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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ARAB COUNTRIES.

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Political Participation in Arab Countries

Introduction ¹

In analyzing political participation in Arab countries during the last decade of the twentieth century, it is important to start by defining the basic concept of political participation and to specify the temporal and geographic limits of this study. This chapter will proceed later to examine the constitutional and legal framework of political participation in Arab countries, and the basic forms of political participation in order to discuss both the basic features of political participation in these countries and find out the major obstacles which limit political participation. The chapter will end up by outlining future prospects of such participation.

Political participation is defined by most political scientists to be any kind of behavior which aims at influencing the public decision making process whether directly or indirectly in view of favoring a particular political outcome. In other words, it is an action, one of the inputs into the political system, which aims at obtaining a particular output, whether by inducing public authorities to undertake a certain policy, shaping the way such policy is implemented, or placing certain individuals or groups into public decision-making posts.^a

This definition raises two particular problems related to the meaning of the political in this particular context. Does the political refer also to decisions about allocation of economic resources, or is it limited only to allocation of non-economic values such as posts within the government or civil and political rights. A related question breaks the boundaries of the political further by including concerted actions among the people, even when public authorities are not directly involved. The first question does not raise much of a problem among political scientists, as both radical, liberal and conservative political scientists would agree that the political process involves the authoritative allocation of values including, for most, economic values. Politics becomes in this view the study of who gets what, when and how? The second question is more problematic as it conceives politics not to be just a struggle for power, but more broadly to be a collective effort at undertaking concerted action. People acquire power when they act together. In this sense, power is identified with the absence of conflict. This latter definition of political participation was adopted by Dianne Singerman in her study of poor neighborhoods in Cairo^b.

These questions give rise to a more fundamental debate about the adequacy of the definition of political participation adopted in standard political science textbooks. Some political scientists would argue that this definition is too biased towards the formal forms of political participation, through voting, membership of political parties and interest groups, more typical of political systems in advanced capitalist countries, and could not be relevant to the study of political participation in developing countries, particularly where political parties are of recent origin, outlawed, or subject to severe restrictions, and where interest groups expressing aspirations of the

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vast majority of people have very little opportunity either to exist or to use the same channels as their counterparts in highly developed capitalist systems.

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These objections to the standard definition of political participation are valid in the Arab context characterized by the presence of authoritarian regimes of various types. Political parties, professional association and trade union are completely outlawed in some Arab countries, are subject to the domination of a ruling party in a second category of countries, and operate within narrow limits in a third group. Formal organizations of this type have not taken root still in many Arab countries. Those citizens who like to influence public authorities opt therefore for informal methods of political action. Data on informal forms or channels of political participation, however, are difficult to obtain. Therefore, while these channels would be considered, no claim is made as to their complete coverage in this study.

Two other related remarks on the standard definition of political participation. It tends to focus only on the legal forms of political participation, and it considers usually peaceful forms. As such illegal and violent forms are intended also to influence public decision-making processes, they would be included in the study of political participation in Arab countries.

Taking all these considerations into account, channels of political participation in Arab countries would be classified as follows:

Table 1

Forms of political participation in Arab countries
A Classification

Individual forms	Collectives forms
Peaceful :	
<u>Formal:</u> 1- voting	1- membership of political parties.
2-campaigning	2- membership of people's and community organizations.
<u>Informal</u>	:
<u>Legal:</u> contacting officials political contributions	
<u>Illegal:</u> bribery	demonstrations, marches & strikes.

Violent

riots, terrorism & guerilla
actions.

The study does cover the twenty one Arab countries, members of the Arab League. The time period considered is the 1990's until the present time starting with the end of the second Gulf War in February 1991.

Constitutional and Legal Framework of Participation

In inquiring about the specific rights to political participation recognized for citizens in Arab countries, the first line of research would be to examine constitutions and laws in these countries as they are expected to spell out the range of rights provided for, and the commitments which fall upon citizens of each country^c. It is true that the reality of political participation could diverge in important ways from constitutional and legal provisions. However, the latter are a first clue towards understanding political participation in any country.

Most Arab countries do possess documents of a constitutional nature, although the exact name of these documents could vary from one country to another, called for example Basic Law in Saudi Arabia (1993) and Oman (1996), Declaration on the Establishment of the Authority of the People in Libya and constitution in other countries. These documents could be complemented by other declarations, as the National Charters in Jordan(1989) and Bahrain (20010). The following table lists the dates and names of such documents in Arab countries.

Some of these documents have been amended several times as was the case in Lebanon , Morocco, Egypt and other countries. Some countries have known several constitutions in their recent history, whereas others have kept the same constitution. Egypt has known no less than four constitutional documents since the Revolution of 1952, notably a Constitutional Declaration in 1953, the Constitution of the Republic of Egypt in 1956, the Constitution of the United Arab Republic in 1958, the Provisional Constitution of 1964 and the Permanent Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt of 1971, which was amended in 1980. This is also similar to the cases of Syria, Iraq and Sudan. Lebanon, Jordan and Morocco have remained basically with the same constitution with some amendments since they got their independence.

The table lists constitutions which were in force in Arab countries at the beginning of the twenty first century. They were preceded in several of these countries by other constitutions particularly in countries who obtained a form of autonomy or even political independence in the first half of the 20th century. A brief examination of the constitutional history of Arab countries suggests certain common features among them, which are relevant for the study of political participation. Constitutions which were adopted before the 1950's , were mostly of the liberal type, with the exception of the constitution which was briefly in force in Egypt between 1930-1935. Constitutions which were introduced in the 1960's were mostly of the authoritarian type, particularly in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Mauritania. A return to liberal constitutions took place in Arab , countries since the 1970's, perhaps with the exception of Algeria and

Libya where both the constitution of 1976 in the first and the Declaration of the Establishment of the Authority of the People in the second consolidated the presence of the one party or the no1990's was marked by the adoption of constitutional documents in these countries.

Table 2: Constitutions in Force in Arab Countries

The country	Name of the constitutional documents	Dates of basic Documents and & amendments
Lebanon	Constitution	1926 - 1996
Jordan	„ - National charter	1952 -1992
Kuwait	„	1962
Egypt	„	1971-1980
Morocco	„	1972-1992- 1996
Syria	„	1973
Bahrain	- charter of national action	1973,2001
Algeria		1976-1988- 1989- 2001
Libya	Declaration of the Establishment of the Authority of the People.	1977
Iraq	constitution	1990
Tunisia	“ “ “	1991
Mauritania	“ “ “	1991-1994
Yemen	“ “ “	1996
Saudi Arabia	Basic law	1992
Oman	Basic law	1996

Source: [http://www. Constitution Finder](http://www.constitutionfinder.com)

These early steps in the process of liberalization ranged from the appointment of a consultative council in Saudi Arabia, to recognition of the rights to universal suffrage for

men as well as for women in Qatar, Oman and Bahrain and even to the promise of the authorization of political parties in the case of Bahrain.

In fact, in terms of political participation, as provided for in their basic documents, Arab countries could be classified as follows:

1-Countries which have gone along the path of political liberalization, recognizing freedom of association, thus allowing both opposition parties, professional associations and trade unions with a degree of autonomy to be formed. These include Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen and Mauritania and Djibouti. Both Lebanon, Morocco and Mauritania had adopted a liberal formula of their political systems since they got their independence.

2-Countries which allow political parties, professional associations and trade unions to be formed, but bring them under the control of a dominant party. This is still the case of both Syria and Iraq ruled by the Socialist Arab Baath Party leading a "progressive front" of several parties in the first.

3-Military regimes which hardly conceal their military character behind a loose mass organization, called "popular committees" in Libya and the divided National Islamic Front in Sudan. The military character of these regimes is manifested in the fact that the residence of the head of state is located inside military barracks.

4- Countries which ban the establishment of political parties and restrict freedom of associations. This is the case in almost all the countries members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, although both Kuwait and Bahrain did allow the de facto presence of political groupings and experience the presence of organized political opposition. The new National Charter of 2001 in Bahrain promised to allow the formation of political parties.

Modes of Political Participation

This section examines some modes of political participation, which could be found in Arab countries. Some of these forms are common to all political systems, but their importance does vary from one type of political system to another. Data on some of these forms, namely the informal ones, is quite scarce. However, no full understanding of political participation in Arab countries would be possible if they are not taken into account. Some forms are also limited to particular systems in Arab countries and are not known yet in others. Some countries in the Gulf region have not experienced elections at any level as a form of political participation. Political parties, professional associations and trade unions are still banned in some of these countries. On the other hand, terrorist attacks and guerrilla activities, typical of political life in Algeria, Iraq and Sudan, and in Egypt in the 1990's, are almost unknown in most of the Gulf countries members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The status of these methods as forms of political participation will be explained later. However, an understanding of the status of political participation in Arab countries would not be complete without taking into account the political context within which such participation takes place, particularly the extent to which human rights in general are respected in them, and more particularly those rights which are closely related to political participation. Freedoms of conscience, belief, opinion and expression are therefore crucial for the exercise of all the rights of political participation through any of the channels that will be discussed in some detail in the following sections of this paper.

Freedom of expression and political participation:

It could be safely assumed, beyond any doubt, that freedom of expression is a fundamental

condition for the exercise of all political rights. The crucial importance of freedom of expression, together with all intellectual rights such as freedom of conscience, belief, and opinion and to knowledge and research stems from the fact that the free expression of opinion on public matters is in itself a form of political participation. Freedom of expression is also crucial for the exercise of other forms of political participation. For the voter to make a sound decision concerning whom he should vote for, he should have access to a variety of assessments of the alternative platforms of all competing candidates and political parties so that he /she could make his /her decision in full knowledge of what they stand for. Political parties should be able also to inform the public of their stands on various issues of domestic and foreign policy in order to enlighten this public and eventually to get support from some citizens for their platforms. Such freedom of expression would not be attained if those who hold dissenting views, compared to those of the government, or the majority in society, are intimidated through harassment by government or non-governmental groups. Freedom of access to, if not necessarily ownership of , the media , could provide a solid guarantee for freedom of expression.

Although Arab citizens of all Arab countries have access at present to a variety of views on many issues of Arab politics thanks to the technological revolution in electronic media, .which brought several Arab and foreign satellite television stations closer to Arab citizens. Such stations compete with each other to beam to Arab viewers their talk shows, which carry, very often, opposed views on these issues. Newspapers and even the electronic media in some Arab countries, particularly Lebanon and Egypt, are far from being dominated by a monolithic stand on issues of concern to their societies.

A reading of reports of local, regional and international human rights organizations suggests ,nevertheless that freedom of expression is subject to assaults from many and opposed quarters in Arab countries. An analysis of violations of freedom of expression, as described in the annual report of the Arab Human Rights Organization for the year 2000 suggests four major types of violations:

- 1-Harassment of journalists, including their arrest, trial and imprisonment as punishment for what they write,
- 2-Suspension or closure of opposition and independent newspapers,
- 3-Arrest and imprisonment of political leaders for their expression of views critical of the government,
- 4-Harassment of intellectuals, novelists and artists for their dissemination of critical or unpopular views

Table 3
Major types of violations of freedom of expression in
Arab countries, as reported by AHRO

Type of violation/ country	Harassment of journalists	Suspension or closure of newspapers	Harassment of political leaders	Harassment of intellectuals
Kuwait		Suspension of Al-Seyasa newspaper for five days		Imprisonment of a writer, investigation of a university professor, trial of two women writes
Lebanon				Trial of singer Marcel Khalifa, acquitted later by the court
Egypt	Imprisonment of three journalilsts of Al-Sha'b , an opposition newspaper			
Mauritania	Harassment of journalists	Closure of some newspapers	Detention of opposition leaders	
Jordan	Arrest of three journalists			
Sudan	Arrest of three journalists	Suspension of four newspapers	Arrest of human rights activists	
Tunisia	Investigation and harassment of one journalist		Investigation of a prominent human rights leader	
Yemen	Detention of two journalists	Suspension of a newspaper		
Djibouti			Detention of three opposition leaders	

Source: Arab Human Rights Organization. Huqouq al-ensaan fi al-watan al-‘arabi-Human Rights in the Arab World. Cairo.2000. In Arabic.Pp.42-47.

It should be added that newspaper reports suggest that such violations of freedom of expression continued in most of these countries in the following years. Two newspapers were closed in Egypt , namely AL-Sah’ab and Al-Naba’, and journalists ,human rights activists and intellectuals were harassed in Morocco Tunisia, and Egypt ,just to offer few examples.

What is truly alarming is that some violations for the freedom of expression are not initiated by the state, but rather by certain societal conservative forces., Governments, who suffer from a

shortage of legitimacy, concede to these conservative forces out of the fear that they might lose some of their popularity if they stood by intellectuals who take positions or express views in ways with which the general public is not accustomed. The cases against the singer Marcel Khalifa in Lebanon, the feminist author Dr. Nawal El-Sa'dawi in Egypt were brought to the courts by citizens who hold conservative views, and constituted perhaps embarrassment to the government. This was similar to what happened to Nasr Hamed Abou Zeid, the Cairo University professor and Yusuf Shaheen,² the film director in Egypt years ago.

Informal modes of participation:

Not all acts of political participation in Arab countries pass through formal channels. This is also true of all political systems. The importance of informal channels of political participation is far greater in developing countries, including the Arab world. The modern forms of political participation are of recent origin and are products of the historical experience and political culture of Western countries. Moreover, these modern forms, including elections, membership in political parties and organized interest groups, have yet to demonstrate their effectiveness as methods of influencing the decision-making process, either to get some services to the local community, install popular figures in elected posts of the government or change government policies. Informal methods, under these conditions, are believed to be more effective and are used by a wide variety of individuals and social groups.

Informal methods also vary among countries and social groups. Contacts are the most popular of these methods. Persons who are contacted do not have to occupy official posts in the government. If access to these officials is difficult, the door is open for indirect access through influential persons who might know them. The latter could be simply their relatives, wealthy people or others who enjoy prestigious status in the local community. Communication with such influential people could be an oral conversation. It could also take the form of a written petition,⁸⁷⁷ to be presented by the latter to those who could make the relevant decision within the government. The Arab political culture has coined the term “Wasta” to describe this method, which consists of finding out the middleman who could carry citizens’ concerns to those who have the decision-making power. Unlike what might be suggested by this term, concerns of citizens who resort to this method are in most cases legitimate concerns, finding a job for a young member of the family who has been unemployed for a long time; paving a road; or building a health center for the local community. This method could be used also to attain some illegal benefits and could be combined with the promise of some benefits to the government official who is the object of the “Wasta”. In the latter case the “Wasta” becomes a “rashwa” or bribery, but this would be favored by wealthier citizens.

Under some Arab political systems, one variant of these informal ways has been institutionalized in such a way as to allow citizens access to the rulers. Heads of state in some Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia used to allow citizens to have a free access to them one day a week. Those who have some grievances could take them to the supreme authority on the land, either directly or most probably, through the traditional chief to whom they owe allegiance, the latter could be a tribal chief or a prominent religious leader. Another variant would be to complain to a particular

Nasr hamed Abou Zeid was accused by an Islamist lawyer of apostasy. The lawyer obtained from a court a ruling² that Zeid should divorce his wife, since their marriage, in his view, would not be legitimate in terms of the Islamic Shari'a. Shahin, the famous film director had seen a case brought against the public showing of his film "Al-Muhajir", allegedly because the main character in the film is the prophet Joseph. The impersonification of prophets in movies is, in the view of the lawyer who sued Shahin, is a violation of Islamic teachings.

office subordinate to the King, called in Saudi Arabia-Diwan Al-Mazalim, or Department of Complaints-.The complaint would be viewed by senior officials of the government and communicated to the citizen later on.^d

It is definitely difficult to quantify resort to this informal method of political participation in Arab countries, which falls under what political scientists describe as “contacting officials” or “lobbying” under more modern political systems. It is known however that members of the parliament in Egypt receive hundreds of petitions from citizens in their constituencies. A large part of the time ministers spend in the two houses of the Egyptian legislature is devoted to the signing of these petitions carried to ministers by members of the parliament who would like to demonstrate to their constituencies that they did not waste their votes when they elected them to the parliament.

Formal modes of participation:^e

As for the formal modes of participation, this section will outline three of the most important, namely elections, participation in political parties and participation in associations, as examples of both individual and collective forms of participation. As was suggested earlier, such forms acquire more importance in countries, which have embarked along the path of political liberalization, but they are to be found also on countries with authoritarian and semi-traditional political systems.

Elections:

Elections, as a mode of political participation at both local and national levels, is quite common in most Arab countries, and have been known in one country(Egypt) since the second half of the 19th century and in other countries since the first half of the twentieth century (Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq). At present, only two Arab countries still do not allow elections at all, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In a third Gulf country-Qatar- elections have been practiced only at the local level, with the promise to hold elections at the national level in 2003.^f

In examining elections as a mode of political participation, the following aspects should be taken into account:

- ? Conditions for eligibility of voters and candidates,
- ? freedom of campaigning,
- ? fairness of the voting process,
- ? method of monitoring of elections,
- ? relevance of elections as a mode of political participation.^g

All Arab countries require some conditions to be met by all voters and candidates. Most of them however have adopted systems of universal suffrage, with the conditions, which usually apply in democratic countries. However, two important deviating patterns emerge, one which has been confined to Kuwait, that still bans women from exercising the right to vote, not to talk of

being candidates. The Emir of Kuwait issued a decree granting Kuwaiti women the right to vote, but this decree has been rescinded by the Council of the Nation, the Kuwaiti national assembly, dominated after the last election by Islamist deputies. A Kuwaiti Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Council of the Nation. Other Gulf countries which practice elections such as Oman, Bahrain and Qatar granted women rights of voting and candidacy in local and national elections. Moreover, Kuwait limits voting rights to Kuwaiti male nationals of the first degree, excluding both naturalized citizens and those inhabitants of Kuwait who could not demonstrate their Kuwaiti nationality, and thus remained without nationality, although they do serve in the army and police force. The second deviation from the principle of universal suffrage is practiced in Iraq, which allows military officers and policemen to vote in legislative elections, but bans the candidacy of those who do not fulfill certain political conditions, including support of principles of the ruling Arab Socialist Ba'th Party, and approval of the two Gulf wars launched by Saddam Hussein against Iran (1980-1988) and Kuwait (1990-1991).

As far the conditions found in other Arab countries, they relate mostly to the minimum age of the voter, being twenty one years in some countries (Lebanon, article 21 reduced to eighteen in other countries (Syria, Article 54,)^h and not having a criminal record.

Freedom of Campaigning:

Campaigning is rarely entirely free in Arab countries. Few countries have reached a considerable degree in campaign freedom, particularly Morocco and Jordan, in addition to Sudan under civilian governments, although the royal family in both Morocco and Jordan is above political debates. In other countries, freedom to campaign is subject to various restrictions, including requirements of the state of emergency, which limit the exercise of certain rights without police authorization, as is the case mostly in Egypt. Opposition political parties do not have easy access to electronic mass media in countries of the dominant or the single party system, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria and Sudan. Opposition party candidates and their supporters could become object of police harassment, as was reported in Mauritania, Egypt and Yemen. Finally, the use of money and dominance of tribal loyalties could hinder very much freedom of campaigning. The use of money to purchase voters' loyalties was widely reported in the last legislative election in Egypt and Lebanon. Tribalism is a very important factor in Jordanian, Yemeni and Kuwaiti politics.

Fairness of the Electoral Process:

Fairness of the electoral process is indeed a thorny issue in Arab countries. It is quite rare to find one single Arab country in which the electoral process does not give rise to charges and counter-charges of rigging of elections. The electoral law itself is often the object of complaints by opposition parties and personalities who claim that it is tailored in such a way as to favor government candidates and to weaken the chances of opposition candidates. This has been the case in Egypt (1984-1995), Lebanon (1992-), Jordan (1993-) Tunisia (1989-), and Mauritania. Boundaries of electoral districts in Lebanon are said to have been deliberately redrawn to weaken representation and chances of success of opponents of Syrian military presence³.

The outcome of elections is known in advance in some countries, as the proportion of deputies of the ruling coalition is fixed in the electoral law. In Syria for example, the number of

seats to be occupied by both National Front and the Ba'th Party is decided in the electoral law, no matter how citizens vote. Even when the electoral law does not fix the number of ruling party candidates, electoral 'practices' ensure that no other than members of the ruling party or those approved by its leaders would win membership in the national legislature. Members of the Ba'th Party are encouraged in Iraq to run also as independents, to ensure that only Ba'th loyalists would monopolize membership of the National Assembly¹. In the last two elections of the People's Assembly in Egypt, independent candidates who won seats in the assembly were said to have asked to join ranks of the parliamentary group of the ruling National Democratic Party who "technically" did not win the majority in the last election of October- November 2000.¹

One important condition for the fairness of the electoral process is neutrality of the body supervising the election. Such neutrality would at least ensure no bias in preparation of voters' lists and in counting of the votes, although it does not ensure lawful practices outside of voting stations. Only in Lebanon and Yemen does a non-governmental body supervise election. In Lebanon, elections are supervised by an independent electoral commission, and in Yemen by a multiparty committee. In other Arab countries, it is usually the Ministry of Interior, responsible for internal security, which is entrusted, with the task of supervising the electoral process from beginning to end. Even when the Egyptian Government gave in to the Supreme Constitutional Court's ruling that judges should be present in all voting stations in the country, the Ministry of Interior found ways in October –November 2000 to intimidate voters in constituencies where candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization not legally recognized as a political party, were expected to win.^k

Monitoring of elections:

Fairness of elections could be further improved when an individual body is entrusted with the task of monitoring the elections, reporting on violation of the electoral process and suggesting ways of minimizing them in future . This task could be carried out either by a national body of experts and activists or by an international body. Human rights organizations in Egypt formed such a body on the occasion of People's Assembly elections in 1995, and published several reports, but the Egyptian government did not welcome such initiative.¹ Harassment of human rights organizations and activists, prior to People's Assembly elections of October - November 2000 discouraged them to undertake the same effort on the occasion of this last election. Only the Palestinian authority (1996), and Algeria (legislative elections 1997) have accepted the presence of an international commission to supervise their elections. Those were judged to be among the fairest elections conducted recently in the Arab world.

Relevance of elections as a mode of political participation:

Despite the fact that election is the most popular of all modes of political participation, as it is open to all citizens, and could theoretically lead to a change of the incumbents or of policies of the government, elections do not seem to be very relevant as a method of effecting political change in the Arab world, at least under the conditions prevailing in most Arab countries at present particularly with respect to freedom of campaigning, fairness of the electoral process and absence of independent monitoring bodies.^m No transfer of power has taken place through the ballot box in any Arab country, with the exception of Morocco and Lebanonⁿ recently, and Sudan during periods of the civilian or transitional governments. Elections are viewed by most of the rulers in the Arab world to be a device for political mobilization in favor of regime's goals and a demonstration of the regime's legitimacy.No wonder that under these conditions, participation in

election ranges from very low to quite moderate when reliable data is available on voters' turn out. The table 4 offers a range of rates of voters' turn- out in recent elections in Arab countries.

Although no figures were available for some countries, some trends could be discerned from the table 4. Rates of electoral participation tend to be quite high in Arab countries in the early stage of electoral politics, when citizens are given the right for the first time to elect their representatives. Rates of voters' participation tend to be quite impressive therefore in the Gulf countries where the electoral system is of a recent origin as well as in Palestine where the people were called on to elect their first legislative assembly in 1996. Also rates of participation tend to be quite high in truly competitive party systems, as is the case in Morocco and Jordan. Voters' participation there was close to 60% of all voters. This should be the case in Algeria, and in Lebanon, despite the fact that the Islamic Salvation Front in the first is excluded from electoral competition, and Christian political parties boycotted elections in the second believing that the Syrian government plays its heavy hands in their country's political process.⁹

Finally, when electoral politics is of relatively long date, and the outcome of elections seems to be pre-determined, voters' apathy is the inevitable outcome, as is the case definitely in Egypt

Table 4: Rates of voters' participation in Arab countries, Data collected from the site of Arab Social Science Research (ASSR)⁴

The country	Type of election	Date	Rate of participation
Lebanon	legislative	1992	44
		1996	
		2000	
Morocco	legislative	1993	63.7
		1997	58.3
Jordan	legislative	1989	63.2
		1993	68.3
		1997	45.45
Yemen	Presidential	1999	66.
	Legislative	1997	61
	Local	2001	
Egypt	People's Assembly	2000	27.5
Tunisia	Presidential	1999	89.7
	Legislative	1999	91.5
Algeria	Presidential	1999	60.25
	legislative	1997	66.3
Mauritania	Presidential legislative	1997	65.6.
Kuwait	Council of the Nation	1999	80
Oman	Shura Council	1997	
Bahrain	Referendum on a National Charter	2001	90.3

The site offers a list of several electronic data sources, see in particular :[Http://agora.stm.it/elections](http://agora.stm.it/elections)⁴

Qatar	Local elections	1999	85
Palestine	National legislature	1996	90
Syria	Legislative presidential	1998 2000	77.8 N.A.
Iraq	legislative	2000	83.6.
Sudan	Presidential and legislative	December 2000	

Participation through political parties:

In discussing participation through political parties in Arab countries, four questions should be examined: the presence of the party system, freedom to establish political parties, the freedom to operate political parties once they have the legal right to exist, the representative character of political parties and finally the impact that political parties might have on the electoral process. All these questions are very important since the presence of any modern democratic system is hardly conceivable without the presence of political parties. Political parties do in fact perform indispensable functions under any such system, as they organize political competition, represent different trends of the public opinion, communicate with citizens on important issues of domestic and foreign policies and recruit political leaders.

Political parties do not officially exist in six Arab countries at present. The five countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council ban the presence of political parties, although the National Charter approved in a referendum in Bahrain in February 2001 does promise to turn Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy, which implies that political activities would be authorized, but it is not clear whether political parties would be explicitly authorized.^p In Kuwait, distinct intellectual trends, identifies with specific meeting places called “Diwaniyyat” have been in existence for some time.^q

presence of political parties. The Sudanese government of General Omar Al-Bashir did authorize the formation of opposition parties under a law called the Law of Succession-Qanoun Al-Tawali- which has been criticized by most Sudanese parties opposed to the Islamist regime.^f

It is rare however to find one Arab country with a multiple party system that allows parties complete freedom. Lebanon , Jordan and Yemen are the only countries in which there are no restrictions on the formation of political parties. Restrictions on political parties freedoms are of two types:

- 1- Banning the establishment of specific political parties: The Islamists are the most notable groups that are not allowed to form political parties. This is the case in countries ranging from the Moroccan monarchy to the republican regimes of Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. The Law of Political Parties of 1977 in Egypt bans also other groups most notably the Communists and any party based on religion, which means also the banning , not only of Islamist parties but also Christian parties. The Law of Political Parties in Iraq bans parties opposed to principles of the ruling Arab Socialist Ba’th Party.
- 2- Restrictions on freedom of action by political parties. Even when political parties are authorized, their freedom to act is restricted in law and in practice. In some countries they are

not allowed to operate within schools, universities, economic enterprises and government offices, and not just among police and army officers. In other countries, they are not allowed to have ties to foreign political parties or organizations. State monopoly over electronic mass media, which is the case in most of these countries, does not enable opposition parties to communicate with the largest sections of the people who do not read newspapers. Effective press censorship, whether externally imposed or effectively internalized by newspaper editors, makes it difficult for the non-ruling parties to communicate freely with their public.⁵

Despite all these restrictions, politically-active citizens in Arab countries established a large number of political parties, as could be seen from table 5. Admittedly, not all the parties counted in the table are active organizations, particularly in the countries which have a relatively large number of parties as Algeria, Jordan, Sudan and Lebanon, but the table suggests nevertheless the extent to which party pluralism has been attained in Arab countries.

Table 5: Major Political parties in Arab countries

The country	No. of authorized parties	Political parties in the government in 2000
Lebanon	18	
Jordan	36	Non-partisans
Yemen	5	2
Morocco	22	7
Algeria	37	6
Tunisia	7	1(RCD)
Egypt	16	1
Mauritania		
Syria	6	1(Ba'th)
Sudan	15	1(National Congress Party)
Iraq	1	1
Palestine	6	1(PLO)

Source: Counted from Banks, Arthur S. & Thomas C. Muller Eds. Political Handbook of the World :1998 . CSA Publication, Binghamton < State University of New York. 1998.

In the absence of detailed study on political parties in Arab countries, it is difficult to reach reliable conclusions about the extent to which they represent most important segments of the public opinion in their countries. However, the banning of certain political parties is likely to cast a shadow on the representative nature of the political parties that are allowed to exist. It is likely therefore that important segments of the public opinion are not well represented in parliaments of Arab countries that proscribe the presence of organizations that speak for these segments. Thus, the Islamists, or at least the largest body that speaks for them, have no voice in political systems of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Communists have no

voice in the party system of Iraq and Egypt. Kurds and Shi'i's do not have a voice in the political system of Iraq despite the fact that they together constitute the vast majority of population in that country.

How relevant are political parties in Arab countries as a vehicle for political participation.? A complete answer to this question is difficult without a detailed study of the interaction between Arab governments and political parties operating in their respective countries. However, the fact that governments in most Arab countries which allow the presence of opposition parties are always formed by members of one party, which has been in power in many of these countries in decades suggests that, with the exception perhaps of Morocco, Algeria, and Yemen, political parties do not count much in other Arab countries as effective mechanisms for political participation. Most of these parties stand very little chance of participating in the government. Moreover, the way opposition parties are dealt with by the governments of the dominant party system suggests also that such dominant parties are not very responsive to the demands that might be formulated by these parties.

Table 6: Banned parties in Arab countries

Country	No.of banned parties	Country	No. of banned parties
Lebanon	No information	Mauritania	No information
Jordan	No information	Syria	6
Yemen	No information	Sudan	9 clandestine groups
Morocco	1	Iraq	19
Tunisia	9	Libya	10-Exiled groups
Algeria	4	Palestine	No information
Egypt	10		

Source: Counted from Banks & Muller. Op.cit.

An examination of the parties authorized in countries with multi-party systems suggests that, in terms of ideological orientation, a variety of ideological orientations and interests are articulated by Arab political parties. In this respect, one could classify Arab political parties into the following categories:

1-Nationalist-Statist political parties that used to rule Arab countries or that are still in power. The most notable examples of such parties include the ruling Arab Ba'th Socialist Party in Syria and Iraq. The Algerian National Liberation Front belongs to this category as well as the Constitutionalist Rally in Tunisia. The Nationlaist –Statist ideological strand is still to be seen among parties in other countries, which are to be found either in the opposition or in the government sharing power with other parties. The Socialist Union of Popular Forces in Morocco is the prototype of such parties, as well as Nasserite parties in opposition in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. Most of these parties, with the exception of the Nasserites have abandoned their former radical ideologies in favor of more liberal stands on questions of the management of the economy and acceptance of political pluralism.

2- Marxist parties which continue to call for a state-led model of development, with some of them maintaining their old communist labels whereas others have adopted names that suggest a reformist or revisionist stand within Marxism. Such parties are to be found in nearly all Arab countries that allow a multi-party system from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia in the Maghreb to Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine in the Mashreq to Yemen in the Arab Peninsula.

3-Religion-based political parties, mostly Islamist that enjoy a legal status in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. This was also the case of the Socialist Labor Party in Egypt before the government-dominated Committee of Political Parties in Egypt outlawed it. Among these parties, only the National-Islamist Front could become a dominant party ruling Sudan since June 1989. Islamist parties in Yemen and Jordan did also share in the government of their countries, but rather as junior partners with other parties or forces. Followers of non-Islamic religious creeds rarely establish political parties on their own in Arab countries. Christian parties in Sudan and Lebanon are more an expression of ethnic divisions in their countries rather than politico-religious organizations. Their membership could be predominantly Christian, but they do not advocate a political ideology based on religion.

4- Ethnically based political parties that call for respect of the rights of particular ethnic groups. One would find such parties reflecting aspirations of Berber in Morocco and Algeria, or those of Southern Sudanese, followers of the Mahdi or Khatmia in Sudan , Maronites, Chi'is and Kurds in Lebanon and Iraq.

5-Government-founded parties which were established by heads of state in republican regimes to provide legitimacy to their exercise of power, and which do not advocate a clearly defined ideology other than the positions of the day that the head of state would like to adopt. The most notable example of such parties are both the ruling National Democratic Party in Egypt and the General People's Congress in Yemen. Under Arab monarchies, a coalition of political parties emerges on the occasion of each election with the distinction of being the parties that are favored by the king. This is particularly the case in both Morocco and Jordan.

6- Old liberal parties that led struggle for independence which are found either in the opposition or occasionally in the government. This category is represented by both the Isteqlal Party in Morocco and the New Wafd Party in Egypt.

7- A variety of parties of the personalistic type that reflect the aspirations of a particular leader who relies on a family or a personal following. This is the case of most other political parties in Arab countries. They are to be found in any of these countries.

However, legally authorized political parties in Arab countries are still not fully representative of all currents of the public opinion. In many Arab countries, some political parties and organizations are banned, even though there are indications that they do possess a considerable following among citizens. This is particularly the case of Islamist parties in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia , Egypt and Syria. It is also the case of Communist parties in Egypt and Iraq. Major Sudanese political parties have refused to recognize the Law of Political Parties in Sudan, adopted in 1999. The number of such banned parties' increases in countries with the single party or no party system, notably Iraq and Libya. However, some of the banned parties are organizations that call or practice armed struggle against their governments. This is notably the case of the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria and many Southern Sudanese groups. This was also the case of both the Jihad and the Islamic Group in Egypt before they renounced armed struggle

and attempted even to establish a party called AL-Shari'a Party, which does not stand much chance of being authorized by the Committee of Political Parties in Egypt.

Participation through People's and Community Organizations:

In several Arab countries, citizens have the opportunity to participate in politics at the national and local levels through so-called People's and Community Organizations. Although such organizations do not concern their members all the time with national politics, their contribution to political participation is tremendous. If politics is defined as the process of the authoritative allocation of values, then they are at the heart of the political process. They either make demands for the allocation of material and non-material values, in terms of the distribution of government and societal funds among various uses, or effect such distribution of values through the financial, human and symbolic resources at their disposal. Moreover, they occasionally call on the government either to change certain policies it has adopted or endorse continued pursuit of other policies. More importantly, they do act as channels of political socialization. They could in this way either reinforce values of freedom of expression and equality, or quite the opposite, disseminate values of prejudice and ethnic and social discrimination. Which of these functions they perform effectively depends largely on the type of socio-economic and political system under which they operate.

An examination of Arab political systems under study suggests that Arab citizens could join or have access to one of the following types of People's and Community Organizations, depending on their socio-economic status, personal preferences and local organizations:¹

1-Class –based organizations: These include on the one hand business groups of various types, be they chambers of commerce, bankers' associations, investors' societies on the one hand, or trade unions on the other,

2-occupation-based associations: These refer to professional associations like those of lawyers, journalists, medical doctors, engineers, etc.

3-interest-based societies: These cater for the varied interests of citizens. They are usually called societies, or Jam'eyyat in Arab countries.

4-Local elected bodies, which allow citizens to make their voice heard on purely local matters.

The proliferation of such organizations and their effectiveness as vehicles of political participation depends very much on the socio-economic structure, the history of statehood and the legal system of interest representation in each country. Thus countries with complex level of social differentiation in terms of the variety of social classes and occupations, with a relatively long history of statehood, and a degree of freedom of association are the countries where the presence of such associations is strongly felt on the political scene. On the other hand, countries with modest complexity of their class and occupational structure, recent history of statehood and a limited degree of freedom of association, are the countries where no active associational life is to be expected. However, as practices in Arab countries do diverge considerably from the texts of their constitutions and laws, it is difficult to find an Arab country where such organizations are totally free from government interference and bureaucratic controls.

Thus, in terms of the legal system of interest representation, Arab political systems could be classified into the following categories:

1-Political systems where associations are established upon notification of authorities. No authorization is required. This is the case- in theory – of both Lebanon and Morocco. These are the two countries which allow pluralism in the representation of one single occupation, either on a geographic or political basis. Several syndicates in the two countries represent lawyers. Morocco is the only Arab country with several (three) trade union federations.

2-Political systems where government authorization is a necessary condition for the legal recognition of an association. Specific laws govern establishment of professional associations and trade unions. This is the case of Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, Tunisia and Sudan.

3- Political systems where professional associations, trade unions as well as citizens' societies are dominated by the ruling party, or are even integrated in its structures. This is the case of Syria, Iraq and Libya. The ruling organization in Libya is not officially described as a single-party, but as People's Congress. Trade unions and professional associations constitute specialized congresses, or associations within the People's Professional Congress.

4- Political systems where certain associations are not authorized at all. This is the case of most members of the Gulf Cooperation Council who, with the exception of Kuwait, do not authorize trade unions, and who severely restrict freedom of associations for other categories of people.^u

Arab countries share however a number of practices, which restrict freedom of association, despite variations in the legal, provisions governing associational life. The restrictions include imposition of the state of emergency, which limit other liberties necessary for the exercise of freedom of association, such as freedom of expression or freedom of assembly. The government ministry in charge of associations becomes practically the Ministry of Interior , responsible for internal security rather than the Ministry of Social Affairs. This is the case in Lebanon, among other countries. Leaders and militants of certain associations, particularly those of journalists, lawyers, trade unions and even engineers are often harassed when they voice views or undertake activities not to the liking of the government. Leaders of professional associations in Egypt, Jordan and of trade unions in Tunisia, Lebanon and Morocco have recently experienced different forms of harassment by the government. Human rights groups are ill tolerated in most Arab countries, with very few exceptions. In Egypt and Tunisia, such groups came under the repressive grip of the government in recent years. In the two cases, repressive government policies caused some of these groups nearly to halt their activities. This is the case of the Egyptian Human Rights Organization and of the Tunisian League of Human Rights.^v

Where a certain degree of freedom of association is permitted, members of associations do practice their rights of electing their leaders. The following table presents the number of associations in Arab countries where data was available, their membership, and method of selection of their leaders

Table7: Status of Freedom of Associations in Arab Countries

Country	No.of citizens Societies*	No. of prof. associations	No. of trade unions	No. of assoc./ 1000 population	% of elected leaders**
Lebanon	2500				66.7
Morocco	2896				93.4
Jordan	587	12?	17		

Yemen	223(1992)			
Algeria				
Tunisia	5186			91.7
Egypt	14600	23	23	93.6
Palestine				71.5
Mauritania				
Djibouti				
Syria	628(1992)			
Sudan	262		13	77
Iraq				
Libya		34		
Kuwait	56	16		
Bahrain	98 (1992)	10		
Qatar	3 (1988)			
Oman	16 (1989)			N.Auth.
United Arab Emirates	91	10		Not Auth.
Saudi Arabia	125 (1992)			Not author.

*Nafissa and Kandil.1990.
countries, Source : Al-Baz,op.cit.p.101.

** out of a sample 1457 societies in 11 Arab

The table suggests important variations among Arab countries in several respects. The density of associational life varies tremendously among these countries, with Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco coming on top, while associational life is the of the least density in Arab Gulf countries. This is probably the case even when we assume that not all the associations counted in the table are functioning organizations, for this observation would apply as well to the other Arab countries. Elections are the dominant method of the choice of leaders in countries which have embarked upon the path of political liberalization, although the significance of this fact is overshadowed by the observation that the tenure of elected posts is relatively long, reaching on average more than eight years in some of these countries. The lowest degree of rotation, according to the sample of Al-Baz was found in Morocco, Sudan, Palestine, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Gulf countries in that order where less than 5 persons have alternated the post of president of the association since its establishment.^w

Several of these People's Organizations in Arab countries do not limit their concerns to the narrow professional interests of their members, as they venture to express their views on matters of national politics. When such views are not to the liking of governments, these associations risk suffering the wrath of these governments, with consequences ranging from

imposing a media blackout on their activities, harassment of their leaders and even dissolution of their elected councils. Professional associations in Egypt and Jordan paid the price of their opposition to the foreign policies of their governments, trade unionists in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Morocco paid the price of their activism and human rights organizations in Egypt and Tunisia incurred government persecution of their leaders because of their zeal in monitoring the human rights situation in their respective countries. ^x

Finally, **local councils** have become an essential landmark of local politics in almost all Arab countries, and their members are elected for the most part. The most recent local elections were those that took place in Jordan, Mauritania, Qatar in 1999, and Yemen 2001, and it was the first time that such an election was organized in Qatar. Few Arab countries do not organize local elections, either because they do not allow elections at all for public posts, as is the case in both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, or because they are too small to have locally elected bodies besides their national assemblies, as is probably the case in Kuwait or Djibouti. However, as is the case with national elections, local elections are marred in some countries by heavy government handling of its results, barring in some countries success of but very few of opposition candidates, as what happened in Mauritania in 1999 where only one seat out of 208 seats went to an opposition party candidate^y. Besides, local councils often have very little power, with their members not even able to question local officials on performance of their duties, not to speak of proposing motions of censure against those officials. However, when such elections are fair, and a measure of power is given to locally elected councils, the presence of such councils could offer an opportunity for training in democratic politics.

Extra-legal methods of political participation:

An understanding of political participation in Arab countries would not be complete if the study of this process is limited only to methods of participation recognized by laws in force in each Arab country. Citizens in Arab countries, as well as in other countries, strive to influence public decision-making by resorting to methods which might not be authorized by the government, such as collective protest actions, including strikes, marches and demonstrations. Some of them would even go further and use armed methods in their opposition to the government. Resort to these methods is more likely when other legally recognized methods are in short supply or are ineffectual. Their inclusion in a study of political participation is called for on several grounds. They often imply a clear political message in the form of demands that participants in such actions put forward to the government or opposition to certain measures which have been taken by these governments. Besides, on several occasions, governments in Arab countries had to change some of their policies in response to these acts. In fact, the transition to more liberal arrangements that expanded political participation in some Arab countries, notably Algeria and Jordan, came in the wake of major collective protest actions.

Collective protest actions:

Collective protest actions vary widely in terms of their method, scale and objective. They include mostly sit-in, strikes, marches and demonstrations. These methods are perfectly legal under liberal political systems. Moreover, some of these methods are used by Arab governments in order to show public support for their policies, when they mobilize citizens to protest against domestic opponents to the government, or against policies of other governments. Demonstrations were organized in Baghdad, Damascus and in towns under Palestinian authority to protest policies of the US or Israel in recent years. Collective protest actions could be undertaken at the local level, or in one single mass organization, like a school, a factory or a government department, but they could be organized at a regional or even national level. Although the

undertaking of a collective protest action might be intended and prepared in advance, the development of this action might result from spontaneous reactions by other people, who decide to join it once it starts. In fact, organizers of collective protest actions might end up losing control over its development, once they take to the street, particularly when they are met by the opposition of security forces which try to prevent them from proceeding any further. Under these conditions of confrontation between strikers, demonstrators and security forces, the collective protest action that was meant initially to be a peaceful gathering, might turn into a riot. The explicit demands put forward in such collective protest actions do vary, from the expression of economic grievances to the highlighting of purely political demands.

It would be difficult in this paper to examine all cases of collective protest actions in all Arab countries as not all such actions are reported in Arab newspapers, not to mention electronic media which are firmly under government control in the vast majority of Arab countries. The chapter would refer to the major collective protest actions in Arab countries which either led to important changes of government policies or which reflected major cleavages of the political system.

In their recent history, some Arab countries have experienced major collective protest actions. This was the case of Egypt (January 1977, February 1986), Tunisia (January 1978), Morocco (1981,1984, 1990,1991), Sudan (1985) , Palestine (1987,2000-),Algeria (1988,2001) and Jordan (1989, 1996).Most of these protest actions took place on a national scale, whereas others were confined to major cities or to a particular region. The mutiny of Central Security soldiers in Egypt in February 1986 were largely confined to Cairo and the 1981 riots in Morocco had Casablanca as its major theater. The most recent food riots in Jordan were confined to the North of the country in August 1996. The most recent protest actions in Algeria took place in Berber areas but moved to Algiers in June 2001. Calls on the government to drop decreed price increases, usually in response to recommendations of the International Monetary Fund marked the outbreak of most of these protest actions. Central security forces protested against their harsh work conditions and a rumored lengthening of their military recruitment. Arab governments responded in some cases by temporarily calling off the price increases (Egypt January 1977), ordering an inquiry into causes of the unrest (Egypt February 1986, Algeria 2001), or by initiating reform of the political system expanding the range of political freedoms practiced by citizens. In many cases, the response was accompanied usually by arrests of those believed by the government to be the leaders of the protest action (Egypt 1977, Tunisia 1978, and Morocco 1981). In few cases, the response fell far short than demands of participants in the protest action, a matter that fuelled the unrest and led to its continuation. A prominent example of this situation is what happened in Algeria following protests of Berber parties against police brutality in dealing with imprisoned Berber youth and government's indifference towards Berber demands of cultural autonomy. Unrest and collective protest actions by Berber groups therefore continue.

Armed opposition to the government:

To consider armed opposition to the government, as a method of political participation is even more problematic. The use of arms in political action by citizens is not only illegal, but it is also a violent form of political action. More importantly, political participation is predicated on the premise that rules of political action laid down by the incumbent regime are accepted by all political actors, even though they may not all share the same ideology or political creed. Political participation in this sense does not preclude the wish to get fundamental change introduced in the political regime. Such change should be effected, however according to the very rules of political action laid down by the incumbent regime. In other words, fundamental change could be peacefully introduced according to the rules of the basic law or the constitution in force in the

country in question. Accordingly, armed struggle would seem to be an attempt to change the present regime, its leading personnel, policies or institutions in ways incompatible with the rules laid down by the constitution in force. It should not be considered therefore as a method of political participation.

Examining demands of actors involved in armed actions against their governments in Arab countries would suggest however a different interpretation of their acts. Armed confrontation between the government and opposition groups have been a distinctive feature of politics in several Arab countries throughout the 1990's. Such confrontations continued to the first year of the 21st century though on a smaller scale in some of these countries. The bloodiest conflicts were those of Sudan followed by that of Algeria where the confrontation there took the full dimension of a civil war. Much smaller in scale was the confrontation between the Egyptian government and radical armed Islamist groups, though this confrontation subsided during the last four years. Isolated armed attacks on foreigners took place in Yemen, before and after the civil war with militants of the Socialist Party that used to rule Southern Yemen. Few such attacks were reported also in Jordan.

Table no.8: Order of magnitude of of domestic armed conflicts

In Arab countries in the 1990's

The country	Estimated number of casualties in armed conflicts
Sudan's civil war (1983-)	2 Millions killed. 4 millions displaced,
Iraq's civil war against Kurds and Shi'is	
Algeria's armed confrontation involving	
Islamist groups	100.000
Somalia	thousands
Egypt	1000
Djibouti	hundreds
Yemen	103 incidents between 1993-1999.
Lebanon	tens
Jordan	tens

It will be difficult to make any generalization about the political objectives of opposition groups who took up arms against their governments in all these cases. However, one could classify their objectives into five categories:

- 1- Those who aspire to secede from the existing state and claim the right to self-determination. This is obviously the case in Southern Sudan and of some factions in the Somali civil war,
- 2- Those who would like to participate in the political system of their countries but are not recognized as legally established political parties by their governments. This is the case of both the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, and militants of the islamist groups in Egypt who are trying to win recognition of their Shari'a Party.

- 3- Those who use armed methods, including kidnapping of foreigners as a way of extracting concessions from the government, related mostly to the extension of certain services to neglected regions of the country. This would seem to be the case of some armed actions resorted to by tribes in Yemen.
- 4- Those who are completely opposed to the political system of their countries and would like to overthrow it by force. Radical Islamist groups in Egypt throughout the 1990's as well as the armed Islamist Group in Algeria and even some factions of the Northern opposition groups in Sudan who joined the Sudan's People Liberation Army belong to this category.
- 5- Finally, those who use the territory of their country to launch attacks against foreign nationals. This is mostly the case of few Islamist groups in Jordan and Yemen.

It could therefore be reasonably argued that the volume of political violence in countries like Algeria, Sudan and Egypt could have been considerably reduced had the incumbent regime accepted to recognize all political actors willing to abide by the rules of a fair political process accepted to all of them, incumbents and opposition alike. In the case of Yemen, the price to pay in order to reduce the magnitude of armed actions resorted to by tribal groups would have been a fair distribution of government services and a regionally well balanced development planning. A concrete manifestation of the intention of the Yemeni government to undertake such developmental effort could have perhaps dissuaded the tribal groups from undertaking such actions. It is only in this way that the more radical groups intent on overthrowing the regime by force could be isolated. As for the other cases which involve basic disagreements on the definition of the national community and its proper boundaries, they are the symptoms of the protracted process of nation-building, which took centuries in other countries to reach an end satisfactory, even temporarily to all parties.

Major Features of Political Participation in Arab Countries

This survey of modes of political participation in Arab countries suggests several features of this process, which could be discerned by looking at political participation in other regions of the world, comparing rates of participation among Arab countries, examining their evolution over time, determining those who are still excluded from participation, assessing its relevance for the evolution of political systems of these countries, and finally links and inter-relationships among different modes of political participation.

A comparison between the Arab region and other regions in the South would reveal immediately that political participation has advanced more in other regions than in Arab countries. In Latin America, East and South East Asia, and many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, the mobilization type of political participation is eroding, freedom of association is less restricted and governments change through the ballot box. Using ratings of countries according to the degree of political freedoms enjoyed by their citizens computed annually by the Freedom House, and on a scale of 7 of the combined average ratings, with the most authoritarian country getting 7 and the least authoritarian getting 1, one Arab country gets the score of 4, three get 4.5, one gets 5. These countries enjoy moderate levels of political freedoms. Sixteen other Arab countries are counted as offering their citizens low levels of political freedoms. Out of 48 countries that score the lowest on these ratings, one third of them are Arab countries. It is legitimate of course to criticize ratings by the Freedom House. There is no doubt however that mobilizational type regimes still exist in a number of Arab countries, such as Iraq, Syria and Libya, that freedom of association is severely restricted in other Arab countries, and that the transfer of power through the ballot box is a rare phenomenon in the Arab world. Transfer of power through the ballot box has become a familiar occurrence in countries of East and South East Asia, Latin America and many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, with few exceptions in these other regions.^z

Within the Arab world itself, the rates of political participation are uneven. On the scale of political freedom prepared by the Freedom House, Arab countries register varied ratings. Out of eleven countries with the highest level of restrictions on political freedom, five are Arab countries. The eleven other Arab countries in the category of low levels of political freedom register scores ranging from 5.5(8 countries), 6(one country), and 6.5(two countries). Four get scores of 4.5 which correspond to moderate levels of political freedom. This corresponds to the conclusion one could draw from the survey of modes of political participation in this chapter, which indicated the variety of situations prevailing in Arab countries with some countries recognizing in law at least major rights of political participation to their citizens, while other countries deny such rights to their citizens, in law and in practice as well.

Looking at the situation of political participation in Arab countries over time, a different conclusion emerges. There is no doubt that considerable advances have been made. Citizens in two Gulf countries do elect their representatives in national assemblies, while citizens in two other Gulf countries are promised to enjoy this right in the near future. There is a larger degree of freedom of expression and association in other Arab countries than was the case two decades ago. Multi-party systems have become almost the rule outside of the Gulf region. The mobilizational type of political system is limited now to four Arab countries, namely Iraq, Libya, Syria and Sudan and has disappeared in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Somalia.

Women are denied the right to election in one country which has an elected national assembly. In other countries, despite legal equality of women and men in terms of political rights, women are by far under-represented in all political organizations. Of all regions in the world, Arab countries register the lowest percentage of women members of the parliament. According to the UNDP Human Development Report of 2000, women occupy 3.5% of all seats in parliaments of Arab countries, 4.2 % in East Asia, 8.4% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 12.7% in South East Asia and the Pacific, 8.8% in Latin American and Caribbean countries and 21.2% in East Asia.^{aa} Apart from denial of political rights to women in one Arab country, equality of these rights is ensured to all citizens in constitutions of all Arab countries that recognize such rights to their citizens, with no distinction as to race, ethnic origin, religion or language.. Some minorities in Arab countries do legitimately claim, however, that they are under-represented in the elected institutions of their countries. This could be the case of Berber in Algeria, Southern Sudanese, Kurds in Iraq and Copts in Egypt.

However effectiveness of political participation in reflecting attitudes of public opinion, changing incumbents or policies according to popular will, is constrained by frequent imposition of the state of emergency, which limits the exercise of several civil and political rights^{bb} in some countries, and by restrictions of freedom of expression in all Arab countries.

It is for this very reason that educated Arab citizens are becoming skeptical of political participation. This is reflected in a lower turn-out rate in national and local elections and of aversion to participation in activities of political parties. Table 4 has shown that rates of electoral participation were lower than 50% in three countries which allow competitive legislative elections, namely Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. In two other countries, (Yemen and Morocco) which allow competitive elections, the trend has been a declining voting rate in recent elections.

Obstacles to Political Participation

This survey of the situation of political participation in Arab countries suggests the type of obstacles that stand on the way of increased political participation at local and national levels. These obstacles are of legal, institutional, cultural and political nature.

Laws in several Arab countries do constrain political participation in several ways. Some modes of political participation are simply excluded in some countries. Citizens in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are not allowed to elect their rulers at any level. Women are denied by law the right to participate in elections either as voters or candidates in Kuwait. Establishment of professional associations and trade unions is not recognized in several Gulf countries.

Political participation seems also to many Arab citizens to be of limited relevance as a way of political change given the nature of political institutions in their countries. Hereditary regimes in these countries are not of the constitutional monarchy type, notwithstanding the promise contained in the National Charter of Bahrain to turn it into a constitutional monarchy in the very near future. Arab monarchs, emirs and sultans exercise vast powers of executive and in some cases of legislative nature, but they are not accountable to anybody. With the exception of Lebanon, Arab republics are of the presidential type, where the head of state is elected directly by the people, and therefore is not accountable to a national legislature. No Arab president so far has lost an election, and once one is elected president in an Arab country, it is taken for granted that he will be president for life. Constitutional provisions setting duration of presidential terms become just a formality that has nothing to do with actual practice. Finally, elected assemblies have little powers vis-à-vis the executive. Powers of the elected assembly are balanced by those of the appointed upper chamber in Jordan and Morocco. With the exception of Kuwait which came close to voting ministers out of office, this is indeed a rare occurrence in Arab elected assemblies. Members of the People's Assembly in Egypt would risk their own survival if they dare and vote a motion of censure against the Council of Ministers. Elected local councils of Egypt do not even have the right of interpellation vis-à-vis local officials.

Disputes about fundamental arrangements for political participation between ruling regimes and the opposition hinder expansion, and even exercise, of rights to political participation. Laws on Islamist political party. The Law of Political parties adopted in Sudan in March 2000 is not acceptable to Sudanese political parties. Electoral laws in Jordan and Lebanon were criticized by opposition parties and led them to boycott elections in the two countries. Most opposition parties in Egypt boycotted People's Assembly elections in 1990 because of their belief that there were no guarantees for the fairness of elections. Such disputes were among the causes that led to civil wars in Sudan, Iraq and Algeria that made the exercise of peaceful rights of political participation practically impossible in these countries.

It is likely also that expansion of political participation is quite modest in Arab countries due to the persistence of certain beliefs in the minds of both rulers and citizens alike. Rulers believe that if restrictions on certain modes of political participation, particularly freedom of association, under conditions of the pursuit of stabilization and structural adjustment packages as well as perceived threats to national unity, could undermine political stability. They are concerned that an Algeria-type situation would prevail in their countries if they move to lifting of all restrictions on freedom of association and allow fair elections. President Hosny Mubarak in Egypt has expressed this concern on several occasions. On the other hand, educated citizens who realize

that practice of political participation in the recent past did not lead to any significant change in the way their countries are governed, nor even in the composition of the ruling group, shun political participation, particularly through elections and involvement in activities of political parties. Moreover, the resort by governments to repressive measures in dealing with political activists makes them perceive political participation to be a risky undertaking.

Prospects for Political participation in Arab Countries

History has proven Political Scientists to be wrong on several issues concerning the future. Few of them could foresee the collapse of the USSR, or the transition of so many countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, East and South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to more democratic forms of government. Given this observation, any statement on future prospects of political participation in Arab countries must be considered to be a highly probabilistic in nature.

General discussions of democratization suggest four variables that could impact the course of evolution of any country towards expansion of political participation and eventually to more liberal political system, namely economic development, political leadership, political culture and past historical experiences.^{cc}

The most powerful predictor of the move towards more democratic regimes is economic development. All highly developed countries have multi-party systems, elected governments, and a considerably high level of respect for civil and political rights to their citizens. The emergence of more democratic types of governments in South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico ,Argentina and others in Eastern and Southern Europe, Latin America and East Asia was possible after all these countries reached a relatively high levels of economic development in the 1980's.. High levels of economic development are associated with high levels of literacy and educational attainment among the population, a large middle class, a strong skilled working class, which all increase the demand for democracy, as well as more complex economic and social structures that cannot be accommodated within an authoritarian political system. . They also correspond to high levels of human development. To the extent that economic development, in the sense of a structural change of the economy, proceeds in Arab countries in future therefore, prospects for democratization would improve.

Political leadership committed to democracy is another variable that promotes expansion of political participation. The move towards more democratic regimes in those regions of the South and in South and Eastern Europe had been accompanied by the coming to the fore of a new breed of leaders who believe in the importance of democracy as the best formula to run the political systems of their countries. Prospects for the expansion of political participation in Arab countries would depend largely on the emergence of a new breed of leaders who are truly committed to democratic values.

Much has been written about the relationships between culture and democracy. There have been also contradictory statements about the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Some authors have advanced the claim that Turkey has been the only Muslim country to have a democratic government for a considerable length of time. However, this has been associated also with the adoption of a secularist culture and by the interruption of this democratic experiment with brief interludes of military regimes and heavy involvement of the military in Turkish politics.^{dd} A closer analysis of this issue shows that Islam, an important component of political culture in Arab countries, which are predominantly Muslim, teaches many values, such as egalitarianism,

openness to science, importance of work, and personal nature of the religious belief, all conducive to democratic development. Moreover, any religion is a complex body of ideas, norms and beliefs, which are subject to many interpretations. One could find a liberal current among Islamic scholars in Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Tunisia. Interpretations of religion are dynamic in nature. Much was said for example about both Catholicism and Confucianism and their incompatibility with both economic development and democracy. However, one finds that some of the countries which made largest advances towards economic development and democracy in the last two decades are precisely Catholic and Confucian countries ranging from Ireland, Portugal and Spain in Europe to South Korea and Taiwan in East Asia. Islam would not stand therefore against expansion of political participation in Arab countries if the other pre-conditions for successful political participation were met.

Finally, past experience with a form of liberal government is said to facilitate the move towards expansion of political participation towards a more democratic rule. Several Arab countries had the experience of multi-party politics and elections in the past. This was the case of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq at several moments, going in the case of Egypt to the 1860's, and in the other countries to the 1920's. Morocco had a similar experience since its independence. Other Arab countries in Africa and Kuwait had this experience although for shorter periods. However, even in the absence of such past traditions. The move towards more democratic governments is possible.

To put it briefly, if economic and human development proceed rapidly in Arab countries in the near future, the ground would be laid for the emergence of regimes that allow wide expansion of meaningful political participation. The other conditions would follow, or would not stand much in the way of such evolution.

ENDNOTES

For a discussion of definitions of political participation, see Nelson, Joan. "Political Participation" in Weiner, Myron^a & Samuel P. Huntington. *Understanding Political Development*. Boston & Toronto. Little, Brown and Company. 1987. Pp. 103-159

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For a survey of elections in all countries including Arab countries, see : <http://agora.stm.it/elections>.^f

For the details of these conditions see : Arab Human Rights Organization. *The situation of Human Rights in the^g Arab World*. In Arabic. Reports of the 1990's.

For the texts of constitutions of the two countries as well as constitutions –inter alia- of Arab countries, Constitution^h Finder in: [Http://confinder.richmond.edu](http://confinder.richmond.edu)

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^q See commentaries by Ghalloum,Mohammed Hussein, and Qattami, Jasim in Al-Alawi,Sa'eid Ben Sa'eid et al. AL-Mujtama' al-madani fi al-watan al-'arabi wa dawroho fi tahqiq al-dimuqratiyyah. The Civil Society in Arab Countries and Its Role in Achieving Democracy. Beirut. Center for Arab Unity Studies.1992.Pp.594-602. Arab Human Rights Organization. The State of Human Rights in Arab Countries 2000.op.cit. pp.47-48^r

For the details ,see the section on "Freedom of association" in the introduction to annual reports of the Arab Human Rights Organization., for specific case studies , see chapters on Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco in Al-Sayyid, Mustapha Kamel &Salah Salem Zarnouqa, Eds. Al-Ahzaab wa al-tanmiya fi al-watan al-'arabi wa kharejoh-Political Parties and Development in Arab and Non-Arab countries. Center for the Study of Developing Countries of Cairo University. Cairo.1997.^s

For a detailed discussion of freedom of association in Arab countris and activities of civil society organizations see Sa'eid ben Sa'eid et al-AL-Mujtama' al-madani...op.cit, Norton, Augustus Richard. Ed.. Civil Society in the Middle East. Leiden, New York and Koln: E.J.Brill. 2 volumes, Brynen,Rex ,Bahgat Korany & Paul Noble.Eds. Political eralization & Democratization in the Arab World. .Boulder and London. :Lynne Rienner Publishers.2 volumes.1995.^t

For a detailed discussion of People's Organizations in Arab countries, see the excellent study of Al-Baz,Shaheeda. Al-Munazzamat al-ahliyyah al-'arabiyyah 'ala masheref al-qarn al-hadi wa al-'eshreen:muhaddedat al-waq'e' wa afaaq al-mustaqbal. Arab People's organizations on the eve of the twenty-first century:Determinants of their present reality and future prospects.: Cairo: Follow-Up Committee of the Congress of Arab People's organizations.1997.Pp.109-136^u

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Ibid.pp.52-61^y

Consult the site of Freedom House on the internet, particularly the table "Combined Average Ratings-Independent Countries"^z

UNDP. Human Development Report 2000.Table 6.^{aa}

the state of emergency was the rule, de jure or de facto in seven Arab countries (Egypt, Syria ,Sudan ,Algeria, Iraq[?] ,Bahrain and Somalia in the year 2000 according to the annual report of the Arab Human Rights Organization. AHRO. The situation....2000.op.cit.p.9^{bb}

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Read the discussion by Huntington of this point. It should be noted , however that he does not jump to the conclusion that Islam is an obstacle to democratization in Muslim countries, Ibid. PP.307-311..^{dd}