2006, the SMB formed an alliance with the just defected former Vice-President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam.<sup>73</sup> The alliance did not produce the desired revolution, but placed strain on the SMB's cooperation with the secularist opposition.<sup>74</sup> The opportunity for political change further dissipated as the Bashar al-Assad government regained regional and international support. The last Syrian troops left Lebanon in April 2005, which made Syria compliant with international demands. Al-Assad's ally Hamas' 'victory' over Israel in the June 2006 war further strengthened the Bashar al-Assad government's regional standing, while international pressure further softened in the absence of the UN indicting any member of the Syrian leadership in the Hariri investigation.<sup>75</sup> Finally, in July 2008, France paved the way for Syria's reintegration in the international community by inviting Bashar al-Assad to an EU-Mediterranean summit.<sup>76</sup>

In sum, the two episodes of contention threatened the government's interests. During the Damascus Spring, the SMB tried to reconcile with the Bashar al-Assad government. Its claims were a clear departure from the SMB's advocacy in 1980 for an Islamic revolution, but the Brotherhood did not discard its commitment to political pluralism. In fact, by emphasizing its support for a 'modern state,' the SMB signalled that reconciliation was not unconditional. In 2004, the SMB revised its political platform, which allowed the unique cooperation between the Brotherhood and the domestic secularist opposition in 2005, as reflected in the Damascus Declaration. However, this repertoire of contention also failed to unseat the Syrian government, which five years later was facing the Syrian uprising.

## THE 2011 SYRIAN UPRISING

The Syrian uprising began in the wake of the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. This section shows that the SMB successfully adapted its repertoire of contention to the political environment, which was initially created by the Bashar al-Assad government and the protagonists of the Syrian uprising but progressively influenced by external actors.

Regional, as opposed to domestic developments caused an opening in Syria's political opportunity structure in 2011.<sup>77</sup> The political elite in Syria, specifically the military and intelligence corps, remained unified,<sup>78</sup> as was the case during the Damascus Spring. What changed in Syria in 2011 was a collective perception among Syrians that they had the ability to challenge the Bashar al-Assad government,<sup>79</sup> based on the fall of the Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, and the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a month later. In March 2011, NATO started its direct military intervention in Libya, which led to Muammar Gaddafi's capture and summary execution in October 2011. Such foreign military intervention, officially based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine,<sup>80</sup> was seen by many to be as relevant to Syria, as Libya.<sup>81</sup> Mobilisation in Syria therefore occurred when the seemingly impossible became feasible, based on the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators, as well as NATO's military intervention in Libya.

The SMB did not have an official presence in the social movement that was built on developments in the southern city of Dara` in March 2011.<sup>82</sup> Nor did the SMB 'initiate' the Syrian uprising,<sup>83</sup> although a member of the SMB executive explained that some of his nephews were involved in organising protests in Homs because they 'had relatives who were killed or in exile,' adding that 'the new generation was linked to previous events at a personal level'.<sup>84</sup> The SMB as a political actor was therefore mostly absent from the demonstrations inside Syria in 2011, but the Brotherhood supporters were involved due to the legacy of contention between the Hafez al-Assad government and the SMB in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>85</sup>

The SMB's early repertoire of contention reflected its understanding of the limitations of its political exile. In contrast to the protest movement inside Syria, the SMB convened and participated in opposition conferences in Istanbul, Antalya, and Cairo. The SMB's first conference, 'Istanbul Meeting for Syria', was held on 26 April 2011, and the key theme was political reforms. A member of the organising committee recounted: 'We

as Syrians were calling for reform and calling for Bashar [al-Assad] to lead that reform'.<sup>86</sup> The conference also demanded an end to detentions and torture, the release of political prisoners, 'people's right to assemble and to demonstrate peacefully', the rule of law, and press freedom.<sup>87</sup>

In the months that followed, the SMB's focus on conferences calling for political reforms made way for roundtable meetings to establish the Syrian National Council (SNC). In doing so, the SMB drew on its history of contention with the Bashar al-Assad government, but also demonstrated learning from the Libyan uprising in 2011. Empowered by its 2004 political platform, the SMB convened roundtable meetings with representatives of minorities, and also with participants of the Damascus Declaration.<sup>88</sup> These efforts came together with the establishment of the SNC in Istanbul on 2 October 2011. The SNC was modelled on Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), but tailor-made for Syria. Other than the SMB's secularist partners in the Damascus Declaration, the SNC incorporated Kurds, independents, and representatives of the protesters known as the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs).

The SMB's investment in the SNC was initially a success, as shown by the international community's certification. Tilly and Tarrow describe certification as 'an external authority's signal of its readiness to recognise and support the existence and claims of a political actor'.<sup>89</sup> The climax was therefore when the 'Friends of the Syrian people' crowned the SNC as 'a legitimate representative of all Syrians', in April 2012.<sup>90</sup> However, the same authority subsequently withdrew its recognition and support from the SNC, and thereby undermined the SMB's influence. The SMB explains this reversal in fortune as due to an enduring Western suspicion of Islamists.<sup>91</sup> Initially, however, the Brotherhood maintained significant influence in the National Coalition (NC) of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces,<sup>92</sup> which replaced the SNC in November 2012. But after a further restructuring of the NC in 2013, the secularists gained the advantage with the support of Saudi Arabia.<sup>93</sup>

The SMB's repertoire of contention was also influenced by Western suspicion. On 25 March 2012, the SMB published its Pledge and Charter, which reiterated its commitment to a civil, modern state, with a civil constitution, political pluralism based on universal suffrage, equal citizenship, human rights, a heterogeneous character, democratic rule, division of powers, compliance with international conventions, rule based, and reconciliation between opposing elements of Syrian society.<sup>94</sup> The reason was not only to provide a political alternative to the Ba`th one-party state, but,

more so, to address a direct challenge to the SMB's democratic commitment. A member of the executive recounted the challenge during one of the numerous workshops that were held in Europe to deliberate on 'Syria, the day after'.<sup>95</sup> He described how his interlocutors accused him of representing his own, as opposed to the Brotherhood's position. In response, he undertook to get a press statement from the SMB executive to confirm the Brotherhood's commitment to a multiparty democracy, as he explained it in the workshop. The result was the Pledge and Charter, which, according to my interlocutor, was approved not only by the executive, but by the *Shura* or Consultative Council, which is the main decision-making body of the SMB.

### *Civil War and Foreign Influence*

The militarisation and internationalisation of the Syrian uprising empowered the armed opposition, which undermined both the social movement in Syria and the SMB's early repertoire of contention. The formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011 contributed to the shift in power from the political to the armed opposition. The development of the FSA was inadvertently linked to the government's military response to the early peaceful protests. In using the military as opposed to the police to respond to demonstrations, loyal elite units disproportionately staffed by Alawis were stretched.<sup>96</sup> 'Poorly equipped and trained regular units' were therefore deployed as demonstrations spread across the country.<sup>97</sup> This use of regular units to quell public unrest in turn increased defections, as witnessed in Jisr al-Shughour in early June 2011.<sup>98</sup> The Syrian government disputed this version of events and presented Jisr al-Shughour as proof of an 'armed insurrection'.<sup>99</sup> The formation of the FSA, after Jisr al-Shughour, provided an umbrella not only for army defectors, but also for the many civilians who took up arms in self-defence.

The SMB revised its repertoire of contention in response to the militarisation of the Syrian uprising. In March 2012, the SMB 'saluted the heroic jihad', and pledged moral and material support for the FSA.<sup>100</sup> A member of the executive explained that the Brotherhood's initial reluctance to support the armed struggle changed after the army's almost total destruction of the Bab al-Amr neighbourhood of Homs in February 2012.<sup>101</sup> However, by March 2012, the armed struggle had become 'part of the political mainstream' in Syria.<sup>102</sup> The SMB's decision to adopt armed jihad was therefore also prudent given the militarisation of the



uprising. Later the same year, the SMB formed its own armed group, which became ‘fully operational’ in January 2013 as the Shields of the Revolution (*Duru‘ al-Thawra*).<sup>103</sup>

Though the SMB’s adoption of armed jihad was therefore new in the Brotherhood’s repertoire of contention, it was not unique in the political context. By the end of 2011 and early 2012 opposition groups across the political spectrum, with a few exceptions,<sup>104</sup> supported an armed struggle against the al-Assad government. The head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, added his voice in February 2012, calling on Muslims to support armed jihad in Syria,<sup>105</sup> and even some LCCs were drawn to the armed struggle in early 2012.<sup>106</sup>

The internationalisation of the Syrian conflict paradoxically coincided with the inaction of the UNSC. Permanent members Russia and China vetoed 11 and 6 UNSC Resolutions on Syria, respectively, between October 2011 and November 2017,<sup>107</sup> based on a sentiment that efforts at ‘regime change’ in Syria (as witnessed in Libya) should be foiled. The ensuing impotency of the UNSC, and the indirect role adopted by the US under the Obama administration left the Syrian arena open to the influence of Russia and regional actors like Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. This prominence and proximity of the regional actors added their country-specific agendas to the Syrian contention. For example, the non-state Lebanese actor Hizbullah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards entered the Syrian contention to represent Iranian interests, while Turkey’s interests were served ad hoc by rebel formations such as Ahrar al-Sham, and later by the Turkish Armed Forces.

The armed opposition’s displacement of the political opposition changed the character of the Syrian uprising from a peaceful protest movement, to an insurgency, and eventually, a civil war. Once the Syrian contention took on the characteristics of a civil war, armed forces became an authentic tool of claims making. Earlier, we saw that the SMB successfully adapted its repertoire of contention to ensure its continued relevance in the civil war. However, Tilly and Tarrow point out that in contrast to bringing people to a demonstration, it takes ‘extensive resources’ to create and maintain armed forces.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, civil strife often continues in places where oil, diamonds, or other minerals fuel the fighting.<sup>109</sup> In Syria, however, moderate deposits of oil have rendered both the Syrian government and the opposition dependent on external financial sponsors. The SMB’s armed groups too had to abide by the rules of their sponsors.

The Shields of the Revolution (hereafter the Shields) functioned within the boundaries authorised by the foreign sponsors of so-called moderate fighters, and in line with the SMB's centrist ideology.<sup>110</sup> On its website, the Shields 'called on its followers to respect international laws on human rights, to support ... the National Coalition (NC) and the FSA',<sup>111</sup> and to unconditionally reject 'all calls for *takfir* [excommunication of some Muslims by other Muslims], forced displacement, mass murder, and sectarian and ethnic discrimination'.<sup>112</sup> Thus, other than abide by the SMB's moderate Islamism, the Shields sought to satisfy the US and its allies' requirements with its clear commitment to international humanitarian law.

The Shields was however not sustainable. The project was terminated when it 'lost support of many inside the Brotherhood.'<sup>113</sup> Faylaq al-Sham (Sham Legion) took its place in representing moderate Islamist militias in March 2014.<sup>114</sup> The Brotherhood has not publicly sponsored Faylaq al-Sham, but Faylaq al-Sham has co-opted factions from the SMB-sponsored Shields,<sup>115</sup> and groups that were previously serviced by the SMB-backed Committee for the Protection of Civilians (CPC).<sup>116</sup> Faylaq al-Sham also participated in the August 2016 Jarabulus operation (under Turkish leadership),<sup>117</sup> which was applauded by the SMB. Faylaq al-Sham, similar to the Shields, further functioned within the boundaries set by the US and its allies. In May 2014, Faylaq al-Sham and other armed groups signed an Honour Charter, which called for a 'state of law, freedom and justice',<sup>118</sup> and not an Islamic state.<sup>119</sup> It further included a clause indicating respect for Syria's ethnic and religious diversity as well as human rights.<sup>120</sup> These concepts are in line with the SMB's 2004 and 2012 political platforms, and in stark contrast to the contentious performances of Salafi-jihadis, such as Islamic State (IS).

In sum, although the SMB was not part of the social movement in Syria, it still engaged with the Syrian uprising in 2011. Exile determined the SMB's early repertoire of contention, namely convening conferences as opposed to public protest. Western suspicion undermined the SMB's influence in the political opposition, and led to the Pledge and Charter, which confirmed the SMB's commitment to political pluralism. As the 2011 Syrian contention continued, the uprising took on an armed character that undermined the social movement, and pushed the SMB to adapt its repertoire of contention to include armed activities. In addition, the influence of external actors increased.

Financial dependence on the foreign sponsors of the FSA meant that the SMB's armed groups functioned within the boundaries set by the US and its allies. Thus, the SMB showed itself to be ever responsive to changes in its political environment, and willing to modify its patterns of contestation in order to maximise its chances of survival and perhaps even success.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter used a contentious politics framework to focus on the SMB as a significant political actor in three episodes of contention during the presidency of Bashar al-Assad. In providing context to the relationship between the banned SMB and the Bashar al-Assad government, the chapter showed the early SMB as an astute and pragmatic political actor, which pursued political influence within institutional boundaries. However, after the ruling Ba`th party's takeover in 1963, and especially in the context of the criminalisation of the SMB under the al-Assad rule, the SMB engaged in transgressive contention.

In exile, the SMB remained politically relevant by adapting its repertoire of contention, as Syria's political environment changed. In 2001, the SMB (unsuccessfully) pursued rapprochement with the Bashar al-Assad government in order to return to Syria's political arena. In 2005, the SMB cooperated with the domestic secularist opposition to remove the Bashar al-Assad government from power. In the wake of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the SMB initially called for political reforms and mobilised the political opposition in exile through conferences. But in March 2012, the SMB adapted its repertoire of contention. On the one hand it confirmed the SMB's democratic commitment in the face of persistent Western suspicion, and on the other, adopted armed jihad in response to the militarisation of the Syrian uprising.

The Syrian uprising's long duration brought a commanding influence from external actors to the contention. In response, the SMB's armed groups functioned within boundaries set by the foreign sponsors of the so-called moderate opposition, that is, the US and its allies. The SMB, in contrast to the social movement, therefore successfully modified its repertoires of contention during the various stages of the Syrian uprising. In doing so, the SMB ensured its political survival in Syria's ever-changing political arena.

## NOTES

1. In an interview, an executive member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) used this quote to show that the al-Assad family inadvertently enhanced the SMB's public profile by blaming all Syria's calamities on the Brotherhood.
2. Law no. 49 of 1980 made membership and association with the SMB a capital offence.
3. Sidney Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 92.
4. Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, "Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012).
5. Jasmine Gani, "Contentious Politics and the Syrian Crisis: Internationalization and Militarisation of the Conflict," in *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism Beyond the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Fawaz A. Gerges (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015).
6. Umar F. Abdallah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983); Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Perilous History of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood* (London: HURST C & Company Publishers Limited, 2013), 81–129; Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba`Th Party* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 89–117; Thomas Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria: 1961–1982," *Orient* 24 (1983); Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016); Raphaël Lefèvre, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: A 'Centrist' Jihad?," *Turkish Review* 4, no. 2 (March/April 2014).
7. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 236.
8. For a discussion of the moderate-radical dichotomy, see Jillian Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis," *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (2011): 350.
9. Centrist or *wasatiyya* Islam represents a moderate world view, as professed by Yusuf al-Qaradawi. See Bettina Gräf, "The Concept of *Wasatiyya* in the Work of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi," in *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi*, ed. Bettina Gräf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 213–228.
10. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
11. Abdallah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, 95.

12. See the SMB's National Charter in *ibid.*, 174.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Mustafa Al-Siba'i, "Islam as the State Religion a Muslim Brotherhood View in Syria," *The Muslim World* 44, no. 3-4 (1954): 40; Alison Pargeter, "From Diplomacy to Arms and Back to Diplomacy: The Evolution of the Syrian Ikhwan," in *The Muslim Brotherhood from Opposition to Power*, ed. A. Pargeter (London: Saqi Books, 2010), 64.
15. Mustafa Al-Siba'i, *Al-Abzab Al-Siyasiyah Fi Suriya* (Damascus: Manshūrāt Dār al-Rūwād, 1954), 11.
16. Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 170.
17. Johannes Reissner, *Ideologie Und Politik Der Muslimbrüder Syriens: Von Den Wahlen 1947 Bis Zum Verbot Unter Adib Ash-Shishakli* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz, 1980), 132; Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology," *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 215.
18. Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *Merip Reports*, no. 110 (1982): 1; Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Baathist Syria* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 280.
19. Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Baathist Syria*, 55; Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the "Struggle for Syria," 1947-1958 Between Accommodation and Ideology," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004): 136.
20. Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology," 220.
21. Syria's minorities as a percentage of the total population in 1945 were: Christian 14.1%; Alawi 11.5%; Druze 3%; and Jews/Yazidis 1.2%. The total population was just more than 2.9 million. See Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945*, vol. 58 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987), 15.
22. Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology," 222; Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the "Struggle for Syria," 1947-1958 Between Accommodation and Ideology," 141.
23. Syria's early parliamentary experience was interrupted by four military coups and a union with Egypt (1958-1961), before the Ba`th party's ultimate takeover in 1963.
24. Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the "Struggle for Syria," 1947-1958 Between Accommodation and Ideology," 137 & 141.
25. *Ibid.*, 137-138.
26. Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, 174.

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 175.
30. The SMB held ten seats in parliament in 1961. See Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 40.
31. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 236, define transgressive contention as that which ‘crosses institutional boundaries into forbidden or unknown territory.’
32. Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, 179.
33. The SMB supported some (successful) conservative candidates in governorate (regional) councils in 1972. See *ibid.*, 184.
34. Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba`Thist Secularism* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 74–75.
35. For an opinion that explains the SMB’s adoption of armed jihad as due to ideological change, see: Pargeter, “From Diplomacy to Arms and Back to Diplomacy: The Evolution of the Syrian Ikhwan,” 66–67; Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 96–98; Lia, “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–1982: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt,” 4; Hans Günter Lohmeyer, “Islamic Ideology and Secular Discourse: The Islamists of Syria,” *Orient*, no. 32 (September 1991): 398.
36. Previously, the SMB adopted armed jihad in 1948, but this was part of its external policy in defence of Palestinian sovereignty.
37. “Statement and Program of the Islamic Revolution in Syria/ *Bayan Al-Thawrat Al-Islamiyya Fi Suriyya Wa-Minbajuba*,” in *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983).
38. Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 37.
39. For more detail on the events in Hama, see: Lia, “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt,” 13–15; Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 122–128.
40. Thomas Pierret, “Islamist-Secular Cooperation: Accounting for the Syrian Exception”, in *The Dynamics of Opposition Cooperation in the Arab World: Contentious Politics in Times of Change*, ed. H.J. Kraetzschmar (Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2012), 92.
41. Chris Kutschera, “L’Éclipse Des Frères Musulmans Syriens,” *Cahiers de l’Orient*, no. 7 (1987).
42. Ibid.
43. See Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 8–9.
44. Barry Rubin, *The Truth About Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 135.

45. Christopher Hemmer, "Syria under Bashar Al-Asad: Clinging to His Roots," in *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures*, ed. Barry R. Schneider and Jerrold M. Post (Washington, D.C.: USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2003), 227.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Gani, "Contentious Politics and the Syrian Crisis: Internationalization and Militarisation of the Conflict," 135.
49. See Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003), 30–46, for the development of the civil society movement that became synonymous with the Damascus Spring.
50. The Bashar al-Asad government was shutting down the discussion forums by mid-February 2001, after which the intellectuals leading them were arrested. See Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar Al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 89–90.
51. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
52. "Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Head Cites 'Positive Indications' for Bashar's Rule," (BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, 18 July 2000).
53. Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, "Draft Charter of National Honour for Political Activity: Interim Papers Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Released in London, 3 May 2001," *Middle East Affairs Journal* 7, no. 1–2 (Winter–Spring, 2001).
54. Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: Experiences and Prospects," *ibid.* (2001): 117.
55. The 2001 draft Charter's modern state is based on the rule of law, free and fair elections, political pluralism, and the division of authority.
56. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
57. Eyal Zisser, "Syria, the Ba`th Regime and the Islamic Movement: Stepping on a New Path?," *The Muslim World* 95, no. 1 (2005): 57.
58. Ibid.
59. "Syrian Minister Plays Down Significance of Muslim Brotherhood Conference," (BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, 27 August 2002).
60. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, and continued to occupy the south when it withdrew from other parts of Lebanon in 1985.
61. Robert G. Rabil, *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), 123.
62. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/1828>
63. Bassel Salloukh, 'Demystifying Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar Al-Asad,' in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred H. Lawson (London: Saqi, 2009), 163–168.

64. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2004/sc8181.doc.htm>
65. The Arab League initially legitimised Syria's military presence in Lebanon in the context of the Lebanese civil war.
66. Salloukh, "Demystifying Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar Al-Asad," 166–168.
67. Rabil, *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*, 149.
68. An Arabic copy is available on the SMB's website: 'Political Project for the Future of Syria – Vision of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria 1425/2004,' <http://ikhwansyria.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84.pdf>
69. Interviews conducted with two executive members of the SMB in January 2015.
70. Sami M. Moubayed, "The Ball Is Now in Syria's Court," *Asia Times Online*, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/GJ25Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GJ25Ak02.html); Volker Perthes, "Coping with External Challenges," *Adelphi Papers: Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits for Change* 44, no. 366 (2004).
71. An English translation of the Damascus Declaration is available at: <http://joshualandis.oucreate.com/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>
72. See Pierret, "Islamist-Secular Cooperation: Accounting for the Syrian Exception," 92.
73. Yvette Talhamy, "The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009): 578.
74. Pierret, "Islamist-Secular Cooperation: Accounting for the Syrian Exception," 97.
75. See *ibid.*
76. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-syria-lebanon/sarkozy-meets-syrias-assad-ahead-of-summit-idUKL1246476620080712>
77. Gani, 'Contentious Politics and the Syrian Crisis: Internationalization and Militarisation of the Conflict,' 136; Reinoud Leenders, 'Social Movement Theory and the Onset of the Popular Uprising in Syria,' *Arab studies quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2013): 277.
78. Gani, "Contentious Politics and the Syrian Crisis: Internationalization and Militarisation of the Conflict," 136.
79. Leenders, "Social Movement Theory and the Onset of the Popular Uprising in Syria," 275.



80. For an alternative perspective, see Inez Von Weitershausen, “Foreign Engagement in Contentious Politics: Europe and the 2011 Uprisings in Libya,” in *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism Beyond the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Fawaz A Gerges (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 159–165.
81. International Crisis Group, “Anything but Politics: The State of Syria’s Political Opposition,” in *Middle East Report* (Beirut/Damascus/Brussels, October 2013).
82. For a detailed account of these events, see Carsten Wieland, *Syria – a Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2012), 20.
83. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
84. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
85. The 2011 Syria Revolution Facebook page (now Syrian Revolution Network) is said to have been an initiative of a member of the SMB, but the Brotherhood does not claim the initiative and the page has none of the SMB’s branding.
86. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
87. A member of the SMB executive furnished the writer with a copy of the press statement on the conference, which is dated 26 April 2011.
88. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
89. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 36.
90. See [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/chairman\\_s-conclusions-second-conference-of-the-group-of-friends-of-the-syrian-people\\_-1-april-2012\\_-istanbul.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/chairman_s-conclusions-second-conference-of-the-group-of-friends-of-the-syrian-people_-1-april-2012_-istanbul.en.mfa)
91. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
92. International Crisis Group, “Anything but Politics: The State of Syria’s Political Opposition,” 20.
93. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in June 2015.
94. An English translation is available at “Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: Pledge and Charter on Syria,” Carnegie Middle East Center, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48390>
95. The United States and German governments funded a number of meetings in Europe between Syrian exiles and Western technical experts on the reconstruction of Syria, aptly called: ‘The Day After.’

96. Philippe Droz-Vincent, “The ‘Dark Side’ of the Syrian Transition and Its Potentially Dire Regional Consequences,” in *NOREF Policy Brief* (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, April 2012), 2.
97. *Ibid.*, 3.
98. Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 83.
99. The Syrian government bussed diplomats stationed in Damascus (including the writer) to Jisr al-Shughour in order to observe a mass grave, which officials said contained the bodies of soldiers killed and mutilated by ‘terrorists’ and ‘armed gangs’.
100. The final statement of the SMB’s consultative council, held from 8–10 March 2012, is available in Arabic at: [www.ikhwansyria.com/Portals/Content/?Name=%20المسلمين%20الإخوان%20جماعة%20شوري%20مجلس%20لمنحاي%20البيان%201032012...سورية%20في&info=YVdROU16QTRNemdtYzI5MWNtTmxQVk4xWWxCaFoyVW1kSGx3WlQweEpnPT0rdQ==.Sy](http://www.ikhwansyria.com/Portals/Content/?Name=%20المسلمين%20الإخوان%20جماعة%20شوري%20مجلس%20لمنحاي%20البيان%201032012...سورية%20في&info=YVdROU16QTRNemdtYzI5MWNtTmxQVk4xWWxCaFoyVW1kSGx3WlQweEpnPT0rdQ==.Sy)
101. Interview conducted with an executive member of the SMB in January 2015.
102. Thomas Pierret, “Salafis at War in Syria: Logics of Fragmentation and Realignment,” in *Salafism after the Arab Awakening: Contending with People’s Power* ed. Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2016), 279.
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## Nahda and Tunisian Islamic Activism

*Fabio Merone, Ester Sigillò, and Damiano De Facci*

This chapter examines the *dynamics of contentious politics*<sup>1</sup> in Tunisia between 2011 and 2016. In particular, the authors focus on the transformation of Islamic activism in the aftermath of the revolutionary events of 2011. The two main Islamic actors in this period have been the Nahda Party, derived from the Muslim Brotherhood family, and a new Salafist-jihadi *jamaa* (Islamic society) called *Ansar al-Sharia* (AST).<sup>2</sup> The Tunisian Islamic landscape largely developed in the country after 2011<sup>3</sup> for a number of different reasons. First was the rise of a free debate on Islam and Islamism that the fall of the authoritarian Tunisian regime opened up. Moreover, the peculiarity of the post-revolutionary period saw the emergence of high levels of political contention and a fluid ideological landscape, which favoured framings of new types of protests. Finally, the expansion of Islamic contention has been the outcome of a new wave of Islamic revival (*sahwa*) that brought many people to ‘rediscover’ religion. The combination of these three factors led to the rise of a moderate

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organised Islamist party, a vast Islamic public and a radical Salafist option, which represent the backdrop of the Islamic dynamics of contention that this chapter discusses.

In particular, the authors look at the transformation of Nahda by shedding light on the dialectic dynamic between the party and the Islamic public.<sup>4</sup> It focuses, therefore, on the evolution of the Islamist party from 'Islamist' to conservative, a process formalised by the decisions taken during the two national congresses of 2012 and 2016. While specialists on religious parties analyse this change through the lens of secularisation,<sup>5</sup> we emphasise that this change must be seen from the point of view of the renunciation of Islamic politics as a transformative or revolutionary force. By 2016, in fact, Nahda had established itself as a democratic party that distinguished between religious and political activities.<sup>6</sup> This evolution has a significant impact on the way the Islamic polity is examined because renouncing (or separating) the religious from the political in an Islamic framework is not only about secularising politics but also dismissing its transformative social and political nature.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between the party and the new Islamic public is particularly important in order to understand this process after 2011. We refer to this large public as the 'Islamic constituency' because it is the Nahda Party's natural electoral basin, although this public does not always share common goals with it. It deals with a variegated public, composed of people that share imagined solidarities<sup>8</sup> and that perceive itself as part of an Islamic community, regardless of their specific interest in politics. This Islamic constituency contains Nahda activists, other kinds of Islamist militants (dubbed by the media as Salafists of Nahda) and a larger pious public, which is active in cultural and religious associations. The Islamist activists who are the focus of this chapter belong to this Islamic constituency.

In the first section of this chapter, the authors describe the general political process occurring in Tunisia from 2011 to 2016. In the second section we highlight the emergence of a broad Islamic constituency in the post-revolutionary landscape. In the final section, we analyse the nature of interactions between the Nahda leadership and the new Islamic constituency, notably how the party maintained an ambiguous relationship with Islamic activists. When the *political process* was in favour of mobilisation, the party's leadership did not oppose social activists but tried to co-opt them. Likewise, when the political environment turned against popular mobilisation, the party's leadership imposed the end of contentious politics.



## ISLAMIST MOBILISATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Nahda is the heir of the Tunisian Islamist movement that was born in 1972 as a typical preaching *jamaa* (society) inspired by the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The process of politicisation of the movement developed in two stages. Following the partial political liberalisation of the 1980s, the group attempted first to establish a party in 1981, called the Islamic tendency (*Ittijah al-islami*). At that time, however, the Bourguiba regime did not tolerate any political participation by Islamists and arrested the leadership. The second stage was in 1989 when the new President Ben Ali seemed initially in favour of a policy of inclusion, allowing the creation of the Islamist party under the name of Nahda, although it was not allowed to participate in the election.<sup>9</sup>

Although this process of formation of a political organisation showed a clear stance in favour of political participation, the issue of how to deal with *dawa* (preaching) as opposed to proper political activity, was never really resolved. The official denomination of the party as *harakat al-nahda* (Nahda movement) demonstrates this quite clearly because keeping the reference to the word *haraka* (movement) meant that politics and *dawa* were not to be separated. The essence of any Islamist movement is to consider religion as a totalising frame, including all aspects of social and public life. This problem emerged after 2011, becoming the main issue of discussion in the two party congress in 2012 and 2016.

A split emerged therefore within the party between those who refused such a change in the name of the original Islamist ideal and those who thought that the new historical juncture demanded a separation of politics and preaching. The former are the more ‘activist minded’ or ‘radical’ and are those keen to keep a dialogue with the larger Islamic constituency, while the latter are those under pressure from the ‘nationalist’ camp to give up to any reference to the old Islamist heritage, and who we define sometimes as ‘moderate’ or ‘reformist.’

In this chapter we deal with terminology that must be specified. While we talk about ‘Islamic activism’ as referring to ‘the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes,’<sup>10</sup> we refer to the ‘Islamic public’ or ‘constituency’ as all those people shaping such activism. We also make use of the category of ‘nationalist’ in reference to the political bloc that took the power after independence. In Tunisia they are also referred to as ‘Bourguibist’ (in reference to Bourguiba, the founding father of the nation) or ‘modernist’ because they claim that the nationalist project was

a modernist one inspired by enlightenment. In this chapter, we refer to anti-Islamist or Nationalist indistinctly; both terms in fact refer to the essential ideological difference between those who occupied power after independence and the most important bloc of opposition that appeared afterwards.

By providing the Tunisia case study with new empirical data, this chapter contributes to the literature applying Social Movement Theory (SMT) to Islamist movement studies. This approach has the advantage of considering Islamist movements as any other movement that behaves according to resource mobilisation, political opportunities and ideational framings. Thus, *dynamics, processes and organisation* of Islamic activism can be understood as important elements of contention that transcend the specificity of 'Islam' as a system of meaning, identity and basis of collective action.<sup>11</sup> Since the early 2000s, there have been a number of attempts at combining the study of Islamist mobilisation with that of social movements. The first examples are the academic contributions of Wiktorowicz<sup>12</sup> and Wickham.<sup>13</sup> Wiktorowicz applied *Resource Mobilisation Theory* to Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood Islamist mobilisation in Jordan. He argued, in particular, that institutionalisation is a prerequisite for obtaining the resources needed for mobilisation and its eventual success. Wickham explicitly applied SMT to Islamic movements in Egypt by analysing how Islamists have found avenues for mobilisation in the repressive environment of Mubarak's regime. Janine Clark employed SMT in the analysis of Islamist networks in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, and at a second stage, in the investigation of alliance structures between Islamist and non-Islamist movements.<sup>14</sup> Singerman applied a similar approach, focusing though on *informal* (horizontal) networks in Yemen.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Hafez applied the Political Process Approach (PPA) to Islamist radicalisation in Algeria.<sup>16</sup>

By applying a 'PPA',<sup>17</sup> this chapter analyses the transformation of Tunisian Islamic activism since the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2011. This theoretical approach contends that a movement's behaviour is shaped by the broader political context (or political opportunity structures), which can facilitate or hinder collective action.<sup>18</sup> The PPA further maintains that collective action involves organisational structuring and normative framing to facilitate the mobilisation of resources. In other words, organisational dynamics and cognitive processes mediate between the political environment and collective action.<sup>19</sup> In this chapter we refer to a political process that after 2011 was characterised by a dramatic polarisation

between the Islamist and nationalist ideological blocs. This put the Islamist camp under dual pressures, in which those outside the organisation demanded that it prove its democratic commitment, while those inside the camp wanted it to demonstrate its Islamic credentials.

The aim of this research is to empirically contribute to the analysis of Islamic mobilisation. Indeed, the authors aim to fill the gap in studies on Nahda in light of its interaction with other components of Tunisian Islamic activism. Thus far, the literature has neglected the multidimensional nature of the Islamic social movement and its impact on the party. Thus, by providing empirical evidence of an ongoing transformation of the Islamic movement, this study contributes to the conceptualisation of the notion of ‘Islamic polity’ itself. Indeed, the evolution of the Tunisian Islamist movement from *jamaa* to party and the consequent transformations within the party ultimately reveal the changing nature of Islamist party politics rather than a secularisation process.

### TUNISIA’S POLARISED POLITICAL PROCESS

An extraordinary period of political contention began in Tunisia after the ousting of the country’s long-reigning President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011,<sup>20</sup> lasting for four years until the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014–15. During this period, old regime actors disappeared from the scene and new players entered it, most of them framing their actions under the ideological discourse of Islamism. This period can be divided in two phases: from 2011 to 2013, despite the beginning of a constitutional process, street politics and contention prevailed and was monopolised by Islamic radical activism. From 2013 to 2016, the Nationalist camp reacted and united in an anti-Islamist front. Beji Caid Essebsi, an old Bourguibian cadre, led this movement under the banner of a new party, Nidaa Tunis (Call for Tunisia). In the period between October 2011 and January 2014, Nahda was in a government as the majority party. Although the Islamist party was in a coalition with two other secular parties (Congrès pour la république (CPR) and Ettakatol), events on the ground led to a division in the political landscape between a pro-Islamist camp and an anti-Islamist one. As a consequence, the pressure on Nahda increased during this phase, until the Islamist party found itself isolated and forced to resign from government in January 2014. In the winter of 2014–15, the country voted again according to the new rules. The nationalist party defeated Nahda, though the latter remained

the second parliamentary force. Beji Caid Essebsi, the leader of the winning party, became president of the republic. The outcome of the elections and the new climate of consensus around the constitution created the environment for a gentlemen's agreement between Nahda and Nidaa Tunis, which decided to form a national unity government.<sup>21</sup> Between 2015 and 2016, the new government imposed a policy of normalisation, in particular against Islamic activism.

The political transition from authoritarianism to democracy triggered both a process of institutionalisation and a dynamic of political contention. In the period between March and October 2011, political and social forces in the country built up an institutional body with the aim of giving a degree of legitimisation to the political process. Its main purpose was to lead the country to transparent and credible elections and therefore to vote for a legislative minimum corpus.<sup>22</sup> While a provisional system of governance was created, unrest and social claims dominated the political scene. Political parties participated in government but were at the same time hoping to maintain revolutionary legitimacy and therefore kept a foot in both formal and street politics. From the beginning of the process, the Nahda Party emerged as a key player, although at this stage it too was playing a double game. It participated in the enlarged committee of civil society that was created in place of the dissolved parliament,<sup>23</sup> while it simultaneously participated in grassroots Islamic politics in an effort to exert influence through its militants. Until the first elections of October 2011, Nahda was the only organised Islamic political project.<sup>24</sup>

The post-election period was characterised by an Islamic hegemony with Nahda primacy in government and the development of a widespread revivalist movement in the public space. A new radical Salafist group AST Tunisia, linked ideologically to the international jihadi movement, emerged and began organising preaching tents and public events on the streets.<sup>25</sup> A broad range of Islamic associations, such as zakat/alms charitable associations and religious studies organisations, proliferated across the country, prompting concern among the secular elite. An emblematic example of this fear was the decision to broadcast the film *Persepolis* on Nessma TV on October 7, 2011, the preferred broadcaster of the secular elite. The film triggered debates over its depiction of the image of God, which is forbidden in Sunni Islam. Yet its broadcast aimed to warn Tunisians that the events of 2011, like the 1979 Iranian Revolution, could easily transition into an Islamic revolution. Immediately after the end of the film, the TV station organised a debate in studio denouncing Islamic

clerics' alleged hijacking of the political revolutionary process.<sup>26</sup> This was aimed at warning secular Tunisians about the 'Islamist threat.'

The situation worsened dramatically in 2013 with the assassination of the left-wing leader Chokri Belaid in February and the explosion of landmines in the mountains close to the Algerian border in April.<sup>27</sup> In the aftermath of Belaid's assassination, the Trade Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail—UGTT) organised a general strike, which degenerated into isolated attacks on Nahda Party headquarters throughout the country. The Nahda Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali came under pressure to resign, but the president of the Nahda Party refused to accept his resignation, denouncing the events as a masked coup d'état.<sup>28</sup> This polarisation of the political landscape reached its peak in the summer of 2013, with AST calling on Nahda to form an Islamic front to react against those they perceived as the counter-revolutionary caciques of the old regime.<sup>29</sup> Simultaneously, the July 2013 events in Egypt culminated in the violent overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammad Morsi and pushed Nahda's leadership to adopt a different political strategy: instead of forming a front with radical forces, it declared AST a terrorist organisation. This move clarified the ambiguity surrounding any links between Nahda and the Salafi-jihadis and appeared as a strategic premise for a political compromise with the nationalist camp. After the approval of the new constitution, the final stage of the transition began, ending with the 2014–15 parliamentary and presidential elections. Nidaa Tunis won them both, but Nahda maintained a strong political bloc in parliament.<sup>30</sup>

In 2015, following the formation of the government of Prime Minister Habib Essid, the country experienced a new balance of power, which Boubekeur labelled 'bargained competition.'<sup>31</sup> While Nidaa Tunis controlled the presidency, Nidaa and Nahda formed a parliamentary coalition that represented the majority that supported the government. This new situation meant that a *de facto* agreement between the moderate seculars and Islamist actors was reached to the exclusion of the radicals on both sides.<sup>32</sup> In 2014 and 2015, the government began a vigorous campaign of normalisation against Islamic associations, which had been tolerated up to until that point. In particular, suspected charity organisations were shut down and official imams who were dependent on state institutions replaced a number of unofficial imams in mosques across the country.<sup>33</sup> While the compromise between Nahda and Nidaa guaranteed a political outcome to the crisis at the end of this period, the transition to democratic institutions had been characterised by a high level of polarisation.

## THE ISLAMIC CONSTITUENCY

We use the concept of Islamic constituency to describe a large Islamic public that emerged in the Tunisian public sphere after the fall of the regime in 2011. This category refers to the popular Islamic activism that took place outside the party but overlapped with its militant base. Popular Islamic activism had an influence on Nahda's political decisions, especially in this peculiar time of contention. The existence of such a constituency was a novelty for the Tunisian public sphere and became a central part of the post-revolutionary social and political activism.<sup>34</sup> In addition to a more pious and personal way of expressing religiosity, the Islamic constituency resulted in a new political and social engagement that developed into two directions: participation in Islamic charitable associations and increasing interest in formal religious studies.<sup>35</sup> Islamic social activism can therefore be further disaggregated into three main types: charitable associations, religious schools and the new organisations for imams.

Charitable associations became the most visible form of new Islamic activism. Although emerging spontaneously, the associations developed as a structured social field capable of mobilising thousands of people. The first moment of this mobilisation occurred from approximately March to October 2011 during the Libyan crisis. The massive influx of refugees at the *Ras Jadir* border in the Southern region of Medenine led to the establishment of several informal groups that provided humanitarian assistance before and after the arrival of international aid.<sup>36</sup> This proliferation of charitable activities represented the first sign of the emerging Islamic activism. Nahda activists played an important role, often leading the setting up of associations.<sup>37</sup> Nahda's older militants occupied the role of president in many of these associations, underlining the party's eagerness to retain ties to the new forms of social activism. However, this quasi-hegemony of the party over the associations led to tensions. Between 2011 and 2013, the party would be accused of attempting to create a system of dependence between social aid organisations and politics, just as the old regime had done.<sup>38</sup> With time, this huge network of associations aggregated into a few main blocs of associations, the three most famous being *Marhama*, Tunisia Charity and *Attaawn*. The nature of those associations and the quality of their humanitarian actions changed over time, transforming increasingly into professionalised, Western-style NGOs that specialised in human development. This change occurred in parallel to the evolution of the party.<sup>39</sup>

A second type of Islamic activism was that of religious schools. As Islamic activism was the consequence of an Islamic revival (*sahwa*), Tunisia also witnessed an increased interest in religious learning. Religious learning had not been a priority for Nahda since the 1970s, when the Islamic party was a *jamaa*.<sup>40</sup> Since the party was not deeply engaged in the sector, education as a form of active spiritual renewal over the previous two decades had been monopolised by Salafi/Wahhabi trends. The Ben Ali regime used a pietistic style of Quran teaching as a form of compensation for the repression of other more politicised Islamic organisations.<sup>41</sup> After the revolution in 2011, however, a new wave of religious teaching entered the public space and challenged the traditional Zeitounian educational system, which was accused to be an ideological instrument of the ruling elite.<sup>42</sup> Those schools expressed a Salafist type of influence, not only in teaching but also in mobilising the public on specific political issues.<sup>43</sup> The position of Nahda on religious teaching favoured the modernisation of Zeitouna University and its style of teaching,<sup>44</sup> a stance underwritten by intellectual considerations rather than enhancing the mobilisation potential of young Islamic activists. Islamic intellectuals such as Sami Brahmi began to refer to an ‘enlightened’ type of reformism that had little appeal among the majority of the new radicals.<sup>45</sup>

A third form of Islamic activism was seen in the increased prominence of imams and charismatic preachers. The emergence of new leaders and activist Islamists was the result of the efforts of new charismatic sheikhs. A sheikh is someone that acquires leadership through charisma and concrete actions, becoming a leader by preaching. This performance/preaching can be carried out in preaching campaigns in public spaces such as coffee shops or public squares, or with friends, in ‘liberated’ *minbar* (preaching tribunes) of the mosques. After the fall of the regime, many state-controlled imams deserted their mosques, leaving space for new activists who wanted the *minbar* to become a place where sincere and genuine Muslims should recover.<sup>46</sup> This phenomenon was at the origin of the radical AST Salafist trend but also paved the way for different types of activism, giving birth to a specific Islamic social movement whose centre was the city of Sfax. This Islamic constituency was therefore a new arena in which Nahda was only one of the players. For Nahda, the new public represented the place where influence had to be asserted. The party enjoyed a privileged position in the Islamic political landscape but now had to face a mobilised Islamic constituency that was willing to challenge its primacy. In the next two sections, we observe how Nahda’s evolution into an institutionalised, secular

party was a response to the emergence of the new Islamic social movement. In particular, the activist nature of this movement became a problem for the Nahda's leadership, which desired a normalisation of the political situation in order to reach a democratic deal with the secular and nationalist forces.

### NAHDA, *DAWA WA ISLAH* AND THE ISLAMIC SOCIAL MOVEMENT

On March 1, 2011, Nahda became a legal party in the midst of an exceptional period of political transformation and the beginning of Tunisia's transition to democratic institutions. The party faced two challenges. First, it needed to convince the traditional non-Islamic public of its democratic credentials. Second, it simultaneously needed to maintain credibility as the only Islamic political option on the scene.<sup>47</sup> The Nahda leadership was aware that if it were seen to support radical policies, it would provoke a backlash from secular elites and give them the justification for the restoration of the country's pre-revolutionary authoritarian institutions. History helped the Islamist party's analysis of the present. At the end of the 1980s, Ben Ali's regime temporarily opened the political field, allowing Nahda to emerge as the largest opposition party. This led Islamist militants to defy the regime on the streets, providing it with an excuse for a campaign of total eradication. The establishment of genuine democratic institutions would be required to guarantee the existence of an Islamist party.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, in order to accomplish its evolution into a party operating in a liberal-democratic environment, it had to deal with a radical and activist Islamic public. This is why the leadership of the party tried for a while to balance conciliation with the nationalists and support for the grassroots Islamic movements. A perfect balance was nevertheless difficult to implement in practice and increased the risk of Nahda being crushed in the middle. If the party, for instance, chose to go too far in the direction of institutionalisation, it risked losing its popular constituency to more radical Islamic groups. On the contrary, if it framed its politics in favour of grassroots and activist-minded Islamists, it would lose the trust of those already hostile to Islamist politics.

Nahda was the party of reference for the Islamic vote until the elections of October 2011, after which a variety of different Islamic ideological trends emerged. The position of Nahda in government put the party in a



difficult position vis-à-vis more radical Islamist competitors. In particular, its efforts to maintain the politics of moderation in a period when expectations for radical change were high became problematic. Nahda's governing alliance with two secular parties—CPR and Ettakatol—was devoid of radical proposals. This alliance was in fact a tactical move that promoted strategy of compromise.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, tensions grew throughout 2012 as the occupation of public spaces by Islamist activists and preachers created fear among segments of society. It became impossible for Nahda to remain equidistant from the two opposing sides.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout 2012, Tunisia witnessed rising Islamic activism, prompting Nahda to implement new strategies to manage the situation without renouncing its strategy of moderation. The first of these crucial junctures was the Islamic mobilisation of March 2012, which called for the introduction of *shari'a* as a reference for legislation in the constitutional draft.<sup>51</sup> Between February and March 2012, an intense debate developed in the country that led to several public debates and demonstrations.<sup>52</sup> While this new Islamic constituency had existed since 2011,<sup>53</sup> the crisis provided an opportunity for the formation of a more structured and unified front that could mobilise thousands of people. The most important gathering of people was organised in front of parliament on 16 March by a network of associations presenting themselves as a unified front.<sup>54</sup> New leaders emerged on the scene such as Sheikh Mokhtar Jebali and Bechir Ben Hassan. Others, like Habib Ellouze and Sadok Chourou, were historical Nahda leaders who distinguished themselves as capable of building a bridge between the party and the constituency. The anti-Islamic camp labelled this front the 'Salafists of Nahda,' but they were in fact an Islamic social movement that tried to exert pressure on Nahda in order to influence its transformation. In the March mobilisation, the front proved strong. However, the modernist camp, through the leadership of the longstanding human rights and feminist organisation 'Les Femmes Démocrates,' reacted strongly to this mobilisation and began a widespread debate in the media.<sup>55</sup> Nahda's leader Rached Ghannouchi came under pressure from the secular camp to renounce any reference to *shari'a* (in keeping with the promise he had made even before the elections). Although a meeting of the party's extraordinary constitutive committee (*majlis taassisi*)<sup>56</sup> supported renouncing the demand to introduce *shari'a* in the constitution,<sup>57</sup> the party now had to deal with this rising grassroots movement.

The second of these crucial moments was the Nahda congress in June 2012. The congress had two aims: to elect the local and national organs of the party and to define its own ‘identity’ and strategic political platform.<sup>58</sup> This was a party that had lived for most of its existence underground or in exile. Political liberalisation provided the opportunity for a frank discussion among the party’s militants about the significance of remaining Islamist after the revolution and the role the party should play at such a key historical juncture. Such discussion was spurred by the debate on the division in the party’s activities between *dawa* and politics.<sup>59</sup> The decision implicitly signalled that the Islamist party might renounce not only religious practices but also its capacity to be an instrument of societal transformation. Such a dramatic move in this moment of contentious politics had to be carefully considered, and it is likely why the congress decided to delay the discussions to a future congress, while proposing that the group’s more *dawa*-oriented members participate in civil society independently from party politics.<sup>60</sup> A new association was subsequently created *Dawa wa Islah* (DwI) with the purpose of unifying and coordinating the activities of the civil society movement that had emerged spontaneously and beyond the control of the party.<sup>61</sup> This quickly became a political tool to indirectly penetrate and co-opt the Islamic social movement.<sup>62</sup>

DwI was founded in Sfax in September 2012 on the initiative of eight historical preacher-activists (*da’ya*), four of whom were Nahda members. Habib Ellouze became the president, while Sadok Chourou took the vice presidency.<sup>63</sup> DwI’s role as a bridge between Nahda and the Islamic social movement became evident during a presentation of the association at the ‘Convention Centre’ in Tunis on September 24, 2012. The presentation was attended by Nahda leaders Ghannouchi, Ellouze and Chourou, as well as known Salafist sheikhs such as Bechir Ben Hassan and Mokhtar Jbeli.<sup>64</sup>

DwI initiatives included conferences on Islamic finance (in collaboration with the ‘Tunisian Association of Islamic Economy’ and the ‘Tunisian Association for Zakat’) and information booths (*khimat*) about the importance of sharing collective moments during Ramadan and helping the poor. According to the members of the Association, DwI wanted to play a reformist role in order to channel *dawa* initiatives into a progressive vision of Islam.<sup>65</sup> The members claimed that it wanted to reform Islamic political thought and action (*Islah*) from below in order to empower the grassroots to positively influence the party’s leadership. In the period between 2012 and 2013, when mobilisation was at its highest, the association was merged

into the Islamic constituency occupying a space much larger than the Nahda activist base, thus helping the party to avoid isolation.

The third crucial moment in 2012 was the UGTT general strike against the Nahda-led government. In December 2012, the powerful trade union called for a general strike against the 'illegitimate' government. Nahda and CPR, the two biggest parties in the government coalition, were accused of keeping power illegitimately. Nahda's opponents claimed that it was supposed to remain in government for only one year. Nahda on the other hand claimed that it never agreed to a limited schedule, but that it had committed to giving up power as soon as the assembly voted for a new constitution. In response to the union's strike, Islamic activists formed a campaign in which signatures were collected from 246 associations, culminating in a popular march in Sfax. The demonstration was organised by the same network of associations that participated in the March protests for the inclusion of shari'a in the constitution.

The mobilisations of 2012 represented a period of political contention organised by an Islamic constituency that perceived itself as 'revolutionary.' In post-revolutionary politics, it is normal that new discourses are framed and that new forces emerge. The fulfilment of a revolutionary programme however inevitably creates polarisation. This was the case in Tunisia, where a mobilised Islamic public played the role of the revolutionaries, while the nationalists became the counter-revolutionaries. Nahda found itself stuck in the middle, endorsing a strategy in which it used all means to channel the Islamic movement into mainstream politics without losing the trust of its nationalist partners. But if Nahda's position was difficult in 2012, it became untenable in 2013 after the assassination of the left-wing leader Chokri Belaid. In April–May 2013, DwI organised a high-profile preaching campaign across the country, inviting preachers from the Gulf states.<sup>66</sup> Simultaneously the Salafi-jihadi organisation AST tried to organise a congress in Kairouan.

These developments provoked a response of Tunisia's formal political institutions, which signalled that the time for tolerance had ended. The interior minister banned all 'non-authorised' public religious activities. This action was aimed especially at AST, whose congress was prevented by force,<sup>67</sup> but was generalised to all 'Salafist' activities and those suspected of sharing the same constituency as the radical Salafist-jihadis. Nahda subsequently came under pressure as groups of Islamic activists organised neighbourhood patrols to 'protect' the people against what they saw as an attempted coup d'état. AST called for the formation of an Islamic front

against the secular ‘counter-revolution,’<sup>68</sup> while the first armed attacks against military patrols occurred in the mountains on the border with Algeria. For Nahda this was a dramatic juncture at which it would make political choices that were decisive for the future of the party.

The security apparatus of the state (with the backing of the nationalist bloc) returned to the scene, opposing all forms of religious-political practices, while the Islamic social movement strengthened and began to radicalise. Nahda’s strategy of co-opting the Islamic constituency’s activists eventually failed, with members of DwI pushed instead to the radical camp. At the grassroots level, there was a desire to form a large Islamic front with the inclusion of the radical Salafists. These events could have resulted in a situation similar to Libya and civil war could have broken out at the expense of Nahda’s moderation strategy. However, the events that followed led to a very different outcome.

#### NAHDA, DEMOCRATISATION AND THE END OF CONTENTION

The years 2013 and 2014 were the turning point for democratisation in Tunisia. After the ousting of the Egyptian president in July 2013 and the second political assassination of the Nasserist leader Mohammed Brahmi,<sup>69</sup> a group of left-wing activists tried to imitate the Egyptian anti-Morsi mobilisation by organising a *tamarrod* campaign against the government.<sup>70</sup> The pressure against Nahda reached its highest point during a large demonstration in front of parliament in the summer of 2013, during which protesters demanded the resignation of the government.<sup>71</sup> While Nahda refused to leave power, it agreed to outlaw AST and made many concessions on the draft constitution. It eventually handed over power to a technocratic caretaker government in January 2014.<sup>72</sup> In November/December that same year, Nidaa Tunis won the parliamentary elections with 85 seats but Nahda remained the second largest parliamentary bloc with 69 MPs. A ‘secret’ meeting in Paris before the election between the Nidaa Tunis leader Beji Caid Essebsi and Nahda leader Rached Ghannouchi established a new governance deal. This spurred a period of several governments supported by a large parliamentary majority.<sup>73</sup>

The period of democratic transition (2011–15) finally ended with a new pact system of power with the inclusion of Nahda among the ruling class and the normalisation of post-revolutionary politics (i.e. the end of social and political mobilisation). The relationship between Nahda and its constituency evolved during this period, with the country’s changed

political balance empowering the party to impose hegemony on the Islamist scene, preventing challenges from any credible Islamist alternative. This change in the party-movement relationship was apparent during the government's 2014 crackdown on illegal imams and Islamic associations. While Nahda tried to mediate in order to minimise the fallout, it also exerted pressure on Islamic militants to turn charitable associations into professionalised NGOs.<sup>74</sup>

The most sensitive issue for both the state and Nahda however was control of mosques and public Islamic spaces. This was particularly evident in the Jawadi case in Sfax in 2015, which represented the Islamic social movement's last challenge against the normalisation of post-revolutionary contentious politics. Sheikh Jawadi was a central figure in Tunisian Islamic activism. He was not only the imam of the central Sidi Lakhmi mosque but also the president of *Lakhmi kbairiya*, the vice-president of the Imams' association and president of the *Attaawanou* association network in Sfax. During the campaign against unofficial imams, Jawadi was asked to leave his mosque. His replacement was an imam the Minister of Religious Affairs had chosen. The attendants of the mosque (his public, more specifically) protested, claiming that he was a loved imam they had chosen freely. Protests against the government, which was accused of violating freedom of worship, erupted.<sup>75</sup>

The mobilisation of the Jawadi community became the focal point of the Islamic social movement around the country. Jawadi was finally ousted on September 15, 2015, and replaced by Abdelaziz Loukil, who was an old Nahdha militant, highly respected in Sfax. Although Loukil was a respected religious figure, this process showed that the time for spontaneous and contentious Islamic politics was over. The role of Nahda as a mediator proved also that the power balance between the Islamist and the state had changed. The grassroots Islamist movement, if it wanted to survive, had to renounce never-ending mobilisation and draw on Nahda's role of mediation. In other words, the exclusion of the young sheikhs and post-revolution imams 'from below' represented the beginning of a new phase where the party's leadership made major decisions 'from the top.' Nahda had become the solution: it could claim that its strategy was successful because it had presented itself to the Islamic public as the only credible player and to the nationalists as the guarantor of a successful democratic transition.

In June 2016, the tenth congress of the party took place with Nahda stating that it had chosen liberal democracy and pluralism without

ambiguity.<sup>76</sup> It also declared itself to no longer be Islamist but instead a conservative party inspired by Islam along the lines of European Christian parties.<sup>77</sup> This change marked the end of the debate about the separation between *dawa* and politics. It was now a matter of fact, and those who wished to reform religion as a basis for a new social system should do it through civil society. The associations thus became agents of development instead of activist-minded Islamic associations, at least in theory.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, religious studies became part of a generic call to religious reform in tune with the modernist Tunisian/Zeitounian tradition at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>79</sup> Nahda would therefore be a national party engaged in political democratisation and religious reform. The only role left for Islam was that of representing the country's identity in a reformist and modernist manner.

The outcome of the process of dialectic confrontation between Nahda and the Islamic social movement favoured the party's leadership and its reformist wing in particular. The party's change in direction was the consequence of a long historical process and the theoretical elaboration that its more 'enlightened' leaders made. The political process was key to understanding how this outcome was finally imposed upon the larger Islamic constituency.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter contributed to this volume on *New Opposition in the Middle East* by demonstrating the importance of the political process and political opportunities in determining the direction of political change. We have in particular highlighted the evolution of the Islamic political landscape in Tunisia. Although we only focused on mainstream Islamism (excluding from the analysis the case of AST), we showed the importance of Islamist actors in the politics of opposition and contention of post-2011 Tunisia.

This study highlighted the importance of the political process on the transformations of the new Islamic social movements that emerged in the post-revolutionary period. The transformation of Nahda from 'Islamist' to an 'Islamic conservative party' through the lenses of the historical renunciation of the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood Party to its politics of social transformation is crucial to Tunisian political developments. By renouncing *dawa* activities, Nahda effectively renounced its goal to transform society. This move implies a deep transformation of the Islamist party. However, in order for the party to maintain hegemony over the Islamic

scene, it could not completely cut its links with its constituency. At the beginning of Tunisia's democratic transition, Nahda's strategy appeared to be one of 'ambiguity,' in that it maintained a repertoire of contention while participating in the institutionalisation of the democratic process. This attitude depended in large part on the political environment, which was favourable to contentious politics. The context changed however in 2013, when the former anti-Islamist nationalist elites returned to power, putting pressure on Islamist and radical activities and creating a more suitable ground for the Nahda's leadership strategy. History as well as Nahda's previous experience with the Ben Ali regime meant that Nahda was now able to play differently, leveraging the changing political context to impose its strategy of normalisation of politics to marginalise the most radical and activist-minded parts of its constituency.

## NOTES

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3. Anne Wolf, 'An Islamist "renaissance"? Religion and politics in post-revolutionary Tunisia,' *The Journal of North African Studies* 18.4 (2013): 560–573.
4. In this chapter we only make general reference to the other important Islamist movement, *Ansar al Sharia*. For a study of AST within the social movement frame, see Fabio Merone, 'Between social contention and takfirism: the evolution of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Tunisia,' *Mediterranean Politics* 22.1 (2017): 71–90 and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, 'Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's long game: dawa, hisba, and jihad, ICCT Research Paper, May 2013,' (2013): 1–25.
5. Luca Ozzano, 'The many faces of the political god: a typology of religiously oriented parties,' *Democratization* 20.5 (2013): 807–830.
6. Intissar Kherigi, 'Ennahda separation of the religious and the political: a historic change or a risky maneuver?,' *Alsharq Forum*, last accessed September 2, 2017, <http://www.sharqforum.org/2016/09/08/ennahdhas-separation-of-the-religious-and-the-political-a-historic-change-or-a-risky-maneuver/>
7. This is a similar process to that of the European socialist parties when they cut off the organic link with the working unions.
8. Asef Bayat, 'Islamism and social movement theory,' *Third World Quarterly* 26.6 (2005): 891–908.

9. The name Nahda means 'renaissance.' The name was chosen because did not make explicit reference to religion, as requested by the new law on political organisations.
10. Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed. *Islamic activism: a social movement approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004).
11. Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed. *Islamic activism: a social movement approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 3.
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15. Diane Singerman, 'The networked world of Islamist social movements' in *Islamic activism: a social movement approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 143–163.
16. Mohammed Hafez, 'From Marginalization to Massacres: A Political Process Explanation of GIA Violence in Algeria' in *Islamic activism: a social movement approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 39.
17. Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims rebel: Repression and resistance in the Islamic world* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).
18. Mohammed Hafez, 'From Marginalization to Massacres: A Political Process Explanation of GIA Violence in Algeria,' *Ibidem*.
19. Doug McAdam, 'Micromobilization contexts and recruitment to activism,' *International Social Movement Research* 1.1 (1988): 125–154. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of contention* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).
20. Sami Zemni, 'The extraordinary politics of the Tunisian revolution: the process of constitution making,' *Mediterranean Politics* 20.1 (2015): 1–17.
21. While the nationalist camp coalesced to push the Islamist party back to opposition, this exit was less a total victory than a political compromise. A national coalition of civil society groups (headed by the strong union UGTT) supported a compromise between the two main contenders (Nahda and Nidaa), favouring a democratic resolution to the crisis. The result was a national unity government that is remained in 2017 (although with several government re-shuffles).
22. Yadh Ben Achour, *Tunisie: unerévolution en pays d'Islam*, (Tunis:Cérès Edition, 2017).



23. The assembly created in March was also called the ‘Ben Achour assembly,’ named after its chair. Its main scope was the approval of a new electoral law.
24. Nahda won 37 per cent of the votes, which was four times more than the second most popular party, CPR, which scored 8.7 per cent. The parties in the governing coalition (Nahda, CPR, Ettakatol) were the three parties that polled highest in the election, with a combined total of approximately 53 per cent of the votes.
25. Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, ‘Salafist movement and sheikhism in the Tunisian democratic transition,’ *Middle East Law and Governance* 5.3 (2013): 308–330.
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27. Tristan Dreisbach, ‘Three landmines explode around Mount Chaambi this week’ Tunisia live, last modified November 20, 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/11/20/three-landmines-explode-on-chaambi-mountain-this-week/>
28. BBC ‘Tunisia prime minister HamadiJebali resigns’ BBC, last modified February 19, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21508498>
29. Fabio Merone, ‘Between social contention and takfirism: the evolution of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Tunisia,’ *Mediterranean Politics* 22.1 (2017): 71–90.
30. Nidaa Tunis won 85 seats in parliament against 69 for Nahda. The Islamist party did not present a candidate for the presidential election.
31. AmelBoubekeur, ‘Islamists, secularists and old regime elites in Tunisia: bargained competition,’ *Mediterranean Politics* 21.1 (2016): 119
32. Amanda Kadlec, ‘Tunisia’s paradoxical political union: Ennahda and Nidaa Tunis,’ The Randa bloc, last modified February 5, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/02/tunisias-paradoxical-political-union-ennahda-and-nidaa.html>
33. Jasmine Foundation, ‘Tunisia crackdown raises fears of rights rollbacks,’ Jasmine Foundation, last modified August 29, 2014, <http://www.jasminefoundation.org/en/?p=960>
34. Under Ben Ali’s regime, the only tolerated ‘civil society’ groups were human rights associations that were mostly monopolised by the militants of the left wing movements and parties. LarbiSadiki, ‘Bin Ali’s Tunisia: democracy by non-democratic means,’ *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29.1 (2002): 57–78.
35. ‘After 2011 several militants created charitable and religious associations as a prosecution of their engagement into the Movement of the Islamic tendency.’ Interview with the president of the Nabaa al Khir association, Sfax, May 2017.

36. According to the president of Tunisia Charity, 'the first-hand experience in collaborative civic engagement helped participants establish structural horizontal ties, which in turn ultimately led them to consider founding an association with a specific identity and goals' (interview with the president of Tunisia charity, Tunis, November 2015)
37. 'After the revolution we could choose whether to keep playing a role in the party or to go for associative activities. However some were participating in both at the same time.' Interview with Rachid Ali, a historical Nahda militant and president of the Nabaal Khir association, Sfax, February 2016.
38. Kaled Ammami, secular activist in the associations world, interview with the authors, Tunis, November 15, 2014.
39. Ester Sigillò, 'Tunisia's evolving charitable sector and its model of social mobilization,' Middle East Institute, last modified, September 15, 2016. <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/which-civil-society-post-revolutionary-tunisia>
40. After the success of radical Salafism, many Nahda leaders complained that the party had abandoned the space of religious studies for politics. Observations from fieldwork.
41. Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle and Francesco Cavatorta, 'Islamism in Tunisia before and after the Arab Spring,' *Popular Protest in the New Middle East: Islamism and Post-Islamist Politics* 147 (2014): 31.
42. Sheikh Mohammed Ali, 2013, interview with the authors.
43. The Ibn Malik School is an important case. Founded by Sheikh Mohammed Ali, it became an important reference point for new sheikhs and Islamic leaders that emerged in 2011 and 2012. International clerics like the famous Ahmed Mazid Shanquity also belonged to the scientific committee of the association. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bG3GVAv33M>. Last viewed on January 12, 2017.
44. Zeitouna director, Tunis, June 24, 2013, interview with the authors.
45. Sami Brahami, *Religion and politics. Between the fluttering seculars and the inability of the Islamists* (translated from Arabic) (Tunis: Manshurat Karm al-Sharif, 2012), 199.
46. Abu al Mouwahed, AST leader, December 8, 2012, Douar Hisher interview with the authors
47. Kasper Ly Netterstrøm, 'The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia,' *Journal of Democracy* 26.4 (2015): 119.
48. Rached Ghannouchi, interview with the authors, Tunis, March 20, 2013.
49. Laura Guazzone, 'Ennahda Islamists and the test of government in Tunisia,' *The International Spectator* 48.4 (2013): 30–50.
50. Such events include hostile demonstrations in front of an art exhibition and theatre, *hisba* activities in working class neighbourhoods and violent riots against the offense of religious symbols. Rory McCarthy, 'Protecting

- the sacred: Tunisia's Islamists Movement Ennahdha and the challenge of free speech' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42.4 (2015): 447–464.
51. This discussion was important because Article 1 of the constitution of 1956 was at stake. This article stated that Islam was the 'religion of Tunisians,' thus maintaining ambiguity on the role of Islamic law as a reference for legislation.
  52. AsmaGhribi, 'Role of Islamic law in constitution provokes debate' Tunisia live, last modified March 22, 2012, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/03/22/role-of-islamic-law-in-tunisian-constitution-provokes-debate/>
  53. See section "The Islamic Constituency" of this chapter.
  54. Two main organisations appeared to officially organise the mobilization: At national level the 'Tunisian Front of Islamic associations' and at regional level in Sfax, the most involved association was the so-called Imams association.
  55. Kapitalis 'Des democrates tunisiennes: la charia ne doit pas etre une source de lois' Kapitalis, last modified October 9, 2011, <http://www.kapitalis.com/politique/6253-des-democrates-tunisiennes-lla-charia-ne-doit-pas-etre-une-source-de-loir.html>
  56. Nahda did not have elected party organs until the 2012 congress.
  57. Le Monde 'Ennahda contre' inscription de la charia dans la constitution' Le Monde, last modified March 26, 2012, [http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2012/03/26/ennahda-contre-l-inscription-de-la-charia-dans-la-constitution-tunisienne\\_1675938\\_1466522.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2012/03/26/ennahda-contre-l-inscription-de-la-charia-dans-la-constitution-tunisienne_1675938_1466522.html)
  58. The last party congresses were held abroad and the decisional organ of the party were never renewed. In particular, the party leadership had suffered on a relative lack of legitimacy because, living in Paris and London, had lost contact with the country. The split between the militants from inside the country and those outside was felt as particularly problematic after 2011 (Rory McCarthy dissertation manuscript).
  59. Kherigi, 'Ennahda separation of the religious and the political,' 6.
  60. Interview with Daimi, Nahda leader, Tunis August 5, 2012.
  61. 'Before 2012, the *dawa* activities were scattered. Each working individually with its own association. DwI wants now unify all the *dawa*'s activities' (interview with DwI's secretary general. Sfax December 2015).
  62. The association appeared to emanate from the party retrospectively. The party's double strategy of *dawa*/civil society activity and party co-optation of the movement was evident in interviews with both activists and party members 'DwI is an association too linked to the party (Nahda): it is not able to well manage the activities and therefore does fail in its activities' (interview with the president of an Islamic charitable association. Sfax December 2015).

63. Habib Ellouze is the party's strongman in Sfax. In exile between 1981 and 1984, he became the president of the *Shura* council after Ben Ali's arrival in power. He spent 15 years in prison but was later released on medical grounds. He spent his time before 2011 under tight administrative control. In 2011, he was elected MP in the Sfax electoral district Sfax, but maintained his style of preacher.
- Arrested in 1991, as president of the party, Sadok Chourou spent 16 years in prison, 14 of which were in solitary confinement. After the revolution, Chourou was elected as MP. Much like Ellouze, he is identified inside and outside the party as more of a preacher than a politician.
64. The presence of Habib Ellouze gave legitimacy to the initiative. He is the symbol of the Islamists' struggle against the regime. Besides, its leverage on the Islamic public in Sfax gave a certain authority to the Nahda attempt to establish its roots in the movement. Sfax is in this period the epicentre of the Islamic/Salafist social movement. In this city, the disparate dawa activities evolved around consensual and charismatic leaders such as Loukil, president of the 'Koran safeguard association' and Ridha Jawedi, imam of the big mosque Lakhmi and president at the same time of the association 'Lakhmi Khayri' and of the association of imams.
65. 'The aim of the association is the development of modern Islam: it is about adapt the Islamic values to the modern world, because it is possible to live the modern life by respecting what is forbidden or permitted in the religion. There is not contradiction?' KhawlaTriki, Secretary General of DwI Sfax, December 2015.
66. DwI came under the spotlight in the spring of 2013 during the successful Egyptian Sheikh Mohammed Hassan's series of lectures. The tour was a success, with significant media coverage and the participation of thousands of people attending the event in the al-Menzah theatre in Tunis on April 30 and the Lakhmi Mosque in Sfax on 4 May. 'Thousands participate to the preacher Mohammed Hassan event at the "Coupole" (translated from Arabic)' YouTube video, posted by ShemsFm April 30, 2013 <https://tunisie14.tn/videos/detail/la-coupole-affiche-complet-pour-la-visite-du-predicateur-mohamed-hassen>
67. Alice Fordham 'Tunisia's moderates lost patience with Ansar al Sharia' The National, last modified May 21, 2013, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/tunisia-s-moderates-lose-patience-with-ansar-al-sharia-1.655866>
68. Fabio Merone, 'Between social contention and takfirism' 71–90.
69. Mohammed Brahmi, a Nasserist MP, was assassinated on July 25, 2013, with the same type of action as that of Belaid.
70. *Tamarrod* is the name that young Egyptian activists gave to the signature collection campaign that led to the huge demonstrations in Egypt against

- President Morsi. After the Egyptian campaign, a group of left wing activists in Tunisia tried to do the same but failed to unify the anti-Nahda block for a street mobilisation, Reuters, ‘New Tunisian protest to mirror Egypt’s Tamarrud campaign’ Reuters, last modified, July 3, 2013 <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/75627/World/Region/New-Tunisian-protest-movement-to-mirror-Egypt-Tam.aspx>
71. BBC news, ‘Tunisia crisis: tens of thousands join protest’ BBC news, last modified, August 7, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23597308>
  72. Monica Marks, ‘Tunisia’s Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup,’ *Rethinking Political Islam Series* (2015).
  73. Sharan Grewal, ‘From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: How Living in Secular Democracies Shaped Tunisia’s Ennahda,’ (2017).
  74. Islamic charities were accused of opacity and lack of professionalisation.
  75. Kapitalis ‘Mosqué Sidi Lakhmi: la prière du vendredi de nouveau empêché,’ Kapitalis, last modified November 6, 2015, <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/11/06/mosquee-sidi-lakhmi-la-priere-du-vendredi-de-nouveau-empechee/>
  76. Kherigi ‘Ennahda separation of the religious and the political,’ 10
  77. Kherigi ‘Ennahda separation of the religious and the political,’ 12.
  78. As a consequence, several party militants left the executive committees of Islamic associations. Abdessalem Khammari, for instance, left the *Dar al Khair* association once he was elected to the *Shura* (general counsel of party). Several members of the Shura, in turn, left the party to focus on the activities of their associations and decided to be engaged exclusively in ‘civil society.’ This is the case of Habib Ellouze, president of DwI, and also the case of Jendoubi who left the party to focus on its new association Organisation Tunisienne pour le Developpement Social (OTDS), that heir of Marhama. Interview with the vice president of OTDS. Tunis, December 2016.
  79. Merone, Fabio. ‘Enduring class struggle in Tunisia: the fight for identity beyond political Islam.’ *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42.1 (2015): 74–87.

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## Conclusion

### *Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit*

The Green Movement of 2009 in Iran and the Arab Uprisings of 2011 were significant periods in the Middle East. They highlighted that despite repressive measures employed by authoritarian regimes in the region, dissent continues to be expressed in many forms. Oppositions from Iran to Tunisia took advantage of openings for public expression, with those advocating political accountability seizing opportunities in the changing political environment to move beyond closed circles of friends and like-minded allies to take their message of change to the streets.

In 2009, the Iranian presidential election campaign and the surprise results provided the opportunity for the Reform camp to utilise electoral momentum and challenge the political establishment. While the Green Movement was suppressed through an overwhelming show of force by the security agencies, it demonstrated the potential for dissidents to take advantage of opportunities to pose serious challenges to the political order. The fact that the regime resorted to extreme force to clear protesters from the streets secured the status quo but dented its legitimacy.

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 followed a different path but exhibited very similar qualities. The victory of the revolt in Tunisia to topple the

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incumbent regime and set in place a coalition government that represented diverse public interests proved to be a lightning rod for the rest of the region. Tunisia served as an inspiration for others in North Africa and the Middle East; uprisings against repressive and un-representative regimes spread like wildfire with varying degrees of success. The most promising case after Tunisia was in Egypt, where sustained public rallies by a mix of dissidents led to the removal of long-time President Hosni Mubarak from office. The subsequent electoral victory of Mohamed Morsi in June 2012 was welcomed by observers as a watershed moment in Egypt's democratic transition. However, Morsi's arrest following a military coup a year after he took office pointed to the resilience of the authoritarian deep state and the failure of the elected government to implement rapid change. The experience in other states trying to emulate the model of political change through popular uprisings proved disastrous. Libya and Syria descended into civil war, which opened the door for external interference and the emergence of proxy war. In Bahrain, the uprising was swiftly suppressed by the security forces, who were reinforced by neighbouring Saudi Arabia. The Arab Uprisings were inspired by the success of the Tunisian example, and the apparent gains in Egypt. But street mobilisation through social media to protest against undemocratic governments proved ineffective in the face of a well-entrenched machinery of repression.

Common features of these revolts were their lack of a clear vision for the future and their opportunistic nature. The changing political landscape, whether in the context of the electoral campaigns or through public expressions of dissent and rallies, offered opportunities for activism. Dissidents were quick to respond to these openings and take up the mantle of change through public protests. They faced incumbent regimes with well-entrenched apparatuses of suppression, which could withstand prolonged popular pressure. Even in the case of Egypt which appeared to be turning the corner with direct presidential elections, the army and remnants of the old order retained their authority and moved to topple President Morsi when they sensed a shift in the public mood. This experience suggests that authoritarian states have significant staying power that is reinforced by the absence of alternatives. The popular expression of opposition to incumbent regimes was diverse and divided, with often-contradictory long-term objectives. While the ideal of political and economic accountability was close to their heart, the protestors represented many political ideologies and ideals (from Islamism to republicanism).

There was no articulation of a common purpose, save for their opposition to the ruling regime. This shortcoming is closely tied to the limits of political and social activity under authoritarian rule.

It is in the nature of authoritarianism to suppress organised dissent and prevent the emergence of opposition parties. Save for Tunisia, which had a history of trade unionism and open civic activism, other states that experienced the Arab Uprisings were marked by their closed political systems, absence of organised and fully functioning oppositions and the heavy hand of state security apparatuses. This environment meant that there was little opportunity for alternative visions of the future to develop and take root in the imagination of the public prior to 2009/2011. Without deeply entrenched opposition parties or legally operating trade unions to represent the interests of their members, the stage was left open for erudite individuals or famous personalities to take on leadership roles. There were of course no shortage of courageous individuals who spoke against tyranny, but the logic of authoritarian suppression meant that the focus of the regime was on organised forms of opposition, leading to an atomisation of dissent which took place at individual and small community levels. This phenomenon explains why observers dubbed the Arab Uprising as a leaderless revolt.

The atomisation of dissent plays into the hands of incumbent regimes. Most authoritarian regimes in the Middle East see low-level opposition as manageable and grudgingly tolerate it. This tolerance is deceiving. The rise of democracy and the principle of popular sovereignty as a normative global framework has meant that no statesman or stateswoman would find it palatable to present their rule outside the bounds of democracy. It is common practice for dictators and military rulers to claim that they represent the interests of their people. This claim is aided by adopting a façade of democracy, most notably aspects of procedural democracy. Elections to a national parliament are a common feature in authoritarian regimes. In some cases, such as in Egypt where the system emerged out of a republican movement, the office of the president is also open to direct elections. In a similar case, the Islamic Republic of Iran holds regular direct elections for the national parliament, the presidency and city councils. Yet, the adoption of these electoral practices has not weakened the hold of the incumbent regimes on power, as genuine opposition is excluded from the process. The choice at elections is between regime-loyalists and the most-loyal alternatives. In between, there may be scope for individual dissidents to enter the parliament, as in the case of Egypt

under Hosni Mubarak, but not to the extent that they can have any significant political consequence. This phenomenon has perfected the atomisation of dissent. Not only is there no tolerance for organised opposition, those individual dissidents who are brave enough to raise their voice are rendered ineffective by a system that muffles them, not to mention the ever-present fear of the security agencies.

The atomisation of dissent benefits authoritarian regimes in a number of ways. The first and most obvious, as noted earlier, is the fact that a dispersed and unorganised opposition would be unable to formulate a vision for the future that enjoys popular support and fidelity. Instead the many agents of opposition speak for their own vision, challenging those of the others as either too soft on the incumbent regime or too extreme. The criss-crossing schisms between opposition activists along religious, ideological and ethnic lines mean that the incumbent regime can pick on one or the other faction with a certain degree of confidence that the other opposition factions would not be mobilised into a united front. This clear imbalance of power strengthens the hands of authoritarian rule.

The second is that atomised dissent leads to a diversity of interpretations and competing strategic assessments. While some dissidents reject the ruling system as illegitimate and worthy of nothing but total destruction, others might see opportunities in the veneer of democracy and seek to utilise legal avenues for the expression of dissent, albeit in a somewhat watered-down format to avoid raising the ire of the ruling regime. These dynamics often lead to a certain level of self-censure necessary for their continued presence in the public domain, and ultimately survival. The compromises made by opposition activists to survive and stay relevant raise obvious ethical and political questions. To what extent can opposition activists water-down their public objections to authoritarian practices and still remain faithful to their private ideals? Is survival as quasi-opposition, with an expediently contained political agenda worth the compromises that they entail? In other words, is the mere act of enduring enough?

The expedient strategy to survive by avoiding direct confrontation with the ruling regime is criticised by some in opposition as a sell-out. This has caused significant rifts in the ranks of regime-dissenters. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood which has borne the brunt of the military quo by General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi has distanced itself from earlier overtures to build coalitions with other opposition groups, as they appear too complacent. In Iran, some elements of the reform movement have broken away with the leadership to openly challenge the system, as

evident in the December 2017/January 2018 unrest. In such cases, the reform movement and those aiming primarily to survive under authoritarian rule are not viewed part of the solution. They are part of the problem, as they allow themselves to be manipulated into the system and confer a degree of legitimacy to it. By bringing their self-censured ideas to the public domain and participating in elections which have little or no impact on the level of authoritarianism, they lend credibility to the ruling regime without making a dent in its pillars of power. The tolerated opposition contribute to the resilience of authoritarian rule, and that is why they occupy that space of tolerance.

The Middle East went through a turbulent phase in 2009 and 2011 with very little movement on democratic governance. The reassertion of the rigid and unresponsive political orders across the region, even worse the nightmare of Syria and Yemen, point to the return of a familiar pattern. The conceptualisation of the Middle East through the prism of contentious politics continues to be apt at capturing the game of cat-and-mouse played by the ruling regimes and their opponents. The Middle East continues to suffer from the absence of political representation and responsive governments. This does not bode well for the future as various opposition actors negotiate their responses to state repression and raise questions about the limits of compromises they are willing to make.

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