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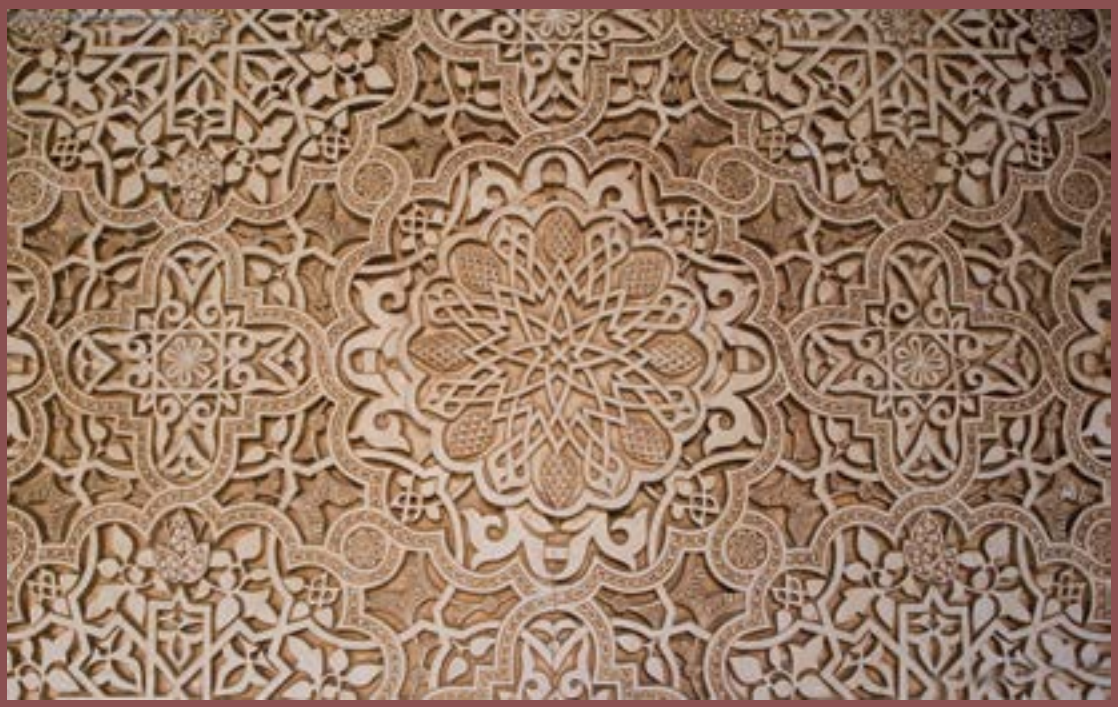

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Anti-Neoliberal TSMs in the Arab region: *Contentious Politics, and Regime Change*

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Bridging Academia and Activism

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Introduction

Amr Adly[1]

The past several years have witnessed a confluence of a reinvigorated neoliberalization agenda and mounting political repression and state violence in the Arab region. Both phenomena have happened in the aftermath of the first wave of Arab uprisings in 2011. This chapter addresses how Arab civil societies -defined in the broadest sense to include all collective expressions and actions- have reacted to these changes, by primarily focusing on the intensification of neoliberal measures through austerity, foreign indebtedness and regressive taxation, increasing privatization of state-owned assets and the continuous decay of public services. The chapter raises two questions: how did contentious politics appear in the Arab region through protest movements, dissentious discourses and other forms of collective action? And; whether and how these expressions of contention over economic questions were national and/or regional variations of (a) broader transnational movement(s) against neoliberalization?

Despite the shaking of its global ideological hegemony following the financial meltdown of 2008/09, neoliberal measures like austerity, privatization of state-owned assets, the expansion in indirect taxation and the scaling down of public services have all been going in earnest in the region. This had to do with a number of political-economic factors.

First, the revolutionary turmoil of 2011 and the regional spillover of conflict exacerbated the needs of many Arab countries for foreign financing. This has reinvented the role of the IMF and the World Bank and renewed the mechanisms of international conditionality to impose austerity and structural adjustment through credit and conditionality (Asfari, 2019). This was most apparent in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco but soon extended to other cases, and most recently Lebanon. It also created patterns of debt-dependency on foreign capital markets that called for strict macroeconomic discipline (Adly, 2020). This trend was further exacerbated by the dramatic decline in oil prices in 2014 that impacted not only oil-rich countries but also secondary rent recipients through aid, investment and remittances like Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and the countermeasures taken to contain it added much more pressure to already fragile socioeconomic settings, making what some suggested as a perfect storm for some countries, if not the region as a whole (Diwan, 2020).

The second factor is authoritarian restoration, the consolidation of standing authoritarian regimes and the reproduction of old interests in more pluralist settings like Tunisia, Lebanon and Iraq. Resort to more repression across the board weakened the capacity of civil societies and grassroots organizations to push back against many of these measures, as unpopular as they may have been and detrimental to the standards of living of the majority. The re-invigoration of neoliberal transformations has hence been a living linkage between national, regional and global dynamics. Not only did this apply to state policies but also to civil society actors countering them, including TSMs amid other collective forms of action (or attempted action).

I argue that contentious actions against neoliberalization have shared the same objective global and regional context. However, they came as domestic political responses and expressions to the manifestations of neoliberalization that were deeply embedded in the national and sometimes even local contexts. Unlike social movements, these forms of contention did not just target actions or policies of public authority rather its very structure. Whereas social movements view the state as a fulcrum to achieve their objectives (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2010; Hiatt, Grandy, & Lee, 2015), Arab contentious politics were more revolutionary in their orientation targeting transforming rather than working with existing power structures (Goldstone, 2001; Skocpol, 1979).

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Overall, economic contention was deeply embedded in broader political dissent and opposition to ruling regimes, elite composition and state-big business relations. Even though the mobilizations under study in the Arab region targeted neoliberalization measures partly or wholly, they were not just about reversing or halting them. Rather, they aimed at challenging the fundamentals of state power either through physical protest or through the framing practices of economic problems in the language of corruption, cronyism and the collusion between political and economic elites. This has been the case with Morocco's boycott movement in 2017 (Masbah, 2018) as well as the Lebanese "revolution" that ignited in reaction to regressive taxes and developed into a popular outburst against banking institutions perceived as deeply involved with corrupt sectarian elites. In Iraq, the 2019 mobilizations did not just target debilitating corruption, massive unemployment and absent public services. They also attacked the foundations of the ethno-sectarian regime founded in the aftermath of the US invasion of the country in 2003 (Hassan, 2019). In Egypt, the rare popular protests that irrupted in September 2019 upon the calls of a dissident businessman's allegations of corruption in the military's economic complex immediately assumed a grave political dimension (DW, 2019 https://www.dw.com/en/protests-in-egypt-demand-el-sissis-ouster/a-50523404). In a similar vein, the sharp economic crisis in Sudan and the hardships it unleashed coupled with the corruption of the ruling elites were the factors that drove the popular revolt for a full regime change. Even in Tunisia where the complex and precarious elite pact resulted in a pluralistic political system, socioeconomic protests pose questions about the ability of the newly formed system to integrate the marginalized groups and regions (Meddeb, 2020). This means that a systemic rather than a mere policy dimension is inherently present in much of contentious politics in the Arab region, regardless of the exact dynamic of the political regime, be it authoritarian or somehow pluralist as in Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia.

In this chapter, I focus on the Arab region as a whole, invoking examples from specific national contexts whenever relevant and necessary. As for the periodization, the chapter focuses on the post-2014 interval, as the rough marker for the confluence of authoritarian restoration and intensified neoliberalization underlined above. Methodologically, the chapter will capitalize on the materials and analyses compiled by the different papers, workshops and reports produced on thematic or country-basis within the framework of the TSM project so far. The chapter will synthesize these earlier productions. It will depict broad regional patterns, contrast country trajectories and draw on links between national, regional and global dynamics that can stand for transnational movements. It will also bring in the literature on neoliberalism as a global class hegemonic project to converse with the scholarly bodies produced on social movements in areas of austerity, rolling up of public services, privatization of publicly-owned assets and foreign conditionality in the Global South.

8 Mouvances, transnationalism and neoliberalization

This chapter focuses on collective forms of action that emanate from institutionalized and uninstitutionalized actors (e.g. networks, grassroots organizations and local communities) from the civil society, broadly defined, in response to neoliberalization measures and processes in their respective national contexts. These actors in the Arab region involved in contention do not constitute movements as perceived in social movements theory. They are rather closer to being considered "mouvances", which is a French word referring to a wide domain or sphere of action and interaction instead of a coordination whole of member groups and individuals. El Khawaga (1997) holds that a mouvance includes divergent actors that do not however impede them from constantly cooperating and coordinating their actions. The concept of mouvance also indicates changing centers among the diverse groups involved that are engaged in countering or contending neoliberalization. What we are focusing on is the moments and dynamics of contention by societal actors that might reflect diverse ideological stances, different repertoires of action and operate within different framings of the problems and solutions.

Neoliberalization is by definition a transnational process as it emphasizes mechanisms and dynamics that emanate from beyond the borders of the national contexts under study. Whether one considers neoliberalization as an ideological force that informs and guides simultaneous reshaping of state-economy relations or as a set of economic and non-economic forces like IFI conditionality, flows of goods and capital and increasing levels of foreign debt, these dimensions have to do with redefining how national economies are related to the external world. Much literature has underlined the global aspect of neoliberalism as well as the neoliberal content of globalization (Ayres, 2004). I capitalize on these scholarly trends when dealing with neoliberalization as an unfolding transnational process in national contexts that depends primarily on national states to redefine their relations with their societies and economies as well as how their national economies are inserted in the global division of labor. However, the imminent presence of such transnational elements does not mean that domestic contexts, that is national and local concrete socio-political, historical and institutional arrangements are irrelevant or of secondary importance. Quite to the contrary, these domestic arrangements, coalitions and power relations are the ones that shape to a great extent the actual pace, scope and scale of neoliberalization on the national and local levels creating varieties of neoliberalization experiences. As Roccu maintained (2013), national states are no mere transmission belts of a global political-economic project. This leads us to conceptualize "actually existing neoliberalism", after Brenner and Theodor (2002: 351) defined as "the contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects insofar as they have been produced within national, regional and local contexts defined by legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regime, regulatory practices and political struggles".

Transnational influences have made themselves present in national and regional contexts through IFI conditionality, ideational linkages and market mechanisms having to do with capital movement in the form of investment, aid and debt. However, none of the dynamics on the national or regional levels could be reduced to global ones. It would not be accurate either to assume any uniqueness for national cases, given the high level of penetration by global and regional actors and flows i.e. the rich GCC countries linkages through investment, debt, aid and remittances or the strong ties to the EU through trade, investment and tourism. I build on the contribution by J.F. Bayart on the historicite of each national context where concrete sociopolitical situations have been created out of certain trajectories of state-society relations since independence (Bayart, 2008). National power dynamics act as interfaces that shape and define the scope and scale of influences that emanate from beyond the borders of national states. Once again that applies to state and societal actors. Only through this premise can we understand the specific expressions of global trends of neoliberalism like military-led capitalism in Egypt, the interpenetration between Lebanon's weak state, feudal-sectarian arrangements and the "rule of

the Bank" or the militia-elites in war-torn countries that are engaged in accumulation by dispossession and investing in real estate as part of the post-war order.

Hence, the mouvances against neoliberalization have existed across the Arab region as part of a broader protest discourse and movement against authoritarian regimes, corrupt officialdom and the incompetence of public authorities. The invocation of anti-neoliberalism has been thus strategically employed to target the points of strength and legitimacy of ruling elites and their allies abroad. This led to an explicit or implicit invocation of it, with the former being uttered by renegade technocrats and epistemic communities. The latter has been used by grassroots activists who have used since 2011 and earlier elements of the global discourse on corruption, cronyism and the unholy marriage between power and money, ironically originally created by centers of neoliberalism like the World Bank and rightwing think tanks.

Contentious politics as revolution

It is remarkable that contention politics across the Arab region seems deeply embroiled with questions of regime change. This makes contentious politics and their ideological and organizational expressions either revolutionary or potentially so. Moreover, this seems to apply to all political regimes regardless of their degree of authoritarianism or pluralism. Whereas contesting austerity, privatization of state-owned assets and corruption and rent seeking is politically destabilizing and threatening for authoritarian regimes by definition as revealed in the cases of Egypt and less so in more institutionalized authoritarians like Morocco, they can also prove as challenging to regimes in more pluralist settings like Lebanon, Iraq and even Tunisia, albeit to a lesser extent. This means that contentious politics occupies a very different position in the Arab world compared to where it originated in Latin America through the 1990s where the focus was on blocking or reversing neoliberal reforms and their adverse socioeconomic impacts on the popular sectors (Rossi and Bulow, 2015). In Latin America, liberal democracy was not contested. After decades of rightwing military rule, the popular sectors have come to appreciate liberal democracy and the protection of human rights. Rather, contentious politics aimed at changing the actions of political authorities instead of their structures. These policy changes were all meant to be delivered through the democratic system itself not by undermining it (Rossi, 2019). This trend culminated in the early 2000s in the "left turn" in most Latin American countries where labor and socialist parties made it to the helm of power through elections and introduced policy and institutional changes for the aim of redistribution that constituted reversals of earlier neoliberal measures (See Cleary, 2006; Rochlin, 2007).

Conversely in the Arab world, contentious politics are more regime-targeting. This can partly be traced to the rampant authoritarianism in the region where dissent in the physical or virtual spheres is by definition defying actions to these regimes' control over the public space and sphere. The rare anti-regime demonstrations that took place in September 2019 in Egypt exemplify this link. Following a series of YouTube videos by a dissident contractor called Mohamed Ali who talked about corruption in military-run megaprojects, popular protests irrupted targeting the very military-led regime. Allegations of corruption, predation and extravagant private expenditure of the leader and his direct entourage, turned immediately into anti-regime mobilizations that not only questioned the legitimacy of the regime and its claims over serving the public good but also challenged into control over public space.

In a similar but more dramatic vein, the Sudanese intifada that ended up with toppling the Al Bashir regime was ignited by sharp economic deterioration and austerity measures amid widely-reported corruption by the ruling elites. Economic malfeasance was a regime-challenging topic and the discourse on corruption and economic hardship transcended contentious politics into calling for ending the 30-year tenure of Omar Al Bashir.

Morocco's boycott movement of 2018 (let it spoil) is another case in point. Despite not being as regime threatening as the cases of Egypt and Sudan, the boycott campaign transcended the mere economic aim of cutting prices into targeting crony businessmen close to the Makhzen. Masbah (2019: 14) held the boycott as "a sign of structural dysfunction of mediation mechanisms between the state and society". The campaign was launched online by anonymous persons at a time when physical protest in the streets was being increasingly repressed.

Moreover, this pairing of contentious with revolutionary politics permeates through all regime types. Corruption and the unholy marriage between political and economic elites was as revolutionary in

character in Lebanon and Iraq. There, anti-corruption protests were by no means confined to transforming the actions of political authority. They rather targeted the very structures of state power and the elites manning them by calling for bringing down the whole ethno-sectarian system as the root cause of all the ills, debilitating corruption included.

The Lebanese "revolution" is another case in point. What started as an economic protest movement against the levying of yet another regressive tax on WhatsApp users, developed into a popular mobilization against the ruling elites and the post-Taif regime they uphold (Atallah, 2019; Salem, 2019; Cammet and Murad, 2020). Protest against austerity, consumption taxes and a depreciating national currency soon targeted the banking sector as the central mechanism through which corruption and injustices were reproduced. The slogan of "down with the rule of the bank" is quite intriguing on many fronts. To start with, popular protests were targeting private institutions i.e. banks that have played a structural role in financing Lebanon's huge dollar-denominated public debt. Banks were not considered as state institutions rather as instrumental of the corrupt sectarian elites running the country. At this moment, economic contention became organically related to challenging sectarianism as a socio-political system in the special case of Lebanon of consocionational democracy in a very weak state. Economic grievances and demands (expressed on class and regional rather than sectarian basis) converged with an older repertoire of contention developed by civil society activists invoking citizenship and nationhood as replacements to sectarianism.
Doubtless, Arab societies have a long history of anti-austerity popular mobilizations that stretch back to the 1970s and 1980s when IFI conditionality came to the fore. Egypt's January 1977 riots, Tunisia's 1978 were replicated in Morocco in 1988 and in Jordan in 1989. This is a phenomenon that went hand in hand with the introduction of neoliberalization measures. Even though these were national, rather than local or isolated, events, they often targeted the unpopular policies rather than the structures of power that created them in the first place. Conversely, the recent contentious mouvances in the region are explicitly more regime-targeting. They are hence more structural in their focus and in their demands to change the rules of the game instead of just their outcomes. This leads us to the discussion of the framing of these recent contentious actions in the following subsection.

Framing: *anti-neoliberalization in other words*

Austerity, privatization, currency devaluation and the rolling back of public services are all signs of progressing neoliberalization, which is transnational in character as noted earlier. However, despite being part of this transnational objective context, not all contentious political actors in the Arab region subscribed explicitly to the same framing around neoliberalism. As a matter of fact, explicit framing using the language of neoliberalism as a global class project aiming at the dispossession of the masses and the upward distribution of wealth in favor of the rich, remained almost confined to elites within the leftist political opposition and civil society organizations and networks. These academics, experts, journalists and commentators have been truly transnationalized not just in their mode of organization, financing and networking but also in the discourse they relied on for the construction of the socioeconomic problems in their proper national contexts.

Neoliberalism as a concept referring to both an ideology prescribing the rearranging of state-economy relations as well as a political project of redistribution of value and power in favor of capital has been a robust leftist framing that originated in critical academia. The overall framing of neoliberalism as an essentially transnationlized economic project was critical for contentious political movements in Latin America, where neoliberalization efforts proceeded in earnest in the 1980s and 1990s. This enabled the rise of transnational anti-liberalization movements that linked grassroots mobilizations of workers in privatized companies, victims of deindustrialization and unemployment, and indigenous communities facing MNCs' destruction of the environment with activists, experts and civil society organizations in the Global North and other parts of the Global South. The framing of anti-neoliberalization was rather transnational, responding to the globalization process itself (Ayres, 2004). Spalding (2015, 187) shows how transnationally-aligned domestic movements in Latin America, active in anti-neoliberal and anti-globalization arenas could establish "[H]orizontal alliances that strengthen the organizational capacity and resources of a resistance network". The case of the anti-mining mobilization in El Salvador demonstrated the instance of a local community movement that could insert itself into a transnational coalition against a Canadian multinational (Spalding, 2015, 189-190).

Conversely in the Arab region, ongoing processes of neoliberalization did not trigger a transnational response in the same manner, especially when it came to framing. Contrary to the case of re-localization of a transnational discourse in specific national contexts, this was a case of local expressions that were in reaction to a transnational process. As shown in the previous section, contentious politics in the Arab world has been regime- rather than policy targeting. This does not mean that the framing was oblivious of the transnational conditions of neoliberalization. To the contrary, IMF conditionality, currency devaluations, growing foreign debts and foreign investors taking over privatized and divested state-owned enterprises were all inherently transnational economic phenomenon that were not missed by contentious actors. This is what "corruption" came to play in the past several years.

Corruption and cronyism as cases of re-localization of transnational concepts

In an old piece, El Khawaga (1997) suggests that the Egyptian human rights movement has interacted with essentially global and universal concepts and norms through their re-localization in the concrete Egyptian sociopolitical context of the 1980s and 1990s. She defines re-localization as "a process of encoding the principles of human rights into the Egyptian political vocabulary by redefining them in relation to references acknowledged and appropriated by national and regional actors like nationalism, re-Islamization, social justice and Pan-Arabism" (El Khawaga, 1997:3). The concept of re-localization intersects significantly with that of resonance, as a strategic formulation process pursued by social movement actors in order to communicate with their targeted audience among the movement members or their other interlocutors. I argue that the anti-neoliberalization mouvances in the Arab region has exercised re-localization with some components the transnational discourse on neoliberalism, both to the right as well as to the left. This was most apparent with corruption and cronyism (al-fasad wal mahsoubiyya).

Unlike neoliberalism, these two concepts served as the framing concepts for much of the socioeconomic contention. They were also organically related to national and local politics and hence contributed significantly to the regime-targeting and revolutionary potential of contentious politics in the region. Interestingly enough, corruption and cronyism have a very different genealogy compared to neoliberalism. Even though all three come historically from within the discourse of the proponents of neoliberalism and were critically appropriated by the left at later stages, corruption and cronyism remained within the arsenal of neoliberal proponents until the present. In the coming paragraphs, I will briefly shed light on how each of the three concepts has contributed to the framing of the contentious politics in the Arab world.

To start with, neoliberalism could be traced to the academic writings of the Austrian and German interwar scholars who were critical of Fascism and more generally of state-led development. Economists like Von Hayek, Ropke among many others aimed at reinventing liberalism by providing a critique from within to classical liberalism in the wake of the Great Depression. This was the content in which ordoliberalism or neoliberalism as concepts emerged as conscious revisionism of liberalism within conservative European and a bit later American academic circles after the end of WWII when Keynesianism had become the prevalent economic paradigm, academically and policy wise. With the crisis of the welfare state and the shift to the right, neoliberalism and neoliberal reforms were used by politicians attempting at pushing for major market-making measures. Under Pinochet's dictatorship, neoliberalism was often used to describe the radical economic reforms adopted, under the guidance of the Chicago boys who constituted a living link between the worlds of academia and policy making. It seems that until the early 1980s, neoliberalism was an umbrella concept used in the political world as a rightwing term with Charles Peters, the conservative ideologue publishing his "neoliberal manifesto" in 1983.

Neoliberalism had a very strange lifecycle afterwards as it became increasingly used as a critical term to the neoliberalization processes by leftist critics, and later on politicians and leaders of social movements. Magness (2019) claims that it was Michel Foucault's lectures of 1978 on neoliberalism that brought the term into leftist and critical circles. Shermer (2014) traces the same process and defines the new use of neoliberalism as "to describe and decry a late twentieth-century effort by policy makers, think-tank experts, and industrialists to condemn social-democratic reforms and unapologetically implement free-market policies".

What is doubly interesting is that neoliberalism and neoliberal reforms gradually stopped being used on the right as neoliberal measures became increasingly unpopular and more people became aware of its adversarial distributional repercussions. The content of neoliberalism either dissolved into the technical and consciously apolitical language of neoclassical economics that assumes markets to be natural and spontaneous expressions of universal

human rationality (Bourdieu, 2005). Alternatively, it metamorphosed into the democratization vocabulary where neoliberal reforms were adopted by democratically-elected politicians in Latin America and post-communist countries in the 1990s. This is best expressed in Williamson's "Washington Consensus" where he framed neoliberalization as a democratic consensus over market reforms.

Neoliberalism became hence a term used almost exclusively to critique and criticize neoliberalism. This passed from the world of leftist academia in the 1980s into the realm of politics, especially in Latin American countries where the hammer fell the hardest in the 1990s. The same set of reforms, albeit with lower intensity and more graduation, took place in MENA countries during the 1990s through a series of structural adjustment programs, austerity measures, IFI conditionality and privatization of state-owned assets. The birth of popular contentious actors in the national and local Arab contexts however did not borrow the use of "neoliberalism" as a framing concept unlike other contexts in the Global South and North. This remained rather almost exclusive to elitist uses of transnationalized networks of individuals and organizations of leftist politicians and left-leaning labor and human rights activists in addition to critical epistemic communities of economists, renegade financial analysts and specialists in areas like healthcare, gender and urban development.

There are multiple examples about these trans-nationalized elitist actors across the Arab region. The odious debt campaigns that appeared simultaneously in Tunisia and Egypt following the 2011 revolutions relied heavily on trans-nationalized networks of activists, politicians, civil society organizations and experts in the Global South and North. In both countries, some human rights organizations active in areas of economic and social rights were important centers, both organizationally and discursively, in bringing up questions of transparency, foreign borrowing, dependency and corruption to post-revolutionary public debates. This included the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights in Egypt, the L'Observatoir Tunisien de L'Economies in Tunisia and the branches of the ATTAC movement in North Africa. In a similar vein, the Observatory was critical of the European Union's plans for the deepening of the free trade arrangements with Tunisia in the wake of the revolution (See: http://www.economie-tunisie.org/en/observatory/commercial-relations-tunisia-breaking-free-european-union and http://www.economie-tunisie.org/en/history-tunisia-eu-trade-relations-moment-disenchantment). L'Observatoir's knowledge production through economic analysis and the critical review of Tunisia's path of trade integration with the EU under Ben Ali's dictatorship intersected with the general anti-globalization discourse garnered by European leftist organizations like Rosa Luxemburg.

Either through the stress over foreign debt, IMF conditionality or trade liberalization, contentious actors attempted to introduce the discourse critical of globalization to their national contexts. Overall, the discourse of these campaigns subscribed explicitly to the global discourse on the evils of neoliberalization, drawing on the leftist movements in the Global North that perceived much of the 2011 revolutions in the Arab world as a regional variation of a global class action against neoliberal capitalism (See for instance Antonio Negri's letter to a Tunisian friend, also see the works by Joya, 2018; Hanieh, 2013 on the political economy of Arab revolutions).

However, these actions, campaigns and organizations could hardly ever mutate into popular movements or contribute independently in broader contentious action involving grassroots, local communities, unemployed youth or workers protesting against privatization. Doubtless, activists and organizations that participated in these trans-nationalized contentious actions and discursive practices might have reached out to local groups and mobilizations. But, the "neoliberalism" framing was almost never re-localized into the Arab political contexts beyond these narrow intellectual and academic circles that were rather transnationalized. Conversely, neoliberalism as a concept was more of an example of a de-localized than a re-localized term upheld by local elements of an essentially global civil society. It remained a foreign word, heavily transliterated into Arabic with no clear meaning in the minds of average Arab citizens, including those adopting objectively contentious action against measures of neo-liberalization.

The unholy marriage between big businesses and the state

Corruption and cronyism come from the very heart of the neoliberal discourse itself. They remain a powerful tool in explaining economic reforms that went wrong and linking the absence of free markets with perpetual underdevelopment (North, 1990; De Soto, 2002). Corruption and cronyism are both aberrations or deviations from normative perceptions of how states and markets should function. Whereas corruption marks the use of public office for the generation of private gains, cronyism is a distorted form of markets that are non-competitive and that lack a leveled playfield. These inherently neoclassical economic formulations made it to the policy world early on. In the wake of the Asian crisis of 1997, the World Bank popularized the term crony capitalism as a description and analysis of the East and Southeast Asian cases of imperfect liberalization that eventually collapsed due to rampant corruption and intimate relations between big businesses and their respective states. The same framing was extended later on to the failed market transitions in the Post-Soviet countries and MENA. The stress over corruption and cronyism absolved neoliberalism as a set of policy precepts of many of the socioeconomic ills that were associated with it like weak growth and adverse redistributive repercussion on a majority of people. It enabled the World Bank, the USAID and other international sponsors of neoliberalization to disown political and economic elites in many parts of the Global South as cases of precluded reform or as bad implementations of an otherwise sound model of market-based development.

Interestingly, this essential component of the neoliberal discourse itself was appropriated by a wide variety of contentious political actors opposed to neoliberal measures in the Arab region. Typical of mouvances, there was little coherence among those actors that were bent on re-localizing corruption and cronyism for the framing of their contention. Within the circles of political and civil society left-leaning elites, corruption and crony capitalism were used under the umbrella concept of neoliberalism as crucial mechanisms for accumulation by dispossession, asset stripping and looting by predatory incumbents and their business allies. These activists, experts and commentators shared the production and reproduction of the same discourse on the evils of neoliberalism as a global political class project that aims at dispossessing the majority using coercion and extra-economic means (Harvey, 2007; Glassman, 2016). Topics like capital flight and asset repatriation in the Global South intersected with the broader leftist debate on financialization of the global economy as a central feature of neoliberalization. Much of the discourse was transnational, where national and local cases were variations of a rather global structural change all related to neoliberal ideological hegemony, MNCs, IFIs and US imperialism.

Corruption and cronyism, and especially the first, could get re-localized rather successfully into the Arab political vocabulary in the past several decades. I argue that corruption and to a lesser extent cronyism, came to serve as the framing concept for contentious politics in the Arab region rather than neoliberalism. It combined both adversarial redistributive impacts on those disaffected by privatization, the rolling back of public services and austerity, together with the undemocratic features of state-society relations where accountability, responsiveness and representation largely lack. Among social and legal activists, usually subscribing to an agenda of social and economic rights or to labor interests, corruption was crucial for the mobilization of societal opposition to neoliberalization measures as well as attempting to reverse them through adjudication. A case in point was the legal activism that Egyptian civil society actors showed before and after the 2011 revolution contesting privatization of state-owned enterprises and the allocation of state-owned land to politically connected businessmen i.e. cronies (Adly, 2012). Corruption also was central in the grassroots and local mobilizations of disaffected workers and the unemployed in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco during the same interval targeting local officials, former party bosses, police officers and compromised trade unionists.

Corruption as contentious politics has become more central to the second wave of the Arab uprisings in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan and Algeria. The re-localization of corruption happened regardless of the degree to which economies were subjected to neoliberalization measures. rather stressing it demonstrated its political potential for mass mobilization against illegitimate incumbent regimes regardless of the economic policies they adopted. Corruption resonated with a wide cultural resource in Arab societies more than other symbols and frames (Williams, 2004, 101). Corruption, as the abuse of public power for the

incumbents' private benefits and their relatives and allies was for long part of the Arab political lexicon since national independence in the 1940s and 1950s. Fighting corruption was a stated objective of military coups in Egypt and Iraq. Moreover, corruption, nepotism and cronyism were all present in inter-elite fighting in the post-independence period. The concept hence existed before the adoption of any neoliberalization measures. It was already associated with delegitimizing ruling elites as not being responsive or up to serving the public. It also marked a general condition of decadence or moral decay, which is the religious and broader significance of corruption, as used in Koranic Arabic. This "storehouse of symbolic elements" (Williams, 2004, 101) provided a source for the framing of contentious action since the 1980s and 1990s amid intensifying neoliberalization. Corruption as bad governance in the neoliberal discourse resonated with the use of corruption as a vice, deviant authority and alienation from self-serving elites.

As of 2011, it could be stated that the re-localization of corruption changed in a number of ways across in the region indicating stronger traits of a transnationalized discourse employed for national contentious politics. To start with, corruption became more central in national mobilization against ruling elites. This was evident in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and Iraq among others. Corruption as the misappropriation of public funds and shady relations between state and business became the core of a broader regime-challenging discourse in all of these cases. Doubtless, corruption existed in the protest discourses that led up to and permeated the 2011 revolutions, however they were not as central. It was an item among others, with the core concern about unseating long-standing dictators and/or disrupting alleged plans for succession within their presidential dynasties. The fact that the macroeconomic economic situation was not as dire in 2011 might also have made a difference. Conversely, in the years since 2014, austerity, fiscal crises and collapsing public services amid a global and regional economic slowdown have propelled distributional issues into the center of anti-regime mobilizations.

Another remarkable development is how corruption as the signifier for contention moved up from local protest (that is subnational) into the national agenda in a number of cases (See on Lebanon, Harb, 2009). In the years leading to the 2011 revolutions and the ones that directly followed them, contesting corrupt practices happened on a wade scale in Tunisia and Egypt, but it remained firmly on the company or local government-levels. For example, Egyptian public-sector companies witnessed numerous strikes and demonstrations by workers that demanded the removal of their managers or management boards on charges for corruption. Tunisia also witnessed local protests against corrupt officials. These protests however made use of the (temporary) collapse of the state security in the wake of the 2011 revolutions with local populations trying to pull the leadership shuffle from the national to the local levels. Despite the presence of "corruption" in the national revolutionary discourse, it did not seem to have resonated much with these local mobilizations. Quite to the contrary, there were elements of undeniable tension between these local socioeconomic demands, be they about corruption, employment or job security, and the national agenda for post-revolutionary transition. For instance, in Egypt, not only where local protests and strikes virtually unrelated to revolutionary rallies and organizations that held explicit political demands, but also they were accused by some revolutionaries for being either untimely or even conspiring to derail the post-revolutionary political transition. The name that was given for these local socioeconomic protests was "particularistic" demands – mataleb fi'awiyya', which accurately indicated their local character that was unattached to any national agenda for political change (See Adly, 2016 on Egypt). It also confirmed the almost conscious apolitical nature of such demands, which remained focused on securing or defending immediate economic benefits for their direct members as were the protests and strikes that workers took in Egypt between 2004 and 2014 (Beinin and Duboc, 2015; Beinin, 2016) or the demands for public hiring in Tunisia and Morocco (Meddeb, 2020; El Baoune, 2019).

Several years later, socioeconomic contention moves into the core of national contentious politics, with corruption as its framing concept. This implied on the one hand, the contestation against national –rather than just local- elites in the name of fighting systemtic corruption. It also meant on the other, that broader popular constituencies nation-wide embraced the corruption framing in their political mobilization. Lebanon is most probably the most dramatic example of such phenomenon where mass nation-wide mobilization targeted ruling elites and the political and economic institutions they stood for and relied upon. Unlike earlier protests in 2015 which were confined to Beirut, the 2019 "revolution" cut across regions

and sects with socioeconomic demands standing as the heart of the matter. From an angle, broader societal constituencies appeared to have embraced the discourse developed by civil society organizations and networks in previous years. This contamination is not confined to Lebanese actors. Rather, it suggests elements of trans-nationalization that have for long characterized civil society organizations and social activists on the organizational and discursive levels.

Conclusion

Arab societies have a long history of contentious politics. This was resumed in earnest in the past few years with mounting economic hardships, austerity and IMF-sponsored neoliberalization. This recent episode of contention however bore some distinctive features compared to earlier ones.

The first is that is that it did not happen within the regime boundaries seeking reversing policies or measures. It rather targeted the very structure of power in a range of authoritarian and pluralist regimes in the region. This might have to do with the impact of the 2011 Arab revolutions on the awareness of average citizens of questions of injustice and the potential for popular action. The final result was that contentious politics has become either revolutionary or potentially so merging with the bigger questions of regime change that marred the Arab world since 2011 and continues to with the advent of the second wave of the Arab Spring in 2019.

The second feature has been the peculiar transnationalization of contentious politics in Arab societies. On the one hand, the adoption of the anti-globalization-cum-neoliberalization as a totalizing concept for opposing austerity and privatization remained almost exclusive to elitist networks of left-leaning social and political activists, renegade experts and human rights advocates. Neoliberalism as a critical concept that refers to adversarial distribution of income and wealth in favor of a global capitalist class through the dispossession of the poor and the middle-classes never made it to the broader base of the mouvance that contended the effects of neoliberalization both organizationally and discursively. On the other, corruption and its sister concepts like cronyism, nepotism and patronage were the notions that got re-localized rather successfully by significantly wider constituencies. Despite the fact that corruption and its auxiliary terms sprang from within the neoliberal discourse itself rather than that of its critics, it was the one that found resonance in the Arab political culture. Throughout an unlikely journey from the right to the left, corruption and related terms provided lethal ammunition for regime critics, forwarding the above mentioned confluence of contending neoliberal policies with demands for regime change.

A third trait is the increasing centrality that corruption as the symbolic framing for contentious politics and the conflict over resource distribution. In the past several years, dissent against essentially corrupt and incompetent elites became a powerful framing for activists, civil society actors and large popular constituencies transcending the earlier local focus of economic contention that for decades involved isolated sites. The nationalization of the question concerning corruption, as broadly interpreted by contentious actors, meant a clear politicization of distributional issues on the national level, introducing a rupture with previously apolitical (and sometimes consciously anti-political) economic and social demands that appealed to ruling elites without explicitly challenging them.

Given the objectively trans-nationalized context of neoliberalization and its discontents, contentious politics and the various expressions within the anti-neoliberalization mouvances in the Arab world did have an undeniable trans-national aspect. This dimension however did not make itself present without passing through the concrete regional, national and local socio-political, economic and cultural dynamics in each of the countries under examination. These expressions of contentious politics were doubtless within a broader universe of anti-neoliberal (albeit not necessarily or automatically anti-globalization) movements around the world since the meltdown of 2008. These nevertheless were specific in their own historically-constructed contexts as Bayart would hold.

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