

# Youth politics in the MENA: Democracy support from the ground up

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# What is populism?

- Three features *combined* (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017):
  - Anti-elitism
  - Anti-pluralism
  - Morally and/or symbolically driven (as opposed to empirically)
    - ‘The people’ vs corrupt elite
- Whether a phenomenon can be defined as populist is also largely context bound.

## The political context

- Theoretically, populism is most fundamentally juxtaposed to liberal democracy.
- Populism in illiberal settings
  - Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017): is or aspires to be.
  - Mounck (2018): crisis of liberal democracy and the rise of liberalism: illiberal regimes democratic.
    - Democracy: a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.
    - Democracy: majority rule.

## The political context continued

- The importance of defining regime types
  - Debate in MENA studies: subtype of democracy or authoritarianism?
    1. Apples and oranges
    2. Lending legitimacy to competitive authoritarianism
    3. Context matter for how regimes operate
- Definition of democracy here: regular RCE w universal suffrage, BCL and PR, EPG of the elected government.

## Populism in the MENA: the roots of the problem

- Why the MENA?
  1. Illiberal, competitive authoritarianism, most hostile to democracy: understudied. Misunderstood?
  2. Also: Arab Uprisings: level and intensity; global interest
- Context: global surge of populism plus regional factors, most notably political instability and the 'youth bulge'.

## Roots continued

- Young people have lost faith in political parties, in particular. Dissatisfaction and lack of trust.
- Problematic re:Schattschneider (1942: 1).
- MENA population, especially youth, shares the misgivings w democracy voiced by the citizenry elsewhere in countries plagued by populism.
- The role of parties: fueling the fire.
  - Distributors of spoils with a view to minimize dissent.
  - '*Wasta*' key at election time.

## Roots continued

- While in the West this state of affairs, where people are effectively becoming non-sovereign and democracy is gradually becoming stripped of its popular element as Mair (2005: 1) puts it, is relatively new, in the MENA it is simply a reflection of the status quo.
- Hence, the frustration with parties and the functioning of democracy consequently has different roots and targets in the two contexts.

## Popular attitudes in the MENA

- WVS, Arab Barometer, Sahwa, P2Y, etc. plus interviews
- Anti-elitism in the MENA
  - Arab Uprisings and anti-elite sentiment
  - Bread, freedom and dignity
  - Not call for democracy
  - No problem with technocrats (WVS2013: V128): different to the West and popular grievances w so-called 'experts' (Mair 2013)
- Not feeling represented, included and heard
  - Interest in politics
  - Language of politics
  - How parties view youth
  - MENA parties: elitist and under-developed



## Popular attitudes continued

- The crux of the matter: corruption in all spheres of society
  1. Elites amassing wealth
  2. *Wasta*
  
- 2<sup>nd</sup> most important feature of democracy
- Qualified for political leadership
- Most important challenge facing the country
- 2<sup>nd</sup> most important challenge
- Government effort to eliminate corruption
- Levels of corruption
- Corruption in state institutions and agencies
- Personal experiences: job and *wasta*

## Popular attitudes continued

- **The Arab Uprisings did not deliver**
  - Not belittling astonishing achievements
  - Impact on the daily lives of many people in areas of high importance to them personally: not improved, but worsened.
  - Expectations perhaps unrealistic, but they are real.
    - Tunisia in Jan. 2018 is one example.
    - Protesters taking to the streets, not via parties. Tired of middle men. Gate keepers. This is the window for populists (Müller 2017).
    - Role of social media in populism: Trump and Grillo. Enormous potential in the MENA.

## Popular attitudes continued

- **Anti-pluralism**
  - The picture is much less clear
  - Never highly pluralistic nor free:
    - Colonialism
    - Authoritarian legacy
  - Tentative openings of the 1990s: very limited
  - Rights curtailed: them versus us justification accepted
  - Nationalist rhetoric
    - Secular (moving out the Islamists: Egypt and Tunisia)
    - Islamo- (Egypt and Turkey)

## Anti-pluralism continued

- Justification for abuses of power: national interest
- Longevity: people do not question it.
- NB! Not because they are keen on the idea of a strong leader or, indeed, military rule,
- ...but rather because they were concerned with issues of order and stability and, by extension, national identity, which remains a so-called boundary problem in many MENA states.