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# Multiparty Coalition Governments in the Arab World: An Introduction

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## Abstract

This article puts forth the justification for examining multiparty coalition governments in the Arab world. Although mostly associated with governance in fully-fledged democracies, the Arab world is no stranger to multiparty coalitions and coalition governance. In its modern history, the region can boast, in fact, a surprisingly large and diverse number of such coalitions. Analysing them in detail employing the theories and concepts of broader comparative politics provides findings that can be compared to what we already know about coalition governments and contribute to render the region less 'exceptional'.

## Keywords

governments coalitions – political parties – Arab world – coalition formation – durability – fragmentation

In 2021,<sup>1</sup> ten years after the Arab uprisings, which constituted an important juncture in the politics of the region and opened the door to area studies

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scholars for engaging with broader theories and methodologies in comparative politics,<sup>2</sup> André Bank and Jan Busse published an article that surveyed the state of political science research on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>3</sup> As the two authors – as well as other scholars – recognised, concepts and methods from comparative politics were being successfully employed to explain political phenomena in the MENA region.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, there was also the recognition that findings from area studies did begin to inform, enrich, and transform established theories and refine concepts used in comparative politics. All this had led to a significant growth in works linking area studies and comparative politics. Something similar had occurred in the 1990s and 2000s in the more limited sub-disciplines on democratization and authoritarian resilience, from which MENA scholars had borrowed and to which they also contributed significantly.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, following the 2011 uprisings, several studies abandoned the idea of ‘exceptionalism’ and argued that it was both possible and fruitful to look at MENA politics using the knowledge accumulated in comparative politics. This meant, for instance, taking phenomena like voting behaviours or institutions/organisations such as elections, parliaments, and political parties seriously and locating them beyond the, by then, rather stale debates on democratization and authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> This effort at linking areas studies much more

2 For the purpose of open access, Hendrik Kraetzschmar has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

3 André Bank and Jan Busse, “MENA political science research a decade after the Arab uprisings: Facing the facts on tremulous grounds,” *Mediterranean Politics* 26.5 (2021): 539–562.

4 Marc Lynch, “Taking stock of MENA political science after the uprisings,” *Mediterranean Politics* 26.5 (2021): 682–695.

5 Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, “Regime change without democratization in the Middle East,” *International Political Science Review* 25.4 (2004): 371–392; Lisa Anderson, “Searching where the light shines: studying democratization in the Middle East,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 189–214; Raymond Hinnebusch, “Authoritarian persistence, democratic theory and the Middle East: an overview and critique,” *Democratization* 13.6 (2006): 373–395; Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

6 Hendrik Kraetzschmar, *Opposition Cooperation in the Arab World: Contentious Politics in Times of Change* (London: Routledge, 2012); Francesco Cavatorta and Lise Storm, *Political Parties in the Arab world* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Eva Wegner and Francesco Cavatorta, “Revisiting the Islamist-Secular divide: Parties and Voters in the Arab World,” *International Political Science Review* 40.4 (2019): 558–575; Francesco Cavatorta, Lise Storm, and Valeria Resta, *Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge, 2020); Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, and Lauren Banko, *Political Parties in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2019).

tightly to comparative politics does not mean dismissing the peculiarities and specificities of the region; it simply means attempting to fit such specificities in with broader trends and explore how they might affect them or be affected by them.<sup>7</sup>

In line with these post-2011 scholarly developments, this special issue focuses on a phenomenon – the politics of multiparty coalition governments – that has been vastly understudied in the Arab MENA context, but whose relevance should not be discounted, as it provides insights into how different regimes work and how they might display similarities and differences with findings from the rest of the world, and in particular established Western democracies. Examining multiparty coalition governments is also useful to understand the everyday business of running governments, including, for instance, how the allocation of ministerial portfolios occurs or what is the weight of different partners in decision-making.

Although mostly associated with governance in fully-fledged democracies, the Arab MENA is no stranger to multiparty coalitions and coalition governance. In its modern history, the region can boast, in fact, a surprisingly large and diverse number of such coalitions in countries ranging from Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia in the Maghreb to Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq in the Mashreq as well as Yemen on the Arab Peninsula. Some of the more famous coalition governments include the short-lived Hamas-Fatah unity government in Palestine (2007), the Youssoufi-led administration in Morocco (1998–2002), the post-reunification grand coalition of 1993 between the GPC, the YSP, and Islah in Yemen, the fragile coalition governments forged in Iraq ever since 2005, the cabinets formed in Lebanon after the Syrian withdrawal in 2005 and the Ennahda-led transitional government that emerged in the aftermath of Tunisia's Jasmine revolution.

### The Special Issue

Whilst we have witnessed a steady growth over the past ten years in comparative research on Arab electoral and party politics, and with it a noticeable shift in focus from descriptive-historical accounts to analyses embedded in the wider theoretical literature, there remains a real gap in our understanding of the role political parties play in the formation, composition, functioning, and survival of the region's governments. This is particularly the case for coalition

<sup>7</sup> Marc Lynch, Jillian Schwedler, and Sean Yom, *The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research since the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

cabinets, which – as alluded to above – are more common in the region than widely assumed. To be sure, some aspects of coalition governance have been explored in the scholarship on the Arab world, mostly in the context of broader analyses of regime coalitions, democratisation, sectarianism, and/or consociationalism. In these studies, however, coverage of coalition cabinets tends to remain limited and for the most part without drawing any region-wide comparisons and/or linkages to the wider political science literature in the field.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, little intellectual exchange has hitherto materialised between regional and global political science research on coalition governance, manifest not least in a coalitions' literature whose theoretical and empirical insights derive overwhelmingly from liberal democratic contexts.

This Special Issue proposes to hone in on the formation, workings and durability of multiparty coalitions in countries across the Arab world. By coalition government we refer to executive institutions that comprise (cabinet) members from two or more political parties and whose leaders have agreed to co-govern for the duration of a legislative period on a shared policy agenda. This type of coalition is hence conceptually distinct from both the multiparty (oppositional) alliance, that may emerge prior to an election, as well as the broader 'regime coalition,' which has become a significant referent in research on Middle Eastern authoritarianism. In its investigative scope, the Special Issue fuses key themes from the broader coalition literature with some of the distinctive socio-political conditions prevalent in the region. It explores not only the conditions under which multiparty coalitions are formed, the shape they take, the bargaining strategies/processes that underpin their formation, and when and why they fail, but also important questions about the interplay between ascriptive identities (sectarian/tribal/familial), partisan ideologies, and coalition governance as well as the nature and utility of multiparty coalitions under authoritarian tutelage.

### Contributions

The Special Issue opens with an overview of coalition-making in the Arab world by Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Francesco Cavatorta. Taking into account all coalitions across the Arab world since 1990, the article provides a macro

8 Inmaculada Szmolka, "Party System Fragmentation in Morocco," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 15.1 (2010): 13–37; Harith Hasan, "Shi'a Islamist Parties in Iraq: From Opposition to Governance," in *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Francesco Cavatorta, Lise Storm, and Valeria Resta (London: Routledge, 2020).

analysis of the functioning of such coalitions with a focus on their formation, fragmentation, and durability. Some of the findings presented in the article tie in with broader theorising in the field, while others are more region-specific, such as, for instance, the prevalence of surplus coalitions and greater ideological diversity between coalition partners. Following on from this, the Special Issue's contributors examine in detail and in comparative perspective five different themes, illustrating how coalition-making and governance are affected.

A first contribution, by Moahmed Daadaoui and Valeria Resta, explores *coalition formation under authoritarian tutelage* in Algeria and Morocco. In many ways, the findings of this article are not wholly surprising, as it appears quite clearly that coalition-making and bargaining are highly dependent on the authoritarian ruler, although this plays out differently in the two countries. In Morocco, coalition-making and coalition governance enjoy some degree of autonomy from the palace, suggesting that parties can actually negotiate on the allocation of ministerial portfolios and therefore have a limited impact on policy-making. Although the monarchy still shapes coalition politics and can count on a set of advisers that function as a powerful shadow cabinet, Moroccan parties negotiate 'who gets what' within the coalition somewhat autonomously. In Algeria, this seems not to be the case, as parties are much more constrained. These findings reveal that the politics of coalition governance can vary quite significantly from one authoritarian context to the other, highlighting that dismissing all coalition politics under authoritarianism as being virtually the same is erroneous.

The second contribution by Tereza Jermanova and Jens Heibach looks at *coalition formation under transition to democracy* with a focus on the cases of Tunisia and Yemen. One of the central tenets of democratization studies is that, following the fall of an authoritarian regime or after a civil war, a very broad consensus between the new political elites is needed to formulate durable rules of the game, which will underpin the new political system and lead to its consolidation.<sup>9</sup> Large government coalitions within which participant parties make significant compromises for the benefit of the nation are therefore to be preferred to minimal winning ones, which are exclusionary and therefore problematic at a time when a broad consensus is believed to be necessary. The cases of Tunisia and Yemen both confirm and infirm the validity of such an assumption. Large multi-party coalitions are in the short-term useful to guide

9 Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: an Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Rory McCarthy, "The Politics of Consensus: Al-Nahda and the Stability of the Tunisian Transition" *Middle Eastern Studies* 55.2 (2019): 261–275; Barbara Walter, "Designing Transitions from Civil War: Demobilization, Democratization, and Commitments to Peace," *International Security* 24.1 (1999): 127–155.

a transitional country out of authoritarian rule or civil conflict and set up a new political system, or in dealing with a very specific national threat such as terrorism.<sup>10</sup> However, insisting on having surplus coalitions to ensure the continuation of the compromises made just after regime change or the end of civil conflict can become detrimental to the democratic game itself, as Tamirace Fakhoury and Vincent Durac's discussion of coalitions in postwar Lebanon shows in this Special Issue (see below) and Nadia Marzouki had already intuited in the Tunisian case.<sup>11</sup> Citizens unable to reward or punish parties for the policies they implement or fail to implement become disillusioned and, combined with poor policy outcomes, lead to what Cimini, examining Tunisia, labelled authoritarian nostalgia.<sup>12</sup> This issue is highlighted in established democracies as well,<sup>13</sup> as surplus coalitions (e.g., grand coalitions), coalitions of national salvation as well as technocratic governments supported by surplus coalitions can often suffer from serious legitimacy problems, which, in turn, open the door to dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement, and ultimately, to the questioning of democratic institutions themselves.<sup>14</sup> The loss of trust in political parties and the increasing calls for strongmen to rule in established democratic contexts are testimony to that effect. The findings of this second contribution therefore speak to a much broader phenomenon and not only to the Arab world.

The third contribution by Lise Storm and Dylan O'Driscoll explores the way in which *party elites bargain* according to formal and informal rules governing coalition-making, illustrating how this works in Morocco and Iraq. The most interesting finding here is that elite bargaining and coalition formation are not necessarily related to election results. It follows that electoral competition is more often than not about access to patronage resources than policy

10 Indridi Indridason, "Does terrorism influence domestic politics? Coalition formation and terrorist incidents," *Journal of Peace Research* 45,2 (2008): 241–259.

11 Nadia Marzouki, "Tunisia's Rotten Compromise," *MERIP* (2015). Available at: <https://merip.org/2015/07/tunisia-rotten-compromise/>.

12 Giulia Cimini, "Authoritarian Nostalgia and Practices in Newly Democratising Contexts: the Case of Tunisia," in *New Authoritarian Practices in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Ozgun Topak, Merouan Mekouar, and Francesco Cavatorta, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

13 Carolina Plescia, Sylvia Kritzinger, and Jae-Jae Spoon, "Who's to blame? How performance evaluation and partisanship influence responsibility attribution in grand coalition governments," *European Journal of Political Research* 61,3 (2022): 660–677.

14 Paolo Bellucci, "The Political Consequences of Blame Attribution for the Economic Crisis in the 2013 Italian National Election," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24,2 (2014): 243–263; Giulia Pastorella, "Technocratic governments in Europe: getting the critique right," *Political Studies* 64,4 (2016): 948–965.

implementation. This access ensures that parties and elites keep supporting the existing political system. What is interesting about this finding is that it applies to an authoritarian system – Morocco – and to a poorly performing nominally democratic, albeit consociational, one – Iraq. The capture of state resources, corruption, and coalition bargains simply struck with the intention to profit from a seat at the government's table are again not unique to the region. With all the differences that certainly apply, democracies are not immune to 'partitocracy,' a term used to aptly describe how Italian or Belgian political parties, for instance, occupied large swathes of the state to derive material benefits for them and their supporters by entering into coalitions that bore little resemblance to what voters wanted.<sup>15</sup>

The *failure of coalitions due to foreign occupation* is analysed next in Palestine and Iraq by Stephanie Stapleton, Taib Biygautane, Maia Hallward, and Tavishi Bhasin. The MENA region is, according to Hinnebusch, a 'penetrated' system,<sup>16</sup> suggesting that international factors have a powerful role to play in determining domestic institutional outcomes and policies, and heavily interfere in internal affairs. This can be seen in post-independence state-formation,<sup>17</sup> in foreign support for authoritarianism,<sup>18</sup> or in the struggle to influence the outcomes of regime change.<sup>19</sup> What coalition-formation and durability tell us when looking at Iraq and Palestine is that external forces have a powerful role in shaping which actors are allowed to participate in the bargain, which ones are not and, crucially, which policies such coalitions will undertake or refrain from implementing. This is an important finding because external interference in coalition-making is not broadly discussed and taken into account in the general comparative politics literature. In fact, and contrary to what conventional wisdom might hold, established democracies too can suffer quite heavily from direct and indirect foreign interference during coalition bargaining and during coalition governance. The European Union's role in Italy and Greece during

15 Maurizio Cotta, "Partitocracy: parties and their critics in Italian political life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics*, eds. Erik Jones and Gianfranco Pasquino, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Lieven de Winter, "Parliament and government in Belgium: prisoners of partitocracy," *Parliaments in Contemporary Western Europe*, ed. Philip Norton, (London: Routledge, 2013).

16 Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

17 Sean Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution: How Foreign Interventions Destabilise the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

18 Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: the Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19 Pietro Marzo, "Solving the security-democracy dilemma: the US foreign policy in Tunisia post-9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 41.7 (2020): 1181–1199.

the financial crisis is quite telling of how coalition-making was to a large extent externally-driven.<sup>20</sup> Integrating such a factor in how we theorise about coalitions outside the MENA context could contribute to a better account of the life, duration authenticity, and effectiveness of coalitions.

Tamirace Fakhoury and Vincent Durac, finally, employ the cases of Lebanon and Yemen to discuss the role of *identity in coalition governance*. The literature on conflict studies and democracy often postulates that consociationalism – informal or formal – is key to solving civil conflicts because it provides a stake in the new political system to all the identity groups in the country. Through their mutual vetoes and the distribution of political power according to sectarian or tribal belonging, identity groups are able to find an institutional balance that allows them to peacefully govern the country. Although consociationalism has worked reasonably well and civil conflicts did indeed end through the establishment of a consociational power sharing arrangement as the case of Northern Ireland shows, the cases explored here all point to its long-term failure, confirming its contradictory nature.<sup>21</sup> Although coalition-making takes place according to a set of rules citizens and parties alike are aware of, the outcome is increased social divisions and governmental paralysis, while ruling elites form accords that enshrine their role as spokespersons of their identity community and derive benefits from them. Once again, such coalition governments and the way in which they work are not limited to the MENA region, but can be found in established democracies too, whether consociationalism is formalised or informal. This means that some of the lessons learned through the study of such cases can contribute to theorising on how consociational coalitions work more generally. In established democracies, the case of Northern Ireland is particularly instructive, insofar as we can detect growing dissatisfaction with the consociational system and increased demands – often translated into votes for non-confessional parties or declining turnout – for the end of such a system. Recent elections have, for instance, seen a considerable increase in the vote for the Alliance Party, an openly non-sectarian party.<sup>22</sup>

20 Paris Aslanidis and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Dealing with populists in government: the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition in Greece,” *Democratization* 23.6 (2016): 1077–1091; Gabriele Furia, “The Monti government and the Europeanisation of Italian politics,” *Dossier Bibliothèque de Sciences Po* (2019). Available at: <https://dossiers-bibliotheque.sciencespo.fr/une-vie-politique-europeenne-european-political-life/monti-government-and-europeanisation-italian>.

21 Rudy Andeweg, “Consociational Democracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000): 509–536.

22 Jonathan Tonge, “Beyond Unionism versus Nationalism: the Rise of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland,” *The Political Quarterly* 91.2 (2020): 461–466.

Popular movements demanding the same in Iraq and Lebanon are therefore not a regional exception.

### Conclusion

Despite the considerable attention that the politics of the MENA have received over the last two decades, the literature still suffers from what has been termed ‘Arab exceptionalism,’ whereby uniquely distinct elements characterise the Arab countries in the MENA that ought to remain beyond the scope of wider comparison.<sup>23</sup> This Special Issue heeds the call to open up area studies to the theories, concepts, and methodologies of inquiry in comparative politics to analyse coalition-making, an understudied phenomenon in the Arab world. By doing so, the findings of the contributions to this Special Issue add new vital insights into the politics of coalition governance in the Arab MENA and hopefully engender fruitful ongoing mutual engagement between area studies and the wider coalition literature.

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23 Francesco Cavatorta, “Overcoming Exceptionalism – Party Politics and Voting Behaviour in the Middle East and North Africa,” in *Handbook of Middle East Politics: Interdisciplinary Inscriptions*, ed. Larbi Sadiki (London: Routledge, 2019).