# Decentralization, Local Governance, and Inequality in the Middle East and North Africa

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Decentralization, Local Governance,
and Inequality in the Middle East and North Africa

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# DECENTRALIZATION, LOCAL GOVERNANCE, AND INEQUALITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Edited by Kristen Kao and Ellen Lust

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# Preface

## Hicham Alaoui

Much of mainstream social science presents a spatial view of the world that prizes uniformity and linearity. In this view, terms such as *center* and *periphery*—often used to describe the territorial components of modern states—vary only in terms of their coordinates. Moving from, say, an urban center to the rural periphery is significant, but only because it involves a linear shift in how people might live in these areas: the population density might change, for example, or the mode of economic production may vary, as will the political rights of those living in these areas.

But there is another, more productive way of conceptualizing space. Space can be understood not as movement on a linear scale (such as the distance between points or geographic locations on a map), but rather as an uneven topography where practices of politics and governance can qualitatively vary between different places. The true difference between an urban metropole and rural governorate, thus, is measured not only by the number of people or by the structural forms of production, but also by localized rules, norms, and institutions that shape the lives and preferences of inhabitants.

The short, succinct way to frame this recalibration is that while politics matters everywhere, it matters as much in those liminal parts of modern countries—local communities, agrarian fringes, contested borderlands, underserved neighborhoods—as in the more stable, routine environs of capital cities. However, comparative political analyses, particularly those

focusing on regimes and institutions, seem purely honed toward capital cities. As the craft of governance and episodes of contestation boil down to power, our theoretical optics often gravitate toward *who* seems to have aggregated the most power—state leaders, presidential rulers, monarchical incumbents, parliamentary speakers, bureaucratic elites, and all those who otherwise command the ramparts of a governing regime.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), scholars have rightly described these tendencies as methodologically "nationalist." This insinuates that investigating politics and policies through the lens of the unitary nation-state is the most appropriate entrée to rigorous theory-building or explanatory research. To be sure, our notions of political order will always borrow the functional form of Westphalian nation-states; when we advocate for democracy or human rights, for instance, we generally wish for democracy to spread not only as a liberal ideal but also as an institutional form of national regimes across the world.

This leaves an enormous expanse of untilled questions, inaugurated by recent events that call into question our implicit biases toward conceiving politics in purely macro-level, national terms. The last decade has taught us a few vital lessons in this regard.

First, every social, economic, or political crisis felt at the *national* level has a *local* context, whose processes and outcomes may not comport with top-level expectations. In the MENA, for instance, when authoritarian regimes stumble, the effects of faltering governance are most visibly felt among the ordinary lives of people and communities far removed from the towering heights of decision-makers.

Consider the literature on weak state capacity. Social scientists often frame authoritarian regimes in the region as lacking the capabilities to sufficiently govern their populations due to autocratic overinvestment in coercive institutions or underinvestment in social and human capital. When governments fail to provide adequate public goods, such as healthcare, rule of law, and education, those disruptions have varying effects across the polity. For example, some states in recent decades have ceded to nonstate authorities—such as religious movements, civil society, and tribal groups— the responsibility to provide order and basic services in certain areas; Iraq is one example. Others, such as Yemen and Libya, even before the Arab Spring, conveniently forgot that such "ungovernable" areas existed.

That national elites and rulers often do not understand how citizens, migrants, and residents live in much of their countries underscores a related point. If politics fundamentally centers on how people strive to imprint their preferences on their environments, then in many parts of the

MENA, researchers confront situations where those struggles are not only ongoing but remain remarkably unknown to the highest power-holders.

At a fundamental level, this should be alarming. There persists an interdisciplinary tendency, not only political science but anthropology, sociology, history, and economics, to invoke entire peoples and countries as unitary actors—e.g., the Saudi nation, the Moroccans, the Egyptian people, and the Iraqi state. Such linguistic flourishes are necessary in everyday academic parlance, but we should recognize that such generalizations may not mean much, even to the most powerful decision-makers of those very countries. For example, the Egyptian government may technically hold legal fiat over its population and territory, but that does not mean its ruling elites know the conditions of life and politics outside Cairo.

Second, the current cycle of mass mobilization in the MENA requires updating prevailing assumptions about how political space and local struggles interact. Publicly, the Arab Spring renewed global interest in the formalized domain of centralized national politics. The world's focus understandably fell on whether national leaders, such as Mubarak of Egypt or Assad of Syria, would lose power in the face of revolution from below. However, the origins of the 2011–12 Uprisings and the second wave of unrest during 2018–19 lay not in glamorous ideological movements or large opposition parties, but rather in the quotidian grassroots struggles of everyday people. When young citizens, most with no affiliation with political parties or other mass movements, chose to undertake collective action to protest their indignity and demand democracy, they instigated rebellions that spread across their countries and then the region. National uprisings began from humble, local beginnings.

Ironically, this theoretical about-face repeats history. During the era of postcolonial state formation, most MENA regimes sought to overlay a new structure of centralized bureaucracies, militaries, and public institutions atop the fractured terrain of their nascent states. They faced many subnational challenges in doing so, from ethnic minorities and local tribal groups to regional identities and social forces that chafed against such repressive impositions. The grievances nurtured by local voices against new regimes did not disappear; they simply burrowed themselves deeply into local memories, to be reactivated in future crises. In Morocco, the example of the Rif and its ongoing protest movement is a case in point— such a flashpoint reactivates long-running rebellions and clashes between local forces and the Moroccans (and before that, the French), stretching back generations.

Hence, scaling down from the national and understanding how politi-

cal grievances, desires, and imaginations operate in the crevices of society remains a crucial task for those of us who care deeply about patterns of emancipation and mobilization. Only by focusing on these microdynamics can we better understand how people see their political and economic challenges and treat individuals as meaningful actors rather than as tangential variables in theoretical models.

This brings us back to the initial point of scale and space. In almost any other issue of political research, such as religious identity, electoral disputes, and public health emergencies, shifting the level of analysis from the national to the local exposes a new range of constraints and opportunities that impact political interactions. This is particularly important when we consider those who tend to be the most marginalized—what many social scientists call "nonelite" actors. These are, in reality, the people who make up the vast majority of societies. They are youths, women, workers, the poor, agrarians, migrants, and all others who lack a political voice in the clientelistic systems that dictate the direction of policies. These are the voices that animate the chapters of this volume, and their behaviors and aspirations must be heard.

Finally, what this volume illuminates most fruitfully is the need to transcend the binary between top-down and bottom-up approaches to political analysis. The top-down framework begins from the states' perspectives and sees their power and capacity radiate outward and downward to regulate the populace. The bottom-up framework begins from the societal level but presumes that the logical goal of most people is to influence, erode, or capture the reins of power within their states. While the former framework epitomizes the state-centric bias of much of political science, history, and economics, the latter framework remains relevant when considering periods of revolutionary turmoil, like the Arab Spring and the more recent 2018–19 Uprisings across countries such as Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Yet it also supposes, mistakenly, that all political action inevitably leads back to the political center and, in doing so, reproduces the spatial assumption of the top-down model.

In reality, many observed social and political behaviors that clash with the rules of governance do not aim at the highest elites who lead national regimes. Instead, they often aim at local sources of authority, such as municipal councils, religious institutions, neighborhood patrons, provincial movements, and political representatives. When individuals and groups engage in activism for better governance, their concerns remain anchored in familiar themes of dignity, justice, and democracy; however, they often seek to effectuate meaningful change in their communities, rather than at the level of political elites.

As we move forward, the lessons of this volume remain as pertinent as ever. Societies across the region will continue to churn out new, creative forms of politics, from groundbreaking protests and social networking to economic entrepreneurship and artistic expression. We must continue to focus on local dynamics, understanding governance through the filter of everyday engagements rather than solely through the vista of centralized, national political order.

That is what this book encapsulates. It embodies the diligent efforts of scholars and specialists—all convened under the aegis of the Governance and Local Development Institute at the University of Gothenburg, supported by the Hicham Alaoui Foundation—who undertook original research to support this refreshing turn. While drawn primarily from political science in their theoretical emphasis on institutions, representation, and participation, these analyses also evince an interdisciplinary spirit. Discerning readers will find plenty of historical context, anthropological detail, sociological inspiration, and economic structure in the arguments conveyed here. Such a vibrant intellectual foundation speaks not only to the value of academic collaboration but also to the new and exciting directions that await as we rediscover the local.

# Introduction

# Decentralization and Local Governance

*Lessons from the MENA*

Ellen Lust and Kristen Kao

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a relative latecomer to the implementation of, and debates over, decentralization—the shift of administrative, fiscal, and/or political control from the center to peripheral units.[1] The states that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s established highly centralized regimes aimed at fostering social and economic transformation. And they seemed to succeed, at least in part. Developmental policies, often buoyed by oil revenues, remittances, and external support, largely eliminated extreme poverty, leading most countries in the region to middle-income status. Thus, even in 2000, when the World Bank noted that 80–100 percent of the world's countries were experimenting with decentralization, the MENA was viewed as one of the most politically centralized regions in the world.[2] Consequently, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars largely ignored the MENA as they sought to implement, and make sense of, decentralization. Likewise, students of the MENA region largely overlooked variations in local politics, focusing instead on national-level institutions and outcomes.[3]

However, the 2011 Arab Uprisings demonstrated that the region had greater economic inequality and less central political control than many assumed. The uprisings started in Tunisia—one of the MENA's best economic performers. With an average annual GDP growth rate of 4.4. per-

cent between 2000 and 2010, Tunisia saw declining poverty and improvements in human development indicators, which generated compliments from the international community. Yet, under the surface of national success lay enormous inequality; in some parts of the country, nearly one-third of the population lived in poverty, and citizens there were significantly more likely than those in other regions to lack safe drinking water and sanitation, to die in childbirth, and to be stunted in childhood.[4] Moreover, as former Tunisian Ambassador Ahmed Ounaïes explained, economic marginalization spawned a parallel governance system.

> The sundry trafficking undermined State institutions. Mafia rings, taken up by Ben Ali circles, were besieging the entire country, taking with them entire sections of the customs and tax administrations, municipal authorities, and security and State services.[5]

Such economic inequalities and weak state control existed elsewhere as well. A 2019 UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) report argued that the MENA has the greatest income inequality in the world when the top 1 percent of the population is taken into account. "The real inequality paradox," the study concludes, was not how inequality sparked revolutions when it was relatively low compared to other regions in the world, but rather, "how little we actually know about the state of inequality in Arab countries . . . even though equity concerns receive considerable attention in the constitutions of these countries, as well as in their development policies over the last half-century."[6] Similarly, long before the uprisings, Lisa Anderson noted that "[m]ost of the countries of the region probably fall somewhere along a spectrum between those with well-established states and those that are virtually stateless."[7] Nazih Ayubi warned against *Over-Stating the Arab State*,[8] while Joel Migdal pointed out how states engage peripheries, making compromises that allow social forces to have greater control.[9] Focusing on the marginalized classes, Diane Singerman and Asef Bayat demonstrated how the state often fails to effectively govern the people, many of whom create means to govern themselves.[10]

Domestic and international stakeholders saw the uprisings as "clear expressions of societal discontent with central power and regional socioeconomic imbalances." In response, they renewed the discourse on decentralization and their determination to institute it.[11] They hoped that by bringing fiscal, administrative, and political processes closer to the people, decentralization might create a more efficient, inclusive government and

reduce inequalities. Yet, what is the nature of local state-citizen relations and the extent of political representation and inequality in the context of these reforms? And how and why do these relationships and inequalities vary across individuals and localities?

This volume addresses these questions. In this chapter, we first provide an overview of the literature on decentralization, reviewing arguments on its benefits and drawbacks, exploring how local contexts can shape outcomes, and considering the importance of bringing the MENA more fully into the conversation. Second, we briefly describe steps toward decentralization before and after the 2011 Arab Uprisings. Finally, we provide an overview of the contributions in this volume, discussing how they combine to provide insights into local governance, political participation, and representation in the context of decentralization. In doing so, we seek to extend the understanding of decentralization gleaned from previous studies, provide a better understanding of local governance in the MENA, demonstrate the abundance of remaining questions, and chart a path for future research on local governance and decentralization, in both the MENA and globally.

## 1. Understanding Decentralization, Local Governance, and Inequality

The past decades have witnessed an extensive and evolving debate among scholars and practitioners over decentralization. Early scholars and practitioners focused primarily on fiscal decentralization, seeing it as an opportunity to counter the adverse effects of the centralist tendencies that dominated the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1990s, such efforts had gained momentum, spurred by the expansion of the European Union, the fall of the Soviet Union, and increased optimism around democracy and development. Some sought to understand how decentralization impacted OECD countries, while others explored the possibility that decentralization could solve development problems. For instance, the 1992 World Bank report, *Governance and Development*, emphasized the importance of participation to good governance; the 2001 World Development Report, *Attacking Poverty*, saw localization—like globalization—as an inevitable contemporary "phenomenon" no one could ignore; the 2004 World Development Report, *Making Services Work*, viewed decentralization as a critical component of service provision; by 2008, *Decentralization in Client Countries: An Evaluation of World Bank Support, 1990–2007*, contained a section entitled "Decentralization: Everyone Is Doing It."[12]

More extensive experience with implementation and investigation has demonstrated that decentralization is a varied set of processes[13] with complex implications. Scholars and practitioners have become more aware of both positive and negative consequences, which depend on a set of contingencies shaping policies and implementation.[14] However, these current understandings are built almost exclusively on experiences from the OECD, Africa, Asia, and Latin America,[15] largely overlooking experience in the MENA region. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the region came relatively late and reluctantly to adopt decentralization policies, but it is unfortunate. The very factors that make the MENA somewhat exceptional—resistant authoritarian regimes, a history of centralization, and the weak influence of development agencies—can affect the implementation and impact of decentralization policies. Thus, findings from the MENA can provide important new insights into decentralization. Moreover, studying local variation in the implications of decentralization can extend the emerging literature on both decentralization and local governance, informing scholars and practitioners of decentralization and adding important insights for MENA specialists.

### Benefits of Decentralization

Champions of decentralization argue that it brings the government closer to the people, improves accountability, and promotes efficiency. Early proponents noted that "decentralization is not a 'quick fix' for the management problems of developing countries."[16] Still, they anticipated that decentralization could improve "resource distribution, local participation, extension of public services to rural areas, [and] project identification and implementation."[17]

Decentralization should increase information flows, transparency, and voice, ultimately improving accountability. Local leaders, service providers, and other officials have a greater understanding of local needs and thus can more efficiently respond to residents.[18] Citizens, too, have better information on officials' performance. They can recognize when policymaking does not respond to local preferences, and they can detect when public service providers engage in favoritism. Moreover, given their proximity to decision-makers and service providers, they may be more encouraged to voice their concerns and punish those who are unresponsive.[19] Thus, decentralization can facilitate accountability.

Decentralization should also improve effective governance. Increased information, voice, and accountability give public officials incentives to

match the distribution of resources to local needs more effectively, thus promoting public-service delivery and community welfare.[20] It also can create competition between localities. Decentralization gives citizens an additional, more intimate layer of voice in governance. Furthermore, if citizens can "vote with their feet," leaving their community for a higher-performing one, all local leaders will be forced to better respond to their publics.[21] Local officials should also seek to be more efficient, avoiding unreasonable taxes to retain popular support and prevent exits.[22]

Finally, decentralization may be a means of reducing national inequality. Decentralization provides an instrument for addressing moral-hazard problems, such as national officials' unwillingness to invest in improving services in areas where votes are not critical to reelection[23] or reticence in punishing local officials for poor performance when they benefit the party leader.[24]

### 1.2 Drawbacks to Decentralization

However, decentralization does not always yield the expected benefits. Some scholars and development specialists argue that the assumptions underpinning the proponents' arguments often do not hold, either in some localities or across entire countries, and that a failure to meet these assumptions may be especially likely in developing contexts. Others point out that decentralization can have negative effects, even when the assumptions underlying effective decentralization hold. Thus, even in best-case scenarios, decentralization entails costs that must be weighed against the benefits.

One set of concerns is based on the possibility that decentralization proponents make assumptions that are often not met. The standard decentralization model is based on several assumptions: Preferences are relatively homogeneous within localities and heterogeneous across them, allowing local leaders to make more appropriate decisions for local communities than national leaders. Local government capacity is high, allowing local governments and bureaucracies to successfully implement policies. Local resource bases and taxation tools are robust, permitting fiscal decentralization. Information flows relatively freely, both upward and downward, which helps officials understand citizens' needs and allows citizens to monitor officials. Finally, residents can punish elected representatives, service providers, and other officials who fail to deliver by, for example, "voting with their feet" when local governments fail to respond to their preferences. These conditions are often unmet, especially in

many African, Asian, and Latin American countries that have been the focus of decentralization efforts.

The consequences of decentralization in such cases can be pernicious. Minorities, women, and other marginalized groups are often sidelined.[25] Local elites, benefiting from their privileged positions, can use elected office to meet their own needs, often at the expense of community welfare.[26] In less-than-democratic settings, the use of "voice" can be particularly problematic, as local politics' narrowed working space can empower politicians to track down, target, and intimidate or punish their detractors. Social cleavages remain, and at times even widen.[27] The result may be elite capture,[28] increased inequalities,[29] and, in divided countries, heightened conflict.[30]

Decentralization may also lead to new problems by weakening the central government's ability to govern. It could create inequalities of scale for service delivery, leading to unchecked, negative spillover effects between localities, as the policies of one community influence the welfare of its neighbors. This could result in higher levels of corruption as the multiplication of administrative levels and increased system complexity, often associated with decentralization, increase rent-seeking.[31] Decentralization can limit the central government's ability to perform its macroeconomic responsibilities, such as maintaining the fiscal balance or a stable currency.[32] Finally, it may increase regional inequalities, both because the center loses its ability to redistribute from wealthier to needier areas[33] and because some regions are better situated to benefit from decentralization than others.[34]

### 1.3 Contingencies and Conditionalities

Decentralization efforts may thus have very different consequences, given different contexts and variations in implementation processes. As Faguet, Fox, and Pöschl argue,

> what decentralization really does is to transform politics from an arena that is, by definition, national, top-down, and hence subject to oligopolization by a socioeconomic elite based in a few powerful cities, to a "meta-arena" embracing many specific regional and local arenas, where pressing local concerns are taken up and addressed, or not, by local politicians and the parties they choose to join.[35]

Whether the involvement of those in the "meta-arena" creates more effective policies, fosters efficient implementation, and reduces inequalities depends on both local and national contexts.[36]

Local governing capacity has a great deal to do with whether and where the benefits of decentralization are realized. In much of the developing world, local capacity is weak. Moreover, more isolated, less educated, and poorer communities often suffer from weaker access to mass media and other information sources, less competent local officers, and weaker governing structures. As a result, citizens—especially the poor and less educated—are less likely to participate in elections and other participatory processes. Where poverty is coupled with inequality, corruption increases, and elites are more likely to shape decentralization to their own interests.[37]

Other social conditions may also influence decentralization. The extent to which a robust civil society exists at the local level affects the community's ability to engage in economic activity and hold the government accountable. As Mansuri and Rao note, decentralization requires

> [local] groups of citizens who organize themselves into collectives to hold the local state accountable; assist with the functions of government (school committees, public village meetings); remedy market failures such as lack of access to credit or insurance (microcredit and microinsurance groups); and directly manage common resources (forest management groups, water users groups). If government functions are decentralized to the local level, it is important to have citizen groups that watch out and correct for local government failures through a process of active engagement.[38]

Social heterogeneity and the extent to which gender, ethnicity, caste, tribal, or other social markers are linked to differences in preferences and power inequalities are also key. Social heterogeneity may complicate policy coordination, although the extent to which it does so may depend on the density of social networks.[39] Particularly when decentralization efforts are linked to donor policies that seek "local consensus,"[40] individuals who are in local minorities but not marginalized at the center may find themselves worse off after decentralization.[41]

Local resources are also important. Whether local policies are implemented effectively depends, in part, on the resources local governments can access. In many communities, local governments rely primarily on resources allocated from the central government.[42] This is because many communities may have limited resources and because, in much of the developing world, the primary sources of income are value-added taxes, grants, and other centrally collected revenues.

Reliance on central governance revenues—fiscal revenue centralization in the face of expenditure decentralization—is problematic on several

counts. It creates tensions between the local and central governments, as local officials blame the center for saddling them with mandates while not providing them with the resources necessary to carry them out.[43] It also promotes political dependencies, as local officials need to remain in the good graces of the central government to obtain revenue. As Oates notes, revenue can often come with "strings attached," destroying "incentives for responsible, and responsive, local decisions."[44] Scholars of fiscal decentralization find that decentralizing spending decisions can improve income inequalities, but only when accompanied by revenue decentralization.[45]

Ultimately, the extent to which decentralization leads to better outcomes depends on the relationship between the central and local governments. Bardhan and Mookherjee conclude that decentralization can improve both efficiency and equity when local governments are less vulnerable to capture than the central government.[46] At the same time, successful decentralization requires strong, effective central governments that are committed to the process.[47] Along these lines, cross-sectional and panel analyses by Enikolopov and Zhuravskaya find that strong political parties (measured by the age of main parties and government party fractionalization) are associated with whether decentralization facilitates economic growth, more effective public service provision, and higher government quality.[48]

Finally, the outcome of decentralization depends on the precise form of decentralization processes. Faguet and Pöschl conclude, "All of these results underline the fundamental point that it is not *whether* a country decentralizes, but *how* it decentralizes that matters."[49] Outcomes may be influenced by the sequencing of administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization and the specific forms of these institutional arrangements. In addition, several institutional safeguards—such as elected councils with quota seats for marginalized groups, budget transparency procedures, information dissemination, citizen oversight, the judiciary, or the media—may mitigate negative outcomes.[50] Policymakers, development specialists, and scholars thus need to carefully consider the context, process, and institutional underpinnings of decentralization.

## 1.4 Unanswered Questions

The increasing prevalence of decentralization and the burgeoning literature evaluating its outcomes provide important insights, but leave many questions unanswered.

What are the political and social consequences of decentralization, and

how do they vary across contexts and individuals? Perhaps because the literature initially focused on fiscal decentralization, much less is known about the political and social consequences. As Mookherjee notes in his review of political decentralization, further research is required to understand the "functioning of local democracy itself (civic participation, political competition, legitimacy, leadership, and learning)."[51] Even more recently, Myerson concluded, "there have not been enough cross-national comparative studies of political decentralization, partly because it has been difficult to obtain comprehensive global data on subnational political institutions."[52] Myerson was speaking primarily of cross-national economic analyses of local governance, but the same remains true of subnational country studies of political outcomes. Much remains to be learned about political participation and representation under decentralization.

Furthermore, what are the consequences of decentralization policies implemented in authoritarian regimes? The extant decentralization studies have primarily focused on democracies, at times distinguishing between developing and developed contexts. As we see below, the literature on decentralization in the MENA context has recognized the importance of authoritarianism but has focused primarily on understanding the extent to which decentralization policies are (or are not) implemented. Questions remain regarding the sociopolitical implications of decentralization under authoritarian regimes.

## 2. Decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa

Studying local participation and representation under decentralization in the MENA can provide insights into both decentralization and the region's politics. This section briefly outlines the region's decentralization experience before and after the Arab Uprisings. We find that, while international actors and global trends prompted discourse on decentralization in the MENA before 2011, actual reforms were implemented in a halting and piecemeal fashion. These reforms hardly amounted to complete subnational devolution of development planning, resource allocation, and subnational accountability and participatory frameworks. Such limited, incomplete decentralization is not unique to the MENA region; as Stuti Khemani notes, governments around the world implement grant-based decentralization policies in a rather cynical fashion to stabilize their regimes.[53] However, after 2011, a heightened sense of urgency and opportunities for political change led to renewed decentralization efforts. This

book focuses on understanding the social and political implications of these reforms.

## 2.1 Before the Uprisings

The region saw a range of decentralization experiences before the 2011 uprisings. One set of countries was well-resourced and led by authoritarian strongmen with little incentive to institute decentralization. A second set contained countries that had experienced conflict and introduced decentralization to reduce political strife. Finally, a third set included those with less plentiful resources and stronger state bureaucracies. This last group took the greatest steps toward decentralization.

Revolutionary regimes and Gulf monarchies, broadly speaking, were the most resistant to decentralization.[54] For example, Libya's "Al Shaabiyat" system of local governance eschewed elected representation altogether, and Ba'athist Iraq and Syria, apart from the quasi-autonomous region of Kurdistan, appointed local officials and constricted budgetary decisions and fiscal policymaking at the national level, often with little transparency. In the Gulf, there were few decentralization efforts, not only because countries such as Bahrain, the UAE, and Qatar are geographically small (with less physical distance between the center and periphery) and have small populations, but also because bottomless financial resources and economic prosperity led them to experience less demand for reform. As Luciani put it, such rentier systems break the traditional social contract between citizen and state, as there can be "no representation without taxation."[55]

Decentralization was only slightly more ambitious in countries such as Egypt and Jordan. There, governments ostensibly sought to organize social welfare provisions and promote economic growth through local engagement. Egyptian local government divisions date back to the 1960 Local Administration Law, which allowed for elected local councils. However, policy implementation at the local level was under the governor's office and an executive council—appointed officials close to the central regime.

Likewise, the Jordanian system depended on the delegation rather than the devolution of powers. Municipal councils have been elected since 1925, but the legal framework surrounding local governance has been gradually reformed to severely restrict municipal powers.[56] For instance, the 1995 legislation provided a fail-safe instrument against rogue councils that refused to champion the central government's policy priorities: hand-selected governors were given the power to dissolve municipal councils and appoint provisory committees for two-year terms.[57]

Lebanon and Palestine faced greater incentives for decentralization, seeing it as a step toward establishing peace and postconflict governance. In Lebanon, the 1989 Taif Pact, which eventually facilitated the end of the Lebanese Civil War, enshrined a political imperative for decentralization. Districts would be entitled to representative elected councils to effectively manage implementation and select mayoral appointees, albeit under a "unified development plan."[58]

In the Palestinian territories, municipal governments constitute the most enduring form of governance, with local elections going back to 1972, predating the Palestinian Authority (PA). After the 1993 Oslo Accords and the 1997 Law on Local Government, the PA saw the homogenization of local authority powers under a unifying framework. However, the perceived legitimacy of decentralized authorities has been low due to the constraints occupation imposes on local Palestinian authorities' ability to set and achieve community development goals, provide services, and address poverty. These constraints have included the Israeli cooptation of certain local government officials, the PA's dependence on foreign development funding (90% of investment budgets since 1993), Israeli tax collection, and the need for Israeli authorization to implement many infrastructure and development projects.[59]

Morocco and Tunisia had the most extensive decentralization prior to 2011. Morocco has a long history of fiscal decentralization, with tax system reforms in the 1960s that allowed municipal divisions to levy taxes and organize funding for municipal projects. Tunisia implemented similar reforms starting in the 1970s, when it allowed municipalities to raise local taxes and sought to provide a more equitable redistribution of central government funds.[60] Despite heavy oversight by the Ministries of the Interior and Finance, improvements in governance—as measured by financial transparency, participation, access to information, and grassroots policy actions—were demonstrable by the 1990s.[61]

These reforms led to some significant long-term benefits at the national level but did not deepen local democracy or alleviate inequalities.[62] Moreover, cooperation with the international community over outwardly progressive reforms narrowed the governing coalition, even at the center. In Morocco, for example, Abdeslam Maghrauoi argues that the regime coopted local actors by "creating a parallel structure of decision-making consisting of close associates of the king."[63] Likewise, in Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime utilized tax reforms and regulatory frameworks to weed out competition and enrich its cronies.[64]

## 2.2 After the Uprisings

The uprisings demonstrated the grievances around inequalities and the fragility of governance structures across the region. However, they also renewed interest in the possibility that decentralization could address these problems. The region continued to witness a range of decentralization experiences, partly because the reasons motivating decentralization varied. Decentralization reforms remained limited in many ways, but were overall more ambitious than those undertaken before the uprisings.

Some regimes pursued decentralization in hopes of staving off demands for more extensive reforms or the overthrow of the regime. For example, Morocco expanded local and regional mandates, first in its 2011 Constitution and then in its 2015 regionalization reforms.[65] The monarchy presented these mandates as a response to the Consultative Commission on Regionalization, not a reaction to protests. Nevertheless, Bohn and Vollmann argue that the reforms allowed the palace to reduce the power of the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, encouraged parties to participate in national elections, and stimulated engagement in municipal elections—all outcomes that reinforced the monarchy at the expense of the opposition.[66]

Similarly, Jordan passed the Decentralization and Municipality Laws of 2015, forming a basis for the first governorate council elections held in 2017.[67] The lack of local-level administrative capacity and training remained an obstacle to alleviating regional inequalities and poverty. Without an implementation framework, the full extent of decentralization, as presented in Jordan's Vision 2025, was slow to roll out.[68] These reforms, and others geared toward open governance more generally, did not meet civil society and international stakeholders' expectations. Mounting political and economic pressures led to a Second National Dialogue on reforms in 2019, which concluded that expectations, powers, and authorities for newly decentralized units needed to be codified to encourage coordination between the well-established local elected and executive councils and the new governorate subdivisions.[69] Laws to this effect were drafted in 2020.

This slow road toward deepening decentralization was mirrored in Lebanon. Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati responded to the 2011 uprisings by forming a special commission to reaffirm and strengthen Lebanon's holistic decentralization framework. Ultimately, the draft reforms were made public on April 2, 2014, introducing a new fiscal system for balanced intragovernmental transfers and reasserting administrative independence for subnational elected councils. However, as of 2024, the draft law remained under parliamentary discussion.[70]

Elsewhere in the MENA, the uprisings upended regimes, at times leading to civil war and leaving nonstate forces governing large swathes of land and people. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, international development agencies and autochthonous authorities pressed for decentralization as a last-ditch effort to provide services, mitigate humanitarian crises, and resolve conflict. International actors, such as the World Bank, the UNDP, and the EU, led programs to strengthen the roles and capacities of local political bodies.

Decentralization was part of the strategy for governance and peace-building in Libya. Following the First Libyan Civil War and the ousting of Ghaddafi, the General National Congress codified administrative decentralization in 2012. However, the resurgence of violent conflict two years later marred the results of the first municipal elections in 2014. Subsequently, international development agencies, in cooperation with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (now the Government of National Unity), sought to strengthen local government actors and institutions through municipal support, expert training, and development funding. The goal was for municipal and local authorities to ensure that public services continued to be provided in the absence of peace; high levels of autonomy would promote peace-building within the highly sectarian country.[71]

De facto decentralization, with varying degrees of formality and liberalization, also occurred in Syria and Yemen. As in Libya, this was partly due to their conflict-weakened central states. In Syria, many communities organized around various interpretations of the 2011 Local Administration Law. Decree 107, which devolves autonomy over the planning and budgeting of development efforts to local government under oversight from centrally appointed governors, a central point for mediators in the Geneva Peace Talks, found such disparate champions as the United States and Russia.[72] A similar law passed in Yemen during the 2011 reforms likewise gave scholars and practitioners hope for peace-building through local empowerment and cooperation between central and peripheral powers.[73]

Finally, in countries where the uprisings succeeded in overturning regimes, new governments sought to use decentralization to address the grievances that had led to the downfall of the previous regime. Tunisia enshrined decentralization in its 2014 Constitution.[74] However, efforts toward decentralization did little to promote the dignity that underpinned the Jasmine Revolution. Eight years into Tunisia's democratic project, economic realities remained grim; local governments often failed to provide services and produce the promised prosperity, and low levels of training

and cooperation severely weakened the state.[75] By 2022, a final blow was dealt to the new democratic vision; President Kais Saied dissolved parliament, and a new constitutional referendum, aimed at centralizing powers within the executive branch and marginalizing the roles of parliamentary and local leaders, passed with more than 90 percent approval, though with only a 27.5 percent voter turnout.[76] This new Constitution effectively smothered whatever embers remained of the postrevolutionary aspiration for democracy and called into question the effectiveness of Tunisia's decentralization.

So, too, Egypt's 2014 constitutional amendments moved—at least in theory—toward decentralization. However, over eight years later, local council elections had still not been held. Despite various explanations, from lack of consensus over local electoral laws, to shifting political priorities, to the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact remains that local governments, while the spiritual backbone of the post-Mubarak order, remained as inchoate as they were under the Mubarak regime (and perhaps more so).

## 2.3 What Do We Know about Decentralization in the MENA?

There are reasons to question whether the lessons from Africa, Asia, and Latin America hold in the MENA. First, academic studies of decentralization in the region remain largely focused on the transitional periods following the Arab Spring. Considering this, research has highlighted the extent to which regimes and transitional authorities have implemented decentralization, how reforms have been instrumentalized for regimes to maintain the status quo, and, to varying degrees, whether local authorities have the mandates, capacities, and requirements (legal, financial, and technical) to realize the theoretical fruits of decentralization.

Two considerations drive these approaches to decentralization studies in the MENA region. First, the long reign of unitary governments has led researchers to focus on national-level dynamics, questioning the extent to which real power-sharing is possible and how it relates to revolutionary impulses in the region. They thus have examined the degrees of decentralization experienced,[77] budgetary allocations for municipalities,[78] and legislative policy processes.[79] They explored how pre-2011 (incomplete) reforms, local-level representative institutions, and macro-level networks shaped decentralization processes and power-sharing in the postrevolutionary context.[80]

Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia have received the most attention. In Tunisia, where the peripheries initiated the Jasmine Revolution, elected

local councils were able to levy popular support for greater administrative autonomy and succeeded in their efforts to enshrine decentralization in the country's new Constitution.[81] However, in the aftermath of 2011's transition, center-periphery tensions bled into all levels of politics, shaping party representation in transitional local councils,[82] complicating the foundations of legitimacy at all levels of political power, and creating governance inefficiencies that hindered both the socioeconomic situation and the development of representative democracy.[83]

Even in Morocco and Jordan, where regimes retained power, decentralization processes have likewise been studied through this autocracy/democracy, legitimacy lens. For example, Demmelhuber and Sturm describe a process of cooptation, whereby the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, in efforts to retain their power, capitalized on center-periphery elite networks, control over intragovernmental transfers, and legal frameworks to implement decentralization while evading the essential prerequisites for greater local-level autonomy.[84] As a result, many conclude that decentralization reforms have reinforced—rather than disrupted—the power of central actors.

Second, the positive and negative outcomes of decentralization vis-à-vis development and democratization have been widely tested across the globe, but there are few assessments of the impact of decentralization in the MENA context. This is partly due to a lack of quantitative data regarding decentralization processes in the region.[85] Scholars have consequently considered how elites act on reform processes and how regionalism and central control over financial transfers have led to subnational funding variations and development outcomes.[86] To a lesser extent, they also explore how decentralization reforms create opportunities for local elites to use local spaces to their advantage, and may even spur innovative attempts at cooperation across municipalities.[87] This includes gap-filling service provision by municipal and local governments as a direct response to citizen's express needs, as evident to various extents in Syria, Tunisia,[88] and Libya, where technical capacity training and additional relief funding (from international agencies such as GIZ and UNDP) promote service provision and local accountability.[89]

However, a deep understanding of participation and representation as key components of decentralization processes has been missing from academic and practitioner narratives. Participation and representation arguably determine the extent to which decentralization realizes its benefits,[90] yet there has been remarkably little study of local political participation and representation in the post-2011 MENA region. Instead, studies have

either considered unique situations, as in Clark, Delmasso, and Lust's work on transitional local councils in Tunisia,[91] or have focused on understanding national-level politics through a local lens—as, for example, in Favier and Kostrz's study of Syria's local elections.[92]

## 3. Decentralization, Local Participation, and Representation in the Middle East

This book aims to provide insights into the dynamics of power and engagement at the local level. It draws together contributions from scholars based in Europe, Australia, the MENA, and the US, who—with the generous support of the Hicham Alaoui Foundation—produced original research and engaged in workshops to discuss findings and insights. The scholars employ diverse methodological approaches, examining a wealth of original, empirical data (e.g., municipal boundary maps; election results; images of elected officials; surveys of citizens, candidates, and elected officials; and interviews with current and former elected officials, bureaucrats, community leaders, NGO representatives, and citizen petitioners). They focus on a range of actors—from voters and party elites to bureaucrats, tribal leaders, and militias—in four diverse countries: Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria. Their chapters explore how local conditions and central incentives shape the design and implementation of decentralization (section 1), local-level participation (section 2), and representation (section 3), as these are the necessary preconditions for the socioeconomic gains touted within decentralization literature. The results provide a detailed portrait of local political dynamics and contribute insights into subnational variation and prospects for resultant inequalities across communities and individuals.

### 3.1 The Cases: Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria

The studies in this volume allow us to draw lessons from two sets of comparisons. The first, a key focus in most of the studies, is subnational variations within each country of study. How do individual-level differences (e.g., in gender, wealth, or education) affect petitioning municipal councils, turning to mosques for service provision, or voting for female councillors? And how does the municipal context (e.g., distance from central power, congruence with national-level parties) affect these outcomes? The second set of comparisons can be made across country contexts. Lessons drawn from these comparisons remain more tentative, as the studies are designed

primarily to leverage subnational comparisons. Nevertheless, it is useful to recognize the diverse countries included in this study and the important variations they demonstrate.

The volume includes studies in four countries: Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria, which vary in important respects (see appendix A for more detailed discussions of each case). First, these cases differ in their decentralization experience before 2011. As discussed above, Lebanon had long-standing decentralization but limited municipal-level capacity, Morocco and Tunisia were taking steps toward decentralization before 2011, and Syria's efforts were limited.

Second, these cases differ regarding their post-2011 experience. Lebanon, Morocco, and Syria announced decentralization reforms to stave off demands for further reform, although with varying degrees of success. Tunisia made reforms in response to revolution and transition, and Syria's efforts occurred in the context of civil war and regime (re)consolidation. Finally, the cases differ in terms of their state capacity and bureaucratic reach. Lebanon and Syria experienced conflict and weakened states, while Morocco and Tunisia maintained a stronger state and bureaucratic capacity.

Although one should be careful not to read too much into cross-country comparisons of a limited number of cases, it is useful to consider this variation in contexts. Dynamics found in very different cases are likely to hold more generally. Variations across countries prompt further inquiry.

### 3.2 Section 1—Decentralization: Design and Implementation

The first section of the book explores two very different decentralization cases. The first is the bureaucratic boundary-making process in transitioning Tunisia, while the second focuses on less institutionalized, center-local relations in war-torn Syria. Yet despite the starkly different contexts, these case studies provide similar insights into the ongoing nature of contestation between local and central power structures and their differential effects on municipalities.

Examining decentralization in Tunisia, Intissar Kherigi provides important insights into how policy implementation processes may make decentralization more disruptive in some communities than others. She examines Tunisia's 2015–17 large-scale municipal boundary reforms, undertaken as part of the decentralization process mandated under the 2014 Constitution. Government officials claimed to base municipal border reforms exclusively on technical criteria, implementing a "neutral" and "objective"

decision-making process. However, through a rich empirical analysis of the boundary-making process, Kherigi finds that the extent to which technical criteria are applied is subject to the central state's fear of local and regional identities. The influence of political and economic interests and pressure from political parties, regional interest groups, and influential local elites played a role. Ultimately, the combination of security-based and clientelist logics led to boundaries that failed to reflect local communities. In this sense, Tunisia's 2015–17 reforms—even while implemented in the context of democratization—represent a continuation of the same logics that have shaped border-making practices since the colonial era and, importantly, preserve the balance of power.

Marika Sosnowski's study of Syria also highlights the contestation between central and local elites. Sosnowski examines local governance in Syria's southern Daraa governorate, primarily regarding service and security provision. She considers three distinct periods: pre-2011, during the uprising, and in the so-called "postconflict" era. She argues there are both continuities and ruptures across these periods in how local governance has been provided and the actors that deliver it. These include how much power has shifted between the Syrian regime, external states (e.g., Russia, Iran), and nonstate actors (e.g., tribal leaders and rebel-groups-cum-pro-state militias). Analysis of local governance in Daraa over an extended period shows how adept actors in Syria are at navigating these shifting terrains of power and authority, bringing both risks and rewards.

These chapters set the stage for discussions of political participation and representation in the context of decentralization, as outlined in sections 2 and 3. Notably, the subsequent studies also reinforce the points made in this section. For instance, Christiana Parreira's study of Lebanon in section 2 further explores the nature of ongoing contestation between central and local forces in postconflict contexts. She views decentralization as an important strategy in the postconflict intertwining of central and local elites, which also affects local governance in postconflict contexts. However, she also points out that the inclusive power-sharing required for reconstruction in the absence of all-out victory may lead to party cartels. She argues that this is the case in Lebanon; the postwar Lebanese government constitutes a party cartel that limits the effectiveness of local government. Her study of representation and service provision forms the core of her chapter, but her observation on center-local relations is key:

> The wide range of outcomes associated with local governance, irrespective of regime type, suggests that specific institutional fea-

tures of center-local relations—rather than the mere presence of democratically-elected local leaders—must be taken into consideration.

### 3.3 Section 2—Participation

The second section examines citizen participation in the context of decentralization. Understanding how citizens engage with state and nonstate actors sheds light on citizen-state relations under decentralization in the MENA. It also extends our knowledge of inequalities in participation, which often mirror troubling trends in other regions.

The first chapter in this section, written by Colin and Bergh, explores citizen participation in a new venue: petitioning for issues to be addressed at municipal council meetings in Morocco. In their study, they shift our focus from more traditional forms of participation, such as voting—well-studied by scholars of the MENA region and students of decentralization elsewhere—to the less commonly studied realm of civic participation. They also make an important contribution by taking a deep dive into the bureaucratic structures and rules governing participation in local government in Morocco, documenting inequality-making processes along the way.

Colin and Bergh's study highlights inequalities in participation both across and within municipalities. Citizens must rely on networks to gain signatures on petitions, organizational skills to navigate the bureaucratic red tape, and money to fund the required documentation. Colin and Bergh conclude:

> The legal requirements of the right to petition favor (mostly male) citizens of affluent backgrounds who can fund mobilization efforts, who are highly educated, and hence can navigate the complicated bureaucratic red tape. These citizens can engage in the public sphere without being hindered by cultural or social obstacles.

They also find differences in how citizens employ petitions in rural and urban areas, with more petitions being presented in urban than in rural municipalities. These differences may partly reflect inequalities in residents' wealth and education, but they also appear to reflect "systemic governance shortcomings (especially related to administrative and financial autonomy) [that] hinder the implementation of petitions."

Brooke and Komer also point to important ways that individual and community factors are associated with citizen engagement. In their chap-

ter, they take the unusual but useful step of focusing on citizens' demand for nonstate services, particularly mosque-based support. This strategy is based on previous findings that citizens frequently engage with mosques to obtain services, particularly in the MENA region.[93] Examining the demand for mosque-based services in Tunisia under decentralization, they find that the demand is greater in communities further from the coast (traditionally the site of strong state presence).

Moreover, engagement is contingent on gender: in areas close to the coast, men are more likely than women to prefer mosque-based services, but the gender gap in preferences decreases as the distance to the coast increases. Brooke and Komer conclude, "Citizen demand for mosque-based services operates as a type of substitute for state capacity: in areas where citizens are more marginalized vis-à-vis the state's reach, demand for mosque-based services rises." Importantly, they turn scholars' attention to the need to understand not only the nature of participatory inequalities in state institutions under decentralization, but the need to explore differences in participation in nonstate institutions as well.

The final chapter in this section, by Christiana Parreira, examines how links to the center affect both participation and service provision in Lebanon. As in many countries, decentralization has left Lebanese municipalities with extended mandates and opportunities for participation, but little ability to raise the required revenue. Core governance responsibilities are devolved to the local level, but the fiscal and bureaucratic authority remains heavily centralized. Consequently, party elites play an outsized role at the local level. Citizens engage, but the choices before them are shaped by cartels of national parties who—even when they are at odds with each other—collude to dominate local municipalities. Leveraging control of the central state, the cartel rewards cartel-affiliated local governments with marginally better governance, an arrangement the cartel uses to further reinforce its power. Thus, much as Brooke and Komer point to how physical distance from the center shapes engagement, Parreira highlights how political distance from (or weak political links to) the center influences participation and service provision.

### 3.4 Section 3—Representation

The final section of this book focuses on representation. Representation is viewed as a key marker of success for decentralization efforts. Local representatives are expected to be more responsive to and reflect the interests of their local constituents, providing citizens with a greater voice and influ-

ence over governance.[94] By bringing elected representation closer to the citizenry, governments are expected to become more accountable, legitimate, and responsive.[95] Yet despite increased funding and international and domestic efforts aimed at decentralization across the MENA, significant inequalities in representation remain at local levels.[96] To better understand how to address these inequalities, we need to know where they exist and how they affect marginalized groups' needs.

The first chapter in this section, by Shalaby and Barnett, explores when marginalized constituents are more likely to be represented. They focus on the election of Moroccan women to local councils, exploring when woman candidates can win seats not reserved for them by gender quotas. They argue that women face multiple electoral barriers that have little to do with their political ideologies or partisan affiliations but are instead associated with different types of localities. For example, women are more likely to win in communities with more modern infrastructure, lower unemployment, and better-educated residents.

They also uncover an association between electoral institutions and women's success; districts where single-member plurality rules decide elections are less likely to see women elected than those governed by proportional representation. Recalling that single-member plurality rules are more likely to favor personal politics and particularistic service provision,[97] Shalaby and Barnett argue that these factors point to the importance of patronage networks and clientelism on women's electability. Women generally are less able to access and benefit from patronage networks, and thus are less likely to be well represented in communities dominated by clientelistic politics.

The second chapter in this section, by Blackman, Clark, and Şaşmaz, explores the extent to which interests align between constituents and their representatives in local councils. The assumption that local representatives clearly understand constituents' concerns is central to much of the decentralization literature. Yet, elected representatives may not know or understand their constituents' concerns, or they may be more interested in pursuing alternative goals.

Examining the preferences of citizens and candidates in Tunisia's local elections, Blackman, Clark, and Şaşmaz find that interests are broadly aligned, but the interests of traditionally marginalized groups, such as women and youths, do not match those of the older, male representatives who dominate the councils. They argue that these differences do not stem from representatives' disinterest in serving constituents; candidates prefer projects endorsed by their citizens over those endorsed by business associa-

tions, unions, or party leaders. Rather, candidates are often more elite than their constituents—as determined by education and income—and thus hold different views and preferences.

Similarly, the third chapter in this section, by Buehler and Gergis, finds that the distribution of power within local councils tends to favor those from traditionally elite groups. Analyzing a unique dataset of council members' pictures, they examine which council members are chosen—by their colleagues—to be appointed mayor. Buehler and Gergis find that those whose pictures reflect the image of traditional power, namely older men with gray hair, are more likely to dominate powerful positions in local councils in Morocco. Decentralization may open spaces for local representation, but it does not necessarily spur the redistribution of power or greater representation of marginalized communities.

## 4. Conclusion

These chapters reinforce and extend our understanding of decentralization and provide important insights into local governance in the MENA region. The findings are consistent with those drawn from both the MENA and other regions of the world. For instance, the studies highlight how political elites can use decentralization to reinforce central authority, exacerbate power imbalances, or create new ones. They also extend findings from studies of decentralization in other parts of the world. They lend insights into how and when citizens in authoritarian or weak states found in the MENA can use opportunities provided by decentralization to extend their rights— for example, shedding light on who can use petitions to make demands on municipalities or obtain seats and leadership positions in local councils, and how and when they can do so. The studies also demonstrate a great deal of subnational variation in local politics, highlighting significant differences across countries, communities, and individuals. In doing so, they shift attention away from national politics and toward local governance, advancing our understanding of the MENA.

NOTES

1. Shantayanan Devarajan and Elena Ianchovichina, "A Broken Social Contract, Not High Inequality, Led to the Arab Spring," *Review of Income and Wealth* 64, no. s1 (2018): 5–25, https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12288

2. Devarajan and Ianchovivhina, "A Broken Social Contract."

3. For a review of the literature on local politics, see Janine A. Clark et al.,

"Towards a Relational Approach to Local Politics," in *The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings*, eds. Mark Lynch, Jillian Schwedler, and Sean L. Yom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 256–80. We agree with their call to establish deeper understandings of "the political" based on a scalar conception of space, but also note that much more needs to be done to fully understand decentralization.

4. World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2014).

5. Ahmed Ounaïes, *Building a Democratic State: The Case of Tunisia* (IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook, Barcelona: IEMED, 2015), https://www.iemed.org/pub lication/building-a-democratic-state-the-case-of-tunisia/

6. ESCWA and ERF, *Rethinking Inequality in Arab Countries* (Beirut: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2019).

7. Lisa Anderson, "The State in the Middle East and North Africa," *Comparative Politics* 20, no. 1 (1987): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/421917

8. Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995).

9. Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

10. Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Asaf Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

11. Erik Vollmann and Miriam Bohn, "Fiscal Decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa: Deciphering Motives and Outcomes," in *Decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa: Informal Politics, Subnational Governance, and the Periphery*, eds. Thomas Demmelhuber and Roland Sturm (Baden Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2021), 108.

12. World Bank, *Governance and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 1992), 5; World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2001); World Bank, *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2004); World Bank, *Decentralization in Client Countries: An Evaluation of the World Bank Support: 1990–2007* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2008).

13. Paul J. Smoke, *Fiscal Decentralization in Developing Countries: A Review of Current Concepts and Practice* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2001).

14. This is well illustrated by Mansuri and Rao's 2013 World Bank report on political decentralization, which reviews work from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, entirely ignoring the MENA region—see Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2013).

15. For instance, the World Bank 2008 report *Decentralization in Client Countries* was based on background reports on Argentina (by Erik Wibbels), Brazil (by Jonathan Rodden), China (by Jing Jin), India (by Nirvikar Singh), Mexico (by Alberto Diaz-Cayeros), and South Africa (by Andrew Reschovsky); Jean-Paul Faguet and

Caroline Pöschl, eds., *Is Decentralization Good for Development? Perspectives from Academics and Policy Makers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) is based on experiences in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

16.  Dennis A. Rondinelli et al., "Decentralization in Developing Countries" (World Bank Staff Working Paper no. 581, World Bank Group, 1983), 8.

17.  Rondinelli et al., "Decentralization in Developing Countries."

18.  Anwar Shah, "Balance, Accountability and Responsiveness: Lessons about Decentralization" (Policy Research Working Papers, World Bank, 1999); John Joseph Wallis and Wallace E. Oates, "Decentralization in the Public Sector: An Empirical Study of State and Local Government," in *Fiscal Federalism: Quantitative Studies*, ed. Harvey S. Rosen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5–32.

19.  For a review, see Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 17.

20.  Jean-Paul Faguet, "Does Decentralization Increase Government Responsiveness to Local Needs? Evidence from Bolivia," *Journal of Public Economics* 88, no. 3–4 (2004): 867–93, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2727(02)00185-8; Wallace E. Oates, "Fiscal Decentralization and Economic Development," *National Tax Journal* 46, no. 2 (1993): 237–43, https://doi.org/10.1086/NTJ41789013

21.  See Charles M. Tiebout "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures," *Journal of Political Economy* 64, no. 5 (1956): 416–24, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1826343 for the classic expression of this argument.

22.  Barry R. Weingast, "The Economic Role of Political Institutions: Market-Preserving Federalism and Economic Development," *Journal of Law, Economics and Organization* 11, no. 1 (1995): 1–31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/765068

23.  Paul Seabright, "Accountability and Decentralisation in Government: An Incomplete Contracts Model," *European Economic Review* 40, no. 1 (1996): 61–89, https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-2921(95)00055-0

24.  Roger B. Myerson, "Local Agency Costs of Political Centralization," *Theoretical Economics* 16, no. 2 (2021): 425–48, https://doi.org/10.3982/TE3763

25.  Diana Conyers, "Centralization and Development Planning: A Comparative Perspective," in *Decentralizing for Participatory Planning? Comparing the Experiences of Zimbabwe and other Anglophone Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa*, eds. Peter de Valk and Kadmiel H. Wekwete (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990), 18, cited in Oates, "Fiscal Decentralization," 241.

26.  Oates, "Fiscal Decentralization."

27.  See Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 9.

28.  Pranab K. Bardhan, "Decentralization of Governance and Development," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2002): 185–205, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3216920; Pranab K. Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee, "Capture and Governance at Local and National Levels," *American Economic Review* 90, no. 2 (2000): 135–39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/117207; Dilip Mookherjee, "Political Decentralization," *Annual Review of Economics* 7 (2015): 231–49, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080614-115527

29.  Tristan Canare et al., "Decentralization and Income Inequality in a Panel and Cross-Section of Countries," *Journal of International Development* 32, no. 4 (2020): 543–79, https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3468

30.  Daniel Treisman, "Political Decentralization and Economic Reform: A

Game-Theoretic Analysis," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (1999): 488–517, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2991803

31. C. Simon Fan et al., "Political Decentralization and Corruption: Evidence from Around the World," *Journal of Public Economics* 93, no. 1–2 (2009): 14–34, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2008.09.001

32. Treisman, "Political Decentralization."

33. Vassilis Tselios et al., "Income Inequality, Decentralisation, and Regional Development in Western Europe," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 44, no. 6 (2012): 1278–301, https://doi.org/10.1068/a44334

34. Mookherjee, "Political Decentralization."

35. Jean-Paul Faguet et al., "Does Decentralization Strengthen or Weaken the State? Authority and Social Learning in a Supple State," (Working paper, London School of Economics, 2014), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60631/

36. Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 12, goes so far as to say that "Outcomes from interventions are highly variable across communities; local inequality, history, geography, the nature of social interactions, networks, and political systems all have a strong influence. The variability of these contexts is sometimes so large, and their effect so unpredictable, that projects that function well usually do so because they have strong built-in systems of learning and great sensitivity and adaptability to variations in context."

37. Bardhan, "Decentralization of Governance"; Bardhan and Mookherjee, "Capture and Governance"; Fan et al., "Political Decentralization and Corruption"; Mookherjee, "Political Decentralization"; Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 5–6.

38. Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 59.

39. For a review, see Erik Wibbels, "The Social Underpinnings of Decentralized Governance: Networks, Technology, and the Future of Social Accountability," in *Decentralized Governance and Accountability: Academic Research and the Future of Donor Programming*, eds. Jonathan A. Rodden and Erik Wibbels (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 14–39.

40. Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 118.

41. Seabright, "Accountability and Decentralization." This may also help explain why Digdowiseiso et al. conclude that decentralization is more likely to reduce ethnic inequalities in certain contexts—namely, countries with greater levels of law and order and lower military expenditure. See Digdowiseiso et al., "How Effective Is Fiscal Decentralization for Inequality Reduction in Developing Countries?" *Sustainability* 14, no. 1 (2022): 505, https://doi.org/10.3390/su14010505

42. Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 114.

43. Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 114.

44. Oates, "Fiscal Decentralization," 241.

45. Oates, "Fiscal Decentralization"; Caroline-Antonia Goerl and Mike Seiferling, *Income Inequality, Fiscal Decentralization* (Washington, DC, International Monetary Fund, 2014); Antonio Estache and Sarbajit Sinha, "Does Decentralization Increase Public Infrastructure Expenditure?" (Policy Research Working Paper no. 1457, World Bank, 1995); Jean-Paul Faguet and Caroline Pöschl, "Is Decentralization Good for Development? Perspectives from Academics and Policymakers," in

*Is Decentralization Good for Development? Perspectives from Academics and Policy Makers*, eds. Jean-Paul Faguet and Caroline Pöschl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–30.

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# Decentralization

*Design and Implementation*

# Municipal Boundaries and the Politics of Space

## Intissar Kherigi

## 1. Introduction

Boundary delineation has always played a central role in state strategies to control territory and populations. By drawing boundaries, the state territorializes land, creating and allocating rights in new ways, thus giving rise to new legal relationships. Boundaries further influence social identities and practices, such as mobility and social and economic exchanges, shaping the communities within them. By drawing boundaries, the state gives symbolic recognition and material benefits to certain areas—economically empowering some regions or groups over others by granting access to state grants, credits, and other resources.

Border studies in the Middle East and North Africa have received renewed interest since the 2000s. Much of this literature has focused on the borders of the nation-state, analyzing them in relation to modern Arab statehood and its contested legitimacy.[1] However, the literature on *internal* administrative borders in the region remains limited. In the Tunisian context, there is a small but growing literature on territorial relations and identities spurred by the 2010–11 revolution and subsequent decentralization reforms. Most of this literature falls within the disciplines of geography and urban studies.[2] Interest is also increasing in analyzing space as a key variable at the heart of the 2011 Arab uprisings.[3] However, literature

on municipal boundaries remains limited, and extant studies have focused on how municipal boundary reforms have been conducted.[4] How these reforms have been received at the local level and how they shape relations between the central state, municipal councils, and local populations have yet to be examined.

This chapter explores Tunisia's municipal boundary reform process, analyzing how boundary decisions were made, the actors involved, the logics that shaped this process, and the local reactions to boundary decisions. Decentralization was proposed as a structural solution to the territorial inequalities that played a significant role in the Tunisian uprising of 2011. The National Constituent Assembly (NCA), which drafted the constitutional text in 2011–14, described decentralization as a means to achieve a "definitive rupture with the former system of excessive centralization, entrench democracy,"[5] and promote development by considering the "specificities of each region."[6] Chapter Seven of the new Tunisian Constitution, adopted in January 2014, thus introduced decentralization as a key organizing principle of the new institutional framework, requiring the extension of municipalities (the lowest unit of decentralized governance) to all Tunisian territory. The reforms that followed in 2015–16 were the most extensive administrative boundary reforms since independence in 1956.

This chapter highlights the importance of examining boundaries as institutions that shape local politics. It argues that Tunisia's boundary reforms were guided by a combination of highly centralized technocratic, security-based, and clientelist logics that failed to engage with territories as lived spaces. By refusing to address the social, economic, and spatial implications of boundary reforms, the reforms contributed to a despatialized decentralization process that had little meaning for residents, creating challenges for the resulting municipalities and their constituent relations. Drawing on over 200 interviews with government officials, boundary reform experts, sociologists, geographers, civil society activists, and international organization representatives, as well as participant observation in eight municipalities, this chapter explores how the logics that underpin national decentralization decision-making interact with the spatial realities of local actors.

This chapter reveals the significant political, social, economic, and spatial implications that municipal boundaries can have for residents, as well as their impact on municipalities' authority and legitimacy. Its findings have implications for boundary-making processes elsewhere in the MENA region. First, the study underscores the continuity in boundary-making practices, even in the aftermath of significant constitutional and political

change. Second, it highlights continued tensions between national and local or regional identities. Third, the chapter reveals that centralized boundary-making practices that sideline or seek to suppress local spatial practices and representations can deepen citizen distrust in local authorities. Finally, it points to the importance of analyzing municipal and regional boundaries as political institutions that shape local politics.

## 2. The Logics of Boundary-Making in Tunisia

Tunisia's administrative organization has passed through three key phases—precolonial, colonial, and postindependence, each reflecting a political regime with a particular socioeconomic model. The precolonial era saw a minimal military-bureaucratic state, with an administrative organization based on natural divisions, kinship, and tribal affiliation.[7] The colonial era saw the construction of an increasingly extractive and expanded state apparatus, introducing significant boundary changes to facilitate resource extraction, the organization of colonial settlers, and indigenous population management. Finally, the postindependence period brought in a new state-building project and, accordingly, boundary reforms to entrench the new vision of the nation-state and national identity.

In each period, designation as a municipality has been a valuable resource. Until 2015, municipalities covered only 9.92 percent of Tunisian territory and two-thirds of the population, making municipal status highly coveted.[8] Municipalities had their own municipal budget, administration, council, and mayor, whereas nonmunicipalized areas fell under the control of the regional governor and depended on the governorate's development budget. Recognition as a municipality thus granted resources and gave local notables additional sources of prestige and patronage. Consequently, throughout these phases, three main logics drove the delineation of administrative boundaries.

### *2.1 Security-Based Logics of Control and Surveillance*

The state has continuously used boundary-making as a tool to strengthen state authority and weaken opposition. On the eve of the Protectorate in 1881, Tunisia was composed of eighty-eight administrative units, *caid-ats*, corresponding to tribal territories. Each unit was governed by a *caid* appointed by the bey and assisted by a *khalifa* and *cheikhs*, each of whom oversaw a *macheikha*—a group of villages or subclans. The *cheikh*, elected

by local notables, represented inhabitants to the *caid*, maintained order, and assured the collection of taxes, but exercised no judicial powers.[9]

These territorial divisions underwent significant changes immediately after independence, with the introduction of reforms that significantly eroded the tribal basis of Tunisia's administrative divisions. The *caidats* were replaced with *délégations* based on spatial, rather than tribal, divisions.[10] The thirty-seven existing *caidats* were divided into ninety-seven delegations to divide and weaken tribal power. For instance, in the Center, the *caidat* of the Jlass tribe was split into five delegations, the *caidat* of the Mejers and Frachiches into seven, and the Hmama *caidat* into four. The *macheikhat* were also replaced by *'imedats* (sectors), replacing the *cheikh* (a name that connotes traditional authority) with the *'omda*. Table 1.1 below shows changes in the number of administrative territorial units between 1956 and 2011.

This reorganization was "continuously refined to destroy the traditional framework of tribes" to counter the power of traditional forms of solidarity (tribes, religious authorities, local notables) and establish the central state's authority.[11] Like many newly independent nation-states in the region, ethnic, religious, regional, or tribal identities were seen as a threat to the national state-building project.[12] In Tunisia, they were also viewed with suspicion by Bourguiba's modernization project,[13] which sought to fashion Tunisian citizens "liberated from particularistic allegiances (tribal, ethnic, regional, class, etc.) and mentalities that it stigmatized as 'archaic.'"[14] In a speech shortly after the creation of Sidi Bouzid governorate, Bourguiba declared:

> What I am most afraid of is that the old tribal struggles are reborn and that the struggle that was dominant between cities and certain parts of the countryside returns [. . .]. These struggles have been the cause of our weakness and our backwardness in the past, and they are the ones that attracted colonialism.[15]

TABLE 1.1. Changes in the Number of Administrative Territorial Units 1956–2011

| Unit | 1956 | 1961 | 1987 | 2011 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Imeda (previously *Macheikat* before 1969)** | 743 | 749 | No data available | 2,073 |
| **Municipalities** | 72 | 112 | 246 | 264 |
| **Delegations (previously *Caidat*)** | 88 | 92 | 200 | 264 |
| **Governorates** | 13 | 13 | 23 | 24 |

*Sources:* Belhedi (1989); Ben Jelloul 2018; Turki and Gana (2015).

Thus, territorial identities were closely linked in the Bourguibist discourse to the weakening of national unity, independence, and territorial integrity. The regime designed administrative boundaries to bolster its control over regions, particularly those that had experienced political unrest or opposition. For instance, President Bourguiba divided the Sahel into three governorates—Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia—in the 1960s following widespread opposition to collectivist agricultural policies. Similarly, after an attempted insurrection in Gafsa in 1980, he divided the region into several new governorates—Kebili, Tozeur, and Tataouine.

The perception that administrative boundaries largely follow a security-based logic aimed at consolidating regime control and punishing opponents frequently appears in local discourses, particularly among those from interior regions.[16] One young native of Siliana, a regional bureaucrat, described how residents of the town of Makther interpreted central state decisions regarding administrative units as a form of punishment by the regime against its opponents:

> Siliana was a much smaller, much less important town than Makther. Why was it chosen as the center of the governorate [of Siliana]? Because most of the people of Makther were opponents to Bourguiba, along with the South. When you look at Bourguiba's speeches, he stigmatized certain regions—Kasserine, Gafsa, Makther, etc. He marginalized Makther because it was a threat to him, and he put it in Siliana and refused to make it the center of the governorate. He chose small towns that had no historical weight as the *chef-lieux* so he could control them. Till today, the people of Makther resent this because their town had historical importance. . . . But it has been purposely marginalized.[17]

## 2.2 Clientelist Logics—Using Municipal Boundaries as Targeted Goods

In Tunisian law, recognition as a municipality confers rights. It grants rights to certain basic services, such as water, electricity, public lighting, waste collection, and civil status services, and it facilitates access to other public services, such as post offices, state grants, credits, and equipment. The creation of a new municipality was thus an important resource that the head of state could distribute to allies, facilitated by the fact that the decision to confer the status was "a purely political act."[18] Before the adoption of the Local Authorities Code in 2018, state officials enjoyed complete discretion in awarding municipal status, as there were no criteria governing

the creation of a municipality. Instead, the decision was taken by the central government and issued by government decree, frequently to mobilize support in particular regions, as the prominent Tunisian geographer Amor Belhedi explains:

> At each political or electoral occasion, we created a municipality. There was no scientific basis for it. It was done simply to show that the state was present and to win support. It was a donation more than a right. In 1985, around 80 municipalities were created in one go before elections without any clear criteria or methodology— simply because the ruling party, the Neo-Destour, wanted to win elections. While those areas that were against the party, they sanctioned them by dividing them up. . . . It was never neutral. It was always part of a political or electoral strategy.[19]

Indeed, the administrative boundary map shows an overlap between regions with a high rate of municipalization and the presence of the ruling Neo-Destour Party in the Bourguiba era.[20] While the Sahel and Tunis, where the ruling party was firmly anchored, were highly "municipalized," the Southern, Central, and Western regions had a low number of municipalities in proportion to their inhabitants.[21] The most famous example is Monastir, Bourguiba's birthplace. The entirety of its territory is covered by municipalities, making it the region with the highest number of municipalities (thirty-one), but with only the ninth-largest population.

Table 1.2 compares the number of delegations and municipalities in two governorates: Monastir, the governorate with the largest number of municipalities, and Kairouan, the governorate with the highest incidence of poverty. As seen in the table, Kairouan, which has a larger population than Monastir, has far fewer municipalities.

Personal relations played an important role in boundary decisions. Municipalities were created in areas where local leaders enjoyed privileged relations with the central state. For instance, one of the smallest municipalities in Tunisia, with 6,000 inhabitants, is described as a "political accident"; it was created in 1982 to please a local notable close to the former regime.[22] Another small rural area—Mida, in the Cap Bon—was given municipal status thanks to the "privileged relations" of a local notable with President Bourguiba.[23] Ben Ali continued the discretionary distribution of municipal status as a reward, personally announcing the creation of new municipalities at the national municipal conference held every two years.[24]

TABLE 1.2. Comparison between the Number of Administrative Units in the Monastir and Kairouan Governorates before the 2015–17 Municipal Border Reforms

|  | Monastir | Kairouan |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Number of inhabitants (2014 census)** | 548,828 | 570,559 |
| **Number of sectors** | 79 | 114 |
| **Number of delegations** | 13 | 13 |
| **Number of municipalities** | 31 | 12 |
| **Municipal coverage** | 100% | 35% |

*Source:* Ministry of Interior (2015).

## 2.3 Centralized Sectoral Logics

The political and security logics analyzed above sit alongside a strongly sectoral logic that views territories purely through the prism of centralized sectoral planning. The Tunisian state is notable for its highly centralized policymaking and planning processes, which see the vast majority of policy decisions made in the capital. These processes have long been criticized for "not taking sufficient account of specificities" in areas such as social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts and sociological composition, allowing for little input from local actors.[25] According to many officials, centralized planning is considered largely disconnected from local realities. One retired former director general at the Ministry of Infrastructure explained how this leads to programs and administrative boundaries being organized according to the needs of central ministries rather than being based on territorial factors:

> The current governorate boundaries are administrative and sometimes not at all suited to territorial planning. . . . To create development, you need to think territorially. . . . This is one of the causes of imbalance we have between regions. Proper territorial planning enables you to think of the needs of an area . . . about what is needed to create development in that area. . . . The sectoral logic [of central ministries] does not really think about space.[26]

Additionally, territorial planning is highly fragmented across policy sectors, and repeated attempts to introduce institutional mechanisms that create coherence across policy sectors intervening in the same territory have failed. For instance, the Directorate of Territorial Planning (*Direction*

*d'Aménagement du Territoire*, DAT), created in 1969, was initially placed in the new Ministry for Tourism and Territorial Planning, when the creation of the tourism sector in the 1960s highlighted the need for a territorially integrated approach that straddled different policy sectors (e.g., transport, housing, tourism, employment, environment).[27] However, the DAT was shuffled between different ministries, and its work was made more difficult by the fact that no national spatial planning policy existed until 1985.

Similarly, cities lack specific agencies responsible for horizontal coordination between different government institutions working in their territory, apart from the brief existence of the District of Tunis as a planning body for the capital.[28] Reforms to give regional governors and councils greater roles in national development planning, including the creation of regional development offices, have had little impact on the definition of national policies and development plans, which continue to be prepared and approved by central ministries.[29] According to a number of Tunisian geographers and urban studies experts, this highly sectoral approach to planning has contributed to a "polarization of space" and the growth of territorial inequalities.[30]

Overall, the various logics that shape administrative boundaries—security-based, clientelist, and sectoral—ignored or excluded local spatial specificities. Thus, administrative boundaries seldom reflect how space is perceived and used by local inhabitants. This produced a municipal system that was, as Marcou notes, "a creation of central power, which responds to functional necessities, but does not genuinely constitute a human community."[31]

## 3. 2011 and the Rethinking of Territory and Space

### 3.1 Contestation of Administrative Boundaries

The outbreak of the 2010–11 uprising in marginalized interior regions and urban peripheries disrupted existing territorial hierarchies by giving these areas visible roles as political agents. The question of the relationship between administrative boundaries and territorial identities emerged after 2011 in the shape of various demands to modify the administrative map. Towns that had long contested their inclusion within various governorates used the political opening to draw attention to long-standing grievances. For instance, the town of Makther in northwestern Tunisia, which contested its status within the governorate of Siliana, witnessed sustained

protests, referred to as "the revolt of Ouled Ayar."[32] This movement drew on feelings of historical injustice, linked administrative boundaries with economic and political exclusion, and demanded that Makther become the *chef-lieu* (administrative center) of the governorate, as one protestor explained:

> When the territorial boundaries were set, the status of *chef-lieu* of the region was given to a less important town—Siliana. Bourguiba accentuated our isolation. The result is rampant unemployment, complete under-development, the absence of all industrial activity, and totally neglected natural resources.[33]

Governorate boundaries were also the subject of open contestation after 2011. For instance, residents of Mezzouna, a small town on the out-skirts of the plains of Sfax, had long contested the town's removal from the Sfax governorate and integration into the Sidi Bouzid governorate in 1974. Protests began in January 2011, calling for the town's return to the Sfax governorate. The islands of Djerba and Zarzis, whose residents resented their integration into the Medenine governorate, also pushed for recognition as separate governorates.

This contestation of the established territorial order signaled the desire to revisit the relationship between territory, authority, and identity. However, the topic of governorate boundaries was entirely sidestepped during the drafting of the new constitution for its potentially explosive effects of igniting the dreaded specter of regionalism, as discussed below.

### 3.2 Chapter Seven and the Rationale for Generalizing Municipalities

Territorial boundaries were identified as an important issue early in the post-2011 transition. The National Constituent Assembly (NCA), tasked with drafting the new constitution, formed six constitutional committees, among them the Committee on Public Regional and Local Authorities (the "Chapter Seven Committee"), which drafted Chapter Seven on Local Authority. An analysis of the committee's archives shows that it dedicated a significant portion of its discussion to whether to expand municipalities to all Tunisian territory.[34] The fact that municipalities covered only 9.92 percent of Tunisian territory and two-thirds of the population, with greater coverage in coastal areas, prompted a debate in the Chapter Seven Committee on whether to modify municipal boundaries to provide universal municipal coverage.

The committee's discussions reflected a tension between the principle of equality, which would require giving all citizens access to a municipality, and material considerations, such as how to municipalize rural areas with low population density.[35] The Ministry of Interior's Department for Local Authorities (DGCPL) advised against generalizing municipalities on the basis that this would be impractical and expensive. However, committee members argued it would be unacceptable to deprive one-third of the population of the right to vote in the first free and fair municipal elections, as it would go against the constitutional right to equality.[36] Furthermore, given that most of the municipal population (76 percent) resided in coastal regions, this would constitute a form of discrimination against a third of the population, largely located in interior regions.[37] Committee members thus chose to prioritize the principles of equality and territorial justice.

These debates reflected a political moment in which interior regions gained great symbolism in public discourse. The symbolic capital that interior regions had acquired as the birthplace of the revolution made maintaining administrative divisions that disproportionately excluded residents of these regions politically unacceptable and costly. Moreover, since Chapter Seven required holding free and fair municipal elections, not extending municipalities to all Tunisian territory would mean excluding 3.5 million Tunisians from municipal elections and depriving them of access to municipal services. Accordingly, the committee inserted the extension of municipalities as a constitutional principle on the grounds of territorial justice.[38] Article 131 of the Constitution states that decentralization is based on three levels of decentralized territorial units—municipalities, regions, and districts—and that "each of these categories covers the entirety of the territory of the Republic in line with a division determined by law."

## 4. 2015–17: The Municipal Boundary Reform Process

Understanding the outcomes of the municipal boundary reforms in 2015–17 requires an examination of the actors and interests that shaped this process. In 2014, the NCA, which had drafted Chapter Seven, was dissolved, and new legislative elections were held. Responsibility for overseeing implementation shifted to the executive, which led to a change in the formal and informal rules governing the decentralization policymaking process. The Ministry of Interior's DGCPL (which had opposed extending the municipal system during discussions with the NCA in 2012–14) became responsible for drafting a new decentralization law and reforming

municipal boundaries.[39] The department had initially argued for a gradual approach, holding municipal elections only in existing municipalities while slowly extending municipalities across all territory over several years.[40]

However, the DGCPL faced political pressure from the coalition government to reform municipal boundaries in line with Chapter Seven, given the potential political costs of excluding a third of the population from the first democratic municipal elections. International partners strongly encouraged the extension of municipalities before municipal elections.[41] Indeed, the extension of municipalities was a condition or expected result written into various international donor programs to support decentralization.[42] Thus, by embarking on an immediate redrawing of municipal boundaries, the DGCPL stood to gain significant funding and technical assistance, enabling it to recruit experts and create special support programs for new municipalities.[43] This encouraged the DGCPL to rapidly extend municipalities ahead of municipal elections.

The process for the most extensive reform of municipal boundaries since independence took place in a remarkably discreet manner. It was carried out in parallel with the drafting of a new Local Election Law and Local Authorities Code, establishing a new legal framework for decentralization. However, while the drafting of these texts was very public—including the release of numerous drafts, engagement in consultations, a lengthy parliamentary debate, and the active participation of civil society organizations—the municipal boundary reforms were conducted without any public input or media attention. Civil society organizations, experts, and even the municipalities concerned were largely unaware that new boundaries were being drawn until the process was completed and results published in the *Official Gazette* in 2015 and 2016.

### 4.1 The Application of "Neutral" Criteria

The DGCPL began the reform process by engaging an external management consultant, funded by an international organization, to oversee technical studies. The first task was to obtain socioeconomic data and territorial maps from various government departments. The expert and DGCPL senior bureaucrats used these to develop different scenarios and determine whether nonmunicipalized areas could be integrated by expanding the nearest municipality within their delegation. These were assessed according to two main criteria: a demographic index, indicating the municipality's postexpansion demographic capacity, and a geographic index, indicating the geographical diffusion of each area. These two indi-

ces helped calculate an "extension index," indicating whether existing municipalities could reasonably be extended to integrate all nonmunicipalized areas within their delegation without becoming too large in terms of population and surface area.

The second stage was to apply a set of development-related indices—the Rural Area Integration Index, Regulated Rural Area Integration Index, Local Development Index, Regulation Index, and Positive Segregation Index—to reduce inequalities within and between governorates.

The technical criteria and indices aimed to achieve two objectives.[44] The first was to "rationalize" the size of municipalities to be closer to the national average of 20,000 to 50,000 residents. According to Mokhtar Hammami, the head of the DGCPL and the senior bureaucrat who led the process, 63 percent of municipalities had fewer than 20,000 residents. Through the boundary reforms, the DGCPL aimed to increase the average municipal population to make service delivery "more feasible and efficient."[45] The second objective was to bring all municipalities' developmental index scores closer to the national average, thus "achieving a reduction in regional gaps to acceptable degrees."[46] Figure 1.1 below shows the population of municipalities before and after the 2015–16 municipal border reforms.

### 4.2 Adjusting "Neutral" Criteria to Political Pressures

The DGCPL presented the proposed boundaries to the Ministerial Council on February 9, 2016. However, coalition government members objected, as the distribution of new municipalities still favored the coastal regions.[47] This was considered politically unacceptable, given that a key objective of the decentralization process was to address regional inequalities—and for politicians to be seen to be addressing them. Therefore, a decision was made to add another criterion—positive discrimination in favor of interior regions—to ensure that more municipalities would be created in interior regions.[48] Consequently, the proposed boundaries were modified to create 24 additional municipalities in interior regions (Beja, Kairouan, Kef, Sidi Bouzid, Siliana). The process, overall, led to the creation of 86 new municipalities (25 in 2015 and 61 in 2016) and the expansion of 191 existing municipalities.[49]

The Ministry of Local Affairs' (MLA's) documents present its demographic and developmental indices as "a comprehensive and multidimensional approach."[50] However, the Ministry's methodology makes no mention of sociological indicators, which were completely absent from key
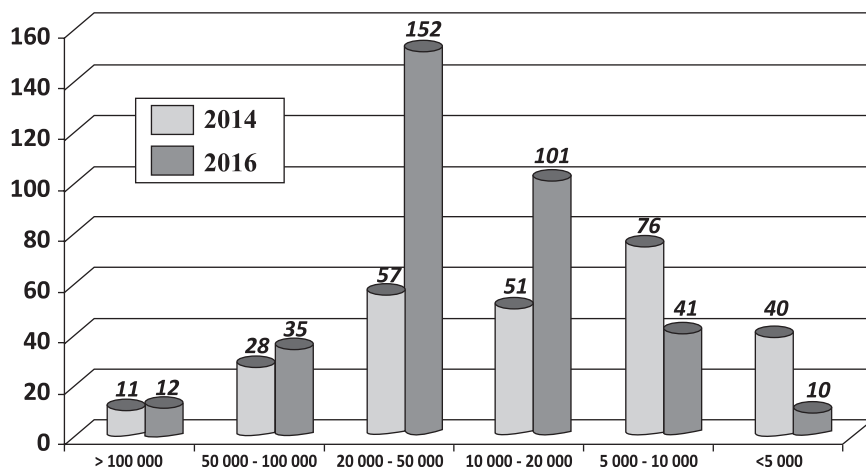
Figure 1.1. Population of Municipalities Before and After the 2015–16 Municipal Border Reforms
*Source:* MLA (2016).

documents and ministry officials' public statements. In numerous interviews and speeches by the expert and leading bureaucrat who oversaw the reforms, the purely "technical" nature of the criteria was emphasized in drawing the new boundaries. As the head of the DGCPL, Mokhtar Hammami, explained, "The big accomplishment is that we applied the criteria in a way that was neutral. . . . It was an IT application with indicators. So tomorrow they can question us, why did you do this or that. . . . But that was our approach."[51]

Hammami emphasized the use of neutral and technical criteria as the best way to manage the boundary reforms and legitimate their results. Factors relating to each area's spatial or sociological specificities, such as social ties, local identities, and local social and economic exchange patterns, were deemed too subjective and problematic to be considered. Hammami explained,

> When we did all this work—the sociological aspect, we did not take it seriously. . . . We need sociologists by our side to study it—is this tribe or group there compatible with that one. . . . We could not get into these discussions. . . . It's not necessary; that was our position because we were working on things that were [pause] neutral. That

was our goal. . . . Sometimes two clans . . . want to be integrated in one *'imeda*. . . . But if we get into this issue, we will never get out of it. . . .[52]

The fear of local and tribal identities often emerges in senior bureaucrats' and experts' discourse on decentralization. Such conceptions of space, which view territorial identities as a threat to national security and unity, are consistent with the conception of national identity shaped by the postindependence state's societal model. In the homogenizing or "unanimous register"[53] of the Bourguibist nation-building project, there should be "no Beni X or Beni Y,[54] only Tunisians."[55] Similarly, the expert who led the boundary reform process stated that considering sociological factors "would provoke unrest" and regionalism (*jihawiyya*) and was "out of the question."[56]

However, far from being "neutral," "technical," and "objective," abstract criteria that deny or overlook the existence of local specificities act as a "codification of dominant representations of space and a technical mechanism for reproducing that dominance."[57] By deploying such "neutral" criteria, decision-makers impose a particular conception of space and the relationship between state, territory, and identity, erasing local spatial practices and representations.

### 4.3 The Intervention of Clientelist Logics

In addition to security-based logics, the municipal boundary reform process has also involved the intervention of clientelist logics. An analysis of the new administrative map reveals that technical criteria were sometimes modified or wholly flouted to satisfy group or individual interests. For example, at the outset of the reform process, the DGCPL declared that new municipal boundaries should not cut across the boundaries of an *'imeda* (sector).[58] Each *'imeda* would be kept intact to keep the municipal boundaries as coherent as possible with the boundaries of the *'imedat* and *mu'tamdiyat* (delegations), the deconcentrated administrative units used by the central state.

However, in several instances *'imeda* boundaries were altered, seemingly at the request of groups or individuals. For instance, in the governorate of Nabeul, the DGCPL created the new municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray out of territory taken from the existing municipality of Slimene. The municipality of Slimene presented a complaint to the governor of Nabeul on June 23, 2017, which stated that the boundaries of the new municipality

cut into an *'imeda* that was part of Slimene and contained several factories, including that of the largest dairy company in Tunisia. The municipality stated that the decision caused significant financial harm, as it transferred a large percentage of Slimene municipality's tax revenues to the newly created municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray.[59] Officials alleged that the decision was made at the request of businessmen close to the region's governor.[60]

The municipality received no response, and Slimene's new municipal council submitted a second complaint to the MLA soon after the municipal elections in May 2018. However, the government decree issued on September 9, 2019, confirmed the boundaries of the new municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray, incorporating the territory that was the subject of Slimene Municipality's complaint.[61] The latter has sought to find a solution with Chrifet-Boucharray. However, the Chrifet-Boucharray municipal council has refused to reconsider the boundaries, threatening to collectively resign and provoking an ongoing conflict between the municipalities.[62] In November 2019, when Slimene's municipal council held a meeting to discuss the issue with regional officials, the municipal council of Chrifet-Boucharray closed its municipal town hall in protest.[63] Slimene municipality officials have accused those involved in the boundary reform of corruption and accepting bribes from local businessmen in exchange for integrating part of Slimene into the new municipality.[64]

The municipality of Enfidha in the governorate of Sousse presents a similar case. It was divided in two, with the new municipality of Grimet Hicher created out of its former territory.[65] The two municipalities of Enfidha and Grimet Hicher disputed the new boundaries, the latter claiming that a portion of its territory was included in the Enfidha municipality. Municipal officials responded that this was done to include a factory in Enfidha's territory, thus increasing the value of the land. The new boundaries have caused significant contestation and even violent conflict between the two municipalities, as one MLA official described:

> I joined a meeting in Enfidha with the mayor and secretary-general [of Enfidha] and some of the people from the new municipality. It got heated, and one of the men hit the mayor with a chair. . . . We thought he was going to die. This was all about the boundaries and problems between Enfidha and the new municipalities. Enfidha was split—and this factory was taken out because the factory owner was friends with the governor. It's a big mistake.[66]

Disputes between the parties illustrate the perception that municipal boundaries continue to be shaped by clientelist logics, whereby the application of technical criteria is modified to benefit politically well-connected individuals. Numerous other complaints have been submitted to the MLA involving similar allegations.[67] Just as with the drawing of administrative boundaries between 1956 and 2011, we see how divergent logics can simultaneously intervene in setting boundaries and how "neutral" technical criteria can be set aside or circumvented to accommodate clientelist logics.[68]

## 4.4 Reversing Municipal Boundary Decisions

A similar process of selectively applying technical criteria can be seen in decisions to divide large municipalities. One of the criteria officially set by the DGCPL states that large municipalities should be divided where a large population or geographical surface area would impede residents from having easy access to the municipality. Consequently, several large municipalities, such as Sidi Bouzid, Gabes, Mhamdia-Fouchana, and Ettadhamen-Mnihla, were divided into two or more municipalities. This separation had significant economic consequences for the original municipality, which saw part of its infrastructure and revenue sources taken away.

One such example is Mhamdia-Fouchana, a municipality with 200,000 inhabitants. The municipality was divided into two—Mhamdia and Fouchana. Fouchana municipality contained virtually all of the former municipality's industrial zone, which brought in 95% of Mhamdia-Fouchana's business tax revenues. Meanwhile, Mhamdia was left with almost no industry and few revenue sources. According to MLA officials, it was apparent that a separation would leave Fouchana with all the economic potential while Mhamdia would have few revenue sources, but no steps were taken to mitigate this or put in place transitional arrangements.[69] As the mayor of Mhamdia, who was a member of the interim municipal council before the 2018 municipal elections, explained:

> Each delegation took whatever resources it had. They [Fouchana] inherited the industrial zone, and we inherited uncontrolled construction and informal settlements. . . . Before the division [of the municipality], I met with the governor in 2015, and I involved civil society in the meeting to ask for the industrial zone's revenues to be split between the two municipalities for the first five to ten years. They gave us assurances that this would be done. . . . They promised

us it could happen. . . . Nothing happened. . . . On top of it, the territory of Mhamdia was extended, so we now have to cover a bigger territory and provide services to a larger number of residents with fewer resources.[70]

Meanwhile, other municipalities with even larger geographic areas than Mhamdia-Fouchana were not divided or saw initial decisions to divide them reversed. For instance, the DGCPL initially decided to divide the municipality of Jendouba, the *chef-lieu* of Jendouba governorate, into two municipalities, given its large geographical size. However, protests in the municipality organized by residents and local civil society organizations in early 2017 led to the region's members of parliament and political parties intervening to oppose the decision. Members of parliament from the two largest parties—Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha—opposed the separation on the grounds that it would divide their electoral base and reduce their chances of winning seats in the upcoming municipal elections.[71] Consequently, the DGCPL reversed the decision to divide the municipality into two.

Similarly, the DGCPL proposed to divide Bizerte municipality, the *chef-lieu* of the Bizerte governorate, into two, with the delegation of Zarzouna given its own municipality. However, local notables opposed this in light of the economic impact of losing the municipality's industrial zone and large markets, all located in Zarzouna. As one local notable, a former governor, explained:

> The economic elites of Bizerte mobilized. There was great pressure . . . by the economic actors—businessmen particularly, via UTICA, the region's MPs, via corporatist structures and professional associations. . . . Taking away the wholesale market alone would cause losses of 1.5m dinars a year to the municipality. . . . There was enormous pressure from the residents of Zarzouna [for a separate municipality]. But they're largely migrants. They're not *Binzartis*. . . . The most influential actors are the *Binzartis*. They would never accept that that territory becomes its own municipality—that their city would lose 30–35% of its budget.[72]

The case of Sidi Bouzid further illustrates the importance of local-national elite networks in determining whether municipal boundary decisions are maintained or reversed. In the case of Sidi Bouzid municipality (the *chef-lieu* of Sidi Bouzid governorate), the DGCPL decided to divide

the municipality into three—Sidi Bouzid (which contains most of the city of Sidi Bouzid), Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda, and Fayedh-Bennour.[73]

These decisions provoked sustained local contestation, which began shortly after the new municipalities were announced. In August 2016, residents of several *'imedat* in Sidi Bouzid began organizing protests outside the governor's office against the division of the municipality and threatening to boycott municipal elections if the decision was not reversed.[74] Residents of several Sidi Bouzid neighborhoods rejected their incorporation into the two new municipalities because they saw themselves as part of Sidi Bouzid, with strong family and social ties to the town. For instance, the neighborhood of Aouled Chelbi was divided in two by the new boundaries, with one part incorporated into the new municipality of Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda and the other remaining in Sidi Bouzid. The residents of Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda also contested their integration, as they were physically divided from the center of their new municipality by mudflats (*sebkha*) and could not access municipal services. Figure 1.2 below shows a map of the new municipal borders separating Sidi Bouzid, Al Ahouaz Lassoueda, and Fayedh-Bennour following the 2015–16 reforms.

When their protests received no official response, residents organized sit-ins in front of the MLA in Tunis and submitted a petition signed by 600 residents. There were also calls to boycott the elections, which may have contributed to the municipalities' low voter turnout (27.42 percent for Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda and 24.92 percent for Fayedh-Bennour, compared to the regional average of 35 percent).

The new boundaries had enormous economic consequences for Sidi Bouzid. The annexation of the *'imeda* of Al Ahouaz to the new municipality of Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda deprived Sidi Bouzid of revenues from the significant economic infrastructure there, including the livestock market, the municipal depot, and the industrial zone. The new municipal council of Sidi Bouzid rejected the division and brought a claim before the administrative court.

Official discourse presents technical criteria as the sole basis for boundary decisions, but analyzing individual cases reveals the operation of a relational logic. The cases of Jendouba, Mhamdia-Fouchana, and Bizerte show that *where* boundary decisions are contested, *who* mobilizes, and *how* they do so are key. Mobilization by civil society and local elites at the regional level in Mhamdia-Fouchana was unsuccessful; however, it succeeded in Bizerte and Jendouba, where local notables exploited ties to national decision-makers, individually or via representative structures.
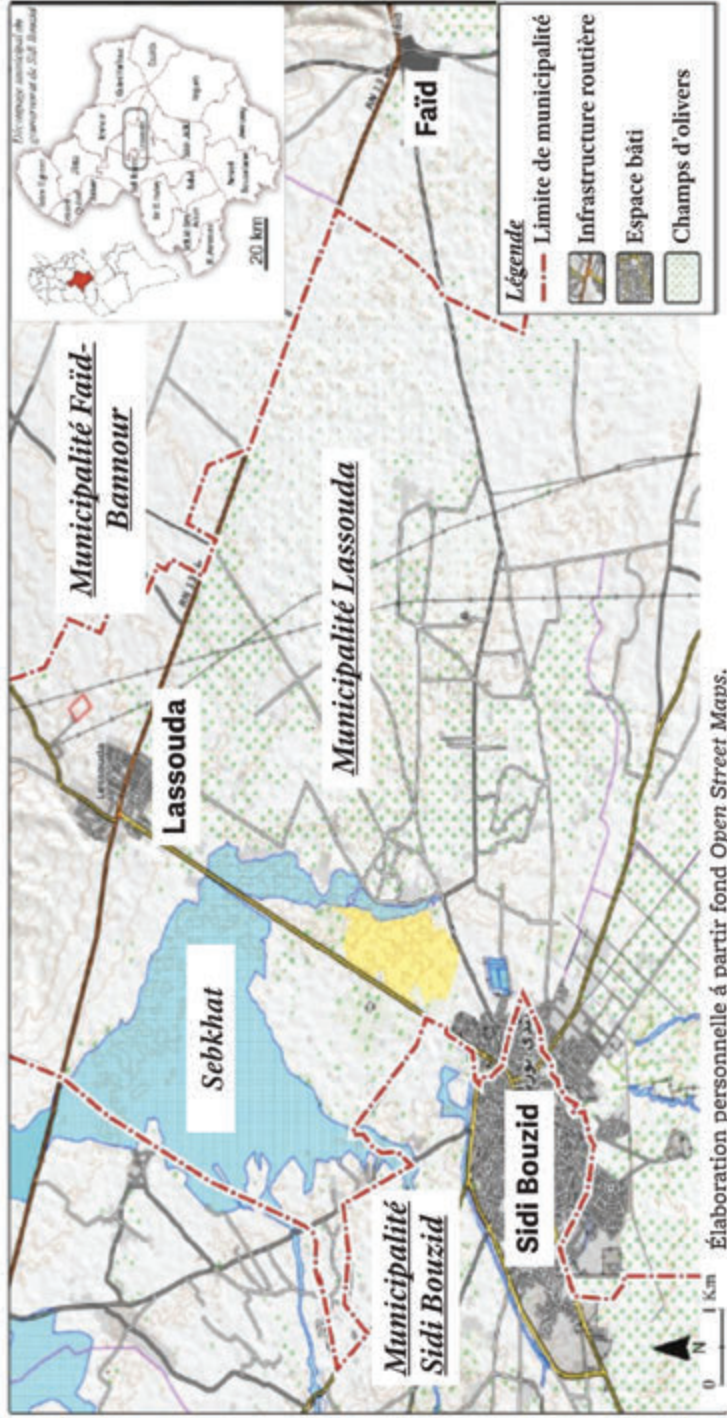
Figure 1.2. Map of New Municipal Borders Separating Sidi Bouzid, Al Ahouaz Lassoueda, and Fayedh-Bennour after the 2015–16 Municipal Border Reforms

*Source:* Ben Jelloul (2018).

The influence of these relational resources does not necessarily cor-relate with the economic weight of the area; Bizerte is wealthier than Mhamdia-Fouchana, but elites from Jendouba municipality (one of the poorest governorates in the country) were able to prevent its division. The configuration of local-national elite networks and the ability of local elites to effectively access national decision-makers through various channels appears to be more significant in determining the outcome of boundary contestation.

## 5. The Relationship between Boundaries and Local Spatial Practices

This section analyzes the relationship between municipal boundaries and local spatial practices. The 2015–17 municipal boundary reforms have pro-duced territorial boundaries with little connection to local spatial prac-tices and patterns of mobility. Residents in several municipalities discov-ered they had become part of a new municipality physically inaccessible to them. For instance, the residents of the *'imeda* of Rhima in Kairouan found themselves attached to the newly created municipality of Chaoua-chi,[75] even though there was no road connecting them to the municipal town hall. Residents contested the decision.[76] Similarly, residents of one *'imeda* in the northernmost part of the Kairouan governorate protested their inclusion within the municipality of Sbikha because the center of this municipality was 40 km away and difficult to access. They argued they had always accessed administrative services in Ennadhour Municipality in Zag-houane governorate—4.5 km from their village.

Residents of Hichria in the *'imeda* of the delegation of Sidi Bouzid West (Sidi Bouzid governorate), composed of three *'imedat* and over 20,000 residents, also contested new boundaries for not considering the moun-tains between them and the nearest municipal center 40 km away. They demanded their own municipality, arguing that they had "suffered many injustices by successive governments," as reflected in poor infrastructure and the fragmentation of administrative services.[77] Residents in Sidi Bou-zid and Kebili found that the new municipal boundaries ran right through some of their houses, which did not appear on outdated or insufficiently detailed government maps. MLA officials only became aware of this when residents submitted complaints after encountering problems registering for the 2018 municipal elections.[78]

These geographical realities were overlooked in a process "carried out

in offices behind closed doors" with little consideration of local spatial realities, such as mobility patterns and social and economic exchange.[79] The DGCPL justified this approach based on the sensitive nature of the reforms and the difficulties in balancing competing considerations and demands. However, the decision to exclude sociological and economic factors from the initial criteria forced the state to integrate them at a later stage. Since 2016, the MLA has faced hundreds of complaints over the new boundaries. In 2017, it was forced to issue several decrees modifying the 2015 and 2016 boundaries. The ministry also set up a special administrative unit to conduct field visits to correct basic geographical errors. Meanwhile, a separate process is underway (within the General Body on Prospection and Accompaniment of the Decentralization Process) to investigate boundary changes subject to official complaints by local officials or residents.

In addition, municipal boundary conflicts have created tensions and even erupted into violent confrontations within and between municipalities. An example of this is Naassen, a small municipality of 28,000 residents created in May 2016 as part of the municipal boundary reforms. Residents have contested the municipal boundary between Naassen and the neighboring El Mourouj, which divided a small neighborhood that extended across both sides of the border. Tensions over the boundary spilled over into a violent confrontation between Naassen's residents and its municipal administration in February 2020. In a mediation session with the municipal council and local security officials, residents contested what they saw as illegitimate boundaries with little connection to their daily spatial practices as a single neighborhood community.[80]

Another municipality that submitted an official complaint over the boundary reforms is Slimene, in the governorate of Nabeul. The municipality, created in 1982, had part of its territory split off in the 2015–16 border reforms to create the new municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray (see section 4.2).[81] The decision violated one of the MLA's rules on the drawing of new municipal boundaries—the requirement to keep *'imedat* within municipalities intact. Slimene municipality claimed the new municipal boundary divided one of its *'imedat* in half and incorporated part of it into the new municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray, with significant economic implications for Slimene. The decision provoked conflict between the two municipalities, leading Chrifet-Boucharray's council to suspend its activity—disrupting municipal services—and threatening to collectively resign if the boundaries were changed.[82] Similar conflicts have taken place in other municipalities affected by the boundary reforms.

The contentious nature of the new municipal boundaries thus shapes how residents view and engage with their municipalities. Boycotting of the municipal elections in many neighborhoods where there was opposition to the new municipal boundaries illustrates how the clash between centralized and local representations of space can undermine political participation. In a polarized, postauthoritarian transition, boundary-making also provided a resource that has been utilized in conflicts between rival factions within municipal councils or between entrenched local elites and newly elected officials.[83] These cases illustrate how grievances regarding new boundaries disconnected from daily spatial practices potentially undermine residents' participation and trust in their municipality and its legitimacy and capacity to govern.

## 6. Conclusion

Questions of spatial practices and representations—how people use and view the space around them—are at the heart of territorial governance. Tunisia's municipal boundary reforms of 2015–17 have implications for similar processes elsewhere in the MENA region. First, the reforms demonstrate the persistence of boundary-making practices in the context of postauthoritarian transition. As demonstrated above, national bureaucrats and elected officials shaped boundary-making in accordance with security-based, clientelist, and technocratic sectoral logics, along with electoral interests. These approaches fail to engage with space as a social construct, produced through the lived experience of those who inhabit and use it.

Second, the reforms demonstrate the continued fears of opening up discussions regarding local and regional identities, which are seen to threaten national identity—even in Tunisia, which has been seen as one of the region's more cohesive societies. These fears obstructed the creation of formal processes for the expression of local preferences. Third, the reforms and local reactions to them demonstrate how the absence of local consultation processes has led to municipal boundaries that have weakened citizens' trust in local authorities. Finally, this research points to the importance of examining municipal and regional boundaries as political institutions that structure local politics and shape the authority and legitimacy of subnational institutions.

### NOTES

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6. National Constituent Assembly, Chapter Seven Committee, *Minutes* (21 February 2012), 2. These inequalities have been attributed to: the domination of coastal elites at the highest levels of the state and an economic model that favors export-oriented activities concentrated in coastal regions—see Béatrice Hibou, "La Formation Asymétrique de l'État en Tunisie: Les Territoires de l'injustice," in *L'État d'injustice au Maghreb. Maroc et Tunisie*, eds. Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb, and Mohamed Tozy (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 101–51. On highly centralized policymaking processes that excluded local actors, see Aya Abbes, "La Maîtrise

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38. Interviews, NCA Chapter Seven Committee members, Tunis, April 2016, March–April 2018.

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40. Interview, Mokhtar Hammami, Director General, DGCPL, Tunis, 18 May 2016.

41. Interviews, DGCPL officials and experts, Tunis, April 2016.

42. See, for instance, the EU's 43 million Euro program to support decentralization, which includes among the expected results, "The communalization of 50 rural areas of more than 5000 residents." European Union, "Annex IV, Document Relatif

à l'action Pour Le Programme 'Cap Vers La Décentralisation et Le Développement Intégré Des Territoires' (CAP 2D)" (Numéro CRIS: ENI/2015/038–422, 2014a), 23.

43. See, for instance, AFD, Italian Development Cooperation and KfW assistance programs for newly created municipalities.

44. These are described in an overview document on the boundary reform process published by the MLA in 2016. The MLA was created as a separate ministry in February 2016, transferring the DGCPL and other departments from the Ministry of Interior to the new ministry. The MLA took over the boundary reforms from the DGCPL, with the same experts overseeing the process.

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47. Coalition government composed of Afek Tounes, Ennahdha, Nidaa Tounes, UPL, and independents. Ministry of Local Affairs and the Environment, *Proposed Generalization*.

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58. Ministry of Local Affairs and the Environment, *Proposed Generalization*.

59. Interview, head of Municipal Boundaries Revisions Unit, MLA, Tunis, 27 January 2020.

60. Interviews, MLA officials, Tunis, 19 November 2019; 26 December 2019.

61. The failure to investigate Slimene's complaint was, according to the MLA, due to an "administrative oversight." Interview, senior MLA official, Tunis, 24 June 2020.

62. Nessma TV, "Jendouba: Civil Society Demands New Municipal Boundaries (in Arabic)," *Nessma TV*, 5 January 2017.

63. Mosaique FM, "Nabeul: The Municipal Council of Chrifet-Boucharray Suspends Its Activities [in Arabic]," *Mosaique FM*, 20 November 2019.

64. Interview, mayor, Slimene Municipality, Slimene, 28 February 2020.

65. Decree No. 601 of 2016.

66. Interview, Tunis, 17 February 2020. Residents in Enfidha contested the new boundaries when they were first announced in 2016, blocking a highway and demanding that the MLA revise the boundary changes. Zoom Tunisia, "Enfidha, Sousse: Highway Reopened after 14 Hours of Closure (in Arabic)," *Zoom Tunisia*, June 5, 2016.

67. Interview, head of Municipal Boundaries Revisions Unit, MLA, Tunis, 24 June 2020; deputy director, Department for Relations with Local Councils, MLA, Tunis, 19 November 2019.

68. Similar practices of applying seemingly neutral, technical criteria in ways that benefit politically connected individuals are also highlighted in Ben Jelloul's study of urban rehabilitation programs under the Ben Ali regime. Mourad Ben Jelloul, "La Réhabilitation du Quartier Ourasnia à Ben Gardane (gouvernorat de Médenine, Tunisie du Sud-Est): Acteurs, Enjeux et Effets Territoriaux d'un Conflit Urbain," *GéoDév.ma* 1 (2013): 1–35.

69. Interview, deputy director, Department for Relations with Local Councils, MLA, Tunis, 19 November 2019.

70. Interview, Mhamdia, 28 January 2020.

71. Interviews, members of parliament from Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes, 30 August 2020.

72. Interview, Tunis, 19 June 2020.

73. Decrees No. 600 and 601 of 26 May 2016.

74. Babnet Tunisie, "Residents of the Delegation of Sidi Bouzid East Demand Revision of Municipal Boundary Changes [in Arabic]," *Babnet Tunisie*, 10 July 2017, https://www.babnet.net/cadredetail-145110.asp; Karama FM, "Residents of Fayedh in Sidi Bouzid East Delegation and the Salama Area in Bir Lihfey Delegation Protest New Municipal Borders [in Arabic]," *Karama FM*, 5 August 2016, https://www.facebook.com/RadioKaramaFm/posts/1119981761394220/

75. Decree No. 601, 26 May 2016.

76. Interview, head of Municipal Boundaries Revisions Unit, MLA, Tunis, 27 January 2020.

77. *Assabah News*, "Sidi Bouzid: Residents of Hichria Demand Recognition of their Area as a Delegation [in Arabic]," *Assabah News*, 13 May 2017.

78. Interview, head of Municipal Boundaries Revisions Unit, MLA, Tunis, 27 January 2020.

79. Interview, junior official, coordinator of technical aspects of municipal boundaries reform process, MLA, Tunis, 11 March 2020.

80. Interviews, Naassen Municipality, Naassen, 17 February 2020.

81. Decree No. 602 of 26 May 2016.

82. Nessma TV, "Slimene: Members of Chrift-Boucharray Threaten Collective Resignation (in Arabic)," *Nessma TV*, 19 November 2019; Mosaique FM, "Nabeul."

83. Interviews, Naassen Municipality, Naassen, 17 February 2020; Sidi Bouzid Municipality, Sidi Bouzid Ville, 2 August 2020.

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# Continuities and Ruptures in Local Governance in Daraa, Syria

Conventional wisdom is that the regime of Bashar al-Assad has won the Syrian Civil War. Yet, despite outward appearances of complete domination, the power and relevance of the Syrian regime vis-à-vis local actors has fluctuated, particularly concerning security, justice, and service provision. Examining continuities and ruptures in local governance in Syria's southern Daraa province before, during, and after the civil war, this chapter shows how and why past relationships and dynamics changed or continued. The reemergence of protests and the significant increase in assassinations that began shortly after the regime's reconquest of the South in mid-2018, as well as the presence and power of different nonstate actors such as tribal leaders and militias in providing local governance, debunk the myth of the Syrian regime's substantive victory.

## 1. Introduction

This chapter examines local governance in Syria's southern Daraa province before 2011, during the civil war years from 2011 to 2018, and after the Syrian regime regained control post-2018. It explores who provides local governance in Daraa, how they do so, and the ramifications of different governance providers for local populations, particularly regarding justice,

security, and service delivery. Comparing and contrasting local governance structures in Daraa during the prewar and civil war periods builds a more nuanced picture of the architecture of local governance in southern Syria. This enables us to better grasp the Syrian regime's strategy for longer-term control, to understand continuities and ruptures in relationships over time, and to consider how this case may offer insights into other postwar scenarios.

Since coming to power in 1970, the Assad regime constructed a pyramid of seemingly near-absolute control over governance across the country. However, despite an outward appearance of complete domination, the power and relevance of the regime vis-à-vis local actors have fluctuated. At different times, the regime has seen nonstate actors as a challenge, responding to them either through cooptation[2] (often through conferring economic incentives or giving nonstate actors access to their own mini-fiefdoms under the ultimate control of the regime) or forced elimination. During the civil war, and due to the regime's inability to provide adequate local governance, citizens across Syria increasingly turned to other actors to establish security, enforce justice, and promote service provision. In Daraa, this resulted in an increased role for the area's large tribal families. These families influenced the composition and operations of local councils, judicial administrations, and local armed groups that acted as security providers. Despite retaking territorial control of Daraa in mid-2018, the regime has not (as of October 2023) reinstated a monopoly over local governance. In late 2023, local councils were once again stacked with Ba'ath Party members, but the influence of the tribal families and affiliated armed groups over security, justice, and service provision continued relatively independent of the regime.

Although the Assad regime has supposedly reconquered Daraa, no individuals interviewed during this project (2017–2021) described the current local governance situation as particularly stable or secure. On the contrary, while large-scale physical violence has mostly subsided, what has emerged is "the dense texture of war and society relations and the long reach of the shadows of war."[3] As such, it is important and relevant to understand how prewar and wartime dynamics have shaped local governance post-2018. Examining local governance over more than fifty years shows that it is, in fact, an architecture of interlocking structures, processes, and relationships composed of preexisting actors, discourses, and cultures—only some of which have been reoriented by the war.[4] In practice, while the Syrian regime remains a formidable local governance actor in the South, it currently operates in a relationship of tacit delegation and continuing (re)

negotiation with a range of other actors. These now include state actors, such as Russia and Iran, and nonstate actors, such as tribal leaders and local militia groups.

This chapter uses a qualitative mixed-methods approach that prioritizes the information from twenty-three long-form interviews with Syrian community leaders from Daraa.[5] These data are triangulated with twenty-seven interviews of humanitarian professionals and conflict analysts working on southern Syria, as well as news reports, social media posts (primarily Twitter), policy reports, and twenty-five documents written contemporaneously with the recapture of Daraa (shared in confidence). These documents comprise situation reports written between June 27 and July 30, 2018, when the regime retook control of the area, as well as an analysis of local actors, including most armed groups and civilian bodies operating in southern Syria. Even before the onset of COVID-19, the inherent messiness of fieldwork in and on conflict settings had become a leitmotif across the Middle East.[6] While "complex" may have become an overused adjective to describe the Syrian situation, Suda Perera's point that we need to analyze the mess coherently and rigorously while at the same time "not being forced to simplify, if simplifying causes us to mislead"[7] is still salient.

Working toward this goal, the first section of this chapter contextualizes Daraa to explain why local governance dynamics in southern Syria are important to understand. The following three sections map continuities and changes in justice, security, and service provision in Daraa pre-2011, from 2011 to 2018, and post-2018. Based on this empirical evidence, the concluding section argues that both state and nonstate actors in Syria have adapted their involvement in local governance to best suit changing dynamics, while simultaneously shoring up their own power.

## 2. Daraa in Context

Daraa is a critically important region of Syria, as events in the South tend to have disproportionately large geopolitical ramifications. The Daraa and Sweida governorates border Jordan to the south, and the Quneitra governorate borders both Jordan and Israel, encompassing the disputed Golan Heights to the west. In addition, the M5 highway that runs north-south through Daraa is a major trade conduit between Syria and Jordan. Likewise, the smuggling of goods between Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria through Daraa is lucrative and common.[8] Finally, the genesis of the revolution, beginning in March 2011, was in Daraa. In Syria's repressive political

Figure 2.1. Map of Daraa

environment, the daily protests in Daraa were radical in and of themselves. Consequently, the uprising in Daraa became a rallying cry for protestors across the country, who often chanted, "Daraa is Syria."

Before the 2011 uprising and subsequent civil war, Daraa had a population of around one million, predominantly Sunni Arabs.[9] Historically, it has been a rich farming region, with most of the population working in the agricultural sector. While people from Daraa have continued their own traditions and customs, they have remained religiously moderate. As a security analyst in Amman relates, "You can't take cards, *shisha*, and cigarettes away from Houranis! [another term for people from southern Syria, or the Houran Plains]."[10]

Perhaps because of these rural leanings, and despite its relative geographical proximity to power (the province's main city is only about a ninety-minute drive from the capital), the Assad regime tended to view Daraa as a peripheral backwater.

[Unlike Homs or Aleppo,] the South was never a priority for the government. The top of the class at Damascus University were never sent there for postings. It was the corrupt folks, the smugglers, who were installed in government positions in the South.[11]

Despite the regime's relative disinterest in developing Daraa, it still wanted to centralize and consolidate its political authority over the region. It did so by stacking local councils and other local government positions with loyal Ba'ath Party members. This was seen as a way to neutralize the power of the large tribal families of the area. However, these families (such as the Zoubi, Rifai, Hariri, and Naime) simply adapted, developing parallel power structures that operated in tandem and often with the consent and encouragement of the regime. As Khedder Khaddour suggests, these family structures "served the regime as a nexus through which it could organize and exert control."[12]

Despite southern Syria's history and unique dynamics, few authors have focused on local governance in the region. Several older expert works deal predominantly with tribes, local administration, and their relationship to the state in Syria, studying the country as a whole.[13] Recent research specific to southern Syria has focused predominantly on the contemporary machinations of various security actors or offered more policy-based perspectives.[14] This chapter draws on much of this excellent work and adds to it by taking a longer temporal approach to local governance dynamics. Looking at how local governance has fluctuated in Daraa over time helps overcome limitations in recent research, given the access issues, restrictions, and security concerns around reporting and disseminating knowledge in an active conflict setting. Likewise, it sheds light on assumptions underlying much of the existing research—that local actors are adept at navigating macro-level changes to shore up their own power structures. This is particularly relevant regarding tribal leaders and associated family structures that have remained structurally intact and relevant to local governance in all three periods analyzed here.

### 3. Local Governance in Daraa before the Civil War (1970–2011)

From 1970 until 2011, the Assad regime was the primary arbiter of justice, security, and service provision across all levels of the Syrian government. Members of the regime's Ba'ath Party in provincial and local offices needed to approve any decisions relating to local politics, security, or polic-

ing. From 1970 onward, the regime appointed local personalities as governors, drawing mainly from the security services or the Syrian Army. To land a prime posting in Damascus, provincial governors would need to demonstrate their knowledge of the nuances of local dynamics.[15] Postings in local governance bodies became a tidy way for the regime to coopt and contain local elites through financial and/or military incentives.[16]

By recruiting local leaders into the state apparatus, the regime set about coup-proofing itself and consolidating its authority against the power of traditional tribal leaders. For example, many important figures from Daraa's large tribal families were recruited into local government or the officer classes of the Syrian military to personally invest them in maintaining the status quo.[17] Other influential tribal leaders were passed over for promotion because they could not be easily controlled. Simultaneously, this investment in local governance structures allowed the regime to keep a close eye on local goings-on to contain political dissent[18] (see Kherigi's chapter in this volume, relating to the central state's attempts to control local sites of power in Tunisia through selective placement of local governance institutions and associated resources, and Parreira's chapter examining the detrimental effects of the postconflict continuity of party-aligned patronage between the central and local governments).

Local-level appointees had very little decision-making power. However, they were responsible for implementing decisions made in Damascus. In this way, they acted as informal intermediaries between locals and the regime. The personalities in these positions enjoyed a high degree of respect in their communities, generally prioritizing people's interests over their own.

In addition to this agenda aimed at political control of local elites, the Ba'ath Party's economic plan was based on providing relative economic equality—particularly for the peasant class—in exchange for political support from the masses.[19] To achieve this, the Ba'ath Party promoted urbanization and industrialization. These policies brought certain opportunities for the working poor, but also rising dislocation and economic disparity.[20] The so-called Damascus Spring economic reforms, initiated by Bashar al-Assad when he came to power in 2000, increased economic liberalization but exacerbated the disenfranchisement of large sections of the population. The reforms, intended to open Syria's economy, mainly succeeded in consolidating wealth in a new kleptocratic elite that saw regional areas like Daraa as their own personal fiefdoms to be plundered.

The Syrian uprising that began in March 2011 represented, among other things, the failure of these economic reforms to keep the populace in

check. It was also the result of a gross misjudgment by the regime regarding the limits of its relationship with local tribal leaders. The two main demographics the regime had been adept at keeping under control for several decades—local elites and the working poor—erupted amid the uprisings that rocked much of the Middle East. Protests in Syria were notionally triggered by an insult that Daraa's governor, Atef Najib, a cousin of President Bashar al-Assad, made to the tribal families of the area. After the regime arrested fifteen schoolboys, all under the age of fifteen and all from prominent local families of Daraa (the Baiazids, Gawabras, Masalmas, and Zoubis), for graffitiing walls with revolutionary slogans, the family heads or sheikhs met with the governor to negotiate a settlement.[21] Insulting family loyalty and tribal honor, he reportedly told them, "Forget your children. Go sleep with your wives and make new ones, or send them to me, and I'll do it."

Tension peaked when the regime's security forces opened fire on the families of the arrested, who had marched to the governor's house to demand their children's release. For over fifty years, the tribes had been kept loyal to the Assad regime through patronage systems. But in 2011, these bonds were broken. As the civil war erupted across Syria and the regime lost control of local governance in Daraa, tribal leaders and a variety of other actors stepped in to manage it.

## 4. Local Governance in Daraa during the Civil War (2011–2018)

For centuries before the Assad regime took power in Syria, tribal leaders had played a role in governance across the Middle East.[22] Since at least the 1800s, tribal systems of law and justice ran concomitant to state-based systems. From mid-2011 until mid-2018, by virtue of their historic relationship as local governance administrators on behalf of the regime, tribal leaders easily stepped in to fill the voids in the absence of state control.[23] Of course, the tribes were never the sole providers of governance in Daraa; but as with the regime prior to 2011, tribal leaders navigated their relationship with other local governance actors adeptly during the civil war.

This took several forms. First, as they had done for centuries before the war, tribal leaders continued to act as justice providers—primarily as mediators and negotiators in cultural and civil disputes, such as family matters or disputes relating to crops or property.[24] The Shura Council existed before 2011, but without any state-based judicial system during the civil war, it became a primary mechanism for mediation and justice provision. It also played a role in

mediating disputes between local armed rebel groups and providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced people and widows.[25]

In addition to the Shura Council, in around 2015, tribal structures coalesced into a body known as the Houran Reform Commission. The Reform Commission consisted of influential and well-respected locals, such as doctors or lawyers, as well as leaders of the various tribal clans.[26] As a former military officer from Daraa explained:

> It [the Houran Reform Commission] is a civilian body independent of any political party or military faction. Its functions are almost like the tasks of the tribal council that existed before 2011, and it is considered an extension of the tasks undertaken by the clans. However, it is a more comprehensive and appropriate body to suit the changes on the ground, such as the presence of the [armed] factions, the House of Justice and other bodies that existed during the revolution.[27]

Until the regime retook control of Daraa in mid-2018, the Houran Reform Commission supervised the work of local councils, overseeing the distribution of fuel, gas, and food baskets and adjudicating disputes between clans.[28] For instance, members of the Reform Commission were instrumental in securing the release of detainees and deescalating a dispute between First Artillery Regiment commander Abu Seydra and residents of Al-Jizeh in April 2017.[29] Likewise, the commission resolved a dispute between the residents of the towns of Al-Naima and Al-Musayfrah in January 2017, which arose after the armed group Fallujah Horan raided the town of Al-Musayfrah and wounded several people.[30]

Local opposition-run governance structures during the civil war, such as local councils, the provincial council, and the main court—the Dar al-Adl (House of Justice)—went hand-in-hand with tribal influence.[31] Tribal leaders played an important role in the local councils that sprang up in towns to replace the Ba'ath Party. During the years of rebel rule, even though most council members were elected, the tribal families of Daraa were influential in vetting who sat on many local councils.[32] Likewise, because most humanitarian supplies from international donors flowed through local councils, managing the provision of aid and services was a crucial means for local council members and tribal leaders to acquire popularity and legitimacy with the local population.[33]

The tribes and councils were also inexorably linked with the armed groups operating in Daraa. Most members of the armed groups were from the large tribal families of the area. This localization of security provision

had mixed consequences. On the one hand, more extreme elements such as al-Qaeda or Islamic State were generally unpopular in Daraa and struggled to gain a foothold. On the other, despite being notionally linked to the larger Free Syrian Army opposition under the banner of the Southern Front—and having been internationally backed by a Military Operations Centre in Amman from early 2014 until late 2015—the armed factions in the South remained parochial, putting local needs above grander political agendas.[34] Their main priority was the security of their towns and family members. This made it difficult for them to organize (financially and logistically) to win major military battles against the regime.[35]

According to a member of a cross-border organization tasked with providing services to local councils in Daraa, the most successful service delivery operations tended to be the ones where the armed groups, council, and tribes worked in unison, such as in Busra al-Sham, Giza, Tsiel, Nawa, Jasim, and Daraa City.[36] In these towns, the rebel groups did not interfere with the council. Instead, there was coordination between councils and armed groups to support locals, particularly in providing humanitarian supplies and services, such as educational and agricultural support, development programs, wheat distribution, and solar panel projects.[37]

Finally, despite losing territorial control of Daraa in early 2012, in a clever strategy to maintain support, the regime continued to pay the salaries of state employees such as bureaucrats and teachers throughout the civil war. It also maintained control over major utility infrastructure such as power plants. This made it challenging for rebels to create parallel systems that belonged wholly to the opposition. To do so, rebels would have had to either take over utility structures militarily or build their own, which the regime could stymie by turning off the power grid.[38] In mid-2018, Daraa accepted reconciliation deals offered by Russia and the regime, in part because the regime had continued to provide them with salaries and minimal services, such as electricity, throughout the war years. Many Daraawis (inhabitants of Daraa) thought this base layer of services would improve once the regime regained control of the area. Unfortunately, as the next section explores in more detail, service provision in the South has remained deliberately poor.

## 5. Local Governance and the Return of the Regime
### (Mid-2018 to the Present)

In mid-2018, the regime reconquered Daraa after eight years of rebel governance. Certain aspects of society remained the same, but others

had reformed and were substantially changed. These often contradictory and fluid relationships necessitated strategic thinking on the part of elites as they sought to navigate the new situation. During the war, and in the absence of other functional justice, security, and service providers, nonstate actors such as tribal leaders, local councils, and armed rebel groups stepped in to fill the gap left by the regime. Many of these changes represented a codification and expansion of the role of tribal structures present before 2011.[39] However, a security analyst stated that, even after the regime's return to Daraa, "The same guys are present before, during, and after the war because they know how to play the game. If they were gone, there would be chaos, so it is not worthwhile for the regime to remove them."[40]

The trajectory of local councils illustrates how some prewar and wartime dynamics continue to manifest post-2018. Numerous interviewees talked about how the composition of local councils in the South changed dramatically after the regime retook the area and how "none of the councils that existed at the time of the opposition remain."[41] Instead, the composition of councils returned to its previous, prewar state—i.e., comprised of members of the Ba'ath Party loyal to the regime.[42] Interviewees highlighted the democratic quality of councils under opposition control in contrast to the current "formal," "appointed," pseudo-elected councils.[43] Several interviewees mentioned the arrest and death of the head of the Jasim local council, Ratib al-Jebawi, a well-regarded local who funded many community projects with his own money during the years Jasim was outside regime control. At the end of 2018, he was summoned to a security office of the Syrian regime, where he was subsequently arrested. His family tried to secure his release through their connections (his brother was a colonel) and paid large sums of money, but a year later his family was informed that he had died in detention.[44]

Despite promises that service provision would improve after reconciliation, many interviewees pointed out that the services provided by the local councils while the area was under opposition control were much more substantial than what regime municipalities currently provide.[45] According to a former regime member,

> The regime pledged during the 2018 negotiations with the Russians to provide all services to citizens and that the government should bear full responsibility for all supplies and services of gas, electricity, water, repair of roads, and rehabilitating them, but unfortunately, all this was just empty words and promises that were not implemented.[46]

The regime demanded that electricity bills be paid for the years the South was outside its control. During the war years, the electricity grid was maintained by the opposition and paid for by locals. However, the regime requested payment to cover the maintenance of the electricity network and associated generators, which had been destroyed in large part by the regime's own aerial bombings.[47]

Likewise, in early 2021, basic commodities such as flour and gas provided by the regime were limited in quantity and very expensive.[48] Several interviewees reported that the price of bread (the cheapest source of calories) rose sharply after the regime retook control. In early 2021, a bread bundle of between six to eight loaves cost between 100 and 250 Syrian pounds, but it was difficult to obtain and of very poor quality, while good quality bread cost around 1,000–1,250 Syrian pounds on the black market.[49] In context, in 2021, basic foods to feed a Syrian family for a month (such as bread, rice, lentils, oil, and sugar) could cost in excess of 120,000 Syrian pounds, compared to an average monthly wage of less than 80,000 Syrian pounds. Flour allocation to Daraa was also around half of what it was before the war (3,500 tons instead of 7,000 tons per day).[50] When asked to provide the governorate with more flour for bread, the Minister for Internal Trade and Consumer Protection answered that he would "not give flour to the terrorists."[51]

After the regime retook control of Daraa in mid-2018, it weaponized how and to whom goods and services were delivered. Although the regime had promised to improve service delivery as part of the reconciliation agreements, it withheld services to repress Syrian citizens based on past events and/or perceived political disloyalty.[52] Since its victory over the South, in a show of control the Syrian regime had also moved to reappoint local council members across the governorate. As a result, those who were council members during the war either left or remained in the area but no longer held political roles.[53] Many who chose to remain fear for their safety, despite reconciliation documents signed with the regime supposedly allowing them to "settle their status."[54]

Consequently, the makeup of local councils closely resembled the prewar situation, i.e., all the councils were stacked with loyal Ba'ath Party members, but there was a stark difference in the level of services provided by the councils before, during, and after the war. This was in large part a deliberate regime strategy to punish and control populations perceived as being traitors during the years of the civil war. Before the war, the councils (controlled by the Ba'ath Party) provided most services, and basic goods were relatively affordable.[55] During the war, the regime lost control

of councils, and council members were elected by their constituencies—albeit with significant oversight and input from local tribal leaders. Despite drastic limitations during the war, with the assistance of international donations, humanitarian aid, and innovative programming, councils under opposition control managed to provide a level of service deemed superior to that of regime-backed local councils reinstalled post-2018.

By 2021, interviewees pointed to a reduced role for the Houran Reform Commission, although not necessarily for individual tribal leaders. Tribal leaders remained an authority at the local level that the regime had to manage.[56] As before the war, the regime employed various strategies, including cooptation, negotiation, and increasingly, the assassination of prominent leaders who crossed unwritten boundaries or were perceived as threats[57] (see also Parreira in this volume, on conflict, collusion, and cooperation in local-state governance in Lebanon along sectarian/party lines).

The tribes continued to influence arbitration and justice in the South, but the "men with guns" wielded considerable influence over security affairs. These included a variety of former armed rebel groups that were subsumed into quasi-prostate militias in the form of the 5th Corps (ex-rebel fighters reconfigured into the Syrian Army and aligned with Russia) and the 4th Division (also ex-rebel fighters now reconfigured into the Syrian Army and aligned with Iran).[58] As was the case during the war, security provision remained heavily influenced by local dynamics and geographies. This hinged primarily on agreements made between local armed groups and Russia, Iran, and the regime at the end of active hostilities in June-July 2018.[59]

Despite these agreements, which aimed at ending the fighting and restoring regime control, several interviewees described how the regime did not have control over certain areas; armed factions from the civil war (now notionally linked to the regime, Russia, and/or Iran) continued to provide security, erecting barriers at the entrances and exits of each city.[60] State police had returned to many cities and towns, and as of late 2023, the regime continued to exercise little power. For example, it could not enter certain areas militarily, and in general, its forces remained unsafe across the South.[61] Occasionally, armed confrontations occurred between regime forces and previous opposition factions against the background of arrests or assassinations, control over resources, access to illicit economies, refusal to hand over criminals, and political competition between various leaders.[62] There were also popular protests and demonstrations against the regime, which would have been unthinkable before 2011.[63] A Syrian governor said, "In Houran, generally, there is no regime control. It remains impossible for

the regime to enter Busra al-Sham, Daraa City, Tafas, and their surroundings due to certain considerations or guarantees, but of course, there are no guarantees but their arms."[64]

In these three areas, the armed factions, together with various local tribal leaders and notables (such as Sheikh Faisal al-Abazid, a well-known dignitary in the Daraa City area), organized into committees.[65] By early 2021, there existed the Daraa Central Committee (focusing geographically on Daraa City), the Western Committee (around Tafas), and the Eastern Committee (in Busra al-Sham).[66] There was also talk of a committee merger to consolidate their power.[67]

All three committees acted as intermediaries between residents of these areas and Russian, Iranian, and regime representatives—similar to the role of tribal leaders before 2011.[68] One possible reason for this is that the committees offered an organized body through which the regime could make demands on local armed groups and the civilian population.[69] A Syrian media activist said the Russian military presence in the South prefers to deal with military-like entities like the committees rather than less structured or civilian organizations.[70]

The committees presented the regime with requests about returning former employees to their jobs, advocating for the release of detainees, resolving tensions in security situations, and assisting with reconciliation.[71] Additionally, in response to the rise of malicious lawsuits brought by the regime against citizens in the South, the Central Committee purportedly met with Major General Ali Mamlouk of the National Security Bureau, Defense Minister General Ali Ayyoub, and Head of Military Intelligence Major General Kifeh al-Milhem, who agreed to form a Dispute Resolution Council (affiliated with the Central Committee) to determine if lawsuits had merit before being referred on to the regime.[72] A former member of the regime, originally from Daraa, said that since the regime takeover of the South in mid-2018,

> The Committees maintain security in their areas, and the regime cannot enter those areas and detain people from within them. If anyone leaves those areas, he will be arrested. The regime does not make any incursions into these areas and has no role or presence in them.[73]

Russia, Iran, and the regime could potentially assert more control over local governance and security in Daraa, but they arguably lack resources and will. As one Syrian media activist noted, "Imposing security in Daraa

is very difficult because of the large number of actors on the ground, and all of these parties have recruited people who work as militias against each other."[74] Despite occasional threats of a more substantial military takeover, it was arguably in the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran's best interests to maintain the status quo, so long as instability did not pass a certain threshold and become costly.[75] However, the facts that violence escalated, service provision was minimal, and the economic situation in Syria remained grim made it difficult for these actors to control the status quo.[76]

## 6. The Architecture of Local Governance

Since the Assad family came to power in 1970, the regime and tribal leaders have been shackled together in a puzzling relationship. Should it wish to do so, the regime could destroy or more fully integrate tribal actors. Yet at the same time, the regime has needed the tribes to provide a level of legitimate local governance it cannot offer. As a result, local actors have leveraged this reliance and operate with varying degrees of independence.

As the civil war died down after 2018, the Syrian regime remained the primary actor able to influence local governance in the South. It operated in a relationship of tacit acceptance and constant (re)negotiation with other state and nonstate actors, including tribal leaders and local militia groups. The regime certainly exercised governance in the South—primarily through the reimposition of bureaucracy (in the form of local councils), political decision-making (e.g., regarding the supply of basic goods such as electricity, flour, and gas and services such as education and garbage collection), and a scattered security presence—but local tribal and militia leaders also provided local governance. Despite the regime's historical ability to navigate this tricky relationship, it remained suspicious of them. The regime arguably recognized the necessity of such providers, but it also viewed them as a potentially dangerous alternative power, an existential threat, or a force for separatism.[77]

This has had important implications for citizens' welfare. Since the Assad regime came to power in Syria, justice, security, and service provision in the South was largely shaped by (a) how much or little control the regime could exert over local actors, and (b) the regime's perception of the local population as being either politically loyal or treasonous. Perceived loyalty and control were high before the onset of the uprising and civil war in 2011, so service provision from the regime during these years was also relatively high. During the war (2011–2018), the regime had little to no control over local gov-

ernance in Daraa and viewed most of the population as enemies of the state. As such, it provided minimal services during this time.

In the postwar era, the regime had more control, but it wanted to punish the population for their disobedience through minimal provision of services. Thus, service delivery throughout the country was poor, and the few resources the regime had went first and foremost to areas that supported the regime after the 2011 uprising began. Additionally, many other local actors continued to wield some level of local power. The dispersion of power across different local governance actors in the South shows the limitations of the Syrian regime's victory. A delicate architecture of power existed, but it was disrupted at certain times when actors attempted to grow their power independently or when unwritten lines were traversed. This included confrontations between the regime and former rebel groups related to arrests and assassinations, criminality, political competition between militia leaders, tribal feuds, and the activities of ISIS cells active in the region.

The continuities and ruptures in local governance provision over the three periods analyzed in this chapter show how and why past relationships and dynamics changed and/or continue. Important unique aspects of the case of Daraa should be noted. Primary among these is the internationalized dimension of dynamics in the South; Daraa exists on the border between Syria and Jordan, has Israel as a southwestern neighbor, and is a strategic area sought by Iran. Russia's interest in retaining leverage over the regime through a physical presence on the ground also creates a particular "high politics" logic, adding complexity to already messy internal and localized dynamics.

At the same time, a similar analysis could be applied to the current environment in Idlib, the Kurdish areas, or other areas ostensibly under regime control (such as Aleppo or Homs), where a range of militias and other actors continued to provide varying levels of governance. The reemergence of protests and significant increase in assassinations that began shortly after the regime's reconquest of the South in mid-2018, as well as the presence and power of different non-state actors in local governance, debunk the myth of the Syrian regime's substantive victory.[78]

NOTES

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2. Cooptation often occurred by conferring economic incentives or giving nonstate actors access to their own mini-fiefdoms under the ultimate control of the regime.

3. Tarak Barkawi, "Decolonising War," *European Journal of International Security* 1, no. 2 (2016): 204, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2016.7

4. Alice Hills, *Policing Post-Conflict Cities* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 29.

5. The interviews on which this chapter is based took place from 2017 to 2021. After mid-2018, because I was not comfortable that I could ensure the safety and security of interviewees inside Syria who were once again living in ostensibly regime-controlled areas, with the help of two researchers, I instead interviewed people from the Daraa governorate who are now located in Jordan about what was happening inside Daraa. These people can generally be classified as members of the opposition, or at least sympathetic to the ideals of the revolution. Many were media activists, local council, or armed group members during the uprising. While they also spoke from their own direct experience, they were able to answer many questions about contemporary life inside Daraa from their contact with family and friends who continue to reside in southern Syria. The assertions and arguments I put forward in this chapter are based on the responses of at least two interviewees, often more. Where there were conflicting accounts, this was more a matter of specifics rather than general theme. In these cases (e.g., the price of gas or flour), I offer the range of responses given.

6. See, for example, Jannis Grimm et al., *Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences: A Guide to Human and Digital Security in Hostile Environments* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2020).

7. Suda Perera, "Bermuda Triangulation: Embracing the Messiness of Researching in Conflict," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 11, no. 1 (2017): 47.

8. Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (London: Hurst Publisher, 2012), 3.

9. Nicholas A. Heras, "A Profile of Syria's Strategic Dar'a Province," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 6 (2014): 20.

10. Interview with security analysts, Jordan, March 2020.

11. Interview with security analyst, Jordan, March 2020.

12. Kheder Khaddour, "Local Wars and the Chance for Decentralized Peace in Syria," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 28, 2017, 4.

13. See for example Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 29–49, https://doi.org/10.3751/64.1.12

14. See for example Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria" (European University Institute Working Paper no. 9, 2019); Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour during Negotiations" (European University Institute Working Paper no. 6, 2019); Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries" (European University Institute Working Paper no. 15, 2019); Haian Dukhan, *Trusted Networks: How the Assad Regime Sub-*

*verts Clan Ties in Daraa* (Washington, DC: ME@75—The Middle East Institute, 2020).

15. Interview with security analyst, Jordan, February 2020.

16. Dukhan, "Trusted Networks"; Rana Khalaf, "Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict," *Syria Studies* 7, no. 3 (2015): 37–72.

17. Dukhan, "Trusted Networks."

18. Fabrice Balanche, "Municipalities in Baathist Syria: Administrative Deconcentration and Political Control," *Revue Tiers Monde* 1, (2008): 169–87. https://doi.org/10.3917/rtm.193.0169

19. Dara Conduit, "The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 73–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1182421; Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1989).

20. Raymond Hinnebusch, "Modern Syrian Politics," *History Compass* 6, no. 1 (2008): 263–85; Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

21. Hugh Macleod, "Syria: How It All Began," *Global Post*, April 23, 2011, https://theworld.org/stories/2011-04-23/syria-how-it-all-began

22. Haian Dukhan, "Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising," *Syria Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014): 1–28; Philip Shukry Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

23. Marika Sosnowski, "Violence and Order: The February 2016 Cease-Fire and the Development of Rebel Governance Institutions in Southern Syria," *Civil Wars* 20, no. 3 (2018): 309–32.

24. Interview with analyst, Syria, May 2017.

25. This was possible because most rebel groups in the South were comprised of members of the tribal families.

26. Interview with members of the Syrian civil defense, Syria, July 2017.

27. Interview with former Syrian regime officer, Jordan, February 2021; interview with Syrian mayor, Jordan, March 2021.

28. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021.

29. Confidential analysis document supplied by security analyst, "Houran Reform Commission Brief," May 4, 2017.

30. Interview with former Syrian regime officer, Jordan, February 2021.

31. Interview with researcher, Syria, May 2017.

32. Interview with member of cross-border organization, Syria, August 2017.

33. Interview with member of cross-border organization, Syria, August 2017.

34. Interview with safety and security officer, Syria, August 2017; interview with security manager for an NGO, Syria, July 2017; Youssef Sadaki, "The MOC's Role in the Collapse of the Southern Opposition," *Atlantic Council* (blog), September 23, 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-moc-s-role-in-the-collapse-of-the-southern-opposition/

35. Interview with researcher, Syria, May 2017; interview with conflict analyst, Syria, June 2017.

36. Interview with member of cross-border organization, Syria, March 2017.

37. Interview with member of cross-border organization, Syria, March 2017.

38. Interview with security analyst, Jordan, February 2020.

39. Dukhan, "Trusted Networks."

40. Interview with security analysts, Jordan, March 2020.

41. Interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020.

42. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021; interview with Syrian governor, Jordan, January 2021; interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020.

43. Interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020; interview with former Syrian regime member, Jordan, December 2020; interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020.

44. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021; interview with governor, Jordan, January 2021; "In Assad's Prisons, an Engineer from the Countryside of Daraa Dies under Torture" (in Arabic), *Horan Free League*, February 12, 2020, https://www.horanfree.com/?p=5113

45. Interview with Syrian governor, Jordan, January 2021.

46. Interview with former Syrian regime member, Jordan, December 2020; interview with Syrian journalist, Jordan, December 2020; interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021.

47. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021; interview with media activist, Jordan, January 2021; interview with Syrian mayor, Jordan, March 2021.

48. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021

49. Interview with Syrian activist, Jordan, March 2021.

50. Interview with Syrian journalist, Jordan, December 2020.

51. Interview with Syrian journalist, Jordan, December 2020.

52. Reem Salahi, "Bridging the Gap: Local Governance Committees in 'Reconciled' Areas of Syria." *Chatham House*, April 2020, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/bridging-the-gap-in-reconciled-areas-of-syria; interview with Syrian writer, Jordan, March 2021.

53. Interview with humanitarian worker, Jordan, February 2021.

54. Interview with Syrian activist, Jordan, February 2021.

55. Interview with Syrian activist, Jordan, February 2021; interview with Syrian governor, Jordan, January 2021.

56. Dukhan, "Tribes and Tribalism."

57. Interview with Syrian mayor, Jordan, March 2021; see also Ehud Yaari, "Rising Tensions in Southern Syria Suggest More Regime Attacks" (in Farsi) (Washington Institute for Near East Policy Report, May 18, 2020), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/tsad-altwtrat-fy-jnwb-swrya-yshyr-aly-almzyd-mn-hjmat-alnzam

58. Interview with Syrian journalist, Jordan, December 2020.

59. Khaled Al-Zouabi, "Daraa: Individual Agreements with Unclear Terms" (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, July 17, 2018; "Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South" (International Crisis Group Report, February 25, 2019), 3, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/196-lessons-syrian-states-return-south

60. Interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020.

61. Interview with Syrian governor, Jordan, January 2021.

62. Armenak Tokmajyan, "Pawnography in Southern Syria," *DIWAN: Middle*

*East Insights from Carnegie*, February 15, 2021, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan
/83873; interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020.

63. Interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, December 2020; see
also *Arabi 21*, "Demonstrations in Daraa, Southern Syria, Demanded the Fall of the
Regime" (in Arabic), *Arabi 21*, October 23, 2020.

64. Interview with Syrian governor, Jordan, January 2021.

65. Interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, 2020; interview with
Syrian journalist, December 2020; interview with Syrian media activist, January
2021.

66. Interview with former Syrian regime member, Jordan, December 2020.

67. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021; interview with
Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021.

68. Confidential document analysis of Daraa Central Committee supplied by
security analyst; interview with Syrian local council member, Jordan, 2020.

69. Interview with Syrian mayor, Jordan, March 2021.

70. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021.

71. Interview with security analysts, Jordan, March 2020; interview with Syr-
ian local council member, Jordan, March 2020; interview with Syrian journalist,
Jordan, December 2020; interview with former Syrian regime member, Jordan,
December 2020.

72. The National Security Bureau is a Ba'ath Party institution that effectively
oversees the state's four intelligence directorates and answers directly to Bashar Al-
Assad. As such, the National Security Bureau is one of the most influential actors in
Syria; interview with security analysts, Jordan, March 2020.

73. Interview with former Syrian regime member, Jordan, December 2020.

74. Interview with Syrian media activist, Jordan, January 2021.

75. For example, Khaled al-Khateb, "Damascus Scrambles for More Control in
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olating-Daraa-al-Balad-threatens-40,000-with-starvation; interview with security
analyst, Jordan, February 2020.

76. Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Syria's Economic Meltdown" (Policy Brief, Newslines
Institute for Strategy and Policy, June 15, 2020), https://newlinesinstitute.org/syria
/syrias-economic-meltdown/

77. Salahi, "Bridging the Gap."

78. Jomana Qaddour and Abdulrahman al-Masri, "Don't Rely on Moscow to
Help with 'Reconciliation' in Syria's Daraa Province," *Atlantic Council* (blog), Feb-
ruary  23,  2021,  https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/dont-rely-on
-moscow-to-help-with-reconciliation-in-syrias-daraa-province/

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# Participation

# Citizen Petitions to Moroccan Municipalities

## *A Case of Unequal Inclusion?*

Francesco Colin and Sylvia I. Bergh[1]

## 1. Introduction

The 2011 Moroccan Constitution granted citizens the right to petition municipalities, allowing them to add agenda items to upcoming council meetings. The right to petition was part of the new constitution's effort to enact the "advanced regionalization" process, ostensibly institutionalizing participatory democracy in the country. Petitions potentially constitute a counterweight to the Moroccan state's increasing control over public discourse, public space, and civil society organizations' actions in society,[2] and the right applied at both national and local governance levels—meaning citizens could present petitions to the head of the government, the presidents of each chamber of parliament, and the council of each level of local governance (region, province or prefecture, and municipalities).

In this chapter, we focus on the municipal level. We argue that the right to petition is critical, as it has represented a new arena for citizen engagement with local governments and, moreover, provided an opportunity to understand concrete interactions between citizens and the state.[3] We have thus taken stock of Moroccans' experiences with this novel right to petition and assessed the extent to which it has contributed to inclusive participa-

tion. Specifically, we ask: In what ways has access to and exercise of the right to petition been shaped by inequalities at the individual and overall contextual levels?

The institutional deployment of the right to petition did not automatically result in the widespread exercise of this right. Official data on the number of petitions presented to local governments is unavailable; however, there is evidence that petitions increased from around 70 instances in 2018, to roughly 200 in 2019,[4] and 212 in 2021,[5] and that citizens petitioned primarily for local service delivery, including libraries, local cultural centers, youth services, roads, and urban spaces. Various contextual and individual factors appeared to influence whether citizens engage in petitions, including citizens' effective capacity to seize this right on the one hand, and the presence of donor-funded activities and municipalities' implementation capacities on the other. Implementation issues not only neutralized the efforts of citizens, potentially discouraging them from petitioning again, but fundamentally drew into question the efficacy of petitions as a mechanism for inclusive local governance.

We proceed as follows. The next section presents a brief review of the decentralization process in Morocco. The subsequent two sections review the scholarly literature on how and why the right to petition is not equally seized by all citizens (section 3) and provide an overview of the data and methods used in this study (section 4). Section 5 then presents the findings related to the effects of individual and contextual characteristics on seizing the right to petition a municipality in Morocco. Section 6 analyzes the differences in municipalities' (mainly financial) capacities to implement the substance of the petitions. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and provides a tentative look forward.

## 2. Decentralization Reforms in Morocco—A Brief Overview

Since Morocco's independence in 1956 and until the current "advanced regionalization" process, successive decentralization reforms have continuously altered the country's administrative structure. The central role of municipalities throughout the various local administration reforms has been broadly acknowledged.[6] Rachik recounts how, before Morocco's independence, the French colonial administration elevated the *jma'a* (the traditional rural village council) as the central unit of its decentralized administration to maintain continuity between indigenous forms of governance and the French administrative system.[7] Postindependence, the municipal-

| DECONCENTRATION<br>State representatives | | DECENTRALISATION<br>Elected bodies | |
|---|---|---|---|

Region

**Wali**
Wilaya

**President of the Regional Council**
12 Regional Councils

| Prefecture (urban) | Prefecture (urban) | Province (rural) | Prefecture (urban) | Province (rural) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Province (rural) | **Governor**<br><br>Prefecture | **Governor**<br><br>Province | **President of the Prefectural Council**<br>13 Prefectural Councils | **President of the Provincial Council**<br>67 Provincial Councils |

| Municipality (urban or rural) | Municipality (urban) | Municipality (rural) | Municipalities (urban and rural) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pasha**<br><br>Pashalik | **Head of Circle**<br><br>Circle | **President of the Municipal Council**<br><br>1503 Municipal Councils |

Figure 3.1. The Parallel Governance Structure Regulating Present-Day Morocco
*Source:* Authors; adapted from Bergh (2021).

ity became key to the monarchy's efforts to bring the local administrations established during the French protectorate under centralized control.[8] In particular, the monarchy's attempt to affirm its power relied on establishing strong, direct ties with rural notables.[9] This strategy laid the grounds for establishing a double-headed governance structure, comprising elected institutions on the one hand and deconcentrated state-appointed officials on the other. This structure remains a key feature of Morocco's current decentralization reforms (see figure 3.1).[10]

The evolution of local governments' status was accompanied by an evolution in their political prerogatives.[11] In each phase, the legal framework reforms defined a specific role for local governments, affecting both their

capacity to act at the local level and their position within the overall administrative structure of the country.

Promulgated in 1960, the first Municipal Charter introduced mostly symbolic decentralization reforms.[12] No substantial transfer of competences was implemented, as initial reforms allocated limited prerogatives and financial autonomy to municipalities. Furthermore, local representatives of the Ministry of the Interior (known as *caïds*) bore most of the authority in managing municipal affairs.[13] These caïds oversaw the work of elected local councils through the exercise of *tutelle* (i.e., "guardianship"), limiting the councils' role to assisting the caïds. In the framework of the second Municipal Charter (promulgated in 1976), municipalities were granted increased fiscal and political autonomy, being recognized as a central unit for social and economic development. The president of the council (i.e., the mayor) was given an executive role (previously held by the caïd) in the municipality's management.

Nonetheless, the *tutelle* by state-appointed officials persisted—substantially limiting the role of municipalities as providers of community services. The 2002 third Municipal Charter further expanded autonomy to municipal councils and their presidents, requiring them to develop a six-year Municipal Development Plan, outlining municipalities' development priorities in collaboration with local actors. Since 2009, a series of laws and regulations have been enacted to improve municipalities' fiscal autonomy.[14] Yet, tutelage by state authorities persisted.

Approved in July 2015, Organic Law no. 113–14 defined the scope of local democracy in Morocco after the upheavals of 2011.[15] However, substantial changes in municipal prerogatives have been limited. For example, the Municipal Development Plan became the Municipal Action Plan, reducing the municipalities' role in formulating and executing development plans.[16] Moreover, the state's tutelage of municipal councils was not ended, as regime-appointed authorities still need to approve councils' key deliberations.[17]

Nevertheless, the reformed institutional framework did provide some opportunities for citizen and civil society organization roles in local governance, including in the development of the Municipal Action Plan and the advisory "body of equity, equal opportunities and gender approach" (*Instance d'Équité, d'Égalité de Chances et d'Approche Genre*). The actual scope of public engagement in these processes depended on the municipal council (or its president), which bore the discretional power to define the selection criteria and extent to which advice was sought from both mechanisms.

Organic Law no. 113–14 granted an unprecedented opportunity to par-

ticipate in the process of agenda-setting at the local level through the right to petition. This right allowed citizens and associations to add a topic to the agenda of the next ordinary session of the municipal council. To present a petition to a municipality, citizens had to draft the text and collect the required number of signatures.[18] Signatures had to be collected on a specific form, from citizens of the municipality enrolled on the electoral lists. The form also had to include the national identity card numbers of all signatories. Petitioners then had to supply hard copies of identity cards when they presented the petition to the municipal council.[19]

Associations were exempted from having to provide the supporters' signatures but had to comply with specific criteria (i.e., having been legally established for at least three years, having established their headquarters within municipal borders, having been run democratically, etc.). They also had to append a series of legal documents to the petition. This exemption was not explicitly stated in Organic Law no. 113–14, but most petitions to municipalities were presented through an association to exploit this legal loophole. The president of the municipality then decided whether the petition complied with all the formal criteria; if it did, the topic would be discussed in the subsequent municipal council meeting.[20]

### 3. Who Petitions Municipalities and Why?

Given the novelty of the petitioning instrument in Moroccan politics, the extent to which it fostered new modes of engagement with local governments remains unknown. Preliminary accounts of petitionary experiences in municipalities show that exercising the right to petition requires knowledge and resources not equally distributed among Moroccans. In the following sections, we examine these inequalities by focusing on the characteristics of those who exercise the right to petition and the differences between municipalities' capacities to ensure meaningful follow-ups to petitionary initiatives—with particular attention to the urban-rural divide.

Officially, all Moroccan citizens have had the right to petition. This right has been granted at the constitutional level (Article 15) and in laws regarding national- and local-level implementation. However, in practice, recurrent limitations have hindered citizens' effective enjoyment of this right. These limitations were fundamentally linked to the inequalities affecting Moroccan society at large, often excluding certain sociodemographic groups from participating in local governance.

The scholarly literature exploring the influence of inequalities on par-

ticipation has brought forward substantial evidence that socioeconomic status—especially education and income levels—influences the degree of civic and political participation.[21] Education has been identified as having a particularly positive association with all forms of political participation, as those who are well educated "are more likely to hold the kinds of jobs that yield high levels of income and civic skills; to be politically interested, informed and efficacious; and to be located in the social networks through which requests for political activity are mediated."[22] Moreover, education has also been correlated with the intergenerational transmission of political participation levels—educated individuals are not only more likely to engage, but are more likely to pass on high levels of education and engagement to their children.[23]

Income is another key element explaining civic and political participation levels across individuals. Higher income levels have been linked with higher levels of participation, as higher-income individuals have the resources (i.e., time and money) required for political action.[24] However, research has shown that higher-income individuals are also more likely to support the status quo, given their higher levels of integration in the polity and social networks; they tend to engage in contentious political action only when macroeconomic conditions are worsening.[25] Finally, this body of literature concludes that systemic education and income inequalities intersect with other characteristics, such as gender, race, or ethnicity, explaining lower levels of civic and political participation in marginalized communities.[26]

Recent scholarship has also explored the specific impact of new forms of participation on civic and political engagement inequality. How new mechanisms for citizens' engagement affect inequalities in participation remains an open debate. On one hand, the educational potential of participatory mechanisms is associated with increased civic and political engagement—e.g., when engaging in novel forms of participation has a spillover effect on established forms of engagement, such as participation in elections.[27] On the other hand, new mechanisms for participation increase the cost of citizen engagement, potentially furthering exclusion dynamics.[28] Citizens need to learn how to seize new opportunities for participation, and those who already have the tools to participate (e.g., higher income, education) are in a privileged position to do so. Indeed, empirical research in the US finds that education levels are a key factor in explaining different levels of engagement even for emerging forms of participation (namely boycotting, signing a petition, and protesting), rendering these novel forms exclusive to the highly educated.[29]

Importantly, the impact of new forms of participation on gender inequalities continues to be debated. Women have recorded higher levels of engagement in emerging forms of participation (especially petitions) in some contexts due to the multiplication of instances and arenas in which women can voice their opinions.[30] However, gender inequalities persist where the educational gap remains wide and where women feel that they are not capable or entitled to participate in politics.[31]

The literature on the MENA region does not explore this question in a comparative perspective, but some observations can be made based on the available empirical data.[32] The fifth wave of the Arab Barometer documents similar inequalities in reported civic engagement: education remains key, especially for nonelectoral forms of engagement; levels of income above the median are related to signing petitions and participation in public meetings and peaceful protests, while below-median levels of income are related to contentious actions to achieve political goals (such as violent protest). Overall, men engage more than women in all forms of participation across all countries in the study.[33]

Even for well-educated citizens, factors may exist that discourage engagement in petitions. Some citizens may simply feel they have neither the time nor the interest to become civically engaged, while others may think their engagement will not bring about change. Further, some citizens may fear retaliation for civic engagement from the regime or its agents—particularly in autocratic settings such as Morocco. Contextual factors also matter. Where a citizen lives might affect their propensity to engage. Those living in municipalities with a long history of inaction or inadequacy in public service provision may remain apathetic toward participation.

Considering these insights, we examine the relationship between the right to petition and democratic political participation in Moroccan municipal governance. We explore two related research questions: (1) Which socioeconomic factors most influenced seizing the right to petition? and (2) In which contexts were petitions most likely to be implemented by the local government? The first question allows us to investigate whether there are structural biases to accessing the right to petition, while the second question explores the contextual factors that determine the success (i.e., the implementation) of petitions in Moroccan municipalities. We argue that two levels of inequalities come into play when assessing the democratic effectiveness of petitioning: those that exist across different groups of individuals stemming from the legal requirements of petitioning, and those that exist across municipalities rooted in differential access to resources.

Thus, we assess two main hypotheses regarding petitioning in Morocco.

Our first is that the legal framework of the right to petition constituted a barrier that substantially excluded a large portion of Moroccan citizens. In practice, it allowed the right to petition to be seized mainly by educated and civically engaged individuals, often from the upper or middle class. This created a parallel exclusion of a substantial portion of the population who lacked formal education or the financial or social capital to exercise the right. Second, we expect more limited petitioning in rural and peripheral municipalities than in urban and central ones. Given the limited autonomy and inadequate resources for self-governance in rural and peripheral municipalities, citizens living in these areas may expect little gain from engaging with their municipal councils, and may therefore be less motivated to submit petitions.

## 4. Data and Methods

This chapter draws on long-standing research engagements by both authors on local governance, participation, and the study of petitions in Morocco. It is based on data collected in December 2018 and between August 2020 and May 2021.[34] During these fieldwork periods, Colin conducted twenty-six semistructured interviews with petitioners, local civil society organization staff, elected officials, civil servants, and personnel of national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This data is complemented by participant observation of a meeting organized by petitioners in a rural municipality and two focus groups.

This chapter also relies on an extensive desk review of reports and newspaper articles, as well as two datasets collected by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA) in the framework of a study on social and political trust in Morocco.[35] The datasets from MIPA comprise two nationwide, large-n surveys. The first survey was conducted in October 2019, with a sample of 1,000 Moroccan adults (aged eighteen and above), while the second survey was conducted in September 2020, with a sample of 1,400 Moroccan adults. The respondents from both surveys were selected through quota sampling to approximate a representative of the Moroccan population according to the latest census data.[36] However, since the petition question in MIPA's survey included both online petitions and those presented to municipalities, the quantitative data will be used to identify which socioeconomic variables influenced the general exercise of the right to petition.

The fieldwork focused on collecting data on petitions and included observation of an aid project fostering citizens' participation.[37] This proj-

ect was chosen as a case study because it explicitly included support for petitionary initiatives and targeted both rural and urban municipalities in three Moroccan provinces (Larache, Al-Hoceima, and Oujda). The data-collection process also included petitionary experiences in Tangiers and Fez, two large and diverse cities. The data for this chapter thus comes from a wide variety of settings we believe represent most Moroccans' experiences with municipal-level petitioning (see table B1 in  appendix B for an overview of the data). We anonymize interview data because we recognize that we are unable to assess all the ways in which the disclosure of personal data may affect the livelihoods of research participants.

Finally, we note that our research suffers from the fact that there is no official, publicly available list of all petitionary initiatives. Data on institutional petitions should be published on a dedicated web portal; however, at the time of our research, this portal only provided information aggregated at the national level.[38] Therefore, we could not conduct a comprehensive analysis of all petitionary instances using official data. However, self-reported instances of petitioning in the MIPA surveys provided an overall picture of Moroccan citizens' attitudes. The findings on petitions at the local government level reported here thus rely on data triangulation between published and unpublished documentation, accounts of those who worked with petitioners, and petitioners themselves.

## 5. Who Petitions?

We use fieldwork data to explore the effects of individual and contextual characteristics on presenting a petition to a municipality in Morocco. Specifically, we aim to provide data to test our first hypothesis—that the legal framework regulating institutional petitions created a barrier that de facto excludes those with limited education and resources from engaging in local governance through petitions.

The data provided by MIPA suggests that between 12 and 13 percent of Moroccans participated in the presentation of a petition (see table 3.1). Given the onerous demands of the petition process, these participation rates were relatively high. According to the World Values Survey, rates of signing a petition are lower across the MENA region, with only 6 percent of Egyptians and Tunisians, 7 percent of Jordanians, and 11 percent of Lebanese and Iraqis reporting having done so.[39] By contrast, rates in more established democracies like the United States and Sweden are 60 percent or higher.

TABLE 3.1. Rates of Participation in the Presentation of a Petition

*Have you ever participated in the presentation of a petition (online or in person)?*

| | 2019 (n = 1,000) | | 2020 (n = 1,400) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Response | Count | % | Count | % |
| Yes | 133 | 13% | 163 | 12% |
| No | 839 | 84% | 1,235 | 88% |
| I don't know/Refuse | 28 | 3% | 2 | 0.1% |

*Source:* Authors' compilation from MIPA datasets (2019, 2020).

However, it is necessary to break down this data according to various societal groups to understand potential political inequalities. Therefore, using the MIPA surveys, we considered the sociodemographic characteristics of Moroccans who reported having exercised their right to petition in the past. Table 3.2 presents the breakdown of the socioeconomic features of the respondents.

The difference between rural and urban municipalities is evident from table 3.2. The overwhelming majority (more than 80%) of respondents who engaged with petitions lived in urban areas. This finding might be explained by the socioeconomic differences noted above. Indeed, official census data shows that average education and income levels were lower in rural municipalities than in urban ones.[40] Specifically, 51% of Moroccans living in rural areas have not received any formal education, and only 2% attended higher education institutions, compared to 37% and 9%, respectively, of the urban population. The urban-rural divide is also evident in income levels, as the wealthiest 10% of urban residents had an annual average revenue 72% higher than the wealthiest 10% of rural residents.[41]

Official statistics align with the data collected by MIPA. Sixty-four percent of rural respondents lived on an average monthly household income below 3,000 Moroccan dirhams (MAD)—approximately US$325—compared to 19% of urban respondents. In urban areas, 54% of respondents had an average household monthly income above 8,000 MAD (around US$870), with this rate dropping to 9% for respondents from rural municipalities. Furthermore, 30% of the surveyed population living in rural areas had no formal education, while that rate was 4% for urban areas. Only 41% of respondents in rural areas had attained a high-school-level education or higher, compared to 90% of respondents living in urban municipalities.

Given that the question on petitioning employed a binary response, we conducted a logistic regression to see which factors most influenced par-

TABLE 3.2. Features of the Respondents Who Stated They Participated in Presenting a Petition

*Features of the respondents who said they participated in the presentation of a petition*

| Features | 2019 (n = 133) | | 2020 (n = 163) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Count | % | Count | % |
| *Sex* | | | | |
| Male | 77 | 58% | 79 | 49% |
| Female | 56 | 42% | 84 | 52% |
| *Level of education* | | | | |
| No formal education | 5 | 4% | 5 | 3% |
| Primary school | 8 | 6% | 12 | 7% |
| High school | 36 | 27% | 61 | 37% |
| University | 45 | 34% | 70 | 43% |
| Masters and above | 39 | 29% | 15 | 9% |
| *Average household income* | | | | |
| Below 3,000 MAD | 11 | 83% | 22 | 14% |
| Between 3,000 and 8,000 MAD | 37 | 28% | 74 | 45% |
| Above 8,001 MAD | 78 | 59% | 59 | 36% |
| Refuse to answer | 7 | 5% | 8 | 5% |
| *Area of residence* | | | | |
| Urban | 115 | 87% | 134 | 82% |
| Rural | 18 | 14% | 29 | 18% |

*Source:* Authors' compilation from MIPA datasets (2019, 2020).

ticipation in a petition.[42] The analysis was conducted on all survey respondents, testing which variables were associated with a positive answer. Table 3.3 presents our findings.

The regression results indicate that those with higher household incomes and those living in urban settings were significantly more likely to petition than those with the lowest household incomes and those in rural areas. These results are robust; going from the lowest to the highest average monthly household income raised the logarithmic odds of petitioning by 1.35 in 2019 and 1.94 in 2020 ($p < 0.01$). Residing in urban areas also proved to be a deciding factor leading to petition, as logarithmic odds of petitioning increased by 0.81 in 2019 and by 0.54 in 2020 ($p < 0.05$) for urban residents. The strength of the correlation is also evident from the repetition of this outcome in both years.

The ways that socioeconomic factors influence civic and political participation have been widely studied in academic literature, as discussed above. The statistical analysis of MIPA's datasets further supports the hypothesis

TABLE 3.3. Predictors of Petitioning

| Variables | 2019 | 2020 |
|---|---|---|
| Female | -0.290 | 0.197 |
| | (0.206) | (0.183) |
| Age | 0.0138* | -0.00776 |
| | (0.00827) | (0.00874) |
| Urban | 0.812** | 0.542** |
| | (0.331) | (0.249) |
| Primary school | 0.475 | -0.0909 |
| | (0.640) | (0.566) |
| Middle/high school | 0.694 | 0.387 |
| | (0.595) | (0.532) |
| University | 0.312 | 0.500 |
| | (0.625) | (0.562) |
| Masters' and above | 1.168* | 0.198 |
| | (0.647) | (0.652) |
| Between 3,000 and 8,000 MAD | 1.263*** | 0.649** |
| | (0.387) | (0.273) |
| Above 8,001 MAD | 1.348*** | 1.939*** |
| | (0.414) | (0.319) |
| Constant | -4.477*** | -3.241*** |
| | (0.708) | (0.659) |
| Observations | 904 | 1248 |

Standard errors in parentheses.
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.
*Source:* Kristen Kao and authors; data from MIPA (2019, 2020).

that individuals with certain characteristics (especially higher income and living in urban areas) are more likely to petition. These findings align with our fieldwork interviews and observations, clearly suggesting that these disparities directly influence the capacity to exercise the right to petition. Indeed, the petitioners must cover all costs incurred while preparing the petition—including time costs, such as copying signatories' ID cards, checking whether they are enrolled on electoral lists, and transportation costs to attend meetings. Thus, having limited financial resources reduces the ability to exercise this right, as those who do not have the financial means to launch a petition are unlikely to do so.

Data collected through interviews and observation clearly indicated that educational level may constitute a barrier. To submit a petition, citizens first need to know that the right to petition exists; second, they must understand how to exercise it in the administratively correct way. This necessitates a certain level of education and availability of resources. Moreover, administrative support is often needed to prepare the legal documents and navigate the formal procedure for submission.

In this framework, relatively high illiteracy rates (32% nationally—23% in urban areas and 48% in rural areas) potentially excluded a large segment of the population. Indeed, the greatest barrier seems to have been lack of education. As one NGO representative explains:

> AO.T.: [. . .] I think that the biggest obstacle to participation is literacy. [. . .] Essentially, if a person cannot read and cannot write, it will be impossible to present a petition[. . .]. We can find a solution to every issue [e.g., lack of financial resources]; there is always a way in which we can overcome a problem which is an obstacle to participation, but when a person is illiterate, there is nothing we can do.[43]

In short, submitting a petition requires a clear understanding of the legal requirements, the ability to draft the petition text, and the capacity to mobilize fellow citizens. Following the submission, citizens need to have the competency to sustain an advocacy campaign targeted at the municipal council to ensure that the petition is accepted and properly implemented. In cases where citizens lack the expertise to manage the whole petitionary process, training is required to reinforce their capacity. Unfortunately, such training is not widely available and mostly depends on the support of international donors.

In fact, a diverse set of international actors (including the United States Agency for International Development [USAID], the European Union [EU], the World Bank, bilateral-cooperation organizations, and international nongovernmental organizations [INGOs]) have developed programs to engage with the right to petition. For instance, Counterpart International (with USAID funding) developed a program to strengthen Moroccan civil society. It supported the General Directorate of Local Governments in delivering training and producing manuals for local governments on managing submitted petitions.[44]

Counterpart International also engaged with local civil society actors to support projects, including presenting the petition. Similarly, Oxfam and Movimiento por la Paz (MPDL) have been working since 2015 (with funding from the Spanish cooperation agency, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo [AECID]) to support democratic processes in Morocco with activities that explicitly aim at submitting petitions to rural and urban municipalities. Among other actions, they trained citizens and civil society actors in urban and rural municipalities on how to present a petition and worked to produce practical guides. The support

provided through these projects has played a crucial role in disseminating the skills needed to exercise this right. As an illustrative example, more than 120 petitions (out of the total 212) have been presented within the framework of the EU-funded program "Mouchakara Mouwatina" alone, which lasted from 2018 to mid-2021.[45] The relative lack of petitionary initiatives that did not benefit from internationally provided training supports the impression that petitions were not an instrument the broader citizenry could easily access.

Moreover, these donor-funded projects have had a limited scope. The specific geographical focus of each donor (for example, Spanish aid mostly focuses on northern regions) determined the area targeted for an action, and thus which citizens would receive training. Marginalized and/or peripheral municipalities were also less likely to be included in donors' activities due to logistical obstacles (e.g., difficulties in accessing by road, distance from main cities with convenient accommodation, and meeting-venue options), reinforcing the exclusion of those municipalities. The role of international donors in the diffusion of participatory practices in Morocco has already been acknowledged.[46] However, based on our data, we believe the donors' training and support activities on the right to petition may also have perpetuated inequalities in democratic participation.

The factors affecting citizens' abilities to utilize the right to petition play out differently in rural and urban municipalities. However, as we will discuss in the next section, such divergences might relate not only to citizens' abilities to petition but also to the actual capacity of the targeted municipality to respond to the demands raised. If municipalities cannot follow up on citizen requests for change due to a lack of resources and prerogatives, citizens may become apathetic and simply choose to exit politics. Although we do not provide direct evidence of this potentially negative effect of the petitioning process, we believe it is important to draw attention to it for policymakers and stakeholders alike seeking to promote greater participatory democracy in Morocco.

## 6. Beyond the Citizens: Municipalities' Capacity to Deal with Petitions

There are significant differences in how municipalities have dealt with citizens' petitions. As explained above, once the petition was submitted, its compliance with the legislative framework was assessed; if successful, the initiative was included on the agenda of the following council meeting, and eventually, policy action could follow. Our second hypothesis is

that citizens were more likely to submit petitions in urban municipalities than in rural ones, given their more limited autonomy, prerogatives, self-governance resources, and implementation issues.

Before discussing structural issues for using petitions, we need to acknowledge the role of local councillors. They were the gatekeepers of the petition system and could block proposals even before they came to be considered by the full council. They could justify blocking consideration of a petition by rigidly applying the formal criteria governing the submission process—for instance, blocking the cultural initiative of an association whose stated goal was to promote physical education simply because such an initiative did not feature in the association's stated mission.[47] Likewise, petitions could be obstructed by referring to a conflict of competences—for example, a municipal council rejected a petition against the unlicensed occupation of public space by businesses on the grounds that addressing this issue was the exclusive prerogative of the president (mayor) of the municipality.[48] Given the municipal councils' wide margin for discretionary (and sometimes seemingly arbitrary) decisions, the nature of relations between councillors, and their relationships with specific stakeholders in local civil society, also affected the use and outcome of petitions.

However, municipal budgets were arguably the most important limitation affecting petitioning. Municipal budgets largely depended on central government transfers (53% on average, increasing to 70% for rural municipalities) and were insufficient for the development of service delivery infrastructure and equipment.[49] Rural municipalities only accounted for 20% of the total local government expenditures in Morocco, while the urban municipalities' share was more than 50%. This, combined with their limited revenue-generating capacity, meant that rural municipalities had very limited capacity to implement new projects.[50]

Rural municipalities were again at a disadvantage, as most petitions presented in these municipalities concerned infrastructure development and public service delivery. For instance, it was common that petitions presented in rural municipalities demanded the creation (or improvement) of roads connecting villages. The substantial funds necessary to implement these projects were often beyond the scale of rural municipalities' budgets. So even if a petition was successful (i.e., on the agenda of a local council meeting), rural municipalities rarely had the financial resources to respond to its demands. Local authorities had to partner with other levels of the administration (the province or prefecture, region, deconcentrated authorities, and/or state representatives) or an international donor to gain the funding needed to implement the petitionary initiative.

Several interviewees reflected on the difficulties for rural municipalities to respond to petitions. A member of an advisory body to a rural municipality explained,

> sh: [. . .] the issue is that the council has some obstacles to take into consideration the needs of its inhabitants; for instance, during summer when residents don't have [access to] water, there is the need to lay pipes or dig a well and ensure their maintenance [. . .] this demands a lot of money that the municipality cannot commit. It has only the money of the VAT [central-government transfers based on value-added tax revenues] or of partnerships [with NGOs and donors][. . .]. Citizens do not understand; they only see that there is no water and that the municipality doesn't do their job, even if it's more complicated. Meeting this need demands a lot of know-how and material resources.[51]

A petition that demanded sanitation for a rural municipality's water table provides another example. After its formal acceptance, the petition's implementation required a preliminary study to assess the extent of the intervention and its cost. However, the municipality did not have the financial capacity to carry out either the preliminary study or the intervention itself. In the words of one of the petitioners: "The council developed a sanitation project for our municipality, [but] the council needs a period of two years to mobilize the resources."[52]

Urban municipalities, on the other hand, were better placed to respond to petitions. Petitions presented in urban municipalities often called for less resource-intensive public goods, such as establishing specific advisory bodies and participatory budgets or regulating public space occupied by cafes and shops. Moreover, they often received more support from international donors. The case of the World Bank's program to promote territorial development by strengthening municipal governance is illustrative. The project focused on municipalities with over 50,000 inhabitants, and more than 80 percent of the municipalities in this program were urban.[53] However, international aid may also have had a distorting effect, in that some municipalities may have conditioned their engagement with participatory mechanisms on the availability of such aid—as happened with some participatory budgeting initiatives in Morocco.[54]

Indeed, international aid may have influenced municipalities' responses to petitions more generally. For instance, even municipalities that could afford to address petitions may have chosen not to do so, preferring to wait

for international aid to become available. Our fieldwork found that a successful petition by one local branch of an NGO demanding the development of an alternative waste-management policy in a large urban municipality had yet to be implemented because the municipality was waiting for international financial support to avoid having to use its own funds. There was a precedent of reliance on international aid—the same demand for a waste-management policy was addressed in a different urban municipality, thanks to a partnership with the German Development Cooperation Agency (the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ]). This trend seemed likely to continue. For example, the new iteration of Oxfam and MPDL's project to support citizens' democratic participation in Morocco also included funds to support municipalities implementing the petitions presented within the framework of this project.[55]

Such partnerships contribute to the implementation of projects developed through petitions, but they also foster a systematic, municipal-level dependence on the other levels of administration and/or international donors—especially for funding. Municipalities' fiscal independence has improved over the years, but at the time of writing, they were still far from being able to autonomously handle citizens' demands for good local governance.[56]

Indeed, the principle of subsidiarity should allow other levels of governance (usually the province or prefecture, but also the regional council or other state institutions) to contribute to municipalities' budgets where needed.[57] However, although this principle has been identified as a key opportunity for many rural municipalities to implement petitions related to infrastructure and other costly interventions, it seems that collaboration between different levels of governance has rarely occurred.[58]

## 7. Conclusion

This chapter set out to take stock of Morocco's experience with local petitions since the passing of the relevant legal framework in 2015. It started by briefly reviewing the increasing role of municipalities in local governance over time, noting that this increase had not been matched by a corresponding growth in financial and political autonomy. However, important new avenues for institutional participation in local governance have opened—including the right to petition, granting citizens and associations the opportunity to add topics to municipal council agendas.

Based on (limited) statistical data and multisite, qualitative fieldwork

spanning two and a half years, we found that the legal requirements of the right to the petition, as well as sociodemographic features of the population, limited institutional inclusion in local governance to educated, engaged, and often urban middle-class citizens. We also found that even if a petition was successful, budgetary and infrastructural constraints could jeopardize its policy outcome. Municipalities often lacked the fiscal autonomy to implement projects and had to rely on other funding sources.

We further observed that international donor projects substantially affected the exercise of the right to petition. In their absence, a significant share of the population was effectively excluded as, even if they wanted to participate, they lacked the means and know-how to exercise the right to petition. We found that rural municipalities were disproportionally affected by these limitations; citizens in rural areas had lower levels of education and resources, practically limiting their capacity to petition, and their more pronounced lack of fiscal autonomy, lesser access to donor funding, and limited self-governance fundamentally obstructed the successful implementation of petitions. Ultimately, this sheds light on the key role of individual- and community-level factors in exercising the right to petition. Similar to the influence of marginalization on individual preferences for mosque-based services in Tunisia (see Brooke and Komer in this volume), individual socioeconomic factors and type of municipality considerably influenced the exercise of the right to petition.

We conclude that substantial barriers rendered petitions a privilege limited to a particular segment of Moroccan society. Indeed, our findings confirm the argument made in the scholarly literature on civic engagement more generally: systematic inequalities and exclusion reproduce uneven access to participatory institutions.[59] Based on our case studies, we observed that exercising the right to petition is often limited to educated, urban, middle-class populations who may already have been active in local civil society. Unequal access to participatory mechanisms, such as the right to petition, reinforced the same inequalities that participation was supposed to address; those who could not exercise the right to petition were further excluded from local governance.[60] As demonstrated in Kherigi's chapter in this volume, decentralization reforms are far from neutral. The regulatory framework defining the right to petition and municipal responses is key in determining who can and will participate. In the case of petitions, too, the discretionary power left to municipalities to implement petitions allows those in power to exploit decentralization's gray areas.

Hence, our outlook is rather bleak: if municipalities lack the political autonomy and financial capacity to engage with submitted petitions, the

efforts of citizens who engage with local governance are wasted. In this chapter, we have shown that petitioning, in terms of both who can most easily exercise the right and who can have a successful petition implemented, favored certain population groups—urban, educated, and wealthy citizens. In addition, we believe the Moroccan regime may have been using the right to petition as a mechanism to channel citizens' demands into procedural and drawn-out processes that allow citizens to present issues to the municipal council while disassociating them from the discussion of (and decisions over) solutions to such issues. This situation draws into question the extent to which citizens can be included in local governance, and points to the danger that petitions might lead to increased levels of apathy among citizens. Therefore, we suggest that the credible institutionalization of local-level participatory policies must be accompanied by a concrete devolution of political and financial autonomy to local government.

## NOTES

1. We are grateful for the financial support from the Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) at the University of Gothenburg, the Hicham Alaoui Foundation, and the Social Science Collaboration India—Netherlands (SSCIN) program for the research grant on "Service with Accountability: Examining Public Service Characteristics in Differing Political Regimes" (NWO project number W 07.04.030.250).

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4. Abdelali El Hourri, "Pétitions Nationales: 5 Saisines en Deux Ans, Toutes Irrecevables," *Medias24*, September 30, 2019, https://www.medias24.com/2019/09/30/petitions-nationales-5-saisines-en-deux-ans-toutes-irrecevables/

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"The 2009 Communal Charter and Local Service Delivery in Morocco" (Program on Governance and Local Development Working Paper No. 2, Yale University, 2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3715521; Sylvia I. Bergh, *The Politics of Development in Morocco: Local Governance and Participation in North Africa* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

9.  Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple*; Bouabid and Iraki, "Maroc: Tensions Centralisatrices."

10.  Hoffmann, "Between Decentralization and Recentralization"; Bergh, *The Politics of Development*; Annabelle Houdret and Astrid Harnisch, "Decentralisation in Morocco: A Solution to the 'Arab Spring'?" *Journal of North African Studies* 24, no. 6 (2019): 935–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1457958

11.  The following account of the four phases is closely based on Sylvia I. Bergh, "Democratic Decentralization and Development: Insights from Morocco's Advanced Regionalization Process," in *Research Handbook on Democracy and Development*, eds. Gordon Crawford and Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 482–501.

12.  Bergh, *The Politics of Development*.

13.  Houdret, and Harnisch, "Decentralisation in Morocco"; Bergh, *The Politics of Development*; Clark, "The 2009 Communal Charter"; Bouabid and Iraki, "Maroc: Tensions Centralisatrices."

14.  Bergh, *The Politics of Development*; Clark, "The 2009 Communal Charter"; Manuel Goehrs, *L'Expérience Communale au Maroc: De la Jemaa à la Libre Administration* (Rabat: Heinrich Böll Stiftung—Afrique du Nord, 2015).

15.  Goehrs, *L'Expérience Communale*, 31; Raquel Ojeda-García, "The Politics of Development in Morocco: Local Governance and Participation in North Africa," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 3 (2018): 522–3, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1446270

16.  Bergh, "Democratic Decentralization and Development," 494.

17.  Lamia Zaki, "Decentralization in Morocco: Promising Legal Reforms with Uncertain Impact" (Research Paper, Arab Reform Initiative, Paris, 2019), https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/decentralization-in-morocco-promising-legal-reforms-with-uncertain-impact/

18.  Organic Law no. 113–14 does not specify the format, but a decree (no. 2-16-403) published in the official gazette in October 2016 defines the specific layout of the petition. The number of signatures required is defined by Article 123 of Organic Law no. 113–14. It depends on the size of the municipality and varies from 100 to 400 signatures for cities divided into *arrondissements*.

19.  Interviewees with experience of exercising the right to petition reported that the petition should be presented or submitted to the municipal council at least a month before the next council session to allow for compliance with formal requirements. This delay is not stipulated in Organic Law no. 113–14.

20.  Municipal councils meet at least three times per year in their ordinary sessions (February, May, and October) (Article 33, Organic Law no. 113–14). Plus, extraordinary sessions can be summoned by the president of the council, a third of the councillors (Article 36, Organic Law no. 113–14), or  the governor of the prefecture or province (Article 37, Organic Law no. 113–14).

21.  Russel J. Dalton, *The Participation Gap: Social Status and Political Inequality*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sidney Verba et al., *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Sidney Verba et al., "Unequal at the Starting Line: Creating Participatory Inequalities across Generations and among Groups," *American Sociologist* 34, no. 1 (2003): 45–69, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-003-1005-y

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23. Verba et al., "Unequal at the Starting."

24. Dalton, *The Participation Gap*, 42.

25. Mario Quaranta, "Repertoires of Political Participation: Macroeconomic Conditions, Socioeconomic Resources, and Participation Gaps in Europe," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 59, no. 4 (2018): 324, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715218800526; Alan Schussman and Sarah A. Soule, "Process and Protest: Accounting for Individual Protest Participation," *Social Forces* 84, no. 2 (2005): 1083–108, https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0034

26. Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 138.

27. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Julien Talpin, "Former des Sujets Démocratiques," *Idées Économiques et Sociales* 173, no. 3 (2013): 17–24, https://doi.org/10.3917/idee.173.0017

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29. Dietlind Stolle and Marc Hooghe, "Shifting Inequalities: Patterns of Exclusion and Inclusion in Emerging Forms of Political Participation," *European Societies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 119–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2010.523476

30. Stolle and Hooghe, "Shifting Inequalities," 123.

31. Michael Baum and Ana Espirito-Santo, "Exploring the Gender Gap in Portugal: Women's Political Participation," in *Portugal at the Polls: In 2002*, eds. André Freire, Marina Costa Lobo, and Pedro Magalhães (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 191.

32. The majority of the studies quoted above are based on cross-national survey data collected in the United States or Europe.

33. Kathrin Thomas, *Arab Barometer: Civic Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa* (Topic Report—Civic Engagement, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2019), 20.

34. The second part of the fieldwork for this chapter was conducted in the framework of Colin's PhD fieldwork in Morocco.

35. Mohammed Masbah et al., *Trust in Institutions Index 2020: The Parliament and Beyond* (Rabat: Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020), https://mipa.institute/8200

36. Census data is available at: http://rgphentableaux.hcp.ma/

37. This project ran between January 2015 and March 2020. It was financed by the Spanish international cooperation agency Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID), and implemented by Movimiento por la

Paz (MPDL, Movement for Peace) and Oxfam Maroc in collaboration with local CSOs. This data was collected for research purposes with the permission of the project management team while Colin worked as a consultant to the project.

38. The platform is available at https://www.eparticipation.ma

39. Christian Haerpfer et al., *World Value Survey: Round Seven—Country-Pooled Datafile*, 2020, distributed by JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat, https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp Note that Morocco was not included in this wave, so direct comparisons cannot be made.

40. The following data is available at the official website of the National Statistics Body of Morocco at http://rgphentableaux.hcp.ma/Home/

41. Youssef Maaroufi, "Revenus des Ménages Niveaux, Sources et Distribution Sociale" (Haut-Commissariat au Plan du Royaume du Maroc, Note d'Information, Rabat, 2021), https://www.hcp.ma/Revenus-des-menages-Niveaux-sources-et-distribution-sociale_a2697.html

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45. The name is the Arabic term for "citizen participation," as stated by one of the managers of the project during the online seminar "Séminaire International de Bonnes Pratiques en Matière de Participation Démocratique et Citoyenne," May 6, 2021.

46. Eric Cheynis, "Les Pionniers de la Participation au Maroc. Espace de Reclassement et Constitution d'un Savoir Autonome," *Participations* 14, no. 1 (2016): 37–59, https://doi.org/10.3917/parti.014.0037

47. Interview with AO.T., 14/12/2018, Laouamra.

48. Interview with Z.J., 13/12/2018, Rabat.

49. Bergh, "Democratic Decentralization," 494.

50. Erik Vollmann et al., "Decentralization as Authoritarian Upgrading? Evidence from Jordan and Morocco," *Journal of North African Studies* 27, no. 2 (2020): 362–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1787837

51. Interview with S.H., 07/11/2020, via telephone.

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53. Morocco—Municipal Performance Program-for-Results Project (English) (Report no. PAD3282, Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2019), http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/935151573441234720/Morocco-Municipal-Performance-Program-for-Results-Project

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57. Lalia E. L. Karamech, *Répartition Des Compétentes Entre l'État et les Collectivités Territoriales: Conflit ou Bonne Gouvernance?* 132nd ed. (Revue Marocaine d'Administration Locale et de Développement (REMALD), 2020), 417.

58. Interview with AO.T. 5/08/2020, online. The two interviewees that mentioned this mechanism were not aware of any instance in which it had been applied. However, our observation includes three petitions to a rural municipality that were relayed to the provincial council of the area for funding; to the best of our knowledge, implementation has yet to occur.

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# Local Elections and Service Provision under Lebanon's Postwar Party Cartel

### Christiana Parreira

## 1. Introduction

In the aftermath of civil war, empowerment of local political institutions is often framed as an effective way to promote democratic accountability and improve the quality of governance. Scholars and policymakers highlight the need to reinstitute free and fair elections at the local level following conflict.[1] Others show that the devolution of basic social service provision to the local level can improve governance quality in contexts where the central state has previously broken down or been subverted by private providers of order.[2] Together, local elections and policymaking can promote a new postconflict equilibrium where citizens participate in the reestablishment of everyday democratic governance.[3]

In many settings, however, local political institutions are associated with authoritarian durability, suggesting they do not act as a panacea for troublesome governing contexts. For example, under single-party rule in Mexico, the governing party selectively distributed funding for service provision to loyal local governments and denied them elsewhere to punish electoral opposition.[4] As Sosnowski argues in this volume, the Syrian regime has used similar strategies to punish localities that supported the opposition. Further, the Moroccan case illustrates how the pursuit of decentralization can be a strategy to co-opt opposition parties and broaden

the regime's support base.[5] Even in electoral democracies, devolution of governance is often associated with clientelism and the creation of subnational authoritarian enclaves, thereby decreasing elite accountability in subsequent electoral cycles.[6] The wide range of outcomes associated with decentralization and local governance, irrespective of regime type, suggests that specific institutional features of center-local relations—rather than the mere presence of democratically elected local leaders—must be taken into consideration.

Lebanon is a postconflict state, where democratic local elections and the devolution of governance responsibilities coincided with a poor governance track record. At the same time, electoral opposition to Lebanon's small set of governing parties—what I characterize as a "party cartel"—has been very limited since the end of the civil war in 1990.[7] Prior explanations of poor governance in Lebanon focus on the prevalence of clientelism as an alternative to programmatic spending, on the country's ethnic diversity, or on the tendency of consociational power-sharing institutions to heighten elite gridlock.[8] By contrast, this chapter argues that the longstanding institutions that delimit the relationship between central and local authorities have handicapped electoral opposition at its local roots. Within this system, party-cartel-affiliated local governments have been given the resources necessary to govern, while opposition areas have not.

This chapter presents empirical evidence supporting this argument. It shows that a core component of the party cartel's strategy has been to selectively reward local electoral strongholds with access to basic governance goods. Local elites who opposed the party cartel were not afforded these privileges, and thus, electoral opposition was hampered and became increasingly limited over time. As a result, in practice Lebanon's multiparty, procedural democracy came to function as an electoral autocracy.

This chapter has important implications for scholars of postconflict state-building, particularly in places where transitions out of conflict involve some sort of elite pact. In these contexts, local elections are quite susceptible to elite capture. Though drawn from a democratic context, the argument presented in this chapter also applies to other polities in the post-Ottoman sphere, where legacies of heavy central state control over local authorities remain intact. This form of deconcentrated but not fully decentralized governance is common throughout the region and has played an understudied role in regime durability.[9] In this sense, although Lebanon is often exceptionalized in studies of the Middle East due to the uniqueness of its consociational, national-level democratic institutions, its

local political landscape is comparable to those of other regional states and should be further considered for comparative analysis.

The chapter also speaks to core debates in the comparative politics literature over how ethnic identity affects governance quality and political stability. Counter to the prevailing narrative, the chapter suggests that *interethnic cooperation*, not only conflict, plays a crucial role in postconflict polities where ethnic identity predominates. Additionally, the chapter's findings are relevant to scholars of ethnic consociationalism, including power-sharing arrangements implemented after a civil war. While some consociational societies are well-governed, the Lebanese case highlights how certain institutional arrangements pair particularly poorly with ethnic power-sharing. Specifically, heavily centralized authority over local governments in Lebanon has compounded the tendency of consociationalism to produce "elite cartels" that have pernicious effects on governance.[10]

This chapter proceeds in three parts. The first section outlines how legacies of state-building in Lebanon during the late Ottoman and early independence eras shaped ties between the central and local levels of government. This led to many responsibilities being conferred onto local governments. Next, the chapter charts the evolution of elite strategies after the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). In the war's aftermath, a cohesive party cartel comprised of several parties formed, initially intended to prevent future violence. However, over time, it evolved to exclude outside electoral challengers, much like an economic cartel. The third section presents evidence from two original surveys showing that Lebanon's key parties competed in local elections in the postwar era as a united cartel, forming alliances and largely avoiding competition, despite different policy preferences. The chapter then shows that local-level party cartel control is associated with higher-quality governance. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for the viability of electoral opposition in Lebanon.

## 2. Local Governance in Lebanon before and after the Civil War

Local municipal councils in Lebanon were initially conceived in 1861 following an outbreak of violence in the broader Levant.[11] During the remainder of the Tanzimat (1839–1876), a series of reforms produced a contractual relationship between Ottoman central authorities and local elected councillors. Central elites provided the resources necessary for

local councillors—largely drawn from the landed elite and heads of families—to reinforce their societal dominance. In return, councillors assured local order, settled communal disputes, and provided information to central elites as necessary.

Two trends subsequently unfolded as Ottoman rule gave way to the French mandate (1923–1946) and early independence eras. First, prominent clan-based elites in the regional urban centers of Tripoli, Sidon, Jounieh, Baalbek, and elsewhere consolidated control over municipal governments and their attendant fiscal resources, allotted via the central state.[12] Second, legislation further expanded municipal responsibilities from 1922 through the tenure of Fouad Chehab (1958–64), during which time the number of new municipalities grew exponentially.[13]

By the Chehabist era, municipal councillors maintained chief responsibility for everyday governance—no small task in rapidly urbanizing areas like Tripoli or Baalbek. Yet the central state's ability to fund and implement larger-scale development projects remained heavily vested. Therefore, MPs and government members in Beirut were able to dictate the terms by which Lebanon's periphery was governed—an institutional arrangement similar to the contemporary one this chapter later describes.

However, the key difference between pre– and post–civil war central control over municipalities lies in the degree of central *coordination* of governance strategies. While MPs and ministers forged ties with the local governments of their respective hometowns, they rarely intervened in the governance of areas outside their narrow personal purview and the capital, Beirut. National parties and factions, such as the Kataeb Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, and the National Bloc, did not coordinate to systematically compete across municipal elections.[14] In summary, central elites' interventions in local affairs were rarely orchestrated in coordination with one another or across multiple municipalities as part of an overarching strategy.

Center-local relations rapidly changed following the start of civil conflict in Lebanon in 1975. Following a brief cessation of conflict in 1977, the central state passed two key laws expanding the scope of municipal responsibilities and formalizing regular financial transfers from the newly created Independent Municipal Fund. The first piece of legislation (Decree-Law 118 of 1977) broadened both the range of duties for which municipalities held sole responsibility and the duties they managed alongside the central state. The second piece of legislation (Decree-Law 1917 of 1979) created an autonomous municipal fund to be dispersed by the central state to local governments. Though renewed violent conflict in 1979 prevented

the enactment of both laws for several decades, these laws formed the legal foundation of center-local ties in the postwar (1990–present) era.

When the war resumed in 1979, municipalities were entirely untethered from the central state. Lacking requisite aid from the center, municipalities either ceased functioning or kept going by other means. Various municipalities continued to operate via the beneficence of wealthy locals or, in some cases, via newly created parties and militia groups.[15] This patchwork of informal local order remained in place until the end of the conflict in 1989.

Lebanon's war-ending Ta'if Agreement (1989) is frequently characterized as having instituted a "no victor, no vanquished" policy, whereby nascent militias-turned-political-parties were granted immunity for their war-era activities.[16] In reality, the agreement's enactment under Syrian auspices entailed clear winners and losers. During the Syrian occupation era, which lasted until 2005, coalitions were formed, comprising most other political factions, along with various independent elites who were largely allied with the Syrian regime. After 2005, formerly excluded parties were reintegrated into the national government, coalescing into a stable "party cartel" of six key parties.[17] With minor exceptions, these parties formed national unity governments thereafter.

Crucially, Lebanon's postwar party cartel system extended to the local level as well. Lebanon's major governing parties competed in *national* elections, often fiercely, but have usually agreed to unity governments. However, parties formed a series of electoral alliances, virtually eradicating interparty competition at the *local* level. For example, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, two parties that draw predominantly Shia Muslim support, agreed to a formal electoral alliance in 2004 that extended to the municipal level. The two major Christian parties, the Lebanese Forces and Free Patriotic Movement, agreed to a similar municipal alliance as part of the Maarab Agreement (2016). Alliances were also forged between parties of different ethnic identities. In diverse locales like Beirut, all or almost all the major party cartel members have formed joint electoral lists against "independent" or, by 2016, "opposition" lists, even though these parties maintain conflicting policy stances.[18]

On paper, center-local relations in Lebanon were not fundamentally altered after the civil war. Per the legislation from 1977 and 1979, along with supplementary legislation, municipalities received regular transfers from the central government and were required to seek its permission for any development work above a low, nominal threshold, varying by municipal size. The approval process usually went as follows. A municipal

council first proposed a general plan and funding structure, which must be approved by the Ministries of Interior and Municipalities (MOIM) and Finance (MOF). Next, the MOIM and MOF designated one or more other ministries to review the plans pertaining to specific sectors. For example, plans for a new landfill facility usually required review from the Ministries of Environment and Public Works. Finally, once the nature of the project was agreed on, contract bidding (if relevant) would be handled by either the Office of the Minister of State Administrative Reform or the Council for Development and Reconstruction.

In the postwar era, Lebanese ministerial leadership has been roughly allocated based on party vote shares in national elections. In most post-2005 cabinets, parties in the cartel were represented through ministerial leadership at some stage in the approval process for local government work. In other words, municipal work would probably involve a party cartel member at some point, and a municipality's collective requests to the central government (over a six-year term) would probably involve mostly or exclusively party cartel members.

As a result, the party cartel maintained heavily centralized control over the resources necessary for local authorities to perform everyday governance tasks. These resources were not only financial but also bureaucratic—even if they independently raised the necessary funding, municipalities needed permission from the central state when any work exceeds a low financial threshold. Bureaucratic authority was granted, or not granted, at the near-total discretion of ministerial leadership.[19] As one municipal councillor said, "If you do not have the parties' support, any little thing will delay a project. It just takes one person being told not to sign a document, to delay, to put some roadblocks up against an idea. And then it does not get done."[20]

This chapter presents two key pieces of evidence related to Lebanon's postwar party cartel. First, it provides novel descriptive evidence that Lebanon's party cartel functioned as a cohesive regime in *local elections*. Second, it shows that party cartel control is positively linked to the quality of *local governance goods*, particularly public or quasipublic goods that are less efficiently targeted at specific individuals.

## 3. Theorizing Lebanon's Predatory Governance System

Postwar Lebanon has performed exceptionally poorly in providing basic social services. Before its 2019 economic crisis, Lebanon was an upper-

middle-income country, with its infrastructure ranked 113th out of 137 countries.[21] Around this time, however, the quality of electricity provision ranked fourth worst in the world, and Lebanese citizens consistently paid monopoly prices for additional electricity via private generators during frequent blackouts.[22] Public water provision was similarly inadequate.[23] Likewise, healthcare was largely privatized and often only accessible through partisan connections.[24]

Poor service provision in Lebanon has also been coupled with high levels of elite predation. The country maintained the third-highest debt-to-GDP ratio in the world by 2018.[25] Scholars have documented how incumbent elites' siphoning of state resources has led to excessive spending, with minimal benefits conferred on the Lebanese people.[26] To that point, a survey indicated that 99 percent of Lebanon's population believed elite corruption to be a pervasive problem.[27]

The simultaneous stability of Lebanon's postwar party system—specifically, the total lack of new party entry—is even more surprising given the tendency of unconsolidated and/or postconflict contexts to produce high levels of elite turnover and unstable party systems.[28] The emergence of moderately stable multiparty systems in such contexts is often heralded as reassurance against the possibility of future violence or autocratization.[29] On the other hand, strong parties alone do not promote postconflict democratic practices: transitions out of conflict can also give rise to single-party hegemony at both local and national levels.[30]

The Lebanese case does not fit cleanly into such characterizations. Lebanon's postwar party cartel was strong in that members, as of the 2018 MP elections, were not fundamentally challenged by outside party competitors, winning most of the national and local races. Yet parties within the cartel were not different faces of the same coin. They competed in national elections within two broader umbrella factions—the March 14 Coalition and the March 8 Coalition—and were ideologically opposed on numerous issues. They also represented different ethnic constituencies. Given these distinctions, their local- and national-level cartel behavior deserves a framing distinct from those generally associated with either democratic party systems or single-party autocracies.

Party cartel systems have emerged in various developing contexts, including Bolivia and Indonesia, almost always after civil conflict and/or regime change. Such collusion is often justified to the public, sometimes via a formal elite settlement, as safeguarding against the threat of future violence and state breakdown. Such agreements, in theory, lengthen elite time horizons by guaranteeing major players a seat at the table, limiting

incentives to defect and engage in antisystemic political action.[31] That said, party cartel systems limit the accountability-enhancing effects of electoral competition, essentially narrowing the voters' choice set to one cohesive faction. As a result, party cartel systems tend to produce regressive policy-making, particularly welfare-state retrenchment and elite rent-seeking.[32] In some cases, party cartel systems have quickly plummeted in popularity and been ousted from power within a few electoral cycles.[33]

How did Lebanon's party cartel system remain in power? Existing scholarship identifies three key factors with applications to various other postconflict and/or diverse contexts. These are (a) civil war–induced incentives for elite predation and rent-seeking, (b) consociational power-sharing institutions, and (c) how diversity impedes voter coordination against extant elites and fosters patron-clientelism. This chapter discusses each of these explanations in turn, highlighting their validity while also arguing that they do not completely explain the Lebanese experience.

Scholars show that legacies of violence can lead to predatory elite behavior. The threat of future violence shortens elite time horizons and encourages short-term rent-seeking.[34] Excessive state predation is, theoretically, a suboptimal behavior, even for elites themselves—who, in failing to invest in their populations, rob themselves of future taxation revenue. However, this is only true if the elites see the existence of the state and their roles in it as stable.[35] Indeed, as previously mentioned, the danger of elite uncertainty is one of the reasons why international observers have lauded power-sharing arrangements like Lebanon's.

This chapter argues and empirically demonstrates that this theoretical framework is less appropriate for the Lebanese case. Either Lebanon's elite have been so fractious that they loot the state instead of cooperating, or they actively cooperate to engage in predation; however, these mechanisms are at odds with one another. Evidence presented in this chapter points to the latter collusive behavior by demonstrating that elites in Lebanon have actively cooperated in political competition, even at the local level, and have predictably attained power where they do so. If this is true, theories linking the *lack* of elite cooperation to Lebanon's current deleterious state should be called into question.

Extensive scholarly literature also investigates how consociational systems based on elite power-sharing hinder or enable certain types of predatory elite behavior. Some scholars argue that consociationalism, if implemented correctly and without pernicious foreign influence, enhances the representational aspects of electoral democracy and reassures against

minoritarian rule.[36] For reasons already discussed, power-sharing is often promoted in post–civil war pacts between elites representing different groups.[37] On the other hand, consociationalism definitionally promotes the formation of an "oversize coalition," limiting competition along ethnic or confessional lines.[38] In other words, some degree of cartelization is usually guaranteed through consociational formulas, particularly at the national level.

With that said, consociationalism is not deterministically responsible for the formation of Lebanon's postwar party cartel. Lebanon's consociational formula has not limited competition within ethnic groups or the formation of a government comprising only some parties or factions from said groups. Additionally, consociationalism dictated nothing about the terms of competition or representation at the *local* (i.e., municipal) level. Councillors have been elected on a simple, majoritarian basis, with open-list voting and no ethnic quotas—most Lebanese municipalities are ethnically homogeneous.[39] In other words, party cartel collusion in local electoral competition has been a product of elite strategy, not consociationalism.

Finally, scholars argue that diversity (power-sharing aside) can impede voters' efforts to coordinate around electoral alternatives to incumbent elites.[40] In Lebanon, for example, alternatives to dominant ethnic party cartel members failed to generate significant electoral support.[41] Relatedly, the literature on identity-based or ethnic parties finds that such organizations rely on patron-clientelism or other forms of particularistic exchange at the expense of programmatic policymaking.[42] The proliferation of clientelism in postwar Lebanese politics is empirically well proven.[43]

However, explanations for Lebanon's poor governance track record focusing on ethnic diversity or ethnic parties fail to consider alternatives to the current party cartel system. Indeed, some of the most viable, if short-lived, challenges to the party cartel have emerged via ethnocentric defectors from within the cartel parties themselves. Such opposition figures situate themselves as anti-cartel through *greater* reliance on ethnic out-bidding, not less.[44] In other words, slightly better performing, but also clientelist and ethnocentric, candidates could have been potential sources of competition for the party cartel. The question, then, is why these alternatives were rarely viable, even on a local scale.

In the following sections, I present evidence demonstrating how Lebanon's party cartel has used local control to reward loyalty and punish opposition as part of a unified strategy. I first present original data demonstrating that governing parties competed as cartels in local elections,

which translated into high victory rates. I then show that cartel-controlled municipalities were governed more effectively, and that these local advantages extended to the realm of programmatic politics.

## 4. Evidence of Cartel Behavior in Local Elections

Party cartel behavior at the *national* level in Lebanon is empirically established. However, it is not documented at the *local* level; systematic data regarding candidate and list partisan affiliation is not publicly available for the just over 1,000 municipal governments. The state institution responsible for local electoral administration (the MOIM) only began publicly releasing candidates' names and vote totals in 2010. Similar data was released for the 2016 local elections, but no data has ever been published about local party competition. Therefore, municipal council candidates' party affiliations (or lack thereof) and electoral lists are not systematically available for any local election.

To understand how Lebanese parties compete in local elections, I partnered with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies to implement an original telephone survey of Lebanese mayors. Between two and four months after the 2016 municipal elections, enumerators called mayors (using publicly available phone data) and asked them to report the number of electoral lists that ran in their municipality, the political affiliation of each list, and the number of seats won by each list. Mayors then provided contact information for one to two other municipal councillors, who (if reached) were asked  the same questions to cross-check answers. Responses were validated with media reports in English and Arabic wherever coverage was available. The total number of candidates was also cross-checked with MOIM data.

An elite survey approach via telephone was taken instead of alternative strategies (in-person and/or citizen surveys). The questions were straightforward, objective, and few. Therefore, systematic reporting of biased, false answers was not a significant concern. Additionally, the survey was comprehensive across all municipalities (n = 1,019 in 2016); a citizen survey of vote choice would not have produced a holistic picture of governance in all peripheral areas, nor would citizens have been better poised to accurately answer these questions. Finally, a phone survey was more economical than in-person interviews, given the geographic span.

Figure 4.1 summarizes patterns of party competition in Lebanon's 2016 municipal elections, looking separately at urban and peri-urban munici-
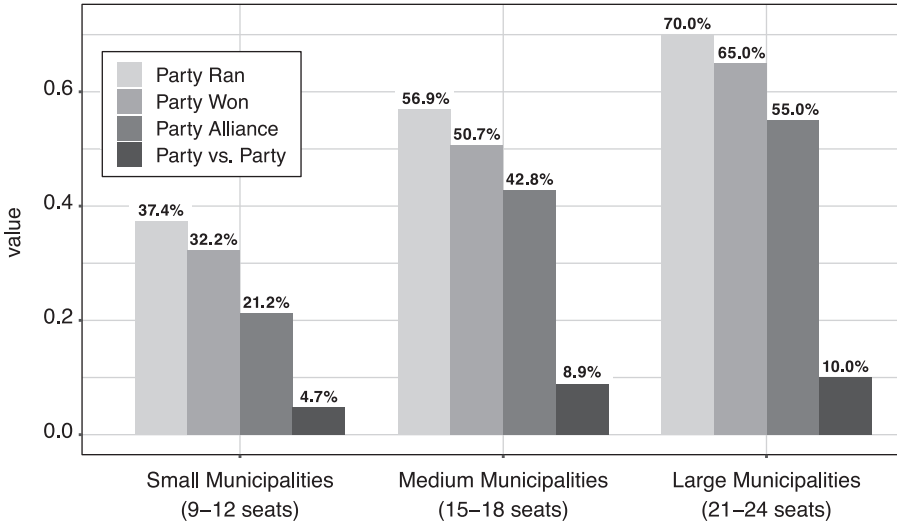
Figure 4.1. Party Cartel Competition in Local Elections (2016)
"Party" in this figure refers to a member of the party cartel. Data on party competition in municipal elections come from a postelection (2016) survey of municipal councillors conducted and analyzed by the author in partnership with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

palities where local governance duties were more extensive.[45] Municipalities were allotted between 9 and 24 councillor seats based on population size, estimated (due to lack of census data) using voter registration data. The largest cities and towns include Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, Sour, Baalbek, Jounieh, Jbeil, and Zahle, all with 21 seats or more (with only Beirut and Tripoli allotted 24). Most municipalities with fewer than 15 seats (listed as "small" here) are rural and contain fewer than 5,000 residents. Municipalities between 15 and 18 seats ("medium") are typically rural or peri-urban, ranging most widely in size. If parties have limited resources (campaign funding, human capital, etc.) to invest in local elections, we should expect them to concentrate those efforts chiefly in the municipalities governing the largest voter bases. Indeed, figure 4.1 demonstrates that the party cartel competes across municipalities of all sizes (44% on average), but predominantly in medium-sized (57%) and large (70%) municipalities.

Why did parties select into competition in some municipal races but not others? The cross-sectional nature of these data makes it difficult to conclusively pinpoint strategies. That said, qualitative evidence from the author's fieldwork points to resource constraints and size of the local voter base as two factors parties use when determining party support. For

example, an elections expert affiliated with one of the party cartel members stated in an interview that "in rural areas, electing a municipal council is less relevant politically" because of population size. But in larger urban locales, "municipal elections act as a pilot for Parliamentary elections. Politicians can see how effective they are on the ground—they can see if they have a chance."[46]

Figure 4.1 demonstrates that the party cartel (labeled "Party" in the figure) maintained high victory rates where it competed, winning 32% of all small councils (86% victory rate), 51% of all medium-sized councils (89% victory rate), and 70% of the largest cities and towns (95% victory rate).[47] These victories were attained overwhelmingly against "independent" lists comprised of locally prominent families who eschewed sponsorship by a political party. Less frequently, parties competed against local elites without national party affiliation but with some national prominence, often from serving as MP and/or minister (e.g., former interior minister Michel El Murr and former justice minister Ashraf Rifi). In a small number of cases, other national parties that opposed or sometimes operated outside the party cartel (e.g., the National Bloc, Communist Party, the Kataeb Party, and the Marada Movement) also competed in elections. Collectively, these actors formed the core of council leadership in areas not governed by the party cartel.

Figure 4.1 also provides evidence that governing parties acted as a cartel, frequently allying and rarely competing against one another. In small municipalities, governing parties allied with one another in 21% of all races, or 57% of all races in which at least one party competed. This increased to 43% in medium-sized municipalities (75% of partisan races) and 55% in large municipalities (79% of all partisan races). Crucially, cartel parties also seldom competed with one another (i.e., cartel breakdown). This happened in 5% of all small municipalities (13% of partisan races), 9% of medium-sized municipalities (16% of partisan races), and 10% of large municipalities (14% of partisan races). Interestingly, the likelihood of cartel breakdown did not increase as the municipal competition stakes increased: in the largest cities and towns, the cartel is equally likely to split.[48]

Figure 4.2 provides more specific evidence of cartel behavior, looking at alliances by party dyad. The number in each box represents the percentage of races in which two parties allied, conditional on both selecting to compete in any given municipality. Several features of these specific party alliances stand out. First, parties rarely systematically opposed one another: The only party dyad that resulted in alliances less than half of the time was between the (Sunni Muslim) Future Movement and the
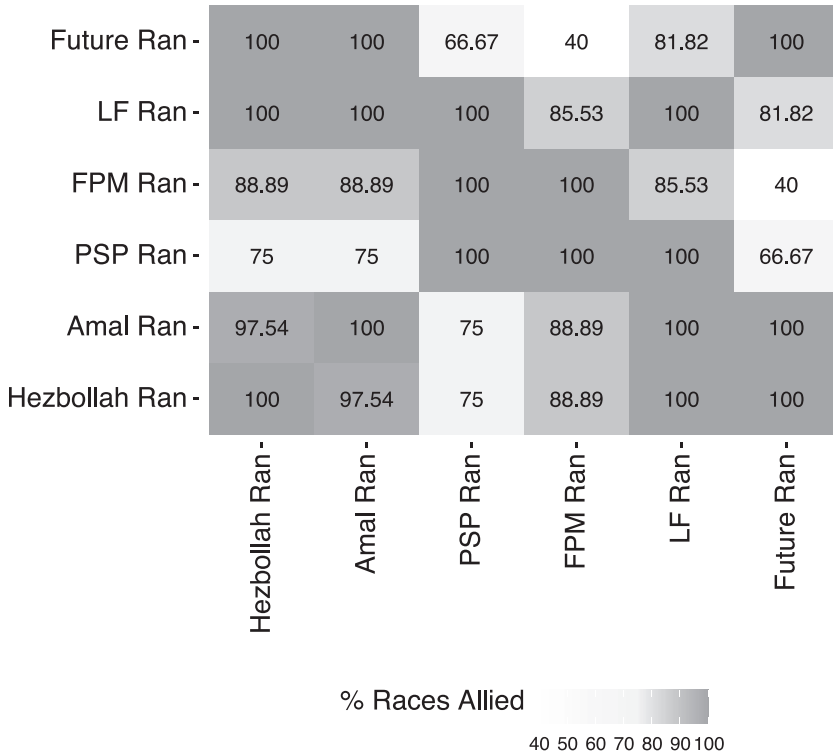
| | Hezbollah Ran | Amal Ran | PSP Ran | FPM Ran | LF Ran | Future Ran |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Future Ran** | 100 | 100 | 66.67 | 40 | 81.82 | 100 |
| **LF Ran** | 100 | 100 | 100 | 85.53 | 100 | 81.82 |
| **FPM Ran** | 88.89 | 88.89 | 100 | 100 | 85.53 | 40 |
| **PSP Ran** | 75 | 75 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 66.67 |
| **Amal Ran** | 97.54 | 100 | 75 | 88.89 | 100 | 100 |
| **Hezbollah Ran** | 100 | 97.54 | 75 | 88.89 | 100 | 100 |

% Races Allied

40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Figure 4.2. Cartel Alliances by Party Dyad (2016)

Data on party competition in municipal elections comes from a postelection (2016) survey of municipal councilors conducted and analyzed by the author in partnership with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Party names included in the table are abbreviated as follows: Amal Movement (Amal), Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Future Movement (Future), Hezbollah, Lebanese Forces (LF), and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP).

(Christian) Free Patriotic Movement (i.e., they were allied in 40% of total races in which both parties ran, including Beirut, where they allied). Apart from the FPM-Future Movement anomaly, parties allied across the board at high rates. Co-ethnic parties rarely competed where multiple parties existed for a given ethnic group (i.e., the Christian and Shia Muslim communities). The two governing Christian parties, the Lebanese Forces and Free Patriotic Movement—despite being ideologically opposed—allied in 86% of all municipal races. The two major Shia parties, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, allied in almost every race where both competed (98%). Other patterns of interethnic party cooperation are also notable; despite broad ideological opposition, the Future Movement and Hezbollah allied, as did Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces. The Druze Progressive Social-

ist Party, a monopsonist of the ethnic group, also allied at high rates with other parties.

These data provide new insights into local-level party behavior in Lebanon. Despite long-standing (and publicly stated) ideological opposition, governing parties competed across municipalities according to the logic of a nationwide cartel. This cartel is not infallible, but it rarely breaks down. The following section addresses why this cartel behavior matters for the quality of local governance, specifically in the realm of programmatic service provision.

## 5. Evidence of Party Cartel Control over Programmatic Governance

In this section, I present evidence that Lebanon's party cartel used central government control to systematically reward and punish different *local* governments. The chapter previously discussed how long-standing institutional arrangements in Lebanon devolved significant authority over governance to the municipal level while ultimate bureaucratic control over local governance remained vested in the central state. I argue that these center-local relations allowed Lebanon's democratically elected, multiparty cartel to treat local governments much like a single-party autocracy—selectively facilitating local governance in cartel-controlled municipalities and neglecting opposition-controlled municipalities.

As with data on municipal electoral competition, systematic information on the quality of municipal governance is scarce in Lebanon. Few municipalities collect this information, and surveys done in larger or more urban municipalities are not standardized across contexts. The Central Administration for Statistics conducts a regular Household Living Conditions survey, but disaggregated data are not made publicly available and do not pertain specifically to local governance quality. A national census has not been conducted since 1932.

To attain data on local governance and perceptions thereof, I conducted a nationally representative survey in Lebanon (n = 1,500) between September and December 2019. The Lebanese Local Governance and Elections Survey contained questions about the quality of services provided by municipalities, participation in municipal elections, perceptions of the municipal council, and partisan affiliation and participation in national elections. The survey sampled residents from 79 municipalities, including the capital of each electoral district.[49]

Survey respondents were matched to the municipality in which they

TABLE 4.1. Comparison of Survey Respondents by Party Cartel Control

| Variable | No Party Cartel (sd) | Party Cartel (sd) | Difference (p) |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Socioeconomic* | | | |
| Age | 41.67 (14.85) | 41.63 (15.67) | 0.03 (0.967) |
| Education | 6.43 (2.98) | 6.63 (3.22) | 0.20 (0.221) |
| Gender | 0.45 (0.5) | 0.46 (0.50) | 0.01 (0.678) |
| Unemployed | 0.20 (0.4) | 0.25 (0.44) | 0.05* (0.016) |
| Economically secure | 0.44 (0.50) | 0.48 (0.50) | 0.04 (0.162) |
| | | | |
| *Ethnosectarian* | | | |
| Sunni | 0.35 (0.48) | 0.27 (0.45) | 0.08** (0.001) |
| Shia | 0.15 (0.36) | 0.35 (0.48) | 0.20*** (0.000) |
| Christian | 0.39 (0.49) | 0.33 (0.47) | 0.07** (0.008) |
| Druze | 0.10 (0.30) | 0.04 (0.19) | 0.06*** (0.000) |
| | | | |
| *Political* | | | |
| Party supporter | 0.44 (0.50) | 0.44 (0.50) | 0.01 (0.835) |
| Voted (2016) | 0.45 (0.50) | 0.52 (0.50) | 0.07** (0.009) |
| Observations | 750 | 750 | |

*Note:* * $p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Data come from a nationally representative survey of Lebanese citizens conducted by the author from September to December 2019. "Education" is measured on a scale of 1 to 11; all other variables are binary. "Gender" refers to the percentage of the sample identified as female. "Ethnosectarian identity" refers to the categorization of the respondent in official state documentation. "Party supporter" indicates whether the respondent identified as feeling very or somewhat close to a national political party.

primarily reside (using the municipal-level data previously discussed) and about which they answered local-governance-related survey questions. The survey included an even number of respondents from cartel-controlled (N = 750) and opposition-controlled (N = 750) municipalities. Table 4.1 presents descriptive data for each of these two subgroups. Across most demographic measures, respondents from cartel- and opposition-controlled municipalities did not differ significantly. Respondents from each pool were of similar age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status, though cartel-controlled areas had a slightly higher unemployment rate (25% versus 20%, $p = 0.05$). This provided some reassurance that demographic differences predating the cartel's formation drove neither the cartel's selection into competition nor subsequent electoral popularity.

Some empirical findings suggested that these results were not driven by social desirability bias, i.e., those living in cartel-controlled areas rating the performance of their local government more favorably for partisan reasons. Interestingly, cartel-controlled municipalities were not associated with higher rates of self-reported party support (44% support for one of the governing parties across both subgroups). In other words, party cartel

control over the respondent's municipal council did not appear to make them more likely to profess support for or membership in the cartel. That said, party cartel control was associated with significantly greater voter turnout, as of May 2016. Respondents from opposition areas reported having voted at a rate of 44%, compared to 52% in cartel-controlled areas ($p$ = 0.01). Therefore, while party cartel control was not associated with higher rates of self-reported partisanship, it was associated with higher levels of formal political participation—specifically voting.

Party-cartel-controlled municipalities were associated with better governance quality. The survey looked specifically at the provision of *programmatic governance goods* instead of individual clientelist transfers and vote-buying, as was the focus of prior political science research on Lebanon. Of course, even nominally programmatic goods can be awarded based on political support; indeed, this is the argument this chapter develops. That said, the analysis focused on the provision of relatively nonexcludable goods at a communal (i.e., municipal) level, and on municipal actions that were not individually beneficial. Some additional analysis looked at overall perceptions of municipal council performance, leaving open the possibility that respondents could interpret performance through the lens of programmatic goods provision, clientelism, or some combination thereof.

Figure 4.3 presents descriptive differences in the quality of governance reported by survey respondents in cartel- and opposition-controlled municipalities. In the column on the left, respondents were asked to evaluate their local government using the following language: "On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 representing very poor performance and 10 representing excellent performance, how would you rate the performance of the municipal council in the municipality where you live?"

Figure 4.3 shows that respondents in cartel-controlled municipalities reported significantly better performance (5.8 out of 10) than their counterparts in opposition-controlled municipalities (5.1 out of 10, or about a quarter of a standard deviation less, $p$ = 0.001). That said, general ratings of municipal council performance may have been driven by other subjective factors that covaried with party cartel control. These include the personalities of councillors selected by the cartel, their ties to the local population, clientelist linkages, and preexisting partisan support. To address some of these issues, I also investigated more specific measures of local governance that, while not immune to certain forms of response bias, were more objective in nature.

The first evidence pertains to road quality, as road maintenance is one of the core responsibilities of municipal governments. The survey asked
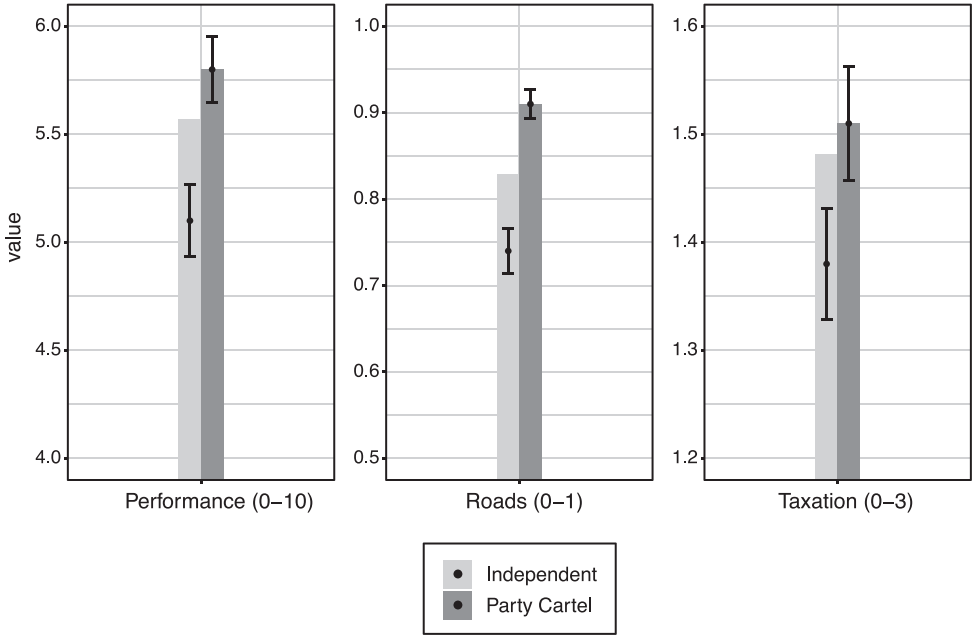
Figure 4.3. Descriptive Differences in Local Governance Quality by Party Cartel Control
Dots represent point estimates. Bars represent 90 percent confidence intervals. Data on party competition in municipal elections comes from a postelection (2016) survey of municipal councillors conducted and analyzed by the author in partnership with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Individual-level data comes from a nationally representative survey of Lebanese citizens conducted by the author in September–December 2019. "Performance" measures how the respondent rated the overall performance of their municipality (1–10 scale). "Road quality" measures whether respondents reported major or minor structural problems in the main road of the municipality where they live (0–1). "Taxation" refers to whether and how respondents were asked to pay taxes to the municipality where they live in the past year. Respondents reported no requests (0), a public announcement (1), a public announcement and personal request from the municipality (2), or an announcement, personal request, and subsequent follow-ups (3).

respondents to evaluate the "most commonly used or main road" in the municipality where they live, with the option to report a road with many structural problems (cracks, potholes, etc.), a few structural problems, or no structural problems. The variable was dichotomized to indicate whether respondents reported a paved road with minor versus major structural problems (few residents report none). Figure 4.3 shows that respondents from cartel-controlled municipalities also experienced better road quality. Respondents in cartel municipalities reported major road problems (as opposed to minor/none) at a rate of 9%, compared to 25% elsewhere (just under half of a standard deviation difference, $p = 0.001$).

Next, the survey considered the quality of municipal administrative capacity, specifically the degree of local taxation capacity. The survey asked respondents how their municipality ensured residents paid annual municipal taxes, with the following options: (a) nothing; (b) a collective announcement posted in a public place; (c) a private message; or (d) a private message and follow-up thereafter. These responses were coded on a scale of 0 to 3.

I examined municipal taxation requests because they served as a measure of whether the party cartel allowed a municipality to govern. Municipalities had very limited ability to tax: the legislation governing local taxation (Decree Law No. 60 of 1988) specified a limited range of municipally taxable items.[50] Municipalities were prohibited from imposing new taxes, and the central government determined tax rates. When municipalities brought in tax revenue, they still had to seek approval from the central state for all municipal work above the financial threshold, as previously discussed.[51] In other words, the central state put a very low cap on local taxation capacity, such that local governments could not become self-sufficient, and the generated income could only be spent with the central state's approval.

Consequently, party-cartel-controlled municipalities had greater incentives to tax their residents. Taxation is a costly tactic that local authorities should only be motivated to engage in if it allows them to engage in other activities to boost their popularity, such as providing local services. Conversely, in municipalities where the central party cartel had less incentive to govern effectively, local officials should have fewer incentives to remind residents to pay their taxes and, all else being equal, should avoid engaging in this costly behavior. Figure 4.3 shows that cartel-controlled municipalities were associated with greater taxation efforts than opposition-controlled municipalities. On a 0–3 scale, taxation capacity in party cartel areas measured an average of 1.51 compared to 1.38 elsewhere (0.15 of a standard deviation difference, $p = 0.01$).

This analysis uses a multilevel modeling (MLM) approach to demonstrate differences in the quality of local governance across Lebanon's municipalities. An MLM accounts for both individual- and municipal-level variables and uses municipal-level random intercepts to account for the fact that individual-level variables may (and presumably do) systematically vary across municipalities. This strategy addresses intramunicipality correlations of individual responses. That said, the approach still assumes a lack of correlation between the random municipal-level intercepts and other municipal-level predictor variables.

Table 4.2 presents results from the MLM, demonstrating that the positive association between party cartel control and quality of local gover-

TABLE 4.2. Multilevel Model Results for Local Governance and Party Cartel Control

Local Governance Quality

| | Performance (1) | Taxation (2) | Roads (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 4.992*** | 1.542** | 0.994*** |
| | (1.445) | (0.570) | (0.253) |
| Age | 0.014** | -0.001 | -0.001 |
| | (0.005) | (0.002) | (0.001) |
| Female | -0.073 | 0.021 | -0.021 |
| | (0.145) | (0.045) | (0.020) |
| Household SES | -0.051 | -0.023 | 0.024** |
| | (0.063) | (0.019) | (0.009) |
| Education | 0.015 | -0.001 | -0.001 |
| | (0.020) | (0.006) | (0.003) |
| Unemployed | -0.034 | -0.094 | 0.009 |
| | (0.171) | (0.053) | (0.024) |
| Party supporter | 0.126 | 0.013 | 0.038* |
| | (0.134) | (0.041) | (0.019) |
| Voted (2016) | 0.200 | 0.061 | -0.026 |
| | (0.135) | (0.041) | (0.019) |
| Party cartel win (2016) | 1.084* | 0.410* | 0.165* |
| | (0.425) | (0.170) | (0.075) |
| Registered voters (per lk) | -0.005 | -0.003 | 0.00004 |
| | (0.004) | (0.002) | (0.001) |
| N refugees (per lk) | -0.026 | 0.029* | -0.004 |
| | (0.030) | (0.012) | (0.005) |
| Municipal SES | -0.063 | -0.058 | -0.058 |
| | (0.295) | (0.118) | (0.052) |
| Observations | 1,286 | 1,191 | 1,290 |
| Log likelihood | -2,848.286 | -1,217.255 | -341.764 |
| Akaike inf. crit. | 5,724.572 | 2,462.511 | 711.528 |

*Note:* $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p < 0.001$. Data on party competition in municipal elections comes from a postelection (2016) survey of municipal councillors conducted and analyzed by the author in partnership with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Data on municipal socioeconomic status and refugees comes from the UNHCR (2013). Data on registered voters come from the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. Individual-level data comes from a nationally representative survey of Lebanese citizens conducted by the author in September–December 2019. "Performance" measures how the respondent rated the overall performance of their municipality (1–10 scale). "Road quality" measures whether respondents reported major or minor structural problems in the main road of the municipality where they live (0–1). "Taxation" refers to whether and how respondents were asked to pay taxes to the municipality where they live in the past year. Respondents reported no requests (0), a public announcement (1), a public announcement and personal request from the municipality (2), or an announcement, personal request, and subsequent follow-ups (3).

nance held when a variety of respondent-level and municipal contextual factors were accounted for (see figure 4.4 for coefficient plots). The effect sizes of party cartel control were comparable to the descriptive comparisons previously presented. Cartel control was associated with an overall performance increase of 1.08 ($p = 0.05$), a 17% greater likelihood of good road quality ($p = 0.05$), and a taxation capacity increase of 0.41 ($p = 0.05$). These results included, as controls, a variety of standard individual-level demographic factors, socioeconomic vulnerability, number of Syrian refugees, and number of registered voters associated with each municipality.

Some other results from the MLM are worth noting. Most demographic factors were not systematically associated with perceptions of better governance. Older respondents were more likely to report higher overall municipal governance quality ($p = 0.01$), though the magnitude of the effect was very small. Respondents of higher socioeconomic status were more likely to report better road quality ($p = 0.01$), though again, with a very small effect size. Interestingly, self-reported supporters of the party cartel did not hold more positive perceptions of local governance, though they reported slightly better road quality ($p = 0.05$). Finally, regarding municipal-level contextual factors, the number of Syrian refugees was associated with a slightly higher taxation capacity. This finding, however, was not corroborated across the other measures of the quality of local governance.

This chapter presents two main empirical findings. First, it incorporates a novel elite survey to demonstrate that parties in Lebanon behaved as a united cartel in local elections. Many parties formed nearly ironclad alliances in electoral races across the country, even those that assumed opposed policy positions in national politics. Conversely, cartel parties very rarely competed against one another. Where they decided to run, alone or allied, party cartel members won municipal races against their independent opposition at a very high rate (89 percent). Second, party-cartel-controlled municipalities were reported as being governed better than opposition areas. Cartel municipalities performed significantly better in terms of road quality, taxation capacity, and overall performance, even when a variety of potential individual- and respondent-level confounders were included.

This data does not constitute causally identified evidence that governing parties colluded to reward loyal municipalities and punish local electoral opposition. This caveat noted, this chapter provides novel descriptive evidence that Lebanon's parties employed a cartel strategy in local elections and that cartel control was systematically associated with better local governance. Both findings are consistent with the core argument presented in this chapter: By rewarding loyal local governments with the ability to gov-
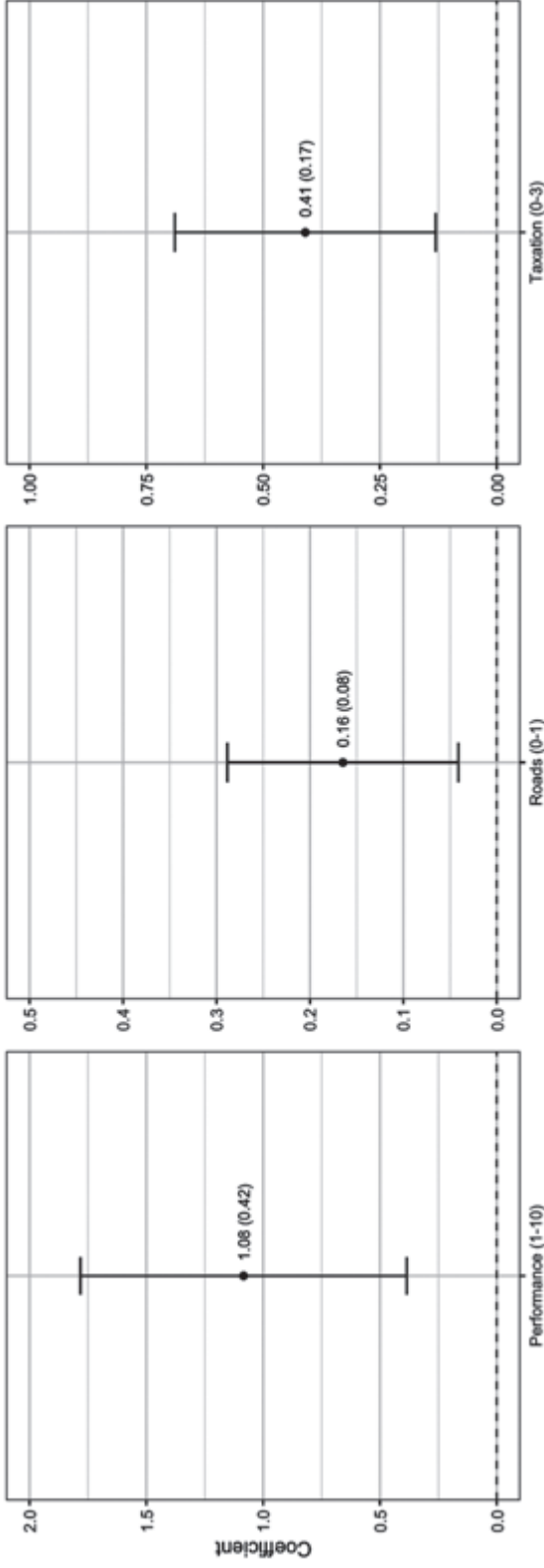
Figure 4.4. Coefficient Plots for Relationship between Local Governance and Party Cartel Control

Dots represent point estimates. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Data on party competition in municipal elections comes from a postelection (2016) survey of municipal councillors conducted and analyzed by the author in partnership with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Data on municipal socioeconomic status and refugees comes from the UNHCR (2013). Data on registered voters come from the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. Individual-level data comes from a nationally representative survey of Lebanese citizens conducted by the author in September–December 2019. "Performance" measures how the respondent rated the overall performance of their municipality (1–10 scale). "Road quality" measures whether respondents reported major or minor structural problems in the main road of the municipality where they live (0–1). "Taxation" refers to whether and how respondents were asked to pay taxes to the municipality where they live in the past year. Respondents reported no requests (0), a public announcement (1), a public announcement and personal request from the municipality (2), or an announcement, personal request, and subsequent follow-ups (3).

ern and denying it to others, Lebanon's party cartel functioned as a local-level electoral autocracy despite the constraints of procedural democracy.

## 6. Discussion and Policy Implications

Scholars and policymakers contend that democratic local elections enhance accountability and service delivery, particularly when the central state has collapsed or experienced intense elite conflict. Local elections are frequently prescribed as a vital component of state-building after a civil war. Yet, the institutional structure of center-local relations rarely functions via a neutral logic of best practices. Instead, as the Lebanese case demonstrates, center-local ties are often used by central states by elites aiming to ensure the continuity of their power.

In postconflict transitions like Lebanon's that result in cohesive elite pacts, I argue that some devolution of authority to local political institutions can be consistent with elite capture and poor governance quality without opportunities for meaningful citizen recourse. I empirically demonstrate that Lebanon's postwar party cartel has extended its central pact into local politics, behaving much like a single-party autocratic regime. The core cleavage in Lebanon's local politics has thus become one of "regime" versus "opposition," in which cartel-affiliated municipalities are afforded better-quality governance than other areas.

These findings have important implications for scholars and policymakers in Lebanon, postconflict contexts, and ethnically diverse societies writ large. The center-local dynamics described in this chapter provide a novel explanation for why postconflict states often fail to thrive, even when active conflict does not recur. In Lebanon, elections were not venues where elites were effectively held accountable for their performance in office. This is particularly surprising at the local level, where electoral opposition entry is often assumed to be easier.[52]

These findings also provide insights into the study of ethnically diverse societies, especially those with formalized ethnic power-sharing institutions. A vast literature characterizes Lebanon as a deeply divided society where ethnic divisions lie at the heart of bad governance and elite corruption. Indeed, numerous scholars have linked ethnic diversity, specifically ethnic power-sharing, to lower-quality social welfare provision and reliance on clientelist practices.[53]

This chapter does not necessarily discount these arguments, but it sheds light on an entirely different political cleavage with relevant implications

for the quality of governance. I have argued that Lebanon's parties engaged primarily in collusion, not competition, in local electoral politics. In this realm, they formed a cohesive political regime, irrespective of local ethnic demographics. Therefore, explanations for the quality of local, everyday governance in Lebanon that rely chiefly on the notion of ethnic division are incomplete. Similarly, the chapter reveals that the previous lack of viable opposition to Lebanon's postwar parties can be explained without assuming a lack of interethnic trust or cooperation. Instead, it underscores that comprehending the persistence of electoral power among Lebanon's postwar parties, despite their limited governance, hinges on a nuanced understanding of center-local ties.

NOTES

1. Kristine Höglund et al., "The Predicament of Elections in War-Torn Societies," *Democratization* 16, no. 3 (2009): 530–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034 0902884689; Terrence Lyons, "Post-conflict Elections and the Process of Demilitarizing Politics: The Role of Electoral Administration," *Democratization* 11, no. 3 (2004): 36–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034042000238167; Benjamin Reilly, "Elections in Post-Conflict Scenarios: Constraints and Dangers," *International Peacekeeping* 9, no. 2 (2002): 118–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/714002729

2. Dawn Brancati, "Decentralization: Fueling the Fire or Dampening the Flames of Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism?" *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (2006): 651–85, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830606019X; Philip G. Roeder and Donald S. Rothchild, *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy After Civil Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

3. Harry Blair, "Participation and Accountability at the Periphery: Democratic Local Governance in Six Countries," *World Development* 28, no. 1 (2000): 21–39, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00109-6; Derek M. Powell, *State Formation After Civil War: Local Government in National Peace Transitions* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

4. Alberto Diaz-Cayeros et al., "Tragic Brilliance: Equilibrium Hegemony and Democratization in Mexico" (Working paper, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 2003).

5. Janine A. Clark, *Local Politics in Jordan and Morocco: Strategies of Centralization and Decentralization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

6. Edward L. Gibson, "Boundary Control: Subnational Authoritarianism in Democratic Countries," *World Politics* 58, no. 1 (2005): 101–32, https://doi.org/10 .1353/wp.2006.0018; Andrea Rigon, "Building Local Governance: Participation and Elite Capture in Slum-Upgrading in Kenya," *Development and Change* 45, no. 2 (2014): 257–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12078

7. The concept of a "party cartel" is discussed at length in Dan Slater and Erica Simmons, "Coping by Colluding: Political Uncertainty and Promiscuous Power-sharing in Indonesia and Bolivia," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 11 (2012): 1366–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453447

8. Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Daniel Corstange, *The Price of a Vote in the Middle East: Clientelism and Communal Politics in Lebanon and Yemen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Tamirace Fakhoury, "Power-Sharing after the Arab Spring? Insights from Lebanon's Political Transition," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 26, no. 1 (2019): 9–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2019.1565173; Bassel F. Salloukh et al., *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015). Per Cammett, Corstange, and others, I refer to core identity-based categories of interest in Lebanon, sometimes referred to as "ethnosectarian," "religious," or "confessional," e.g. Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Christian, and Druze, as "ethnic." I do so because these categories are descent-based and difficult to alter.

9. For a discussion of deconcentrated authority in Lebanon, see Mona Harb and Sami Atallah, "Lebanon: A Fragmented and Incomplete Decentralization," in *Local Governments and Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World*, eds. Mona Harb and Sami Atallah (Beirut: Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2015), 189–228. For a discussion of center-local ties associated with Ottoman rule, see Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

10. For an explanation of elite cartels in consociationalism, see Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969): 207–25, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009820

11. Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

12. Author's fieldwork interviews with former Sidon municipal councillor (2018); two former Tripoli municipal councillors (2017–2018); Tripoli journalist (2018); current Jounieh municipal councillor (2018); and former Baalbek municipal councillor (2018).

13. Ziad Abu-Rish, "Municipal Politics in Lebanon," *Middle East Report* 280 (Fall 2016): 4–11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44578009

14. These parties occasionally endorsed electoral lists in select cities.

15. In the municipalities of Tyre and Sidon, for example, local elites created foundations specifically to fund municipal work in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion. See author's interviews with two current municipal councillors in Tyre (2018), a former advisor to the Sidon municipality (2018), and a former Sidon municipal councillor (2017). For a broader discussion of militia governance structures during the Lebanese civil war, see Elizabeth Picard, "The Political Economy of Civil War in Lebanon," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 258–324.

16. John Nagle and Mary-Alice Clancy, "Power-Sharing after Civil War: Thirty Years since Lebanon's Taif Agreement," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, no. 1 (2019): 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2019.1565171

17. These parties are: Amal Movement (Shia Muslim); the Free Patriotic Movement (Christian); the Future Movement (Sunni Muslim); Hezbollah (Shia Muslim); the Lebanese Forces (Christian); and the Progressive Socialist Party (Druze).

18. Since 2005, Lebanese national parties have been divided into two key alliances, March 8 and March 14. These alliances maintain contrasting stances on

Lebanon's regional alliances, orientation toward the United States, and the permissibility of Hezbollah's status as an armed militia within the country. On several occasions, parties have forged more substantial cross-factional alliances or switched between alliances.

19. For a discussion of how ministerial leadership is centralized and allotted to different party cartel members, see Mounir Mahmalat and Sami Zougheib, "Breaking the Mold? Ministerial Rotations, Legislative Production, and Political Strategies in Lebanon," *Governance* 35, no. 4 (2022): 1029–48, https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12644

20. Author's interview with a Tripoli municipal councillor (2017).

21. See McKinsey's 2019 report commissioned by the Ministry of Economy, *Lebanese Economic Vision: Full Report* (Beirut: Government of Lebanon, 2019).

22. See World Economic Forum, *Global Competitiveness Index 2017–2018* (Cologny: World Economic Forum, 2018).

23. Stéphane Ghiotti and Roland Riachi, "Water Management in Lebanon: A Confiscated Reform?" *Etudes Rurales* 192, no. 2 (2013): 135–52.

24. Melani Cammett and Aytuğ Şaşmaz, "Navigating Welfare Regimes in Divided Societies: Diversity and the Quality of Service Delivery in Lebanon," *Governance* 35, no. 1 (2021): 209–31, https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12576

25. Kassim Dakhlallah, "The Dilemma of Public Debt in Lebanon," *ERF Policy Portal*, June 30, 2020, https://theforum.erf.org.eg/2020/06/30/dilemma-public-debt-lebanon/

26. Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

27. Dima Mahdi and Daniel Sanchez, *How Do People in Lebanon Perceive Corruption?* (Beirut: Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2019).

28. Jessica Gottlieb, "The Logic of Party Collusion in a Democracy: Evidence from Mali," *World Politics* 67, no. 1 (2015): 1–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887711400032X; Noam Lupu and Rachel Beatty Riedl, "Political Parties and Uncertainty in Developing Democracies," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 11 (2013): 1339–65, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453445

29. Adam Przeworski, "Institutionalization of Voting Patterns, or Is Mobilization the Source of Decay?" *American Political Science Review* 69, no. 1 (1975): 49–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/1957884

30. Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, "Political Order and One-Party Rule," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 123–43, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.031908.220529

31. Lupu and Riedl, "Political Parties and Uncertainty."

32. Dan Slater and Erica Simmons, "Coping by Colluding: Political Uncertainty and Promiscuous Power-sharing in Indonesia and Bolivia," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 11 (2012): 1366–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453447

33. Donatella Della Porta, "Political Parties and Corruption: Ten Hypotheses on Five Vicious Circles," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 42, no. 1 (2004): 35–60, https://doi.org/10.1023/B:CRIS.0000041036.85056.c6; Steven Levitsky et al., *Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

34. Dougless C. North et al., *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

35. Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); William Reno, "Predatory States and State Transformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Transformations of the State*, eds. Stephan Leibfried, Evelyne Huber, Matthew Lange, Jonah D. Levy, Frank Nulllmeier, and John D. Stephens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 730–44.

36. John McGarry, "Classical Consociational Theory and Recent Consociational Performance," *Swiss Political Science Review* 25, no. 4 (2019): 538–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12378

37. Caroline A. Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, *Power Sharing and Democracy in Post–Civil War States: The Art of the Possible* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

38. Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy"; Ian Shapiro, *Democracy's Place* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

39. Competition in both municipal and national elections largely occurs *within* ethnic groups, but for different reasons. At the municipal level, this is because most locales are homogeneous. At the national level, this is because seats are allotted on the basis of ethnic identity. In other words, in both cases, electoral competition is already constrained prior to party cartelization. That said, neither constraint prevents the formation of multiple parties representing each ethnic group, which has indeed occurred. These parties choose to engage in collusive behavior as part of an elite pact, not solely due to institutional constraints.

40. For a discussion of and rebuttal to this idea, see Barry R. Weingast, "The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 2 (1997): 245–63, https://doi.org/10.2307/2952354

41. Daniel Tavana and Christiana Parreira, *Lebanon's 2018 Election: New Measures and the Resilience of the Status Quo* (Beirut: Lebanon Support, 2019).

42. Trevor Bachus, "Why Are Ethnic Parties Less Programmatic? Mixed-Method Evidence of Ethnic Endogeneity to Clientelistic Linkages," *Ethnopolitics* (2022): 325–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2020.1790154; Tariq Thachil and Emmanuel Teitelbaum, "Ethnic Parties and Public Spending: New Theory and Evidence from the Indian States," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 11 (2015): 1389–420, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015576743

43. Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*.

44. A key example of this is the victory of former justice minister Ashraf Rifi in Tripoli's 2016 municipal elections. Rifi used populist (and frequently ethno-centric) rhetoric to win victory in the elections following his defection from the Future Movement, a governing (Sunni Muslim) party. For a discussion, see Raphaël Lefèvre, "Man of the Moment?" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 13, 2017, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/74703

45. I limit the analysis to the six dominant (post-2005) party cartel members, as summarized previously in this chapter.

46. Author's interview (2016).

47. I code a party or faction as having won a municipal elections race when the majority of council seats were won by candidates from a list endorsed by that party or faction.

48. If the party cartel broke down at higher rates in larger municipalities, it would suggest that interparty coordination is more difficult as local population size increases, a finding with negative implications for the long-term stability of party cartel systems like Lebanon's.

49. The vast majority of the survey was conducted prior to the 2019 protest wave in Lebanon. Only a partial sample of residents in Sidon were surveyed in November and December, after a pause in enumeration because of the protests.

50. Chief among these are rental fees and construction permits, along with attendant sewage and maintenance fees. These collectively constituted 83 percent of all direct fees in 2008—see Harb and Atallah, "Lebanon: Incomplete Decentralization."

51. Bureaucratic centralization, therefore, prevents municipalities from generating enough fiscal autonomy such that they no longer "need" the central state. If centralized bureaucratic control were not an issue, cartel control would not be an equilibrium outcome, as municipalities would have incentives to raise local taxes to fund local development independent of the center.

52. For a discussion, see Roger Myerson, "Federalism and Incentives for Success of Democracy," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3–23.

53. Alberto Alesina et al., "Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114, no. 4 (1999): 1243–84; James Habyarimana et al., *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009).

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# How Gender and Local State Capacity Shape Citizens' Use of the Mosque

Steven Brooke and Monica C. Komer[1]

## 1. Introduction

In many countries and across every religious tradition, citizens use houses of worship for a variety of purposes beyond simple religious practice. In contrast to other forms of institutional and associational life, religious institutions' ubiquity, centrality in neighborhoods' spatial organization, and extensive social capital networks often make them ideal sites of citizen coordination and local governance. This influence is likely to be particularly consequential under conditions of decentralization.

Understanding the role of religious institutions has notably advanced in the Islamic world, where scholars have identified how Islamist groups leverage religious institutions for political mobilization as part of their "advantage" over non-Islamists.[2] Our chapter seeks to expand this promising research agenda in two ways. First, we extend beyond electoral politics to examine when citizens prefer to use mosques for local governance-related matters: to resolve a personal dispute, receive charity, organize a protest, or gather signatures on a petition. Second, we probe the variation in these preferences, identifying the conditions under which citizens prefer to use mosques to address these personal and community needs.

We answer these questions with original survey data on 1,200 Tunisians, which we nest in 265 census districts (*mu'tamdiyat*, or "delegations"). Our

principal findings lie at the intersection of gender and local state capacity. We find some support for a recognized "gender gap" in mosque usage, in which women were generally less likely than men to utilize the mosque for these ostensibly "nonreligious" purposes. Yet this difference appears to be contingent on Tunisia's particular local development trajectories. In fact, women's preferences for using the mosque to address these personal and community problems depend on local levels of marginalization, roughly proxied by the distance of the respondent's delegation to the coast. The relationship is strong enough that, in areas above the 60th percentile in terms of distance from the coast, the gender gap effectively vanishes. One implication of our study is that how and why religious institutions play particular roles in local governance are a function of both individual and local contextual factors.

The chapter proceeds as follows. We first review the literature to high-light the emphasis on the utilization of mosques for electoral or conten-tious politics. We then narrow our inquiry to the realm of civil society, identifying in the process an expectation of differential usage based on gender and local state capacity. A discussion of our research design and data follows, including a presentation of our results. We close by identify-ing the implications of our findings, discussing how the case of Tunisia may impose scope conditions on the generalizability of the findings and what these findings contribute to broader discussions about decentralization.

## 2. Houses of Worship and Their Local Contexts

Citizens around the world use houses of worship for a variety of important political and social functions. In African and Asian countries, organizations affiliated with churches monitor elections, while in Latin America, they have promoted indigenous causes and disseminated information.[3] In other contexts, citizens also use religious institutions to access educational ser-vices, community improvement projects, and medical clinics.[4] Sometimes, people rely on these institutions' organizational capacity and social capital to spark social movements.[5]

Scholars of the Islamic world have increasingly focused on how mosques contribute to the "Islamist advantage"—the perceived ability of Islamist parties to outperform their non-Islamist competitors.[6] Key to these argu-ments are assumptions that, for ordinary Muslims, mosques are more than a place of worship. They are centers of community life. Early research in this vein focused on how the mosque, as a coordination device, center of

ideological transformation, and protected sanctuary from government repression, often becomes a crucible of social-movement activism.[7] More recently, Masoud shows how religious institutions, including mosques, allow Islamist parties and candidates to better disseminate to potential supporters information about politics, particularly about policies they would pursue in office.[8] Meacham focuses on how religious institutions generally ease horizontal communication and coordination, facilitating the emergence of common knowledge that spurs mobilization.[9] David Patel's book on religious institutions in post-invasion Iraq has a similar emphasis.[10]

This increasingly sophisticated research has improved our understanding of politics in the Islamic world. Yet the emphasis on the electoral consequences of religious institutions offers relatively little insight into the broad spectrum of less-politicized ways citizens use mosques in local communities, including charitable provision, social organization, information-gathering, and mass-elite interaction. This is especially relevant given that, in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Oman, electoral law prohibits political parties from using places of worship for political campaigning.[11] Moreover, there is little empirical documentation and explanation of local variation in citizen preference for mosque-based services. Why do some citizens rely on mosques for various local governance-related, nonworship purposes, while others use the mosque only for religious events?

It is possible to extrapolate from the literature which factors may lead to more demand for mosque-based services. On the one hand, materialist explanations generally document a national-level linkage between weakened state capacity and the emergence of a vibrant religious associational sector. For example, Carrie Wickham's study of the Egyptian Islamic movement identifies how a "parallel Islamic sector," which included mosques and Islamic associations, grew where the state was absent, incubating an opposition movement among those underserved by the government.[12] Brooke shows that the emergence of a vibrant universe of nonstate social service providers, including religious associations and community mosques, was linked to the onset of national economic reforms that sapped the state's ability to provide public goods.[13] These accounts suggest that citizen demand for mosque-based services operates as a substitute for state capacity; in areas where citizens are more marginalized vis-à-vis the state's reach, demand for mosque-based services rises.

On the other hand, citizen demand for mosque-based services may be driven not by citizen marginalization but rather as a reaction to state overreach. For instance, Mahmood traces the emergence of a women's mosque movement and the proliferation of Islamic learning and social services in

Egypt to concerns about the marginalization of Islam in society.[14] Likewise, in her analysis of the Islamist movement in Tunisia, Wolf documents how decades of state repression against Islamic practices spurred increased demand for religious education and discussion groups in mosques, particularly among women.[15] Instead of operating where the state's ability to provide public goods is strongest, religious institutions take up larger community roles where state-enforced policies of secularism and the instrumentalization of religion for purposes of regime stability have closed off alternative avenues for religious expression.[16]

A citizen's willingness to use the mosque for certain non-worship functions is plausibly driven by economic and social marginalization, but we also expect these experiences—particularly regarding mosque-based governance—to be contingent on gender. The "gender gap" in mosque behaviors is well-documented. In Muslim majority and minority countries, women attend mosques for Friday prayer less often than men (partly because it is not considered a religious obligation for women);[17] they are restricted from accessing some leadership positions,[18] and rarely hold seats on mosque boards or management committees.[19]

The 2018 wave of the Arab Barometer shows gender gaps in mosque attendance for Friday prayer in every country surveyed.[20] Across the region, 62 percent of male respondents reported attending Friday prayer "always" or "most of the time," compared to just 17 percent of female respondents. In Tunisia, 36 percent of male respondents reported attending Friday prayer at least most of the time, compared to just 5 percent of women. While we expect this general trend to carry over into the nonworship realm, there is very little empirical data able to speak to the persistence of gender imbalances in these activities.

Broadening the question beyond mosque-based services and into the realm of informal and local governance provides further support for our expectation of a gender gap. As Colin and Bergh's study of local petitions shows in this volume, access to participatory institutions is not equally available to all citizens. Instead, the most privileged members of society are often the only group with unobstructed access to local governance institutions. Although gender is not a focus of Colin and Bergh's analysis, a similar logic applies when considering women's access to institutions. We expect women to face greater barriers to receiving help for their personal and community needs, particularly in marginalized areas. Belge and Blaydes find that, in low-income areas of Cairo, only women with high levels of social capital—ties to local elites—were likely to engage with state institutions.[21] This is in line with Benstead's findings that Moroccan women,

especially in rural areas, were less likely than men to make requests to the government for public service provisions.[22] Indeed, across the Islamic world, despite generally high female education rates, women tend to be less politically engaged than men and less likely to be employed.[23] Taken together, this suggests that women are generally less likely than men to turn to the mosque for services related to local governance.

We derive our main expectations from the interaction between these two literatures—one on state capacity and local marginalization, the other on a "gender gap." We expect the effects of gender on demand for mosque-based services to be contingent on local marginalization, because in core—as opposed to marginalized—areas, women have more opportunities to develop political or social networks to facilitate engagement with state institutions or non-religious organizations, such as bureaucracies, labor unions, interest organizations, local notables and brokers, and civil society institutions.

In contrast, we expect marginalized areas to feature fewer and weaker administrative opportunities and non-religious civil society institutions as possible alternatives to the local mosque. Under these conditions, women will be increasingly likely to use the local mosque to access these services. Put directly, *women will be more likely to turn to mosques for help with personal and community needs as the degree of local economic and social marginalization increases*. We further posit that *the gender gap in mosque use for personal and community needs will narrow as economic and social marginalization increases*.

## 3. Religion and Marginalization in Tunisia

Tunisia is a particularly relevant context to test these expectations. With more than 5,000 mosques nationwide, religious institutions are situated in diverse political, social, and economic settings.[24] There is considerable variation in state capacity and reported satisfaction with public services at the subnational level.[25] Most importantly for our expectations concerning local differences in the gendered use of mosques, there is considerable variation in citizens' social and economic marginalization.

Some of the starkest disparities concern coastal and interior regions. These disparities have roots in Tunisia's authoritarian past, where state-sponsored development programs heavily favored coastal regions.[26] As a result, Tunisia's interior regions have faced higher localized unemployment and poverty rates, lower per-capita income, and fewer employment opportunities.[27]

Figure 5.1. Mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia
*Photo credit:* Srdjan Popovic, via Unsplash.

The interior regions also have suffered from social and political marginalization. Under authoritarian rule, Tunisia's leaders presented the country as part of the Western world. The country's first president, Habib Bourguiba, launched reforms to dismantle traditional religious establishments and expand women's rights. Similar secular policies were enforced by his successor, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.[28] Political expressions of Islam were forced underground; state officials determined the content of sermons in mosques, and religious symbols—such as wearing the hijab—were outlawed in public. Veiled women faced harassment, threats, and humiliation from security officials and secular women's associations.[29] Though the state targeted both Islamist and leftist groups across the country, security forces most heavily surveilled the interior areas, where protests were commonplace.[30] In the late 2000s, after a series of demonstrations in the interior, some activists described the region as largely cut off from the rest of the country due to the heightened security.[31]

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the unprecedented wave of protests that ousted Ben Ali in Tunisia and threatened autocratic rulers throughout the Arab world originated in Tunisia's interior. Decades of repression and economic hardship continued to shape political attitudes in interior communities. Several scholars noted important subnational variations in

voting behavior, including between the underdeveloped, conservative interior communities and the more affluent coastal areas. Patterns of political behavior reflected these trajectories; voters in the interior tended to favor Islamist parties and parties without ties to political elites.[32]

The marginalization of Tunisia's interior communities also exacerbated gender inequalities. In the early 2000s, female unemployment in the interior was twice the rate of male unemployment nationwide. Even when employed, women generally received lower salaries than men. These gender disparities remained most evident in rural and interior areas.[33] In some interior communities, female unemployment was three times as high as men's.[34] In addition to economic disparities, Khalil explained that women's participation in activities outside the home was generally deemphasized in Tunisia's rural communities.[35] Using survey data collected in 2011, Abdo-Katsipis found that Tunisian women were less politically aware than Tunisian men, and this gap widened as distance from the capital (located near the northern coast) increased.[36] She showed that this gap was entirely driven by women. As distance to the coast increased, women were significantly less likely to display political awareness; distance did not influence men's political awareness. Abdo-Katsipis attributed these findings to the fact that rural women were less likely to participate in public activities and therefore had less access to political information.[37]

## 4. Research Design and Data

We use original survey data collected in Tunisia in January 2020 to identify local correlates of mosque usage.[38] Local enumerators conducted face-to-face surveys with 1,200 Tunisians across the entire country. Alongside demographic data, enumerators also gathered respondents' locations, allowing us to identify contextual factors by nesting respondents in their census district (*mu'tamdiyat*, or "delegations").

In this study, we are interested in the conditions under which individuals report a willingness to use their local mosque to fulfill common local or community needs. Specifically, we asked respondents whether they would use their local mosque if they needed to resolve a personal dispute, receive charity, organize a protest, or gather signatures on a petition. Individuals responding that they would use a local mosque for at least one of these reasons are coded as a 1 (n = 255) and 0 otherwise.[39] This is our dependent variable. We intentionally asked respondents if they *would* use their local mosque for these purposes rather than if they *have* used it to

allow us to capture citizen preferences. If we had asked respondents about their past mosque use, we would have been unable to distinguish between respondents who did not use the mosque because they preferred not to and respondents who never needed charity or to address a personal dispute, for example.

Our primary explanatory variables are gender and marginalization. Respondent gender was coded as either male (0) or female (1). To capture levels of marginalization, we conceptualized the regional disparities between Tunisia's interior and coastal regions discussed in the previous section. This variable was created using a preexisting shapefile, where we identified the centroid of each district and measured the distance from that point to the nearest coast (in meters).[40] We log-transform the resultant distance to normalize it.

Beyond these two main predictors, we also used the survey data to adjust for individual-level factors that may have otherwise influenced our results. We included the following common demographic covariates: education level, age, employment status (unemployed/not), and whether the respondent reported living in an urban or rural area.

While the mosque clearly serves a bedrock religious function, our primary interest is in its additional role as a center of local governance, encompassing citizen organization and claim-making, dispute resolution, and receipt of social services. While we expect that preferences for using mosques for these services would be contingent on individual religiosity, our purpose is to understand a mosque's role in a less obviously religious context. Thus, we adjusted in our regression for individual religiosity via a basic "frequency of prayer" question, which we took as a general measure of religion's importance to the respondent's daily life. Table 5.1 provides summary statistics for our variables.

## 5. Estimation and Results

We rely on linear regression models with standard errors clustered by districts to account for possible covariance among respondents and any unobserved district-level factors that may influence preference for mosque-based services.[41] Given our expectations about the contingent effects of both gender and marginalization on our outcome variable, we tested this claim using an interaction between gender and distance to the coast in our second model. Our above review of the literature led us to expect a positive and statistically significant coefficient associated with this interaction term.

TABLE 5.1. Summary Statistics

| Variable | Min | Max | Mean | Std dev. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prefer mosque-based services | 0 | 1 | 0.21 | 0.41 |
| Log distance to coast, meters | 5.24 | 12.3 | 9.58 | 1.51 |
| Female | 0 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| Education | 1 | 7 | 3 | 1.25 |
| Unemployed | 0 | 1 | 0.15 | 0.35 |
| Prayer | 1 | 5 | 3.9 | 0.5 |
| Age | 18 | 87 | 43.73 | 15.46 |

TABLE 5.2. Predicting Preference for Mosque-Based Services

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Log distance to coast | 0.001 | -0.026** |
| | (0.008) | (0.010) |
| Female | -0.086*** | -0.595*** |
| | (0.029) | (0.130) |
| Education | -0.051*** | -0.052*** |
| | (0.010) | (0.010) |
| Unemployed | -0.003 | -0.001 |
| | (0.036) | (0.036) |
| Prayer | 0.019** | 0.019** |
| | (0.008) | (0.008) |
| Age | -0.004*** | -0.003*** |
| | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Urban | 0.025 | 0.025 |
| | (0.027) | (0.027) |
| Log distance x Female | | 0.053*** |
| | | (0.014) |
| Constant | 0.471*** | 0.719*** |
| | (0.096) | (0.118) |
| Delegations | 137 | 137 |
| N | 1,173 | 1,173 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.022 | 0.031 |

*Note:* *$p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.
Linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. SEs clustered by district.

The first column in table 5.2 (Model 1) presents an additive model in which preference for mosque-based services is regressed on gender and distance to the coast along with our control variables. Our main model, Model 2 in table 5.2, presents the results of a model interacting gender with distance to the coast, which we take as a rough proxy for marginalization. This allows us to examine if the effects of marginalization and gender are conditional on one another.

Results from Model 1 indicate that, on average, women were less likely than men to report a preference to use the mosque for these nonworship
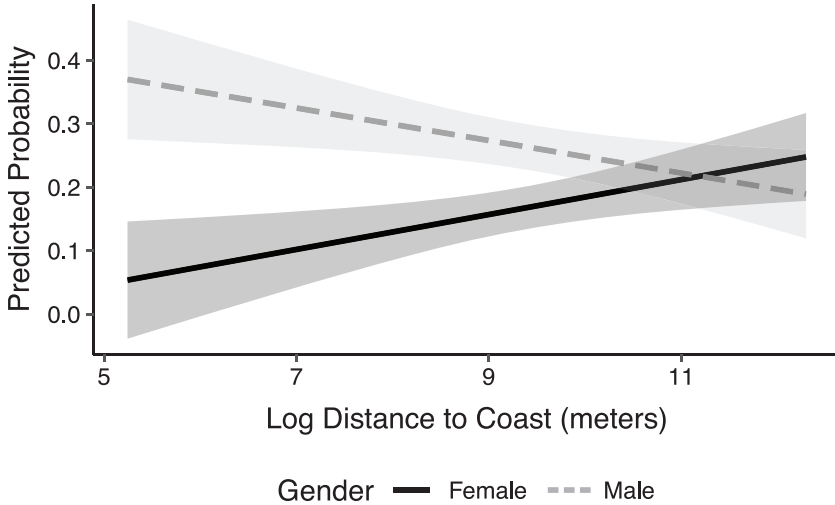
Figure 5.2. Preferences for Mosque-Based Services by Gender and Distance to Coast

purposes. Notably, distance to the coast had no statistically significant independent effect on reported preferences. In Model 2, the interaction between gender and distance to the coast is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).[42] This indicates that the association between distance to the coast and preference for mosque-based services was contingent on respondent gender—with longer distances to the coast being associated with increases in preference for mosque-based services among women and decreases among men.[43]

To visualize these results, figure 5.2 shows the predicted probability of a preference for mosque-based services as a function of gender and distance to the coast. The predicted probabilities in figure 5.2 are based on the results presented in Model 2, holding all other variables at their mean values (shaded areas represent predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence intervals).

Figure 5.2 shows that the predicted probability of using the mosque for civil society reasons is 0.11 for women in areas closest to the coast (7.2 meters logged, the 5th percentile). Moving to women in areas farthest from the coast (11.9 meters logged, the 95th percentile), the predicted probability of using the mosque for at least one of three civil society purposes more than doubles to 0.24.[44] For reference purposes, downtown Tunis is 7.4 meters (logged) from the coast, in the 7th percentile. This aligns with our expectations that women in marginalized areas will be more likely than
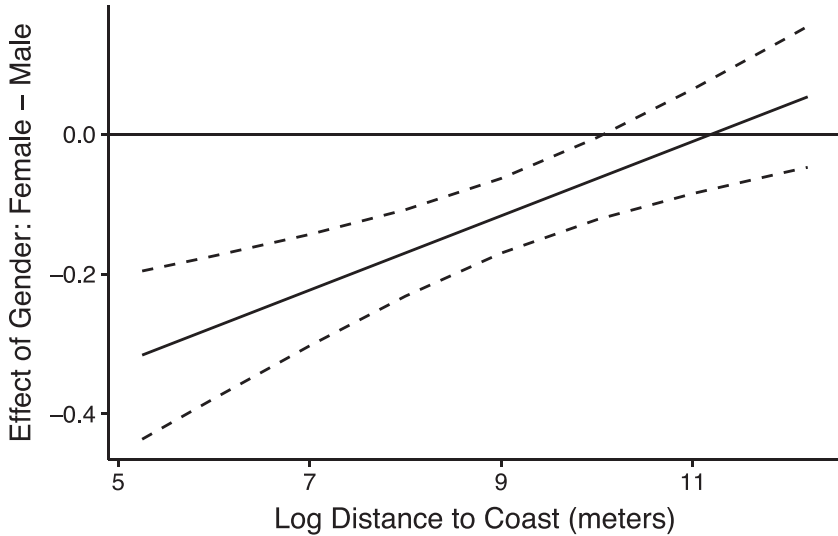
Figure 5.3. Average Marginal Effect of Gender across Distance to Coast on Mosque Use

women in less marginalized areas to turn to the mosque when dealing with a personal or community problem.

Given our expectations about the gender gap in mosque use, it is helpful to evaluate the average marginal effects of gender across the range of distances to the coast. Again, drawing from Model 2, figure 5.3 shows the effects of gender; effects below zero indicate women are less likely than men to use mosques at that distance.

Consistent with the literature, we identify significant gender differences in mosque use relatively close to the coast, with the predicted probability of using a mosque being greater for men than women. However, the gender gap decreases for respondents drawn from the more interior districts. Indeed, once the distance to the coast reaches or exceeds 10 log meters (the 60th percentile), there is no significant difference between men and women. That 40 percent of respondents in our sample lived in an area with no gender gap in mosque use for personal or community problems suggests a strong caveat regarding the notion of a gender gap in mosque usage.

Figure 5.4 plots this gender gap across a shapefile of Tunisian delegations (with the area around Tunis as the inset). Polygons denote districts with survey respondents. The changes in grayscale plot the differences in predicted probabilities of mosque usage between men and women (from figure 5.3) based on the distance of that district's center
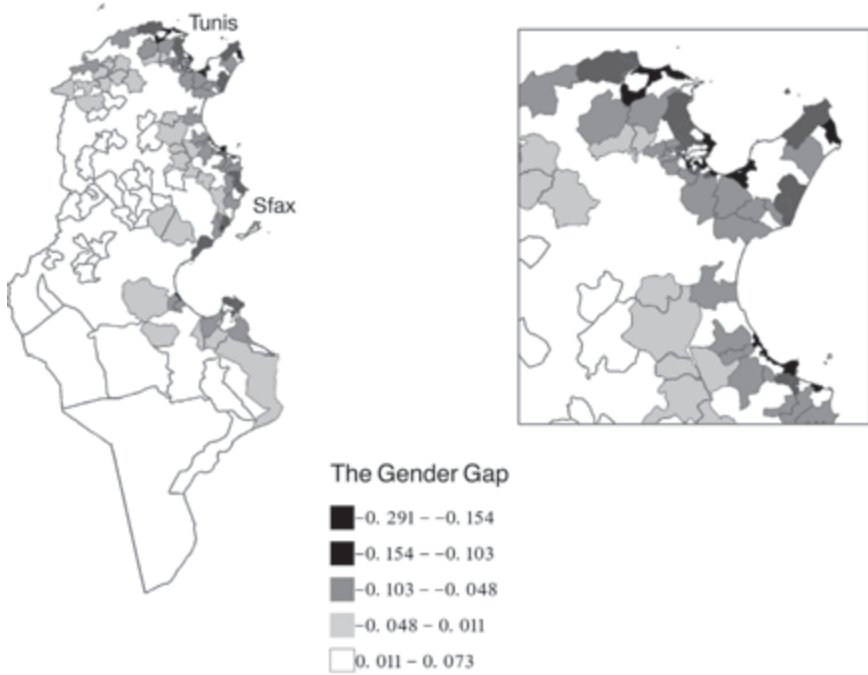
Figure 5.4. The Gender Gap

point to any coast. In interpreting the legend, bear in mind that negative numbers (darker colors) connote a higher predicted probability for men, and vice-versa.

Notably, the effect of the interaction between gender and our proxy for "marginalization"—distance to the coast in meters (logged)—is the net of the effect of various individual-level factors, including education and employment status. Likewise, the inclusion of frequency of prayer helps to allay concerns that our marginalization variable is simply tracking differential patterns of religiosity from the coast to the interior.[45]

A final concern may be that our results can be explained by patterns of Islamist political mobilization, particularly variation in the strength of networks linked to the Ennahda party. Although the party had formally separated its religious activism from its electoral ambitions, including social welfare, it had not divested itself of these networks. Furthermore, electoral support for Ennahda showed notable spatial variation, with the party drawing more support from the interior than the coastal areas.[46] Moreover, in other contexts, Islamist parties benefit from gender-differentiated out-

reach, mobilization, and constituency-service networks, allowing women relatively more opportunities to engage in the political process writ large.[47] Islamist rule, even at the local level, has clear implications for key variables in this study, including education and the status of women.[48] While we cannot completely rule out that our finding is confounded by underlying levels of support for Islamist political parties, it is notable that additional models controlling for an individual's vote for Ennahda do not significantly impact the main findings.[49]

## 6. Mosques, Gender, and Local Governance in the Islamic World and Beyond

Our study provides some of the first systematic evidence that individuals' self-reported preferences for solving personal and community problems through their mosques are contingent on gender as well as local governance characteristics. However, before discussing these results and their implications further, we should first consider the drawbacks of our research design and data. Importantly, our survey measures respondents' hypothetical choices rather than their concrete behaviors; we know their expressed preferences toward mosques, but not their actual practices. On the one hand, this helps capture general attitudes toward the various roles individuals believed their local mosque was well-placed to undertake. On the other, it does not provide grounds for a strong inference about what Tunisian mosques did in practice. Doing so would not only require we identify the roles various mosques play, for instance by reference to administrative data, but also identify the universe of mosques that could theoretically assume these roles.[50]

Ideally, we would have more data on the assumedly reciprocal relationships that emerge between local populations, the type and frequency of their problems and concerns, and the adaptability of their houses of worship. For example, it may be that women in marginalized districts were both more likely to use the mosque when faced with personal or community problems *and* more likely to have these issues arise than women near the coast. Knowing this, mosques in the interior may have responded to this demand by devoting efforts to solving these problems.

Indeed, prior research by the Governance and Local Development Institute at the University of Gothenburg highlighted how priorities for local governments, perceptions of common problems, political participation, and organizational behavior all varied by both gender and municipality.[51] As with the prior argument, adjudicating this would require a dif-

ferent research design and data, and future researchers should be alert to possibilities to extend and potentially revise our findings.

We document a clear shift in the "gender gap" based on rather localized contextual factors, specifically the documented divergence in development and local capacity that emerges the further the census district is from the Tunisian coast. We gain confidence in these findings because our results are robust to the inclusion of variables accounting for obvious alternative explanations, including a respondent's socioeconomic status and religiosity. We can offer a few naïve explanations for why these patterns exist.

Our intuition is that these differential patterns of demand for mosque-based services can be traced to variation in Tunisia's underlying administrative and associational landscape: in areas where potential alternatives were more numerous, accessible, or viable, women relied on the mosque comparatively less. In other words, women were more likely to use the mosque where fewer alternatives exist.[52] In areas where women's public activity was limited, men may have been more likely than women to access services outside the mosque. Our findings support this possibility, given men were less likely to prefer mosque-based services in areas further from the coast, whereas women were most likely to prefer them.

It may also be that our results pick up different historical patterns of state repression and surveillance. For example, under authoritarian rule, security forces disproportionately targeted interior areas, which in turn may have made men in interior areas wary of using the mosque for the types of issues we measured (see also Kherigi's discussion of regime control of interior regions in this volume).[53] However, a truly compelling argument requires additional data on the overall picture of competing institutions, how these vary subnationally, and Tunisians' views on their capacity to redress their grievances.

Our findings have several relevant implications for both the literature on Middle East politics and the study of community development and local governance. First, the literature on the "Islamist advantage" relies on a general assumption that mosques are powerful sites of mobilization for Islamist parties because many Muslims encounter these mosques in their daily (or weekly) activities. Our work, however, shows that, in certain areas and for certain sectors of the population, mosques were sites of community organization, while in other areas and for other parts of the population, the mosque's role was more limited. This differential mosque-based contact implies potentially important downstream political effects that may help

identify why some mosques were centers of Islamist mobilization while others were not.

Second, programs aimed at helping women resolve personal or community problems should consider where women feel comfortable receiving these services. Particularly in interior areas, our findings suggest that women may have had less experience using nonreligious institutions to receive services. Therefore, development programs in these areas might find it useful to utilize religious networks to reach out to women and facilitate their inclusion in such programs.

Third, in several contexts, women have called for more gender-inclusive mosques, and several countries have taken steps to increase women's participation.[54] For example, in the early 2000s, both Morocco and Turkey started training and employing female preachers and spiritual guides to promote the state's Islamic perspectives.[55] These calls should be taken seriously, as our data show how access and use of mosque facilities are relevant for civic engagement and local governance processes, particularly in more marginalized areas. At the same time, while these initiatives may increase women's access to mosque-based services and networks, they also have the potential to alienate some segments of the population that may be drawn to mosques because of their separation from the state.

## 7. Conclusion

Pairing an original survey of 1,200 Tunisians with spatial data on local marginalization, we identified the conditions under which individuals preferred to use the mosque to receive charity, fix a personal dispute, or organize contentious mobilization. In some respects, our work builds on existing findings that gender strongly conditions individuals' relationships with the local mosque. In our sample, women were generally less likely than men to use the mosque to solve personal or community problems. This finding, however, was conditioned by the local contexts of marginalization: the further from the developed regions of the coast, the narrower the gap between men's and women's habits becomes, to the point that the gender gap disappeared.

We tentatively argue that this relationship was driven by individuals' marginalization from state and non-religious civil society organizations. In the case of Tunisia, we argue that women in marginalized areas had weak, if not strained, ties to state and civil society organizations, increasing their

demand for mosque-based services. More generally, these findings suggest that while religious institutions assume various roles across the world, *who* uses religious institutions and for *which* purposes is locally dependent, particularly in areas with considerable developmental disparities.

How does the Tunisian setting affect the scope of the argument? We speculate that three conditions are particularly relevant. First, while Tunisia has subnational variation in state capacity, it is still one of the more capacious Arab States, due in part to its smaller size and population than its neighbors. In larger Arab states, particularly those with even greater variation in local governance capacity, the role of mosques for these tasks will likely be even more pronounced.

Second, the Tunisian state not only strongly repressed Islamist movements for decades, most prominently Ennahda, but it also hosted a strong non-Islamist counterweight in civil society—the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). The existence of such lively civil society organizations may have decreased dependence on mosques for services. In fact, Ketchley and Barrie find that the UGTT transformed the characteristics of protest mobilization by reducing the importance of the local mosque as a site of coordination.[56] However, the UGTT and other dominant civil society organizations in Tunisia have complicated ties to past and present state institutions. Therefore, variation in where Tunisian citizens engage in civil society cannot be separated from the country's particular political landscape.

Lastly, Tunisia is somewhat unique in that a hallmark characteristic of successive regimes was an emphasis on "state feminism," underpinned by official policies and unofficial norms designed to promote women's equality to suppress political competitors.[57] As a result, women perceived as supporting an Islamic organization, or those simply wearing a hijab, experienced varying degrees of harassment, intimidation, and in some cases imprisonment.[58] One legacy of these policies may be a reluctance of women—whether due to personal conviction, perceived social stigma, or some combination of both—to approach the mosque for local governance-related tasks. Meanwhile, women may be reluctant to approach state or state-affiliated institutions for those same tasks. Future work should build on the insights from Tunisia to explore whether women's use of mosques for nonreligious purposes is more prevalent in contexts with, or without, a history of state repression aimed at religious women.

More broadly, our work continues to shift research on religious institutions in the Islamic world from generalized narratives to falsifiable arguments. In this vein, we see several worthwhile extensions of this line of

inquiry. First, as noted previously, our research design does not account for mosque-level variation in the types of services provided, but only in citizen preferences for those services. To the extent that this data can be collected, it would further expand our understanding of mosques' roles in their local communities. Our research also tangentially connects to electoral politics. One possible hypothesis that our work prompts is that individuals who access the mosque for more than just religious services are most likely to support Islamist candidates. Although we note that our results remain unchanged after accounting for whether respondents voted for the Islamist Ennahda party, alternative measures of Islamist-party support could provide insights into a potential link between preferences for mosque-based services and political attitudes or behaviors.

We also know little about how rates of female mosque participation vary across or within countries. Our work is the first to empirically show instances in which the gender gap in mosque use closes. Using a nonrepresentative sample of Arab American Muslims, Jamal provides evidence that there may be other areas where the gender gap in mosque use looks quite different than previously assumed.[59] She also notes that mosque participation increases women's political efficacy and engagement. However, more work is needed to fully understand the causes and consequences of women's use of houses of worship, especially in the Islamic world.

Finally, unlike other chapters in this volume, our study demonstrates the important role of non-state institutions—namely religious institutions—in local governance. One implication is that non-state institutions should be better accounted for in discussions of decentralization. Understanding citizen preferences and use of nonstate institutions can help local leaders and development practitioners make more appropriate decisions about service delivery, community welfare, and local needs. Likewise, for scholars of decentralization, non-state institutions can provide needed insights into relations between local states and their citizens and local governance shortcomings. This is especially relevant in the MENA region, where other contributors to this volume have shown how local-level inequalities, such as representation (see Shalaby and Barnett), access to participatory institutions (see Colin and Bergh), and local capacity (see Parreira), can leave local politics out of reach for many.

## NOTES

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3.  Rachel Beatty Riedl, "Transforming Politics, Dynamic Religion: Religion's Political Impact in Contemporary Africa," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 2, no. 2 (2012): 29–50, https://doi.org/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.2.2.29; Julius Oladipo, "The Role of the Church in Poverty Alleviation in Africa," *Transformation* 17, no. 4 (2000): 146–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/026537880001700408; Ralph M. Goldman and Henrietta Pascual, "NAMFREL: Spotlight for Democracy," *World Affairs* 150, no. 4 (1988): 223–31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672149; Guillermo Trejo, "Religious Competition and Ethnic Mobilization in Latin America: Why the Catholic Church Promotes Indigenous Movements in Mexico," *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 3 (2009): 323–42, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055409990025

4.  Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Anthony James Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Frances Hagopian, ed., *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

5.  Christian Smith, ed., *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

6.  Cammett and Luong, "Islamist Political Advantage?"

7.  Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

8.  Tarek E. Masoud, *Counting Islam: Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

9.  Quinn Mecham, *Institutional Origins of Islamist Political Mobilization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

10.  David Siddhartha Patel, *Order out of Chaos: Islam, Information, and the Rise and Fall of Social Orders in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

11.  Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008).

12.  Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*; see also Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution and Civil Society," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003): 257–72, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592703000197

13.  Steven Brooke, *Winning Hearts and Votes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

14. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

15. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

16. Sarah J. Feuer, *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

17. Dominant interpretations of sharia rule that the Friday prayer is obligatory for all Muslim males to attend, but not women. Additionally, as noted in Marion Holmes Katz's *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), female attendance at Friday prayer is discouraged by more conservative interpretations of Islamic law because it is a form of gender mixing (*al-Ikhtilaf*). However, as Mahmood explains in *Politics of Piety*, there are also mosque-based opportunities for female participation, including study circles.

18. Still, as documented in Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), there has been a global increase in Muslim women serving as religious leaders, often by teaching, leading prayer for women, or creating women-only mosques. See also Richard A. Nielsen, "Women's Authority in Patriarchal Social Movements: The Case of Female Salafi Preachers," *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 1 (2020): 52–66, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12459

19. Line Nyhagen, "Mosques as Gendered Spaces: The Complexity of Women's Compliance with, and Resistance to, Dominant Gender Norms, and the Importance of Male Allies," *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019): 321, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050321; Dervla Sara Shannahan, "Gender, Inclusivity and UK Mosque Experiences," *Contemporary Islam* 8, no. 1 (2014): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-013-0286-3

20. Twelve countries were included in the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer survey: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen.

21. Ceren Belge and Lisa Blaydes, "Social Capital and Dispute Resolution in Informal Areas of Cairo and Istanbul," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 49, no. 4 (2014): 448–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-014-9165-z. Interestingly, they also find that, in general, religious elites are not used to settle disputes.

22. Lindsay J. Benstead, "Why Quotas Are Needed to Improve Women's Access to Services in Clientelistic Regimes," *Governance* 29, no. 2 (2016): 185–205, https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12162. However, it is not always the case that rural women are less politically engaged than women in urban areas. For instance, studies in the US and Britain find that women engage in higher levels of public and private political discussions in rural areas than women in urban or suburban communities—see Pamela Johnston Conover et al., "The Deliberative Potential of Political Discussion," *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 1 (2002): 21–62, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123402000029

23. Lindsay J. Benstead and Ellen Lust, "Women's Political Participation in North Africa: Lessons from Recent Research," (MAP Essay Series, Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., 2015), http://www.mei.edu/publications/gender-gap-political-participation-north-africa; Sabri Ciftci and Ethan M. Bernick, "Utilitar-

ian and Modern Clientelism, Citizen Empowerment, and Civic Engagement in the Arab World," *Democratization* 22, no. 7 (2015): 1161–82, https://doi.org/10.10 80/13510347.2014.928696; Valentine M. Moghadam, "Women's Economic Participation in the Middle East: What Difference Has the Neoliberal Policy Turn Made?" *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 110–46, http://dx.doi .org/10.2979/MEW.2005.1.1.110

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25. Hana Brixi et al., *Trust, Voice, and Incentives Learning from Local Success Stories in Service Delivery in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC, World Bank, 2015); Adam Harris et al., "Governance and Service Delivery in the Middle East and North Africa," Governance and Local Development Institute Working Paper No. 10, University of Gothenburg, 2017, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.358 1800

26. Chantal E. Berman and Elizabeth R. Nugent, "Defining Political Choices: Tunisia's Second Democratic Elections from the Ground Up" (Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Paper No. 38, Brookings Institute, 2015); Chantal E. Berman and Elizabeth R. Nugent, "Regionalism in New Democracies: The Authoritarian Origins of Voter–Party Linkages," *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2020): 908– 22, https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919862363. See also Intissar Kherigi's contribution to this volume.

27. Mongi Boughzala and Mohamed Tlili Hamdi, "Promoting Inclusive Growth in Arab Countries: Rural and Regional Development and Inequality in Tunisia," (Global Economy and Development Working Paper Series No. 71, Brookings Institute, 2014), https://www.proquest.com/working-papers/promoting-inclusive -growth-arab-countries-rural/docview/1790768678/se-2?accountid=11162; Berman and Nugent, "Regionalism in New Democracies."

28. Aili Mari Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

29. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

30. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

31. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

32. Gilles Van Hamme et al., "Social and Socio-Territorial Electoral Base of Political Parties in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia," *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 5 (2014): 751–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.974032; Berman and Nugent, "Regionalism in New Democracies."

33. Boughzala and Hamdi, "Promoting Inclusive Growth"; Valentine Moghadam, "Women and Employment in Tunisia: Structures, Institutions, and Advocacy," *Sociology of Development* 5, no. 4 (2019): 337–59, https://doi.org/10.1525/sod.2019 .5.4.337

34. Moghadam, "Women and Employment."

35. Andrea Khalil, *Crowds and Politics in North Africa: Tunisia, Algeria and Libya* (London: Routledge, 2014).

36. Carla B. Abdo-Katsipis, "Women, Political Participation and the Arab Spring: Political Awareness and Participation in Democratizing Tunisia," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38, no. 4 (2017): 413–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/155447 7X.2016.1268870

37. Abdo-Katsipis, "Women, Political Participation."

38. The survey was conducted by 121 for Research and Polling, in collaboration with Robert Kubinec of NYU–Abu Dhabi and Sharan Grewal of William and Mary.

39. This dependent variable is constructed using responses from three survey questions. Respondents were asked if they would use their local mosque if they needed to (1) resolve a personal dispute, (2) receive charity, and (3) organize a protest or gather signatures for a petition. The distribution of responses is relatively similar, though more respondents preferred to use the mosque for charity (206 respondents) than settling a personal dispute (58 respondents) or for a petition/protest (52 respondents). Given this distribution, we use a composite measure instead of using three separate dependent variables. However, note 42 details the results when each question is used as the dependent variable.

40. Tunisia's coastline spans its northern and eastern borders.

41. Since our outcome measure is binary, we also ran the same analyses using logistic regression models. The results were substantively similar to those presented in this chapter.

42. The outcome variable is a composite measure created from three survey items. Given the distribution of responses for each item (see note 39) and the power needed to detect significant interaction effects, we present results using only the composite measure. However, the interaction term between distance to the coast and gender is still positive and statistically significant when either the charity or the protest/petition questions are used as the dependent variable. The interaction term is not statistically significant when the personal dispute question is the dependent variable. This output is available from the authors on request.

43. Based on Model 2 in table 5.2, for women, the average marginal effect of logged distance to the coast is 0.027 ($p = 0.009$). The average marginal effect for men is –0.026 ($p = 0.016$).

44. Moving from 7.2 to 11.9 meters logged results in a decrease from 0.32 to 0.2 in men's predicted probability of preferring the mosque.

45. The results in Models 1 and 2 also remain substantively unchanged after accounting for the income level of respondents. Income is not included in the results presented here due to a high degree of missing values for this variable. Furthermore, our results are relatively unchanged after accounting for literacy rates across districts and when using distance to the capital (Tunis) rather than distance to the coast. In both instances, however, distance is only associated with a statistically significant change in preferences for mosque-based services among women, not among men.

46. H. Ege Ozen, "Voting for Secular Parties in the Middle East: Evidence from the 2014 General Elections in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia," *Journal of North African Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 251–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1544072

47. Lindsay J. Benstead, "Islamist Parties (and Women) Govern: Strategy, Authenticity and Women's Representation," in *Adaptation Strategies of Islamist Movements*, ed. Marc Lynch (POMEPS Studies, 2017), 21–25; Lindsay J. Benstead, "Islamist Parties and Women's Representation in Morocco: Taking One for the Team," in *Oxford Handbook of Politics in Muslim Societies*, eds. Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones Luong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 827–52.

48. Erik Meyersson, "Islamic Rule and the Empowerment of the Poor and Pious," *Econometrica* 82, no. 1 (2014): 229–69, https://doi.org/10.3982/ECTA9878

49. Specifically, we account for whether respondents voted for the Islamist Ennahda party in the 2018 municipal and/or 2019 legislative elections. We opt not to present the results with these variables included as only 9 percent of respondents are coded as Ennahda voters; the majority of respondents did not vote or did not disclose their vote choice.

50. Neil Ketchley and Steven Brooke, "Mosques and Islamic Activism" (Working Paper, 2020).

51. Lindsay J. Benstead et al., *The Tunisian Local Governance Performance Index: Selected Findings on Gender* (Program on Governance and Local Development Report Series No. 2, Yale University, 2016).

52. There are probably many alternatives to the mosque where women may go for their personal and community needs (i.e., educational settings, health clinics, women's shelters, civic associations, etc.). Although beyond the scope of this chapter, given the well-documented development disparities between Tunisia's interior and coastal regions, we suspect these alternatives to be harder to access for women in interior areas due to distance, awareness, and/or stigma. Admittedly, however, more work is needed to explore the types of alternatives available to women and any barriers to access.

53. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

54. Oguz Alyanak, "Women Demand Prayer Space," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019): 125–34, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-727 3885; Nyhagen, "Mosques as Gendered Spaces."

55. Mona Hassan, "Reshaping Religious Authority in Contemporary Turkey: State-Sponsored Female Preachers," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*, eds., Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 85–103; Margaret K. Rausch, "Women Mosque Preachers and Spiritual Guides: Publicizing and Negotiating Women's Religious Authority in Morocco," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*, eds. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 59–83.

56. Neil Ketchley and Christopher Barrie, "Fridays of Revolution Focal Days and Mass Protest in Egypt and Tunisia," *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2020): 308–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919893463

57. Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy*.

58. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

59. Amaney Jamal, "Political Participation and Engagement of Muslim Americans: Mosque Involvement and Group Consciousness," *American Politics Research* 33, no. 4 (2005): 521–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X04271385

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# Representation

# Success Beyond Gender Quotas

*Gender, Local Politics, and Clientelism in Morocco*

Marwa Shalaby and Carolyn Barnett[1]

## 1. Introduction

Gender quotas for political representation have increased over the past few decades at both the national and subnational levels. Over 100 states have adopted constitutional or electoral gender quotas, and 75 have implemented them subnationally.[2] Quota mechanisms are generally acknowledged to have increased female descriptive representation in decision-making institutions; however, some have argued that quota implementation policies may introduce a glass ceiling, preventing women from being nominated or elected beyond the mandated quota seats.[3] To date, scholars studying the subnational level have investigated the implementation and outcomes of women's quotas in democracies, but much less is known about women's successes beyond gender quotas, particularly in autocratic regimes.[4] This disparity is problematic, as it masks important variations in female political representation across regime types and levels of governance.

This chapter explores the conditions under which women win competitive seats beyond mandated gender quotas in local elections. Morocco is an ideal case for this study, for several reasons. Since 1960, Morocco's regime has held municipal elections to solidify its power and build alliances with rural elites to counterbalance urban and partisan elites.[5] The regime also

introduced national-level gender quotas in 2002, expanding them to the subnational level in 2009. However, female candidates continued to face challenges in accessing competitive seats. In the 2015 elections, only 132 women were elected beyond the quota, representing just 2 percent of the total number of women elected and 0.4 percent of the total number of seats at the subnational level.

We argue that the prevalence of clientelism and patronage networks at the local level has hampered women's abilities to win competitive seats. Clientelism and patronage networks have dominated both local and national politics in Morocco—as in much of the MENA region—but they have been most pronounced at the local level. This has direct implications for female representation. We argue that women's "newcomer" status and weak party affiliation, combined with the majoritarian electoral system (SMD) in most municipalities, curtailed women's success in local politics.

To test our argument, we draw on both quantitative and qualitative data. We rely on an original dataset containing the electoral outcomes of all 1,538 Moroccan municipalities and districts (henceforth municipalities) in the 2015 election, combined with municipal-level data from the 2014 Moroccan census.[6] The quantitative analysis is supplemented with data from twenty-eight original interviews conducted with local party officials and elected councillors in four similar municipalities where women's abilities to win competitive seats varied in 2015. We find that the dominance of clientelistic and patronage networks in Morocco's local politics constrained women's ability to win competitive (nonquota) council positions. Developmental, institutional (SMD versus proportional representation [PR] system), and municipal political features associated with clientelistic political dynamics were also important factors in explaining women's varied success in obtaining nonquota seats. However, our study demonstrates the marginal role parties' ideological orientations played in promoting women's access to local office.

Our approach and results intersect with the perspectives and findings of several other authors in this volume. Like Colin and Bergh, we show how socioeconomic exclusion undermines the potential for more inclusive institutions (in their case petitions, in our case quotas) to translate into more broadly equitable participation in civic institutions. Both the petition system and gender quotas in Morocco expanded opportunities for local political engagement, but they did not eliminate disparities in Moroccans' effective access to responsive and participatory governance mechanisms. Our findings also align with Blackman et al., who demonstrate empirically that partisanship does not play an important role in

Tunisian local politics. Like Parreira, we highlight how party elites, especially those who are proregime, may play an outsized role at the local level, even after decentralization. Finally, Buehler and Gergis's study of mayorships in Morocco's Casablanca region reaffirms that both age and gender stereotypes play an important role in voter preferences at the municipal level in Morocco—suggesting another reason why women may struggle to achieve nonquota seats.

Focused on women's ability to gain nonquota seats in Morocco, this chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines extant work on women's success in local politics and the role of local elections in authoritarian settings—particularly in the MENA region. Section 3 introduces the context of local elections in Morocco and our theoretical framework. Section 4 presents the data, and section 5 analyzes the results, followed by a discussion of potential alternative explanations. We conclude by discussing our contributions to the study of women's local representation in Morocco.

## 2. Women's Representation in Local Elections: A Comparative Perspective

Extant work has shown that local-level offices tend to be more open and accessible to women and other underrepresented groups than national-level offices. For example, studies of local office-holding in the United States find that women's representation is inversely related to the office's competitiveness and prestige.[7] However, this is not the case in the MENA region, where women continue to be underrepresented in subnational politics, even when compared to the national level.

Based on research in other regions, several factors may explain women's success in local politics. Focusing on structural factors, Sundström and Stockemer find that higher levels of female labor force participation and urbanization predict greater local-level female representation in Europe.[8] Districts' demographic factors, such as income, population characteristics, and unemployment rates, are also strong predictors of the strength of women's presence in subnational politics. Additionally, institutional factors such as quotas and the type of electoral system play an important role in shaping women's access to leadership positions at both the national and local levels. Larger districts and party magnitudes—often associated with proportional representation systems—are conducive to higher levels of female political inclusion, especially if combined with closed party lists.[9]

Political parties' ideologies also matter, on both the national and sub-

national levels. Studies in developed democracies have shown that political parties and party ideology play substantive roles in promoting women to power.[10] As Campbell and Lovenduski argued, parties are "gendered institutions" that reflect the gender ideology of their membership and top ranks.[11] Parties with leftist ideologies are more likely to encourage women's representation.[12] In contrast, parties with conservative ideologies emphasize women's traditional roles within the family.

But what about the correlates of women's representation in local elections under authoritarianism? Authoritarian regimes are characterized by the concentration of power at the center, limited opportunities for power-sharing, and weak and/or fragmented party competition. In the MENA region, elections are widely viewed as channels for rent distribution, opportunities for elites to identify the most loyal party figures and to strengthen incumbent regimes.[13] Lust views elections as significant political events for both political elites and voters; however, electoral competition is not about policymaking, but rather about access to state resources and clientelistic networks.[14]

Moreover, political parties play a marginal role in national politics in most parts of the MENA region. The introduction of multiparty systems has led to the creation of parties that reproduce the regimes' autocratic and nepotistic practices rather than promote more liberal processes.[15] Most parties rely on clientelistic party-building and mobilization strategies based on the distribution of selective benefits. While political parties do coordinate within and among themselves to draft and present substantive legislation, and parliamentarians pose questions and participate in debates about important issues, parties rarely advance credible policy programs along clear ideological lines.[16] The more parties rely on such clientelistic strategies, the more they are "insulated" from their constituents' policy interests, and they risk losing candidates and voters if their ability to provide clientelistic services diminishes.[17]

On the whole, we expect local elections to be governed by the same dynamics as their national counterparts, and to serve similar goals. However, political parties at the local level are even more tightly bound to clientelistic political dynamics, with consequences for female political representation. Local elections are widely viewed as even less relevant to policymaking than national ones.[18] Citizens consider local officials mainly as service providers with little or no policymaking power. Voters are therefore even more likely to base their choices on candidates' abilities to provide services and secure resources from the national government. Partisanship and party ideology matter even less at the local level than at the

national level. As voters in underdeveloped areas realize that politics will not improve their daily lives, they are more likely to base their vote choice on candidates' clientelistic linkages and patronage networks than on their ideologies.[19]

The pervasiveness of clientelism and ideology's weak influence further disadvantage female candidates, given their limited access to existing power networks and regime loyalists' circles.[20] Female politicians are often perceived as less competent in service provision and distributive politics, which are particularly important when local elected officials fulfill a clientelistic role.[21] As women are relative newcomers to local politics, they have not had the opportunity to build reputations as efficient deliverers of patronage and services to garner voters' support.

### 3. Local Politics, Gender, and Clientelism in Morocco

Morocco is a multiparty constitutional monarchy with a complex, multi-layered governance system consisting of regions, provinces, prefectures, and municipalities.[22] The country has held municipal elections since 1960 (*Dahir* of 1956 and 1959), and meaningful decentralization effectively dates back to 1976.[23] Municipal councils have three sets of competencies: local, shared, and transferred.[24] Local competencies include public services such as water, electricity, sanitation, road maintenance, and transportation. Shared competencies involve building and maintaining hospitals, schools, and infrastructure and investing in equipment. Finally, transferred competencies, which can be transferred from the central to municipal governments, include protecting monuments, preserving natural sites, and overseeing small- and medium-sized hydraulic works. Local government financing currently comprises 3.5 percent of GDP, which is high compared to many other MENA states. However, most municipalities lack financial autonomy and rely on the central government's transfers.

The past two decades witnessed a steady increase in women's political representation at the local and national levels.[25] This advance is mainly due to the actions of an organized feminist movement that began pushing for women's representation quotas in the late 1990s when the gradual liberalization of Moroccan politics created a new space for claim-making.[26] At the subnational level, the 2009 electoral reform introduced a 12 percent quota for the municipal elections through the creation of additional lists for women in urban and rural municipalities (Articles 204 [1] and [2] of the electoral code), as well as the creation of a "support fund for the promo-

tion of women representativeness" (Article 288). Consequently, women's local representation increased from 0.6 in 2003 to 12.3 percent in the 2009 municipal elections.

The new Moroccan Constitution, adopted in 2011 in response to political pressure raised by the Arab Uprisings and Morocco's 20th February movement, called for the institutionalization of gender parity.[27] Article 146 called for a new organic law to "establish steps to improve the representation of women in the [local] councils." In November 2011, the government issued Organic Law No. 59.11, specifying the number of local council seats reserved for women. In 2015, the number varied from four to eight, depending on the size of the local council and municipal population, as detailed in the following section.[28]

These quotas raise questions about when and why women gain representation beyond the specified number of seats. These questions remain unanswered at the local level, although scholarship on women's representation at the national level suggests that clientelism plays an important role in shaping women's representation patterns.[29] National-level quotas have successfully increased women's numerical representation, but women's ability to access nonquota seats has remained limited due to the patronage-based nature of Moroccan politics.[30] Focusing on the links between female politicians and political parties, Lloren argues that quotas have failed to democratize decision-making procedures within parties and Morocco's politics more broadly.[31] Darhour finds that women's increased representation at the national level has helped legitimize the "de-democratization" of Moroccan politics.[32]

Moreover, extant research emphasizes the prevalence of patronage and clientelism in less-developed areas of Morocco.[33] For decades, the regime has used political parties to build alliances with rural elites, counterbalancing the urban and partisan elites.[34] Political parties in Morocco can thus be grouped into two main categories: palace and traditional opposition.[35] Palace parties include the Popular Movement (MP), National Rally of Independents (RNI), Constitutional Union (UC), and the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM).[36] The traditional opposition parties include Istiqlal (PI), the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS), and the Justice and Development Party (PJD).[37] The regime has mainly used the palace parties to garner support from the rural population to counter the "unrest of the urban center," providing them with ample resources, political favors, and protection in exchange for their support.[38] Thus, voting in these areas has relied on personal ties and proximity to the local notables and elites.[39]

Municipal elections have been administered using PR systems for populations over 35,000 and single-member district systems for populations below 35,000 (the population threshold used in 2015). This electoral system, by design, tends to overrepresent rural areas and continues to be an important tool to solidify the regime's control over elections.[40] Unsurprisingly, the regime's loyalist parties continued to sweep seats in the rural areas, accounting for more than 80 percent of municipalities. However, starting in 2009, the Islamist PJD party made considerable gains in urban and formerly proregime districts due to its demonstrated commitment to good governance, even as it maintains key elements of patron-client relationships.[41]

As argued earlier in the chapter, women often face challenges to winning local office seats beyond the quota in settings where clientelistic politics and patronage prevail. This is mainly attributed to female politicians' limited ability to disrupt the long-standing, male-dominated power structures[42] and/or to overcome existing gender stereotypes of female politicians as less competent service providers. Therefore, we expect to find fewer female candidates winning competitive seats in SMD municipalities and municipalities with lower levels of development where voters may place greater value on (male) politicians' abilities to provide services. Prior work also shows that higher electoral participation rates, mainly in rural areas, are often associated with support for the regime's loyalist parties— where clientelistic and patronage relationships dominate.[43] We thus expect higher rates of political participation to be associated with less electoral success for women. In contrast, we expect women would be more likely to win competitive seats beyond the quota in municipalities with higher development and education levels, as these characteristics are associated with weaker patterns of clientelism.

## 4. Data

We use data on 31,482 local councillors elected in 2015, initially compiled by the Moroccan NGO TAFRA, to examine women's ability to win seats in municipal elections.[44] The dataset includes the councillors' names, party affiliation, council position, and information on the rate of voter participation in each municipality. We manually coded the gender of every official based on first names and combined this dataset with information from the 2014 Moroccan Census on municipal-level socioeconomic characteristics.[45] Due to limitations to the information made available by the Moroccan

government, the data do not specify whether women were elected in competitive seats or through the reserved-seat system.[46] We therefore focus on analyzing variations in the number of seats *exceeding* the legally mandated quota seats. Municipalities with legal populations of 35,000 or lower are, by law, organized into single-member districts (SMDs), with four council seats reserved for women. Municipalities with legal populations above 35,000 have councils elected via proportional representation (PR) based on party lists. Six council seats are reserved for women in municipalities with populations between 35,000 and 200,000, and eight seats are reserved in municipalities with populations over 200,000. All additional women were elected competitively.

The analysis below estimates a series of multivariate models on a municipal-level dataset with 1538 observations. The dependent variable in each model is a binary indicator that takes a value of one if a municipality elected any women beyond the quota and zero otherwise. We use a binary, rather than continuous, outcome measure to enable comparability of the outcome across municipalities with different types of electoral systems, as the larger total number of seats in PR municipalities makes achieving a higher absolute number of "additional" (nonquota) seats feasible compared to SMD municipalities.[47] We also prefer the binary outcome because the continuous measure of "seats beyond the quota" is skewed by the few municipalities electing more than one additional woman.[48] In robustness checks, however, we reestimate our models using the continuous outcome measure and find that our results differ little.[49]

We use the following predictors: *electoral system*, a binary variable that takes a value of one to indicate SMD municipalities and zero for PR municipalities; *participation*, the proportion of eligible voters in a municipality who voted in the 2015 elections; and *competitiveness*, the ratio of the difference in votes between the top two parties in a municipality to the total number of votes cast in that municipality.[50] We also incorporate three variables from the 2014 census: *higher education*, the proportion of the population in each municipality with higher education; *unemployment*, the unemployment rate in the municipality; and *public sewage*, the proportion of households connected to a public sewage network.[51]

In different models, we then include either the *party magnitude* of each of the eight major parties (the MP, PAM, PI, PJD, PPS, RNI, UC, and USFP)—the proportion of seats held by that party in that municipality—or a dummy variable for *party majority*, taking a value of one if a given party holds the most seats and zero otherwise. Municipalities in which two parties tied for the most seats are not coded as a majority for any party. Table C1 in appendix C provides summary statistics for these variables.

We further draw on qualitative evidence from interviews with party officials and local councillors in four municipalities across two provinces (and regions). A local research assistant conducted twenty-eight semistructured interviews (with thirteen female and fifteen male councillors and party officials, whom we anonymized) in person between March and May 2021.[52] Each interview lasted about an hour. The interview questionnaire included questions about candidate selection, list placement, training, campaigning, party strategies and priorities, and councillor experiences in office. These specific municipalities were selected for similarity in underlying characteristics but differed in the outcome of whether any women were elected beyond the quota: Arbaoua and Mnasra in Kénitra province in the broader region of Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, and Sidi Bibi and Biougra in Chtouka-Ait Baha province in the Souss-Masa region. The two municipalities in Kénitra are both SMD municipalities, but Arbaoua elected five women at the local level in 2015, while Mnasra only elected the quota-mandated four. The two municipalities in Chtouka-Ait Baha are PR municipalities, but Biougra elected seven women in 2015, while Sidi Bibi only elected the quota-mandated six. All four municipalities have legal populations between 30,000 and 40,000 (near the threshold for determining whether municipalities will be SMD or PR). Table C2 in appendix C summarizes additional features of the four municipalities.

## 5. Analysis and Results

### 5.1. Descriptive Analysis of Women's Representation in the 2015 Elections

On September 4, 2015, Moroccans elected 31,482 local council seats and 678 regional council seats from 140,000 candidates spanning more than thirty parties. Voter turnout for the elections was 54 percent, up from approximately 45 percent in the 2011 legislative elections. The proregime PAM led in less developed and rural areas, but the Islamist PJD dominated most major cities and urban areas with the highest percentage of the popular vote (1.5 million votes), tripling its seat share compared to the 2009 local elections. The PJD also won the plurality of the regional council seats (174 of 678), followed by PAM with 132 seats. Table 6.1 shows the overall number and share of valid votes and seats won by all parties that achieved at least 1 percent of either votes or seats. We focus on analyzing results for women among the six parties that won the most votes and seats nationwide: the PJD, PAM, PI, RNI, MP, and USFP.

TABLE 6.1. Municipal Election Outcomes 2015

| Party | Votes | Vote share (%) | Seats | Seat share (%) |
|-------|-------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| PJD | 1,558,715 | 21 | 5,018 | 16 |
| PAM | 1,334,273 | 18 | 6,662 | 21 |
| PI | 1,068,560 | 14 | 5,083 | 16 |
| RNI | 886,927 | 12 | 4,415 | 14 |
| MP | 645,750 | 9 | 3,006 | 10 |
| USFP | 562,992 | 8 | 2,654 | 8 |
| PPS | 422,315 | 6 | 1,770 | 6 |
| UC | 400,473 | 5 | 1,480 | 5 |
| AGD | 100,367 | 1 | 332 | 1 |
| FFD | 74,096 | 1 | 193 | 1 |
| MDS | 72,540 | 1 | 297 | 1 |
| AHD | 33,100 | 0 | 143 | 1 |

*Note:* The table shows the number of valid votes won per party, the vote share this represents (out of a total of 7,366,589 nationwide), the number of seats won, and the seat share this represents (out of a total of 31,482 nationwide). An additional nineteen political parties omitted from this table won at least some valid votes but failed to win at least 1 percent of either the valid votes or seats nationwide.

In total, 6,570 women were elected as local councillors in 2015—20.8 percent of the councillors. Table 6.2 shows the number of women elected from each of the six top parties (85 percent of the total seats) and the proportion of that party's total number of women-held council seats; 21–22 percent of councillors from each were women. Across all municipalities, the average is 18–19 percent.

One hundred thirty-two women were elected beyond the quota requirements, spread across 99 municipalities. In 80 of these municipalities, a single woman beyond the quota requirement was elected; 2 women

TABLE 6.2. Women's Representation by Party

| Party | Total | Women | Overall percentage | Average percentage |
|-------|-------|-------|--------------------|--------------------|
| PAM | 6,662 | 1,369 | 20 | 19 |
| PI | 5,083 | 1,097 | 22 | 19 |
| PJD | 5,018 | 1,058 | 21 | 19 |
| RNI | 4,415 | 958 | 22 | 18 |
| MP | 3,006 | 624 | 21 | 18 |
| USFP | 2,654 | 574 | 22 | 18 |
| PPS | 1,770 | 380 | 22 | 18 |
| UC | 1,480 | 274 | 18 | 15 |

*Note:* "Overall percentage" divides the total number of seats held by women for each party into the total number of seats held by that party. "Average percentage" calculates this proportion for each municipality, then averages across all municipalities.

TABLE 6.3. Women's Competitive Victories and Council Sizes

| # of municipalities | Competitive women | Total seats | % of seats |
|---|---|---|---|
| 80 | 1 | 13–65 | 1.5–7.7 |
| 15 | 2 | 19–44 | 4.6–10.5 |
| 2 | 4 | 28–38 | 10.5–14.3 |
| 2 | 7 | 36–65 | 10.8–19.4 |

*Note:* The table presents information on the ninety-nine municipalities where at least one woman was elected beyond the quota requirements. The "Total seats" column shows the range of council size in each set of municipalities. The "% of Seats" column shows what percentage of this total number of seats the number of competitive women elected represents.

were elected competitively in 15 municipalities, 4 women in 2 municipalities, and 7 women in 2 municipalities.

Table 6.3 displays the distribution of competitive women elected across the municipalities where any competitive women were elected, along with the range of total seats per council in each group of municipalities and the percentage range of total seats per council in each group. Where competitive women were elected, they comprise between 1.5 percent (in a 65-seat council where only 1 competitive woman was elected) and 19.4 percent of council seats (in a 36-seat council where 7 competitive women were elected). The 132 women elected beyond the quota represent 2 percent of the total number of women elected and just 0.4 percent of the seats at the subnational level. Additionally, the number of women elected failed to reach the target quota in 7 municipalities: in 4 municipalities (3 PR and 1 SMD), there was 1 fewer woman elected than required, and in 3 municipalities (2 PR and 1 SMD), there were 2 fewer women elected than required, for a total of 10 "missing" female councillors.

Both the overall proportion of women among councillors and the number of women competitively elected varied across the electoral system types. Table 6.4 shows the total number of elected seats and female councillors. Because of the quota design, a slightly greater proportion of seats (21 percent versus 19 percent) was held by women in SMD than in PR municipalities. Therefore, women were more represented in less populated municipalities (with few exceptions).

There were fewer PR than SMD municipalities, but nearly an equal number of municipalities with each system had at least 1 woman elected beyond the quota requirements—that is, PR municipalities were disproportionately more likely to elect women beyond quota requirements. Among the SMD municipalities, 1,331 elected exactly the number required by the quota, while 44 elected 1 additional woman, 5 elected 2 each, and 1 elected

TABLE 6.4. Women's Representation by Electoral System

| Electoral system | Total | Women | Overall percentage | Average percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SMD system | 25,987 | 5,584 | 22 | 23 |
| PR system | 5,495 | 1,039 | 19 | 19 |

*Note:* "Overall percentage" divides the total number of seats held by women for each electoral system into the total number of seats in municipalities with that electoral system. "Average percentage" calculates this proportion for each municipality, then averages across all municipalities.

4. Among PR municipalities, 101 elected exactly the number required by the quota, while 36 elected 1 additional woman, 10 elected 2, 1 elected 4, and 2 elected 7.

### 5.2. Analysis

We estimate six logistic regression models, the results of which are presented in table 6.5.[53] Models 1 and 2 use the entire sample and include the indicator for a municipality having an SMD electoral system as a predictor variable. Models 3 and 4 are estimated on only SMD municipalities, and Models 5 and 6 are estimated on only PR municipalities. Across these sets, the odd-numbered models use the *party magnitude* variables described above, while the even-numbered models use the *party majority* variables. The indicators for all eight political parties that won more than 5 percent of council seats nationwide are included in the regression models. We display coefficients only for the top six parties; results for the two omitted parties (the PPS and UC) are similar.

Consistent with our expectations, results from the first two models show that SMD municipalities are significantly less likely than PR municipalities to have women elected beyond the quota-mandated seats. The results also show that the proportion of the population with higher education is a strong and significant predictor of having women elected beyond the quota. However, this finding loses statistical significance in the models run on the small sample of PR municipalities. Higher unemployment is negatively associated with women winning competitive seats, while the proportion of households connected to public sewage is positively associated with this outcome.

We also find a negative association between the participation level in the 2015 elections and women being elected beyond the quota, which is statistically significant in the full sample while controlling for party magnitudes or majorities and among the sample of PR municipalities while

TABLE 6.5. Regression Model Results

| | All | | SMD only | | PR only | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) Magnitude | (2) Majority | (3) Magnitude | (4) Majority | (5) Magnitude | (6) Majority |
| SMD system | -0.945* | -0.811+ | | | | |
| | (0.446) | (0.447) | | | | |
| Higher education | 10.864** | 10.028** | 13.606** | 13.589** | 7.230 | 5.778 |
| | (3.357) | (3.289) | (5.016) | (5.175) | (4.631) | (4.431) |
| Unemployment rate | -3.759+ | -3.180+ | -3.812+ | -3.566 | -3.829 | -0.796 |
| | (1.984) | (1.926) | (2.196) | (2.183) | (5.464) | (5.355) |
| Public sewage | 1.157* | 1.109* | 1.197* | 1.226* | 0.464 | 0.187 |
| | (0.503) | (0.499) | (0.600) | (0.594) | (1.098) | (1.071) |
| Participation | -2.868+ | -2.554+ | -1.922 | -1.812 | -5.020+ | -3.176 |
| | (1.475) | (1.465) | (1.896) | (1.891) | (2.896) | (2.833) |
| Competitiveness | -0.255 | -0.234 | -0.412 | -0.016 | -0.817 | -1.098 |
| | (0.702) | (0.719) | (0.838) | (0.817) | (1.963) | (1.657) |
| PAM | -0.005 | 0.002 | -0.004 | 0.207 | -0.016 | -0.205 |
| | (0.010) | (0.494) | (0.010) | (0.671) | (0.025) | (0.790) |
| PJD | -0.018+ | -0.037 | -0.029+ | -1.153 | -0.008 | 0.266 |
| | (0.011) | (0.504) | (0.015) | (1.170) | (0.024) | (0.736) |
| PI | -0.011 | -0.003 | -0.010 | 0.254 | -0.020 | -0.574 |
| | (0.011) | (0.542) | (0.011) | (0.708) | (0.026) | (1.024) |
| MP | -0.002 | 0.497 | 0.000 | 0.747 | -0.011 | 0.347 |
| | (0.011) | (0.539) | (0.012) | (0.716) | (0.026) | (0.888) |
| RNI | -0.003 | 0.004 | -0.003 | 0.427 | -0.011 | -16.345 |
| | (0.010) | (0.550) | (0.011) | (0.689) | (0.026) | (1,303.932) |
| USFP | -0.016 | -0.850 | -0.020 | -0.567 | -0.008 | -16.386 |
| | (0.013) | (0.838) | (0.014) | (0.933) | (0.036) | (2,772.445) |
| Num. obs. | 1534 | 1534 | 1379 | 1379 | 155 | 155 |
| AIC | 603.4 | 609.4 | 421.7 | 422.2 | 198.6 | 198.3 |
| BIC | 683.4 | 689.4 | 494.9 | 495.4 | 241.2 | 240.9 |
| Log. lik. | -286.702 | -289.688 | -196.870 | -197.076 | -85.285 | -85.156 |

*Note:* $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Models 1 and 2 were run on the full sample of all municipalities. Models 3 and 4 were run only on the subsample of municipalities with single-member district (SMD) electoral systems. Models 5 and 6 were run only on the subsample of municipalities with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems. In the odd-numbered models, the coefficients reported for each party are for the *party magnitude*. In the even-numbered models, the coefficients reported for each party were for the *party majority* variable.

controlling for party magnitudes. As explained above, voter participation is systematically higher in places with denser clientelistic ties to local politicians dominated by regime-loyalist parties.

We lack a direct measure for clientelism in our dataset, but these results, taken together, suggest that the diminished women's ability to win competitive seats in less developed areas, especially those characterized by higher levels of unemployment and voter participation, is due to the dominance of clientelistic voting. To validate our findings, we turn to our interview data.

Our interviewees reiterated the prevalence of clientelism and patronage politics, especially among the regime loyalist parties, and expressed its adverse effects on female candidates. For example, a party official from Agadir stated:

Well . . . the administrative parties give people [*Makhzen*] money to vote for them. We don't have this kind of issue, but we hope this practice will stop as it strikes the heart of the electoral process. Especially when it comes to providing equal opportunities. Some candidates pay as much as 300 dirhams per vote, and unfortunately, people vote for them because they see that they have so much money. And they get elected! (Interview #8, Party Official—Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party)

Another interviewee from Kénitra stressed that

[Local] elections are still based on rent distribution where citizens are still unable to evaluate and decide among different party programs. All they [the voters] care about is the candidate's family ties and background. We are against bribery as well as providing material benefits in exchange for votes. (Interview #7, Party Official—Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party)

This reality is further complicated by the fact that women often lack the networks and connections that would enable them to compete on an equal footing with male candidates in these highly clientelistic areas. A female councillor from Manasra states,

I think there are some challenges, especially that women do not go out much, they do not go to cafés or public spaces much; they often socialize only during weddings or special occasions. . . . Men also do not want women to compete with them; they want politics to stay a men's field, especially in rural areas. They cannot accept that women challenge them; it represents a threat to their dignity. (Interview #17, Councillor—National Rally for Independents Party)

In this context, parties struggle to recruit and integrate women who can fulfill these expectations. As a female party official in Agadir explained,

The biggest problem is finding women who are willing to run as candidates. I mean, if you go to rural areas, villages, or other remote

regions, it is very difficult to find women willing to run for office. It is not just adding names to the lists. On the contrary, she [female candidate] has to build her place/position, speak her mind, and many other things. (Interview #9, Party Official—USFP)

To compensate for female candidates' lack of clientelistic linkages, parties select women with strong community and social ties to fill the quota seats—but not necessarily lead an electoral list or run for a competitive seat. Elected female councillors also underscored these strategies, recruiting female candidates from prominent families or with strong ties to the local community, regardless of their prior political affiliation or experience. One interviewee described elections as "family selection" (Interview # 15, Councillor—Popular Movement). Another from Mnasra highlighted strong social ties as an important criterion for selection, stating

I am a teacher, and most, if not all, of the families know me personally and interact with me on a daily basis. They see that I am giving, helpful, with a degree, and willing to talk and participate in important conversations, which would definitely allow me to represent them within the council and solve their problems. They trust me. (Interview #17, Councillor—RNI)

Proximity to the regime is critical for women to be selected to head an electoral list or run for a competitive seat. Referring to women's competitive success in Arbaoua municipality, a leading party official from the Popular Movement stated that

the president of the Arbaoua [council], Fatima Al-Keihel, who was a former minister, was able to achieve so many accomplishments and attracted so many women who worked hard and left their own imprints. She is now running so many projects benefiting the entire municipality. (Interview #2, Party Official—Popular Movement)

Being part of the ruling elite facilitates access to resources and networks—indispensable for success as service providers in their districts.

## 5.3 Alternative Explanations

Extant work has emphasized the role of political parties' ideology in shaping outcomes relating to female representation. However, we argue in this chapter that party ideology plays a less meaningful role in Morocco's local

politics, even when compared to the national level. The primary role of local politicians is to secure investment and services for their constituents from central decision-makers. Regarding parties' gender-related ideologies, previous studies of Morocco have underscored the diffusion of the gender equality rhetoric across the political spectrum: "All parties speak of increasing women's political participation nowadays."[54] Others have found very little divergence of opinions between PJD and USFP supporters regarding gender roles.[55]

Our interview data confirm the weak influence of party ideology in less developed, rural areas on female representation. Interviewees emphasized the weakness of party politics at the local level and the predominance of service provision, both from voters' and parties' perspectives. As a prominent party official in Kénitra stated,

> Our priority now is to avoid politics! We want to avoid useless discussions, ideological party debates, and disagreeing about issues and positions! This is counterproductive! What the inhabitants of Kénitra need today is better service provision on the local level. (Interview #1, Party Official—Popular Movement)

Explanations of women's electoral outcomes based on party ideology also find little support in our quantitative data and statistical models. The lack of variation in women's representation across political parties apparent in the aggregate (see table 6.2) holds when we examine the number of women elected by each party under each electoral system.

Figure 6.1 shows the total number of councillors and the total number of women elected from each of the major parties in SMD and PR municipalities, respectively. The proportion of women elected is consistent across parties under both types of electoral system; each party had an overall proportion of 21–22 percent female councillors in SMD municipalities and 17–20 percent women in PR municipalities.

We include party magnitudes as explanatory variables in our multivariate models, and we do not find strong systematic differences across parties in the likelihood of electing women beyond the quota. Increased party magnitudes for the PJD are associated with a lower likelihood of competitive female councillors in the overall sample and among SMD municipalities. However, the magnitude of these associations is small, and no estimates for any of the party variables are large or statistically significant in any other model. These results may also be driven by the PJD's relative weakness in SMD municipalities (see figure 6.1). We separately estimated
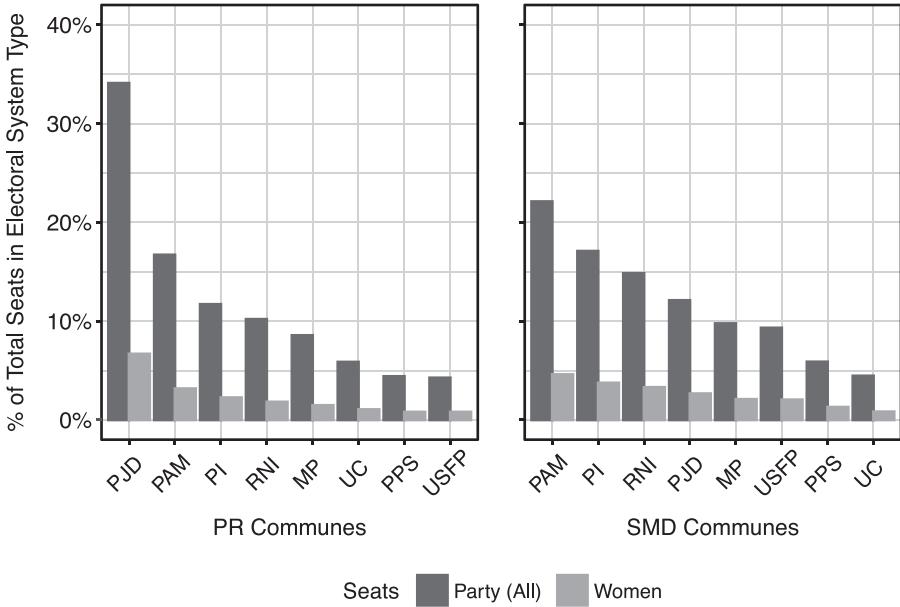
Figure 6.1. Women's Representation by Party and Electoral System
*Note:* This figure displays the percentage of seats held by a party and the percentage of seats held by women of that party out of the total number of seats available within each type of electoral system: 25,987 across all SMD municipalities and 5,495 across all PR municipalities.

the same regression models (results omitted) while aggregating party-level results into broader measures of the magnitudes and majority status of the "palace" versus "opposition" parties; the coefficients on these indicators in all models were substantively small and statistically insignificant.[56] We also find no association between competitiveness (the relative closeness of the election between the top two parties in each municipality) and women winning nonquota seats.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter explores the conditions under which female candidates win beyond the mandated quota seats in local politics. Drawing on multivariate analysis of the 2015 local election results and the socioeconomic characteristics of Moroccan municipalities, as well as insights from interviews with party officials and elected councillors, we argue that the limits on women's ability to win seats beyond the quota reflect the ongoing strength

of clientelist ties and the challenges women face as credible bearers of clientelist service provision. While we cannot directly test the causal influence of clientelism on women's representation, our quantitative findings are consistent with women being less likely to succeed where clientelism plays an especially strong role in local politics. Women are more likely to win competitive seats in municipalities with weaker voter participation, higher rates of development and education, and PR electoral systems. In contrast, party ideology and electoral competitiveness only have a modest relationship to women's ability to win nonquota seats.

We supplement these findings with qualitative evidence, demonstrating that local elected officials and party elites view voters' expectations of clientelistic connections and service provision as a reason why recruiting and electing women is difficult. Future work should directly test, perhaps experimentally, whether valuing clientelism leads voters to display more bias against female candidates and politicians.

This chapter contributes to our understanding of gender politics, local governance, and partisanship in autocratic settings in several ways. First, it offers one of the first systematic analyses of women's descriptive representation at the local level in Morocco. Second, subnational gender quotas have proliferated across the region over the past two decades, but research on the implementation and consequences of these new institutional mechanisms is scarce. Thus, our study paves the way for more comparative analyses of gender quotas and women's local-level representation in the MENA region.

Our findings will be useful to practitioners seeking to further facilitate local governance reform and improve women's representation. The results underscore the utility of gender quotas in achieving some level of representation for women, helping women gain political experience, and accustoming voters to female candidates. However, they also demonstrate the limitations of quotas in the face of constituents who may view women as incapable service providers. Along with other studies in this volume, we draw attention to how more inclusive institutions may not yield more inclusive outcomes, how stereotypes and biases may affect the outcomes of local elections, and the important role of party elites in determining who gains political office, even when political partisanship is not a strong determinant of citizens' behavior.

Over time, experience with female municipal councillors may mitigate the disadvantage they face in the context of more clientelist politics. It is possible that, as women gain experience in local politics, voters will be more willing to vote for women and to trust that they will effectively fill the ser-

vice provision and political connection roles expected of local politicians. However, more work is needed to analyze the variations in women's ability to win competitive seats across different electoral systems and municipalities' different levels of development in future elections. Furthermore, while we find no differences across parties in the number of women elected to local councils, it is possible there are systematic differences in the number of women nominated to run for these positions. Future work should assess this possibility by gathering and analyzing systematic candidate-level data.

Finally, our interviewees reiterated several sociocultural challenges facing female candidates that we cannot systematically assess with our data. Female councillors and party officials alluded to the cultural stigma associated with women in high-visibility positions, especially in rural areas with traditional gender norms. However, absent local-level public opinion data on social norms and attitudes toward female candidates, we cannot rule out that such norms play a role in suppressing female representation in local politics. We believe further research on the effect of such norms is critical to better understand the supply aspect of female representation in Morocco's local politics.

NOTES

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28. Another amendment to the electoral law altered the seat distributions for the 2021 election.

29. We are only aware of one study that employs an ethnographic approach to examining three women's local political campaigns after the introduction of the 2009 quota. See Yasmine Berraine, "The Micropolitics of Reform: Gender Quota, Grassroots Associations and the Renewal of Local Elites in Morocco," *Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 3 (2015): 432–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2015.1017815

30. Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerup, "Sustainable Representation of Women through Gender Quotas: A Decade's Experience in Morocco," *Women's Studies International Forum* 41, no. 2 (2013): 132–42, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.04.008; James N. Sater, "Reserved Seats, Patriarchy, and Patronage in Morocco," in *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, eds. Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 72–87.

31. Anouk Lloren, "Gender Quotas in Morocco: Lessons for Women's Descriptive and Symbolic Representation," *Representation* 50, no. 4 (2014): 527–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2014.979224

32. Hanane Darhour, "Whose Empowerment? Gender Quota Reform Mechanisms and De-Democratization in Morocco," in *Double-Edged Politics on Women's*

*Rights in the MENA Region*, eds. Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerup (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 279–302.

33. Matt Buehler, "Continuity through Co-Optation: Rural Politics and Regime Resilience in Morocco and Mauritania," *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 3 (2015): 364–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1071453

34. Willis, "Political Parties"; Zaki, *Decentralization in Morocco*.

35. Miquel Pellicer and Eva Wegner, "Socioeconomic Voter Profile and Motives for Islamist Support in Morocco," *Party Politics* 20, no. 1 (2014): 116–33, https://doi .org/10.1177/1354068811436043

36. Eva Wegner and Miquel Pellicer, "Left–Islamist Opposition Cooperation in Morocco," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011): 303–22, https:// doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2011.621690; PAM was formed in 2009 as an explicit anti-PJD move by the regime to counter their increasing gains in both local and national elections.

37. These major parties collectively win at least 80 percent of total votes in national and local elections.

38. Buehler, "Continuity through Co-Optation"; Willis, "Political Parties."

39. Janine A. Clark, "The Party of Justice and Development and Municipal Elections in Morocco," in *Islam in a Changing Middle East: Local Politics and Islamist Movements*, eds. Lauren Baker, Kristen Kao, Ellen Lust, and Marc Lynch (Governance and Local Development Institute Working Paper Series No. 13, University of Gothenburg, 2017), 10–16.

40. For instance, the minimum number of seats in government per electoral district is two, often making the least-populated electoral districts overrepresented compared to densely populated ones. See Abouzzohour, "Persistent Rural Failure," 17.

41. Clark, "Justice and Development."

42. Berriane, "The Micropolitics of Reform."

43. Pellicer and Wegner, "Voter Profile and Motives."

44. Data are available from TAFRA.

45. This dataset is available from the Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP), Morocco's national statistics agency. We utilize the version adapted into a more user-friendly format by TAFRA; the authors have manually coded all the names in the dataset. When we encountered gender-neutral names, we checked the municipality's website or searched for news articles that may have their pictures and/or more info on their gender. Native Moroccans were also consulted with some names that the authors were unable to identify.

46. Several variables that would be desirable to include are unavailable, such as female labor force participation rates and gender-disaggregated data on participation rates in the elections. Also, candidate-level data for the 2015 municipal elections are unavailable, so we are unable to analyze variation across parties or municipalities in the number of women nominated and/or how candidacies relate to electoral outcomes.

47. The total number of seats available in SMD municipalities ranges from 13 to 59, with a mode of 15 and a mean of 20. In contrast, the total number of seats available in PR municipalities ranges from 19 to 65, with a mode of 35 and a mean of 37. Thus, using absolute numbers of "seats above the quota" could bias com-

parisons across district types by exaggerating the relative success of women in PR municipalities even though the proportion of women elected in SMD municipalities is actually slightly higher than in PR municipalities.

48. The count of "total number of additional seats" is skewed, with very few municipalities electing more than one nonquota woman (6 SMD municipalities and 13 PR municipalities, out of 1,538 municipalities total), with those counts ranging from 2 to 7.

49. Full results are available from the authors on request. SMD municipalities continue to be associated with a lower success rate for nonquota women. Political party magnitudes or majorities and district competitiveness continue to be uncorrelated with the outcome. Higher educational attainment, unemployment rates, and voter participation remain correlated in the same direction with nonquota success, but are statistically significant in more of the models than we find using the binary variable. One result does change: Greater access to public sewage is negatively correlated with nonquota success using the continuous outcome; this is driven by results among SMD municipalities. As noted above, however, given the skew of this variable, these results are driven by the very few outlier SMD municipalities (6 out of 1,383) electing multiple nonquota women.

50. The electoral system variable is included in Models 1–2 below, and then used to divide the sample for Models 3–6. The level of urbanization is also plausibly an important factor, explaining whether a municipality elected women beyond the mandated quota. Due to the quota design, across the whole dataset, the proportion of a municipality designated as rural versus urban is highly correlated with the type of electoral system in place: only four municipalities with an above-median proportion of residents living in rural areas are PR systems. Including this variable in the models with the full sample introduces a multicollinearity problem as a result. In robustness checks (not presented), we do include this variable in the models run only with PR municipalities (Models 5–6); the variable accounting for the rural population is not statistically significant in these estimations and does not substantively affect the estimated coefficients of other variables.

51. Morocco has made significant progress in the past two decades connecting households to running water and electricity, but the development of public sewage networks lags behind. As a result, this indicator is currently a better proxy for variation in local development. Wegner and Pellicer also control for access to mobile phones and satellite television; see "Left–Islamist Opposition Cooperation." By 2014, the former were ubiquitous and the latter widespread. We estimated additional models (not included) incorporating these variables, but they did not affect the results.

52. The research assistant was approved by the University of Wisconsin–Madison's IRB office and followed strict health protocols.

53. The results are substantively similar across all specifications. We focus on presenting the logistic regression results as they are the most straightforward to interpret while accounting best for the nature of the data.

54. Lloren, "Gender Quotas in Morocco"; Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy*.

55. Wegner and Pellicer, "Left–Islamist Opposition Cooperation."

56. In these models, the PAM, RNI, UC, and MP are coded as "palace" parties, while the PJD, USFP, PI, and PPS are coded as "opposition" parties. The models

replace the individual party-level variables with variables for, respectively, the palace and opposition magnitudes or majorities in a municipality.

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# Local Political Priorities during Tunisia's First Democratic Municipal Elections

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## 1. Introduction

Political regimes in the Middle East have long suffered from an absence of inclusive political institutions to channel citizens' demands to policymakers. Decentralization reforms and local democratic institutions have been championed as an avenue for improving local development.[2] The May 2018 municipal elections in Tunisia—the first truly competitive and nationwide *local* elections in the country's history—were an unprecedented opportunity to bring the government closer to Tunisian citizens by reestablishing the municipal councils tasked with local development, selecting council members through elections rather than appointment, and connecting service delivery directly to democratic practice. Moreover, decentralization and the expansion of municipal governance were proposed to remedy the central government's neglect of certain regions.[3] Many believed that the success of Tunisia's democratic consolidation would depend, at least in part, on the representation of citizens' interests within municipal councils and the establishment of local governance practices to meet citizens' demands.

Tunisia has a long history of municipal governance, but historically, local government was not democratic. This was due to (1) noncompetitive

elections under colonial rule and postcolonial dictatorships, (2) the exclusion of approximately one-third of the population (and historically more) who lived outside the areas governed by elected municipal councils, and (3) the control of local government by older male politicians with ties to the hegemonic parties of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. As a result, local-level representation was unaccountable, unevenly distributed, and unrepresentative.

For this reason, decentralization and local governance were a focus after the 2010 Uprising. After the overthrow of President Ben Ali, the country adopted a set of reforms to improve representation on municipal councils and extended elected local representation throughout the country. Before the 2018 elections, the Tunisian government expanded the municipal system, which had previously only governed areas designated as urban (*communal*), to cover the entire country, incorporating all rural localities into new or existing municipalities. Additionally, the government imposed strict gender and youth quotas on all electoral lists.[4] As a result of new electoral laws adopted in 2017, half of the over 45,000 candidates running were women, and half were under thirty-six years old.[5] More than 2,000 electoral lists competed in the 350 municipalities; of these, 860 were independent lists, and 1,214 were party lists from over twenty political parties. Moreover, the municipalities in which these candidates competed differed significantly; some were newly created rural municipalities, while others were highly urbanized with forms of municipal government dating to the 19th century.

In this chapter, we examine two important questions concerning local governance during this period in Tunisia. First, we look at how individual- and municipal-level characteristics affected local development priorities. We examine the impact of the quota reforms aimed at increasing women and youth representation in local government. Specifically, we consider whether women and youth candidates—the targets of the electoral quotas—expressed different local development priorities than older, male candidates and whether these differences corresponded to differences in local development priorities among the Tunisian population. Second, we examine the congruence between citizens' and candidates' local priorities. How well did candidate priorities align with citizen priorities?

To examine these two questions, we draw on three primary data sources: a survey of nearly 2,000 municipal election candidates, a survey of over 6,500 Tunisians (both fielded around the 2018 municipal elections), and sixteen semistructured interviews with municipal council presidents conducted in October 2019. While we find some variation in local priorities

based on individual- and municipal-level characteristics, we uncover more notable gaps in local priorities between citizens and candidates, particularly around the issues of jobs and security. Finally, we explore some of the possible explanations for the candidate-citizen gap.

## 2. Municipalities and Local Governance in Tunisia

In 1858, Tunis (*Tunis Ville*) was the first of Tunisia's cities to be incorporated as a municipality.[6] During the French colonial period, several other urban Tunisian cities were designated as municipalities, including suburbs of Tunis, such as La Goulette, and urban centers in other regions of the country, such as Kef and Sousse. By its independence in 1956, Tunisia had sixty municipalities, which generally coincided with its urbanized towns and areas of high French settlement.

The Tunisian government has remained highly centralized since 1956, although it nominally pursued decentralization reforms several times, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. These decentralization efforts led to the creation of new municipalities throughout the country.[7] In 1975, there were 158 municipalities, and by the early 1990s, there were over 240. Despite the expansion of municipal governments, however, municipalities remained concentrated in urbanized areas and politically favored regions.[8] According to Khellaf, in 1989, 41 percent of the Tunisian population lived outside the municipality system and had services administered through appointed rural councils.[9] As of the 2014 census, about one-third of Tunisia's residents lived outside the municipality system.[10]

During the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras, these municipal councils were typically elected in authoritarian elections dominated by the hegemonic party.[11] After the 2010 Uprising, there was a push for greater decentralization of political power and public services. As part of this effort, the Tunisian government pledged to hold new local elections, which took place in May 2018 after multiple delays. These elections displayed greater democratic contestation than those before the revolution; under the laws adopted after the revolution, all political parties could contest the elections, and independent candidates were allowed to form nonpartisan electoral lists. All council members would be elected, and the council members subsequently would select the municipal council president.[12]

In addition to holding new municipal elections, the Tunisian government took several steps to extend municipal governance throughout the country. Decentralization reforms were passed to extend municipal coun-

cil governments throughout the country's entire territory and empower councils to play a greater role in service delivery. In 2011, Tunisia had 264 municipalities. This number was increased to 350 before the 2018 elections, following a process of municipal boundary expansion and demarcation to cover the entire territory.[13] In practice, this meant expanding existing municipalities to include the surrounding rural areas and creating new municipalities in some outlying areas.[14] The unaltered municipalities tended to be older, urban areas, while the expanded and new municipalities typically included more rural areas. Figure 7.1 displays a map of the country's old, expanded, and new municipalities.

The Tunisian government also took steps to increase the representation of marginalized groups in local politics. The electoral law for municipal elections included legislated candidate quotas for women and youth (those under thirty-six years old). The gender quota required that all electoral lists include 50 percent women and that the list order alternate between male and female candidates (*vertical parity* with the "zipper" system). It also required that all parties running lists in more than one municipality adhere to *horizontal parity*—parity between male- and female-headed lists. For the youth quota, a candidate thirty-five years old or younger had to be in one of the top three spots on the list and included in every six candidates after that. Lists that did not comply with the gender and youth quotas were disqualified.[15]

Overall, decentralization and municipal council reforms proved difficult. Delays in passing the municipal council electoral law led the elections to be postponed several times, from 2016, to 2017, to 2018.[16] Elections for new regional councils, which were supposed to have taken place in the years following the revolution, had still not occurred as of 2022, when a new constitution was promulgated. The Code of Local Authorities (CLA or *Code des Collectivités Locales*, CCL), which governed the municipal councils and set the councils' mandates, passed only on April 26, 2018, just ten days before the May 6, 2018, elections.[17] In our interviews, some council members expressed frustration with the lack of clarity about the rules and responsibilities of municipal councils.

Some of the councils' work was clear. The primary mandate of municipal councils remained local service provision. This included constructing and maintaining roads; managing waste and the environment; maintaining public spaces such as parks or stadiums; constructing and maintaining public lighting; civil registration; and developing a health and hygiene plan.[18] Municipal councils were also responsible for approving the municipal budget, including organizing service provision priorities and allocating funds accordingly.
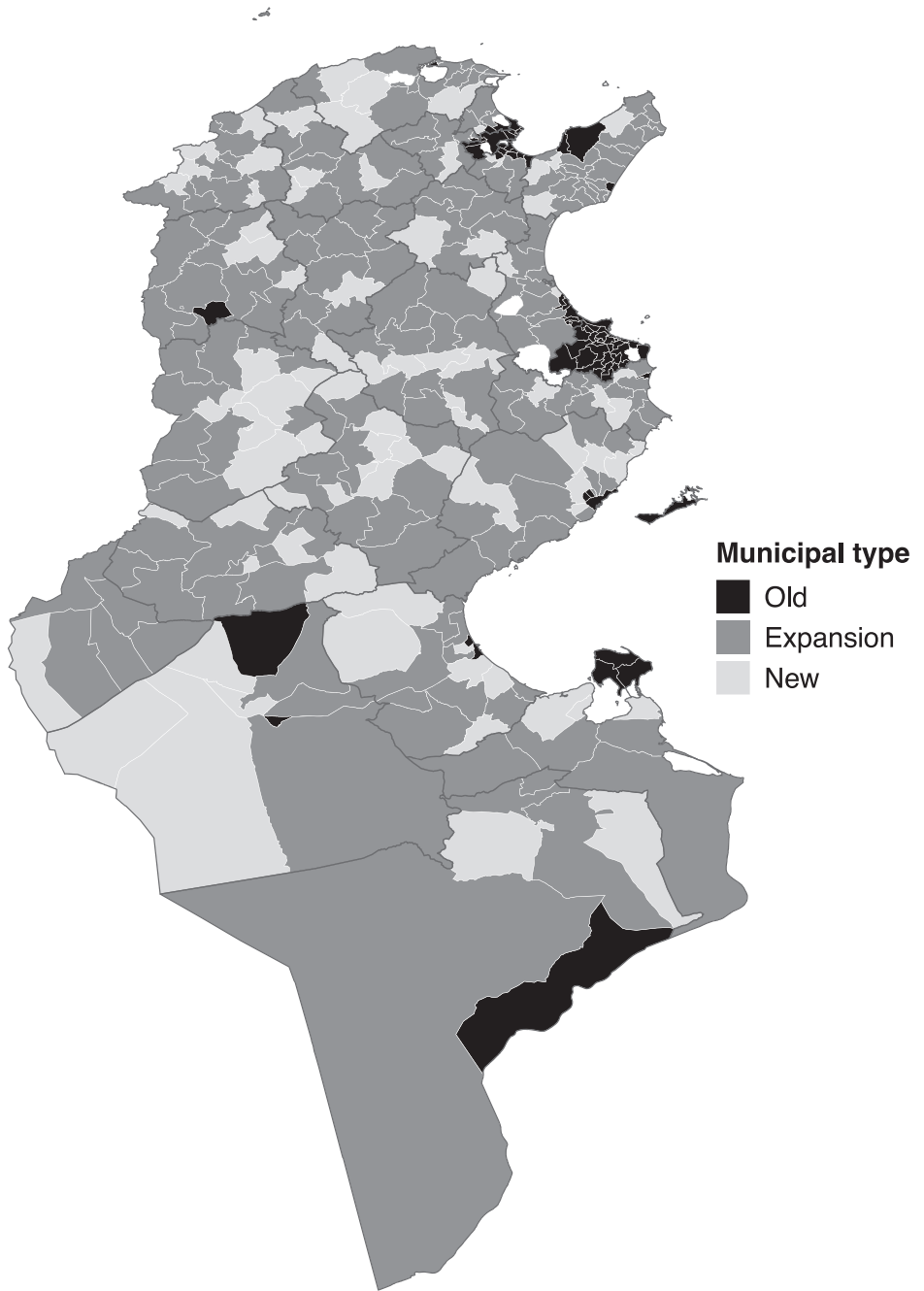
Figure 7.1. Map of Municipalities and Type after the Municipality
Generalization Process
*Note:* This map is based on shapefiles and data created by Clark (2021).

This does not mean municipalities had exclusive control of municipal service provision. As Turki and Verdeil describe, there were three types of municipal service provision: (1) services provided by national companies (e.g., water supply and wastewater management, electricity, and gas); (2) local-level services provided by private companies (e.g., transportation); and (3) services supported by municipalities (e.g., trash collection).[19] There were also cases where mandates overlap. For example, while municipalities were largely responsible for road construction and maintenance, the national government maintained certain major routes. Overlapping mandates like this are common in partly decentralized contexts.[20]

Despite some ambiguity in the municipal (versus central) government mandate, in interviews with council presidents, many emphasized the same local issues: cleanliness and waste disposal, roads and infrastructure, lighting, illegal construction and land issues, and water. Overall, cleanliness and waste disposal—النظافة وتصريف النفايات—were the top issues discussed by the municipal council presidents in our interviews.[21] Additionally, several mayors stated they viewed cleanliness as the primary responsibility of any municipality. Boubaker Souid of the Tataouine municipality stressed that cleanliness and waste management were the local government's main tasks and that municipal councils needed to show success on that issue first.[22] Souad Abderrahem, the first female mayor of Tunis Ville, stated that the absence of a municipal council for nearly eight years before the 2018 election led to the decline of cleanliness and waste management in many municipalities, increasing its importance following the election.[23]

There was broad agreement among the council heads about the main issues facing municipalities; however, we are interested in how politicians and citizens chose and organized local priorities. Specifically, how well did politicians represent citizens' priorities? And how did reforms aimed at improving descriptive representation on these councils (i.e., age and gender quotas) shape substantive representation? These questions can shed light on representation: Whose interests are best represented, and where do gaps or congruence on issue priorities emerge? In the next section, we examine the individual- and municipal-level correlates of prioritizing certain local issues.

### 3. Understanding Local Priorities: Individual- and Municipal-Level Correlates

Previous research has identified several individual-level factors associated with local development priorities: Age, gender, socioeconomic status, and

partisanship have all been linked to differences in local policy and public goods preferences.[24] Some differences in policy preferences—such as those based on gender—have been well documented. For others, such as partisan differences in local governance, the evidence is mixed. For instance, in the United States, local politics historically have not been partisan, but there is evidence that they are becoming increasingly so.[25] Furthermore, as Shalaby and Barnett's chapter on Moroccan local elections in this volume demonstrates, partisan politics play a weak role in local elections characterized by clientelism, such as those in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

In Tunisia, candidate characteristics such as gender, age, social status, and partisanship received significant attention ahead of the 2018 municipal elections. This was largely because these were the first democratically contested local elections, and the quota laws aimed to bring historically underrepresented groups into municipal government. In addition to improving descriptive representation, the quotas were intended to improve substantive representation for these groups. This is important because previous research indicates a gender gap in substantive priorities. In Tunisia, for example, Benstead finds that men are more likely to make requests related to roads, while women are more likely to focus on education.[26] In this volume, Brooke and Komer find a gender gap in mosque use (including access to social services), which varies with local levels of marginalization.

For these reasons, we focus on four individual-level variables that may be correlated with local preferences: gender, youth status, socioeconomic status, and partisanship. We measure youth status as a binary variable for being thirty-five or younger at the time of the election. Socioeconomic status is operationalized through measures of education (university education or above), unemployment (in the labor force and looking for work), and monthly household income (measured in six levels between under 500 TND to over 2,500 TND each month). Finally, partisanship is captured by the partisan affiliation of the list a candidate ran on or the vote choice of a citizen respondent in the municipal elections.

In line with existing work, we expect to find differences related to these individual-level characteristics. For example, following Benstead, we expect women to prioritize roads less than men.[27] Given high levels of youth unemployment, we expect youth candidates and citizens to prioritize employment more than older candidates. We also expect that those who are unemployed will be more likely to prioritize jobs. However, given the nonpartisan nature of the councils, we do not expect local priorities to differ significantly based on partisanship.

At the municipal level, factors such as district magnitude, level of local

development or urbanization, electoral competitiveness, level of formal and informal civic organization, and historical legacies under the previous regime may shape local development priorities and public goods provision.[28] Variation in the strength of local actors and their ability to influence the local political process has already been documented in Tunisia. For example, Clark et al. find that local municipal actors exercised varying degrees of influence over the appointment of special delegations during the transitional period following President Ben Ali's departure in 2011.[29]

We focus on three municipal-level variables likely to be correlated with citizens' and candidates' local development priorities in Tunisia: population size, urbanization rate, and unemployment rate. The first is the municipal population size (logged)—a proxy measure of council magnitude. Tunisia's largest municipalities in terms of population and council size are large cities like Tunis (population over 600,000; sixty-seat council), Sfax (population over 250,000; forty-two-seat council), and Sousse (population over 200,000; forty-two-seat council). These factors are also related to the historical legacies of municipal politics; as Kherigi describes in this volume, in certain cases, municipal boundaries (and, thus, population size) are related to the strength of local notables' ties to the central government.

The second municipal-level variable is urbanization. As a result of the recent expansion of the municipality system to rural areas, the level of urbanization is highly correlated with whether the municipality is new (rural municipalities), old (urban municipalities), or an expansion municipality (mix of urban and rural). Though many local issues were shared among the municipal council presidents we interviewed, the local challenges identified by some presidents highlight variations in municipal institutionalization and urbanization. For example, council presidents from newly created municipalities reported having very few buildings and properties that the municipality owned and could use.[30] In municipalities with rural areas, interviewees often emphasized specific challenges with reaching constituents in more outlying areas.

The final municipal-level variable we examine is the local level of unemployment.[31] This is a key measure of local economic development that varies drastically by region and level of urbanization.[32] Moreover, urbanization and unemployment rates are also correlated with local legacies of marginalization.

We expect these municipal characteristics to shape local priorities. For instance, we expect that citizens and candidates will be more likely to prioritize employment in places with higher unemployment rates. Similarly, we expect that issues such as trash are more likely to be prioritized in more

urban areas. In contrast, citizens and candidates are more likely to prioritize roads in more rural areas with less developed road infrastructures.

### *3.1 Survey Data*

To examine individual- and municipal-level correlates of local priorities of both citizens and candidates, we draw on two surveys conducted in 2018 around the first democratic municipal elections in Tunisia. First, we conducted a survey of over 1,900 candidates for Tunisia's first democratic municipal elections in 100 municipalities between April 13 and May 13, 2018.[33] This survey is representative of high-ranking candidates for the two major parties—the Ennahda Movement and Nidaa Tounes—and includes highly ranked candidates from third parties and independent lists.[34] Second, we draw on a nationally representative survey of over 6,500 Tunisian citizens, completed directly after the May 2018 election. This survey was conducted by Democracy International and included some of the same questions from the candidate survey.[35]

In both surveys, candidates and citizens were asked about the most important local priorities facing their municipality from the following options: (1) improving local roads; (2) collecting waste and maintaining the environment; (3) stopping illegal construction; (4) enhancing local security; (5) creating jobs for locals; (6) enhancing local cultural life; and (7) installing more lights in public spaces.[36] We selected these local priorities based on the municipal council mandates (e.g., roads and waste management) and local issues from our preelection interviews. The candidates were asked to rank the priorities for their local area, and the citizens were asked to imagine they were a municipal council member and select their top priority. As a result, we can directly compare the top local priority of both political candidates and citizens. A respondent is coded as prioritizing a specific local issue if they select it as the top issue facing the municipality. Figure 7.2 displays the candidates' and citizens' top priorities.

### *3.2 Interview Data*

In October 2019, we also conducted sixteen semistructured interviews with municipal council heads from diverse backgrounds. To ensure a diverse interviewee pool while holding governorate-level characteristics constant (e.g., governor, level of regional development, relationships among local councils), we selected council heads elected on the Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, and independent lists from the Tunis, Monastir, and Tataouine

## Top Priorities (Candidates)
Percent of candidates ranking issue as top issue

## Top Priorities (Citizens)
Percent of respondents ranking issue as top issue
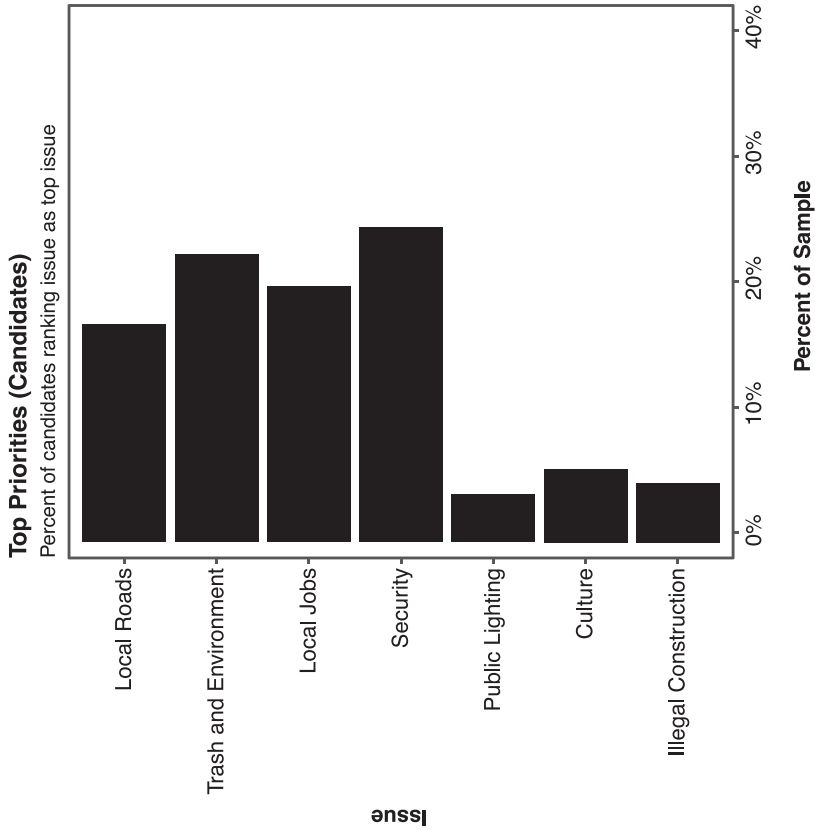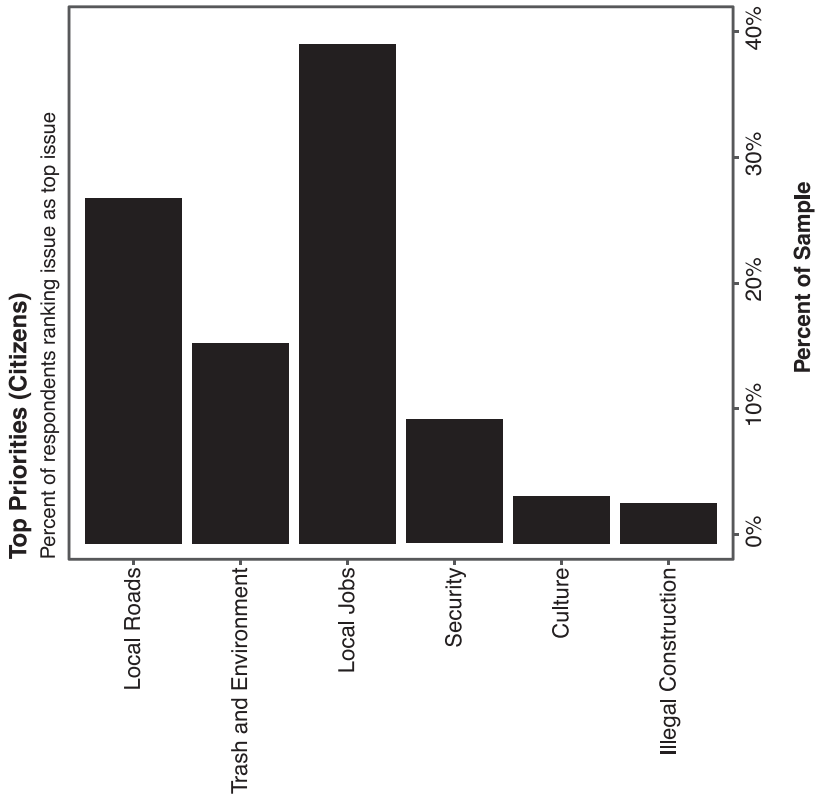


Figure 7.2. Top Local Priorities of Candidates and Citizens

governorates. To increase partisan diversity, we also interviewed council heads elected on the Democratic Current and People's Movement lists in other governorates.[37] We selected both male and female interviewees for each party.[38] In each interview, we asked the same battery of questions on local governance, including the main challenges they face in their municipality, what services citizens have requested, what resources would be useful, and what projects they have undertaken since becoming mayor. All but four interviews took place in the respective municipality headquarters.[39]

### 3.3 Results

We examine whether a respondent selected a given issue as the top issue for their municipality using seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR) to model respondents' preferences regarding local development priorities. The outcomes included improving roads, managing waste and the environment, creating jobs, improving security, stopping illegal construction, and enhancing local culture. Following Gottlieb et al. and Clayton et al., we use SUR because our outcome variables are measured using the same survey question and are not independent of each other.[40] We include the same set of independent variables for each outcome.[41] The coefficients are the same as linear probability estimates from an ordinary least squares (OLS) model. We run the analysis for candidates and citizens separately.

We first examine the local priorities of men and women among both citizens and candidates. Previous research shows that men and women often have different preferences for public goods and service provision, and Tunisia's gender quota—which required 50 percent female candidates for all lists—facilitated the entry of many women into the political process.[42] Tables 7.1 and 7.2 display the SUR results, and figure 7.3 displays the predicted probabilities of selecting each issue (illegal construction, culture, jobs, roads, security, and trash/environment) as the top priority by gender. There are some gendered patterns. Among citizens, women were more likely to prioritize jobs, while men were 6 percentage points more likely to prioritize roads. These findings support earlier research indicating men are more concerned with roads and women are more focused on employment, perhaps because unemployment in Tunisia is higher among women, particularly female graduates.[43] However, we do not find the same patterns for candidates. The only consistent result among both candidates and citizens is that

TABLE 7.1. Citizen Priorities: SUR OLS Regression Results

| | Dependent variable: Issue is top priority | | | | | |
| | Roads | Trash | Jobs | Security | Illegal construction | Culture |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Intercept) | 0.33*** | 0.18*** | 0.30*** | 0.13*** | 0.04** | 0.02 |
| | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Female | -0.06*** | 0.03** | 0.03** | -0.00 | -0.01 | 0.01* |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.01) |
| 35 & under | -0.02 | -0.06*** | 0.10*** | -0.03*** | -0.02** | 0.02*** |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.01) |
| Ennahda | 0.03 | 0.01 | -0.02 | -0.02 | 0.00 | -0.00 |
| | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Nidaa | 0.00 | 0.03 | -0.03 | 0.00 | -0.02 | 0.01 |
| | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Independent | 0.06 | 0.02 | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Nonvoter | 0.01 | -0.00 | 0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| University + | -0.07*** | 0.01 | 0.07** | -0.02 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Unemployed | -0.02 | -0.03* | 0.06*** | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Income level | -0.01 | 0.03*** | -0.03*** | -0.00 | 0.01* | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Urbanization rate (standardized) | -0.02** | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Unemployment rate (standardized) | -0.02** | -0.00 | 0.02* | 0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| LN (population) (standardized) | 0.02* | 0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01* | -0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Regional controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| R2 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Number of observations | 6,595 | 6,595 | 6,595 | 6,595 | 6,595 | 6,595 |

*Note:* * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Omitted (reference) category for partisanship variable is Third Party.

women were more likely to prioritize trash collection and the environment than their male counterparts.

Next, we examine differences by age group. Again, the new quota law for the municipal election helped promote youth voices (thirty-five and under) as candidates and members of municipal councils.[44] Among both citizens and candidates, we find that youth were less likely to prioritize trash and more likely to prioritize enhancing local cultural life. Additionally, both youth candidates and citizens prioritized jobs more than their older counterparts. However, youth citizens were 10 percentage points

TABLE 7.2. Candidate Priorities: SUR OLS Regression Results

| | Dependent variable: Issue is top priority | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Roads | Trash | Jobs | Security | Illegal construction | Culture |
| (Intercept) | 0.22*** | 0.16*** | 0.20*** | 0.26*** | 0.10*** | 0.02 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Female | -0.02 | 0.05* | -0.02 | 0.04 | -0.04*** | -0.00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| 35 & under | 0.00 | -0.08*** | 0.05* | -0.00 | -0.02 | 0.04** |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Ennahda | 0.03 | 0.03 | -0.06* | -0.00 | -0.02 | 0.02 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Nidaa | -0.05 | -0.02 | 0.01 | 0.07* | -0.02 | 0.01 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Independent | -0.03 | 0.04 | -0.04 | 0.00 | -0.03 | 0.02 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| University + | 0.03 | -0.00 | 0.00 | -0.03 | -0.02 | 0.00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Unemployed | -0.03 | -0.01 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.00 | -0.01 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Income Level | -0.00 | 0.01 | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Urbanization rate (standardized) | -0.03** | 0.01 | -0.03* | 0.05*** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Unemployment rate (standardized) | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | -0.01 | -0.02* | -0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| LN(population) (standardized) | -0.02 | 0.05*** | -0.02* | -0.01 | 0.00 | -0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.01) |
| Regional controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| R2 | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.02 |
| Number of observations | 1,906 | 1,906 | 1,906 | 1,906 | 1,906 | 1,906 |

*Note:* \*$p < 0.05$; \*\*$p < 0.05$; \*\*\*$p < 0.01$. Omitted (reference) category for partisanship variable is Third Party.

more likely to list employment as the top priority compared to older citizens, while youth candidates were only 5 percentage points more likely to list it as the top priority compared to older candidates. These results suggest that youth had different priorities than older respondents and that youth candidates were more focused on the substantive interests of youth than their older counterparts. This demonstrates the importance of institutional reforms, such as youth quotas.[45]

The third individual-level attribute we examine is partisanship. For candidates, we measure this as the type of list on which they competed in the election.[46] For citizens, we measure this as the party they voted for in 2018. Citizen respondents who did not vote are coded as "Nonvoter." We

Local Priorities
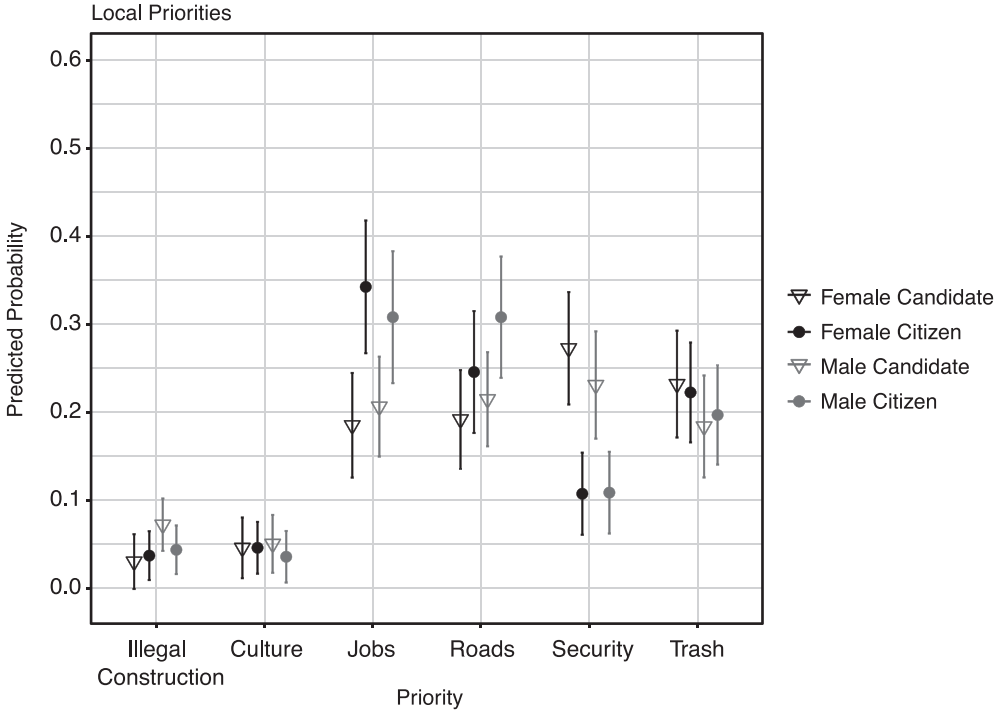


Figure 7.3. Probability of Listing an Issue as the Top Issue by Gender among Candidates and Citizens
*Note:* These predicted probabilities are estimated using SUR and include respondent gender, age cohort, partisanship, education level, unemployment status, income level, municipal urbanization level, municipal unemployment rate, municipal population (logged), and region fixed effects. 95 percent confidence intervals are displayed.

find no notable and consistent partisan differences among candidates or citizens.[47] This builds on existing work by Shalaby and Aydogan that shows that, in Morocco, the two main parties' priorities are more correlated with mass priorities than with the priorities of their supporters.[48] Our interviews with local politicians also reflect the absence of partisan differences. Many emphasized that, though the electoral campaign and internal vote for the council president were infused with partisan politics, the municipal councils' work was nonpartisan. Interviewees stressed that priorities differed little between council members from different political parties or independent lists.

The final set of individual-level correlates that we examine measures respondents' socioeconomic status. Among citizens, education and income were correlated with local priorities. Specifically, respondents with higher

education were more likely to prioritize local jobs and less likely to prioritize roads. Those with higher incomes were less likely to prioritize local jobs and more likely to prioritize waste management. For citizens, being unemployed was also strongly correlated with prioritizing local jobs. However, education, income, and employment status were not correlated with differences in local priorities among candidates. This is, in part, because there is less variation among candidates in terms of measures such as education (most candidates have a university education, while most citizens do not) and income (most candidates have a higher income than the average Tunisian). This selection into political candidacy is discussed further in the following section.

At the municipal level, respondents—both candidates and citizens—in more urbanized municipalities were less likely to prioritize roads. The lesser emphasis on roads in urbanized municipalities largely reflects the different levels of development between the old, highly urban municipalities concentrated along the coast and the more rural municipalities in the country's interior. Varying concerns about roads were also evident in our interviews. In many of the more rural municipalities, including those whose municipal borders have been expanded, municipal council heads expressed concerns about access to the municipalities' more outlying areas and expanding municipal services to the rural areas recently transferred to their jurisdiction.[49]

One interesting finding relates to security. The municipal council heads we interviewed rarely mentioned security as an issue; only the municipal council president in Le Kram cited the high crime rates in part of the municipality under his jurisdiction.[50] None mentioned it as a critical part of their day-to-day work. However, in the survey, we found that candidates were more likely than citizens to list security as a top priority and were as likely to prioritize security as issues such as local roads and jobs (figure 7.3). We also find that candidates in more urbanized areas were more likely to cite security as the top priority. This may be because candidates were concerned about security or crime issues that could disrupt their overall work, even if they do not focus on security issues in their day-to-day work. However, the survey results may also stem from social desirability bias; politicians may want to demonstrate they are pro-security, even if they know it is not the top issue for their municipality.[51]

The data on the individual- and municipal-level correlates of local priorities highlight some important patterns in local priorities by respondent gender and age. These differences suggest that the electoral quotas had the potential to improve substantive representation of women and youth

interests, in addition to increasing these groups' descriptive representation. Figure 7.3 indicates that, overall, candidate and citizen priorities were broadly aligned. However, figure 7.3 also shows that one of the most significant correlates of local priorities is whether an individual is a political candidate or citizen. For example, while citizens and candidates had similar likelihoods of listing roads and waste management as local priorities, candidates were far more likely than citizens to say they prioritize security, and citizens were far more likely than candidates to prioritize employment. In the next section, we examine the possible explanations for this gap.

## 4. Mind the Gap: Exploring Differences between Citizens and Candidates

Tunisian municipal council candidates and their constituents had broadly shared municipal priorities: waste management, roads, and employment issues were among the most cited local priorities. Moreover, candidates and citizens had comparable likelihoods of selecting waste management and roads as the top priority. However, in addition to these topline findings, our survey data reveal some notable gaps between municipal candidates and citizens. Specifically, we argue that gaps between citizens and candidates remained over two key issues: employment and security. Candidates recognized the importance of local job creation but did not emphasize it as much as citizens. Additionally, candidates were far more likely than citizens to list security as a top local priority.

In this section, we examine potential explanations for this gap. First, we examine the correlation between candidate and citizen priorities within municipalities. While there is a positive correlation between the proportion of citizens and candidates who prioritize employment, there is no correlation for security. Second, we explore whether political candidates were more accountable to organized local interests, such as business associations and unions, than they were to citizens' demands. We use a conjoint experiment to evaluate whom candidates were most responsive to when selecting from among potential development projects. The experimental results indicate that Tunisian politicians preferred supporting the priorities identified and endorsed by the local community rather than business associations and unions. Third, we look at selection into political candidacy. We find that, on average, candidates came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the overall population. The relatively elite background of many local politicians is one potential explanation for the reduced emphasis on jobs

Figure 7.4. A Voting Booth during the 2014 Tunisian Elections
*Photo Credit:* Alexandra Blackman (2014).

TABLE 7.3. Summary of Findings on Incongruence between Candidate and Citizen Priorities

| Explanation | Evidence |
| --- | --- |
| Correlation at the municipal level | **Mixed:** Positive correlation for jobs but none for security. |
| Low accountability to citizen interests | **No:** Candidates are more interested in selecting projects that correspond to citizens' demands than to those of other organized groups, such as unions, parties, and business leaders. |
| Selection into candidacy | **Yes:** Candidates differ from citizens on socioeconomic measures. |
| Confusion over mandate | **Yes:** Political upheaval of the past decade has led many citizens to make new demands of municipal councils. |

among candidates. Finally, we discuss whether some of the differences between candidates and citizens were driven by confusion over the mandate of municipal councils. Drawing on our interviews, we find some support for this explanation.

### 4.1 Correlation of Candidate and Citizen Priorities at the Municipal Level

While we find a gap between citizens' and candidates' prioritization of employment and security issues, it may be that the correlation of priorities is higher when we look within municipalities. For instance, perhaps while citizens place a lower emphasis on security overall, both candidates and citizens recognize security as a top priority in certain municipalities. We examine this by looking at the correlation between the proportion of candidates prioritizing an issue and the proportion of citizens prioritizing an issue, measured at the municipal level. After matching the municipalities, we have data on both citizens and candidates in seventy-five municipalities.[52] These municipal-level correlations are displayed in figure 7.5.

As figure 7.5 indicates, there is weak evidence that the congruence of priorities was higher when we look within municipalities. While the proportion of citizens prioritizing jobs in a given municipality was positively correlated with the proportion of candidates prioritizing jobs in the same municipality, the bivariate plot shows that in most municipalities surveyed, more citizens than candidates listed employment as a top priority. The correlation was close to zero for security; in most municipalities, more can-
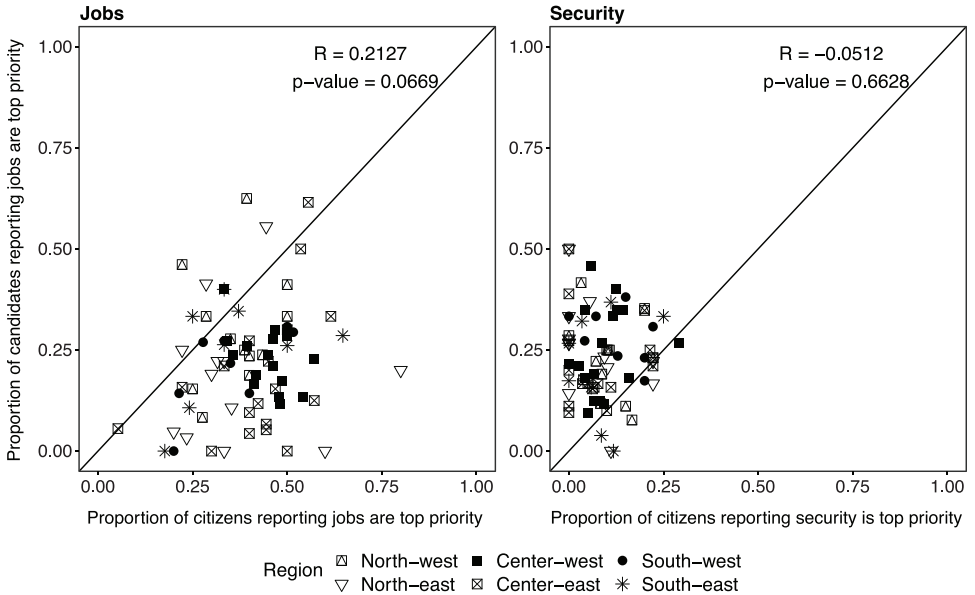
Figure 7.5. Correlation between Proportion of Candidates and Proportion of Citizens Listing Jobs or Security as the Top Priority in a Given Municipality

didates listed security than citizens. This evidence suggests that the gap in citizen and candidate priorities persists, even within the same municipality.

## 4.2 Candidates' Accountability to Citizens

Another potential explanation of the differences between candidates and citizens is whether candidates are motivated to be accountable to special interests, such as business leaders, rather than voters. Various organized political actors may influence candidates' local priorities in each local area, including unions, local party organizations, and business associations. To examine this, in the candidate survey, we included a conjoint experiment to measure candidates' local priorities experimentally. We use this experiment to gain further insight into **what** the candidates view as the primary local priorities and to see if varying **who** proposes a local issue shapes candidates' prioritization of the project. Previous research has used conjoint experiments to study policy preferences, given the multidimensional nature of many policy proposals.[53]

We asked candidates to review two local development proposals while varying project attributes, including the type of project, who supports it,

the cost to the municipality, and the development partner. The development projects include a cultural center, jobs for graduates, jobs for non-graduates, lighting in the city center, lighting in a poor neighborhood, roads in the city center, and roads in a poor neighborhood. The different potential supporters are a business association, a community petition, leaders of the party or electoral list, union leaders, and local youth and activists. The candidates were then asked to choose the project they preferred.[54] Figure 7.6 displays the average marginal component effects (AMCE) and marginal means (MM).[55] While the AMCE and the MM have different interpretations (e.g., the AMCE has a causal interpretation relative to a baseline category while the MM does not), both convey the favorability of a certain attribute level. Therefore, we display both for completeness.

We find that candidates preferred projects supported by citizens rather than organized interests like business associations, political parties, and unions. Candidates were 10 percentage points more likely to select a local development project endorsed by a community petition or local youth and activists than a development project endorsed by a local business association, union leaders, or the local party or electoral list leaders.

These results indicate that candidates were more interested in selecting projects that are popular with a broad swath of constituents than those that reflect the interests of a particular local organization. The fact that candidates were more responsive to citizens than local political leaders further highlights the non-partisan nature of much of the councils' work. These findings suggest that candidates were motivated to understand and reflect constituent preferences once in office. Thus, the gaps in candidate and citizen preferences over issues such as jobs and security should not be understood as the result of greater accountability to organized groups like businesses and parties.

Regarding the type of local project pursued, the conjoint results largely align with candidates' stated priorities. The results indicate that candidates were more likely to prioritize roads and jobs than a local cultural center. When we asked about overall priorities, candidates had the same likelihood of prioritizing jobs and roads. When we measure priorities using the conjoint, we find that candidates were over 10 percentage points more likely to select a development project aimed at jobs than roads. This greater interest in employment projects in the conjoint could be because these hypothetical development projects have the support of an outside donor, which may change the way candidates think about their priorities. Accordingly, candidates may have felt more empowered to pursue employment projects that traditionally fall outside their mandate.

## 4.3 Selection into Political Candidacy

The gender and age quotas discussed above led to significant progress in incorporating new voices on municipal councils. Women and youth had distinct policy preferences at the candidate and citizen levels, suggesting that these quotas were important for substantive and descriptive representation. However, this is not to suggest that the political class in Tunisia was representative of the broader population. This section compares elected officials, losing candidates, and the broader population on two dimensions that could play a key role in determining policy preferences: income and education.

Education level and income are often proxies for social class and may shape the neighborhood one lives in (e.g., paved or unpaved roads) and the daily challenges one faces. As Gulzar summarizes, recent literature finds politicians tend to have higher income and education status relative to the general population in both developed and developing countries.[56] In Sweden, for instance, Dal Bó et al. find politicians are underrepresented at the bottom levels of education and income distributions and are overrepresented at the higher levels. Thompson et al. find similar patterns in the United States.[57]

To examine selection into politics in Tunisia, we again draw on the LECS and DI surveys.[58] We asked respondents in both surveys about their monthly household income and highest completed education level. We display the proportion of citizens, losing candidates, and winning candidates in each education and income category (figure 7.7). The candidate survey is representative of likely winning candidates rather than all candidates because it over-samples from the top of the lists and the major party lists (i.e., Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes).[59] Thus, the LECS results are not representative of all candidates but rather of highly ranked winning and losing candidates.[60]

The results in Tunisia indicate a pattern of selection into politics among those of a higher social class, in terms of both income and education. The gaps in Tunisia between elected political representatives and the general public are quite dramatic; over 20 percent of elected municipal politicians in our survey were in the highest income bracket (i.e., a monthly household income above 2,500 TND), compared to only 1 percent of citizens. Conversely, nearly 65 percent of citizens reported being in the lowest income bracket, while fewer than 10 percent of elected politicians reported the same. There are also gaps between the highly ranked, but losing, candidates and those elected; among elected politicians, only 9.8
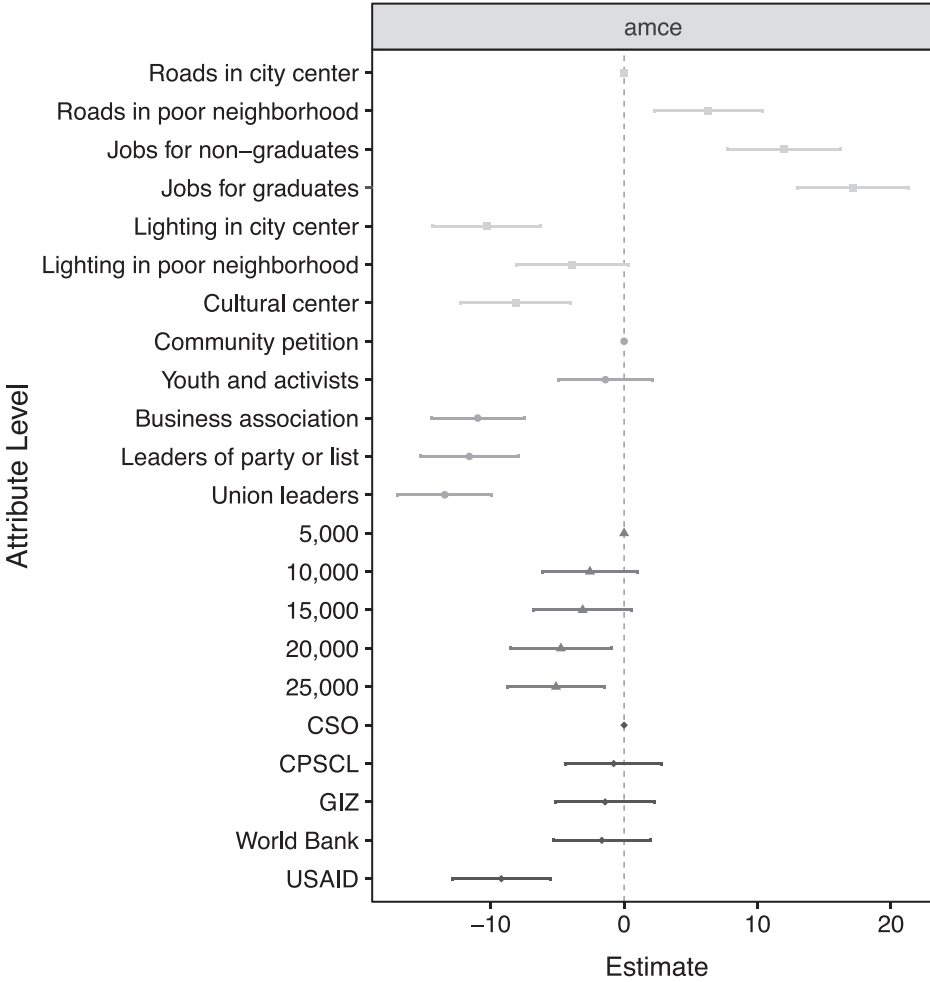
Figure 7.6. AMCE and MM Estimates for Candidates' Selection of a Local Development Project

percent reported being in the lowest income bracket, compared to over 24 percent of highly ranked but losing candidates. Similarly, regarding education, approximately 10 percent of citizens reported having a university education or higher, while 67 percent of highly ranked but losing candidates and 86 percent of elected candidates reported the same.[61]

The overall homogeneity and relatively high socioeconomic status of the political class may explain why these social class measures do not significantly correlate with candidate priorities. These social class patterns
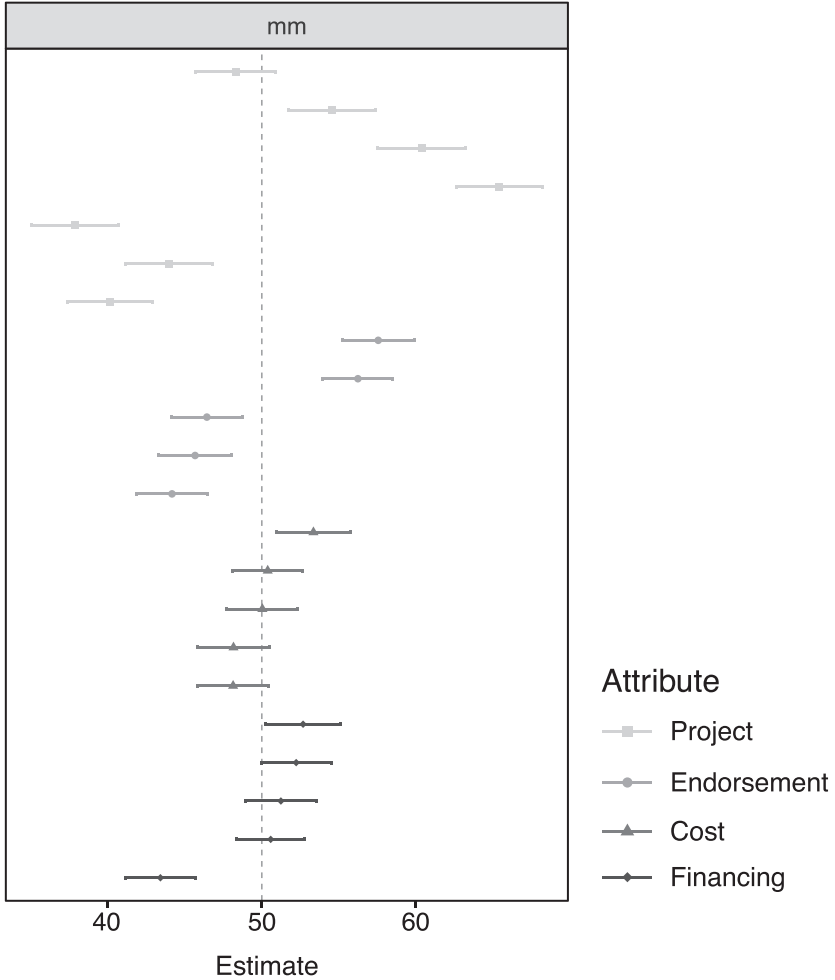
may also explain the gaps between candidates' and citizens' top priorities. With the existing data, however, we cannot distinguish between two potential explanations for this pattern: (1) candidates come from backgrounds comparable to those of the general population but overperform in terms of education and income before running for office,[62] or (2) candidates come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds relative to the general population.[63] Future work should examine this further.
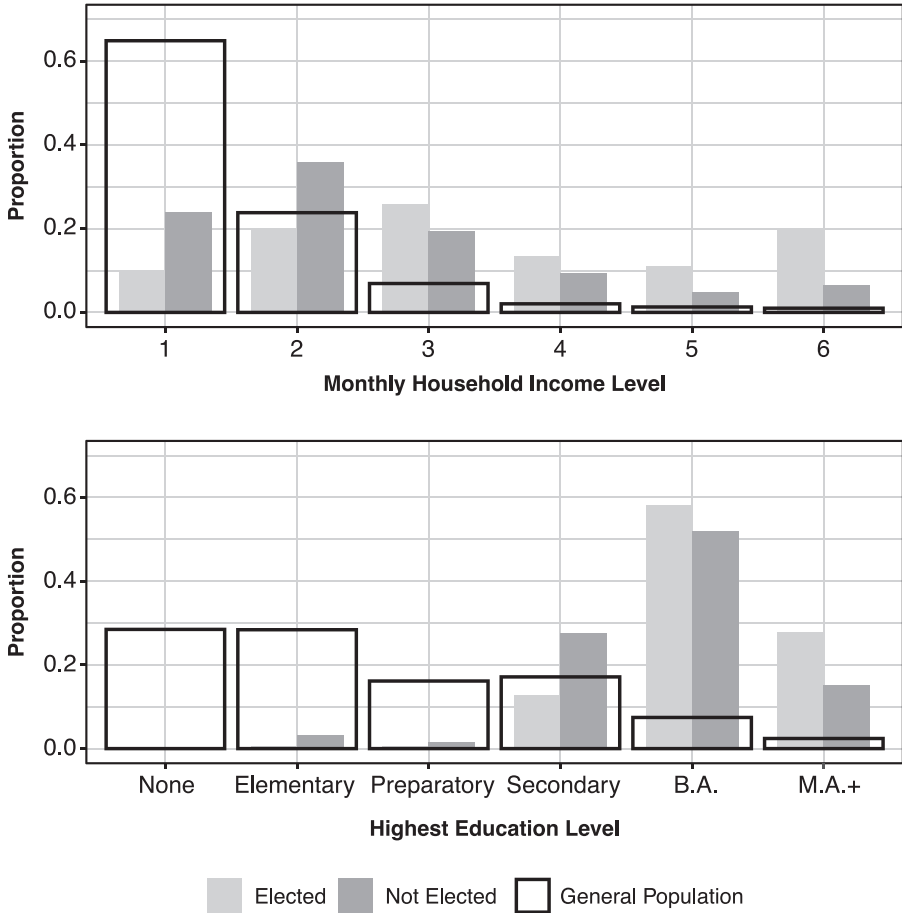
Figure 7.7. Distribution of Income and Education Measures in the Population and among Highly Ranked Winning and Losing Political Candidates
*Note:* The income categories are (1) under 500 TND, (2) 500–999 TND, (3) 1,000–1,499 TND, (4) 1,500–1,999 TND, (5) 2,000–2,499 TND, and (6) above 2,500 TND. The "Elected" category only includes those LECS respondents who won seats (N = 790). "Not Elected" includes those who did not win a seat (N = 1117).

## 4.4 Confusion over the Mandate of Local Councillors

As a result of the long history of failed decentralization efforts, before and after the revolution, and the different levels of government tasked with various public service provisions, the mandate of municipal councils remains a source of debate and confusion for many.[64] During this period of democratic opening from 2011 to 2021, this debate was also related to the continued uncertainty surrounding regional council elections and the

limited budgets of many municipalities, particularly in the face of citizen demands. Confusion over the powers and mandate of municipal governments may have been compounded in new municipalities, which often suffered because administrative staff was inexperienced or simply nonexistent. One council president reported that the main challenges in a new municipality were the lack of a clear mandate and a limited budget.[65]

So how should we make sense of the differences between citizens' overwhelming focus on local jobs and candidates' more mixed local priorities, especially given evidence that local politicians wanted to be responsive to community-led demands? This discrepancy highlights the tension between how candidates understood their mandate as local councillors and how they responded to voters' wants. The candidates recognized a significant demand for better employment opportunities but often had to balance this interest against their specific mandate and other municipal work.

The Code of Local Authorities (CLA) was clear that the management and budgetary decisions related to local services such as waste, roads, and lighting fall under the control of the municipal government. There remained, however, significant confusion over the mandate of municipal councils. Nowhere was this more evident than with the issue of employment. Municipal councillors viewed employment and job creation as issues outside the councils' purview. The council presidents we spoke with nearly unanimously stressed that job creation was not one of their core responsibilities.

Conversely, from the citizens' perspective, employment issues were paramount. Of the citizen respondents, nearly 40 percent stated that jobs were the number-one priority in their municipality, and nearly 20 percent said that it was the second-most-important priority. Moreover, as Salman and Baird-Zars describe, municipalities became an important place for citizens to make demands in the aftermath of the revolution.[66] In the postrevolution era, they argue that municipalities took on more prominent political roles and adopted new regulatory and enforcement roles in the absence of the central state. In practice, this meant that citizens often made demands of municipal councils that did not fall squarely within their mandate.

Despite the demands from citizens, several elected councillors we interviewed maintained that they did not have any plans to address job creation. Others, however, highlighted that they had worked to address unemployment. For instance, the head of the El-Bassatine municipality reported that his municipality had received many requests for employment assistance. He collected these requests and tried to address them in an organized fashion. For example, one factory in the municipality is the major employer, so the municipal council head maintained a list of job-seekers and regularly

shared it with the factory administrators. He also described his ambitions to develop a training program for his constituents.[67]

However, even politicians who wanted to focus on employment issues faced significant financial constraints. In our interviews, politicians expressed frustration with their municipalities' limited budgets, stating that the budget would often not cover the projects clearly under their control, such as cleaning, environmental tasks, and road improvements, let alone any sort of employment project. For instance, in one municipality in the Manouba governorate, the municipal council head expressed a need to increase the municipality's monetary and administrative support to maintain the municipality's limited infrastructure and cleaning equipment.[68] Several other municipal council presidents we spoke with, from both old and new municipalities around Tunisia, expressed similar challenges in meeting the demands on the municipality for waste management and infrastructure with the allocated financial resources.[69] Thus, facing confusion over the mandate of local councils, as well as limited funds, politicians were constrained in their ability to tackle issues like employment that fell outside their official mandate.

## 5. Conclusion

The 2018 municipal elections in Tunisia were historic. As the country's first democratic local elections, the elections aimed to increase accountability and representation of citizens' interests in municipal governance. Heeding one of the goals of this volume discussed in the preface—to transcend the binary between top-down and bottom-up approaches—we examine the local political priorities of both citizens and (aspiring) political elites. Overall, we find that municipal candidates' local priorities broadly corresponded to those of citizens. The top four local issues for both candidates and citizens were local roads, waste and the environment, employment, and security. The quota requirements also supported the entry of more women and youth into the political class. We find that women and youth held different priorities than their older, male counterparts at both the citizen and candidate levels. Accordingly, the implementation of quotas had the potential to improve substantive and descriptive representation in Tunisia.

The overall successful representation of citizens' interests is a positive sign. However, we find some gaps in local priorities between candidates and citizens, particularly concerning employment and local security issues. Citizens placed a much greater emphasis on employment than candidates,

and candidates were more likely to prioritize security than citizens. Drawing on interviews with municipal council candidates and surveys of both voters and candidates, we examine the extent to which these differences result from candidates being accountable to other organized interests, the process of selection into political candidacy, or confusion over the mandate of local councillors. We find that candidates were motivated to select projects that will be popular among a broad swath of constituents rather than projects that reflect the interests of local organizations such as party or union elites. Instead, the gap in candidate and citizen priorities seems to have been driven by selection into political candidacy and confusion over local council mandates, particularly in the aftermath of the revolution. Further research is necessary to fully test these potential mechanisms.

While the overall representation of and accountability to citizen interests were reasons for optimism, Tunisian president Kais Saied's decision to dissolve the municipal councils in March 2023 ahead of local elections cast doubt on the decentralization process. In the future, for democratic decentralization to be successful, more work is required to ensure that local councils understand and represent the interests of all Tunisians, even those from the most socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, the Tunisian government should continue to empower future municipal councils to establish local development plans that reflect citizen demands and facilitate cooperation between the different levels of government involved in providing public goods.

## NOTES

2. Maureen M. Donaghy, "Do Participatory Governance Institutions Matter? Municipal Councils and Social Housing Programs in Brazil," *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 1 (2011): 83–102. https://doi.org/10.5129/001041510X13815229366606; Mona Harb and Sami Atallah, "A New Framework for Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World," in *Local Governments and Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World*, eds. Mona Harb and Sami Atallah (Beirut: Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2015), 1–10.

3. Intissar Kherigi, "Tunisia's Municipal Reforms: Bordering and the Politics of Space," (Governance and Local Development Institute Working Paper Series No. 38, University of Gothenburg, 2021).

4. For these underrepresented groups, there was some drop between the proportion of candidates and the proportion of elected officials. Roughly 47 percent of elected councillors were women and roughly 37 percent of elected councillors were thirty-five or younger.

5. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Tunisia's 2018 Municipal Elections* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/15/results-from-tunisia-s-2018-municipal-elections-pub-77044; Julia Clark et al., "What Men Want: Parties' Strategic Engagement with Gender Quotas," *Comparative Political Studies* (2024). https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241252073.

6. Sami Yassine Turki and Eric Verdeil, "Tunisie: La Constitution (du Printemps) Ouvre le Débat sur la Décentralisation," in *Local Governments and Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World*, ed. Mona Harb and Sami Atallah (Beirut: Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2015), 11–46.

7. Assia Khellaf, "Decentralization and Centralization of Local Public Services in Tunisia" (PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992).

8. Though the municipalities were in more urbanized areas, the municipalities varied significantly in size. Khellaf (1992) reports that, in 1984, only 12 percent of the municipalities had over 50,000 inhabitants, while over 40 percent had fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. For more on the politics of municipal boundaries under Tunisian presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, see Kherigi, "Tunisia's Municipal Reforms."

9. Khellaf, "Local Public Services."

10. Ministry of Local Affairs, *Proposed Generalization Municipal System* (Tunis, Tunisia: Government of Tunisia, 2016); Kherigi, "Tunisia's Municipal Reforms."

11. The municipal council head is sometimes also referred to as the mayor. Prior to the 2010 revolution, Article 48 of Law no. 3 of 1975 stipulated that, unlike other municipalities, the mayor of Tunis was appointed rather than elected from among the fellow councillors.

12. Only heads of the elected electoral lists can initially compete for president. If the president resigns, however, all council members are eligible to compete.

13. Turki and Verdeil, "Tunisie."

14. The expansion municipalities are previously existing municipalities that were expanded to incorporate rural populations or sectors prior to the 2018 election, see Kherigi, "Tunisia's Municipal Reforms"; Julia Clark, "Mapping Municipal Change in Tunisia," *APSA MENA Politics Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (2021).

15. In the previous national constituent assembly and parliamentary elections in 2011 and 2014 respectively, there was a mandated gender quota requiring all lists to adopt vertical gender parity. Lists that did not comply were disqualified. In 2011, lists were also encouraged to include one candidate under thirty, but there was no enforcement mechanism. In 2014, the law required one candidate under thirty-six in one of the top four spots of each list. However, the sanction for noncompliance was the loss of 50 percent of public campaign financing rather than disqualification. A quota for people with disabilities was first introduced for the 2018 municipal elections. It required one candidate with a disability to be included in the top ten spots of each list. The sanction for noncompliance is no reimbursement of campaign finances rather than disqualification; see Jana Belschner, "The Adoption of Youth Quotas after the Arab Uprisings," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 9, no. 1 (2021): 151–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1528163; European Union, *Rapport Final: Elections Municipales Tunisie* (Union européenne—Mission d'observation électorale, 2018).

16. Business News, "Chafik Sarsar: Les Elections Municipales Prévues pour le 26 Mars Prochain Ont Eté Annulées," *Business News*, August 8, 2016, https://www.businessnews.com.tn/chafik-sarsar--les-elections-municipales-prevues-pour-le-26-mars-proain-ont-ete-annulees,520,66253,3

17. The Tunisian Parliament adopted the Code of Local Authorities on April 26, but it was not officially issued as a law in the *Journal Officiel de La République Tunisienne* (JORT) until after the election.

18. Turki and Verdeil, "Tunisie"; International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Elections in Tunisia: 2018 Municipal Elections* (Arlington, VA: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2018). These responsibilities are outlined in the Loi organique n° 2018–29 du 9 mai 2018, relative au code des collectivités locales.

19. Turki and Verdeil, "Tunisie."

20. Harb and Atallah, "Framework for Assessing Decentralization."

21. Ten of the sixteen council presidents mentioned waste management as a top issue in our interviews. The selection of interviewees is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

22. Author interview 13, October 24, 2019.

23. Author interview 16, October 25, 2019.

24. Laurie A. Rhodebeck, "The Politics of Greed? Political Preferences among the Elderly," *Journal of Politics* 55, no. 2 (1993): 342–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/2132269; Jonathan Peterson et al., "Do People Really Become More Conservative as They Age?" *Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2 (2019): 600–11, https://doi.org/10.1086/706889; Amanda Clayton et al., "In Whose Interest? Gender and Mass-Elite Priority Congruence in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 69–101, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018758767; Jessica Gottlieb et al., "Do Men and Women Have Different Policy Preferences in Africa? Determinants and Implications of Gender Gaps in Policy Prioritization," *British Journal of Political*

*Science* 48, no. 3 (2018): 611–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000053; Michael Hankinson, "When Do Renters Behave Like Homeowners? High Rent, Price Anxiety, and NIMBYism," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 473–93, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000035; Cameron Ballard-Rosa et al., "Structure of American Income Tax Policy Preferences," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1086/687324; Christopher Warshaw, "Local Elections and Representation in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 461–79, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-071108; Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, "Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India," *Econometrica* 72, no. 5 (2004): 1409–43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x; Sarah Poggione, "Exploring Gender Differences in State Legislators' Policy Preferences," *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2004): 305–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/3219873

25.  There is other research that finds that despite trends in polarization, there are still fewer partisan differences in local politics than national politics; see Sarah F. Anzia "Party and Ideology in American Local Government: An Appraisal," *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 133–50, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102131; Warshaw, "Local Elections and Representation"; Amalie Jensen et al., "City Limits to Partisan Polarization in the American Public," *Political Science Research and Methods* 9, no. 2 (2021): 223–41, https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2020.56

26.  Lindsay J. Benstead, "Do Female Local Councilors Improve Women's Representation?" *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10, no. 2 (2019): 95–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2019.1580085

27.  Benstead, "Female Councilors."

28.  Greg Distelhorst and Yue Hou, "Constituency Service under Nondemocratic Rule: Evidence from China," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 3 (2017): 1024–40, https://doi.org/10.1086/690948; Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 482–502, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055410000250; Donaghy, "Participatory Governance Institutions"; Lily L. Tsai, "Solidarity Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 355–72, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055407070153; Janine A. Clark, *Local Politics in Jordan and Morocco: Strategies of Centralization and Decentralization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Chantal E. Berman and Elizabeth R. Nugent, "Regionalism in New Democracies: The Authoritarian Origins of Voter-Party Linkages," *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2020): 908–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919862363

29.  Janine A. Clark et al., "Not the Only Game in Towns: Explaining Changes in Municipal Councils in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia," *Democratization* 26, no. 8 (2019): 1362–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1641087

30.  They also reported having insufficient municipal resources—including trucks and other equipment for waste management—and human resources, such as an experienced administrative staff of engineers or planners.

31.  The unemployment data comes from government statistics reported at the delegation level. These delegations do not always correspond perfectly to the

municipalities. In the cases in which the delegation consists of multiple municipalities, we assign all municipalities the same unemployment rates because the more localized rates cannot be determined; in cases where a municipality includes multiple delegations, we average their unemployment levels.

32. African Development Bank Group, *Tunisia—Economic and Social Challenges Beyond the Revolution* (Tunis, Tunisia: African Development Bank, 2012); Mongi Boughzala and Mohamed Tlili Hamdi, "Promoting Inclusive Growth in Arab Countries: Rural and Regional Development and Inequality in Tunisia" (Brookings Global Working Paper Series no. 71, 2014), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-conte nt/uploads/2016/06/Arab-EconPaper5Boughzala-v3.pdf

33. The election was held on May 6, 2018.

34. The respondents include 370 from small- and medium-sized political parties, such as Afek Tounes and the Popular Front, 499 from Ennahda, 466 from Nidaa Tounes, and 572 candidates who ran on closed lists of independent candidates. For more on the sampling and selection of candidates, see Blackman et al., *Introducing the Tunisian Local Candidate Election Survey (LECS)* (Bethesda, MD: Democracy International, 2018).

35. Democracy International generously provided funding for the candidate survey and agreed to include some questions from our instrument in the citizen survey.

36. For the candidate survey, we asked the candidates to rank all the possible priorities; we only asked the citizens to give their top two priorities. The possible response options are nearly identical; on the citizen survey, however, respondents were not given the "Public lighting" or "Other" options. Additionally, in the citizen survey, collecting waste and maintaining the environment are separate options, but in the analysis, we combine them to correspond to the candidate survey option "collecting waste and maintaining the environment." Our results hold if we look at whether an issue was listed in the top two issues rather than just as the top issue.

37. Candidates from these parties were not elected as council heads in Tunis, Monastir, and Tataouine, so we selected council heads from these parties who were in Manouba, Beja, and Bizerte.

38. No women from independent lists were elected as council heads, so, of the independent council heads, we only interviewed men.

39. The four that did not take place at the municipality were conducted over the phone (two interviews), in a local cafe (one interview), or in a hotel lobby (one interview). All the interviewees consented to being recorded. Interviews were typically one hour in length.

40. For more on using SUR to estimate local priorities, see Gottlieb et al., "Different Policy Preferences"; Clayton et al., "In Whose Interest?"

41. We also include region fixed effects to control for underlying regional differences in priorities. The results remain the same with or without these region fixed effects. The results are also robust to governorate fixed effects.

42. Clayton et al., "In Whose Interest?"; Clark et al., "Strategic Response to Gender."

43. Benstead, "Female Councilors"; African Development Bank Group, *Economic and Social Challenges*.

44. For the 2018 municipal elections, a candidate thirty-five or younger had to

be in one of the top three spots on the list, and another had to be included for every six candidates after that. Lists that did not comply were disqualified.

45. Aksel Sundström and Daniel Stockemer, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Explaining Youths' Relative Absence in Legislatures," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 2 (2021): 195–201, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520000906

46. Some independents ran on party lists, and some party members formed independent lists. We use the list type on which they ran in the election to be consistent across all respondents.

47. There are a few partisan differences among candidates; relative to third party candidates, Ennahda candidates are less likely to prioritize jobs and Nidaa candidates are more likely to prioritize security. However, these differences are not statistically significant when compared to all other parties. Moreover, there are no significant results for partisanship among citizens.

48. Marwa Shalaby and Abdullah Aydogan, "Elite-Citizen Linkages and Issue Congruency under Competitive Authoritarianism," *Parliamentary Affairs* 73, no. 1 (2020): 66–88, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsy036

49. Expansion municipalities are supposed to have access to additional funds to extend their services, but some council presidents reported that these funds were insufficient for the task.

50. Author interview 15, October 25, 2019.

51. This may result from the connection of security issues with political leadership stereotypes. Alexandra Domike Blackman and Marlette Jackson, "Gender Stereotypes, Political Leadership, and Voting Behavior in Tunisia," *Political Behavior* 43 (2021): 1037–66, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09582-5

52. We only include municipalities in which there are five or more candidate or citizen respondents. The mean number of responses per municipality is nineteen for the candidate survey and twenty-two for the citizen survey.

53. Ballard-Rosa et al., "Structure of American Tax Policy"; Michael M. Bechtel and Kenneth F. Scheve, "Mass Support for Global Climate Agreements Depends on Institutional Design," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 34 (2013): 13763–68, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1306374110

54. The candidates are asked to choose between two project proposals. The attributes and proposals are fully randomized. The candidates complete this exercise four times. For more on conjoint experiments, see Jens Hainmueller et al., "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices Via Stated Preference Experiments," *Political Analysis* 22, no. 1 (2014): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpt024

55. The AMCE is the marginal effect of a given attribute level on the probability that the profile is selected, averaging over the other attribute levels, and is calculated relative to a reference category. By contrast, the MM "describes the level of favorability toward profiles that have a particular attribute level, ignoring all other features" and is calculated for all attribute levels rather than relative to a reference category. Thomas J. Leeper et al., "Measuring Subgroup Preferences in Conjoint Experiments," *Political Analysis* 28, no. 2 (2020): 210, https://doi.org/10.10 17/pan.2019.30

56. Saad Gulzar, "Who Enters Politics and Why?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 253–75, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051418-05 1214

57. Ernesto Dal Bó et al., "Who Becomes a Politician?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132, no. 4 (2017): 1877–914, https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx016; Daniel M. Thompson et al., "Who Becomes a Member of Congress? Evidence from De-Anonymized Census Data." (Working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2019), https://doi.org/10.3386/w26156

58. We use the Democracy International measures of education and income for several reasons. First, detailed income data is not available from the National Institute of Statistics (Institut National de la Statistique, INS). Second, while education data is available from the INS, it is reported for all individuals ten years or older. Since the relevant comparison is individuals aged eighteen or over, we wanted estimates that excluded younger individuals. As a result of the rapid expansion of public education in Tunisia in the past sixty years, younger cohorts are significantly more educated than older cohorts. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Tunisia," 2022, https://uis.unesco.org/en/country/tn. Finally, the questions asked in the Democracy International survey precisely match those we asked in the LECS.

59. For more on the sampling and selection of candidates, see Blackman et al., *Local Candidate Election Survey*.

60. In the Democracy International survey, we also ask whether a respondent was a municipal election candidate in 2018. Just over 2.2 percent of our sample (n = 148 of 6,595) reported running as a candidate in the 2018 election, though we cannot verify that they ran. When we compare these candidates to the overall population, they are much closer to the population than our highly ranked winning and losing candidates in the candidate survey. However, the candidates still report higher incomes and education. For instance, 23.8 percent of the candidates in the DI survey report a university or higher education compared to 9.6 percent of the general population. Similarly, 2.1 percent of candidates report being in the highest income bracket compared to under 1 percent of noncandidate respondents.

61. These education estimates roughly align with official education statistics in the country. In the 2014 census, just 12.1 percent of the Tunisian population reported having a university education or higher compared to 10 percent in the Democracy International survey. The 2014 census finds that 19.3 percent of the population reported having no formal education, while in our citizen sample 28.5 percent reported having no formal education. Institut National de la Statistique Tunisie, *BEJA: A Travers Le Recensement Général de La Population et de l'Habitat 2014* (Tunis, Tunisia: Institut National de la Statistique Tunisie, 2014). This difference is probably attributable to the fact that the 2014 census data includes all citizens aged ten and over, while the survey only includes those eighteen and over. As previously noted, educational attainment has expanded rapidly in Tunisia. Accordingly, the older population of the survey will have lower overall educational attainment.

62. This is the pattern that Dal Bó et al., "Who Becomes a Politician?," find in Sweden (i.e., inclusive meritocracy).

63. This is the pattern that Thompson et al., "Who Becomes a Member?," find in the US (i.e., exclusive meritocracy).

64. As several contributors to this volume illustrate, the challenge of the decentralization and empowerment of local government is shared by many countries in the MENA region.

65. Author interview 11, October 23, 2019.

66. Lana Salman and Bernadette Baird-Zarz, "From the Fragments Up: Municipal Margins of Maneuver in Syria and Tunisia," *Middle East Law and Governance* 11, no. 2 (2019): 244–82, https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-01102006

67. Author interview 3, October 17, 2019.

68. Author interview 3, October 17, 2019.

69. Author interview 4, October 17, 2019; author interview 7, October 19, 2019; author interview 9, October 23, 2019.

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# Beards, Mustaches, and Power

*The Traits of Male Leadership in Morocco*

Matt Buehler and Freddy Gergis[1]

## 1. Introduction

Male politicians throughout Middle East and North African (MENA) history—Saddam Hussein, Mustafa Kamal Attatürk, and Gamal Abdel Nasser—had mustaches. More recently, politicians challenging the status quo, such as Egypt's deposed Islamist president Mohammed Morsi, had beards.[2] These outward traits—the iconic mustache and beard—have been culturally associated with male politicians as "capable leaders," befitting leadership positions in the MENA.[3] Aside from beards and mustaches, other traits, such as wearing eyeglasses, may subtly suggest other personality characteristics, like intelligence, which could also cause politicians to be perceived as more adept, competent leaders. Examining the outward traits of local Moroccan politicians, this chapter asks: What do male local leaders look like? What psychosocial signals do politicians' outward traits send to other elites during leadership negotiations? Do different subnational communities or political parties favor leaders with certain traits?

This chapter explores these interrelated questions, leveraging evidence from an original quantitative dataset based on coding photos[4] of elected politicians at the local level in the MENA. This study's dataset examines the outward traits of over 3,000 male politicians elected to municipal and village councils after the 2015 local elections in Morocco's Casablanca-Settat region. These photos furnish a large, unique, and untapped reser-

voir of data describing councillors' traits. The dataset includes nearly every male politician elected to a seat within the 168 local governments ("communes") across this region's nine provinces. Casablanca-Settat was chosen due to its importance as Morocco's most populous, diverse, and economically productive commune.

As this book's introduction explains, new conflicts over center-local relations and rivalries have recently erupted in several MENA countries. While some regimes have reacted by reinforcing central rule and sidelining local politicians, others—particularly Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia—have decentralized power and strengthened local governments. When central authority cedes more power to local governments, local politicians become more influential and consequential decision-makers. Given this trend, this study advances a scholarly effort to better understand local politicians' attributes and the factors that are associated with some (and not others) obtaining local positions of power.

Elected local councils govern Morocco's communes, but not all council members possess equal powers.[5] Some councillors—specifically the mayor and deputy mayor positions—obtain commune leadership posts that have local power over municipal functions, determining the success or failure of community governance. These functions include granting permits and licenses, budgeting, urban planning and renovation, cultural activities, trash collection, roadway management, and patronage (mostly the distribution of public jobs and procurement contracts).[6] Following Morocco's 2011 Constitution, the mayor/deputy mayors can also receive and assess citizen petitions (see Colin and Bergh's contribution to this volume).

The remaining councillors—those without leadership posts—sit on the commune's council but only have advisory status, without direct power over the commune's functions. They remain elected commune councillors but do not wield much practical influence over governance. Leadership posts are determined by local-level elite negotiations among the councillors, which occur immediately after local elections. During the meeting, the electees bargain and then vote to appoint who among themselves will occupy the commune's leadership posts. The process through which a councillor obtains a leadership position within the commune is a form of local-level elite negotiation among peers. The first test within this study examines variation in this outcome, exploring the outward traits of male politicians who win such leadership posts within communes compared with those who do not. The second test within this study considers what types of politicians are more likely to get leadership posts in different types of communes or parties.

Before proceeding, a caveat is necessary: This study is limited to examining how politicians' physical features and/or social stereotypes associated with these features may influence their likelihood of obtaining leadership positions within municipal councils. Several variables unrelated to physical appearance probably influence whether elected politicians obtain leadership positions. For example, council members might value a peer's capacity to deliver benefits through clientelist networks, such as carrying out favors or facilitating delivery of particularistic services.[7] A politician's leadership style also may be important. Municipal council members might value some leaders over others based on their ability to employ charisma, humor, or aggression in resolving disputes, overseeing projects, and managing others.[8]

Moreover, a politician's policy preferences, plans, and proposals for the commune's development also probably play a role in determining their chances of gaining the leadership of a given council.[9] Finally, politicians' incumbency status and past leadership experience in similar posts could also determine support. All of these variables may help explain which politicians obtain leadership positions. In fact, many of these variables probably carry more weight than those explored in this study. They are not easily accounted for in our analysis of politicians' photos.

These caveats noted, a politician's outward traits—as secondary or tertiary variables—could still influence how his peers assess his competency for leadership. These variables potentially trigger subliminal psychological processes—a type of trait signaling—that occurs without conscious thought or active consideration. Patel notes similar dynamics in another context, showing how wearing headscarves helps some women subtly "signal their piety" to "improve their marriage prospects."[10] Corstange similarly finds that Yemeni men communicate with their peers concerning their tribal "affiliations and commitments" by the type of ceremonial dagger (*khanjar*) they wear.[11] In the same vein, extant literature has found that a person's outward features (such as height) can influence how peers assess fitness for leadership across various social settings, including managerial positions,[12] military officer positions,[13] and university department chairs.[14] It is possible that, similar to height, a range of different outward traits could subconsciously influence how politicians assess their peers' competency. This chapter explores these dynamics in the MENA, centering on male politicians who obtained leadership posts in Morocco's communes.

This chapter advances as follows. First, it articulates four distinct theories explaining how and why specific outward traits increase estimations of a politician's fitness for leadership from his peers. The first theory—the

one in which we are most invested—relates to subtle signaling, modeling Patel's and Corstange's arguments.[15] A male politician's outward traits may signal higher levels of seniority, religiosity, nationalism, modernization, and intelligence, all considered attributes of good leadership in the MENA. The second, third, and fourth theories consider interrelationships among a politician's political party affiliation, the party's local electoral strength, a community's preferences for certain outward traits, and the underlying community prevalence of such traits among the councillors themselves.

Next, the chapter explains its data collection and methodology and justifies why examining only male politicians (rather than politicians of both genders) makes sense for the constraints of our data. Third, the study conducts two distinct—though related—empirical tests. The first test analyzes variations in elected male politicians' attributes, comparing the traits of those who obtained commune leadership positions with those who did not. The second test focuses on male politicians in leadership positions who exhibit these outward traits and compares them with all other male politicians in our sample of councillors. This test allows us to assess whether patterns exist in the types of political parties and communities these politicians lead. For example, it allows us to analyze whether bearded mayors are more likely to govern communities that have lower levels of development or hail from Islamist parties. The chapter concludes by discussing limitations and future research.

## 2. Four Theories: Traits as Signaling, Party Affiliation, Community Preferences, and Community Prevalence

Four theories predict why and how some outward traits correlate with male politicians who attain leadership positions. **Theory One** treats outward traits as a type of signaling that subconsciously affects how peer politicians assess other politicians' leadership aptitudes. Certain traits in a politician's appearance may culturally signal his seniority, religiosity, nationalism, modernization, and intelligence to peer politicians. Such traits could enhance perceptions that the politician would be an effective community leader. We code traits in the photos of male politicians operationalizing this first theory—specifically gray hair (seniority), beard and/or prayer mark (religiosity), mustache (nationalism), Western-style tie (modernization), and intelligence (eyeglasses).

Numerous studies find that a politician's seniority (coded by gray hair in his photo) or age can affect whether he is perceived as a suitable leader.[16]

In more traditional cultures, it is customary to accord more respect to elders, on the assumption that their age and experience lead to increased wisdom.[17] Older people have had more social interactions with others and have had longer to learn from past mistakes. Older politicians are thus perceived as wiser and, therefore, more capable of administering the state.

Similarly, some scholars argue that a politician's perceived religiosity may affect his perceived fitness as a leader.[18] Politicians perceived as more religious are seen as more trustworthy and righteously guided by religious morals and teachings. They may also be seen as less corruptible, a problem commonly alleged about Morocco's local politicians.[19] An "Islamist advantage" is that politicians from religiously affiliated parties are often seen as more religious and, therefore, less corrupt.[20] Among Muslim men, two outward traits signal religiosity—having a beard and developing a prayer mark (known as a *zabība*). Nothing in the Quran requires men to grow beards, yet most texts document that the Prophet Muhammad had a beard. Many devout Muslim men similarly keep beards in admiration and imitation of the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, Muslim men with beards are generally viewed as more religious, those without are seen as less religious.

However, the most religious trait that can appear on Muslim men is the prayer mark. Most commonly appearing on the forehead, prayer marks are a "commonly occurring dermatological change in Muslims who pray and develop over a long period as a consequence of repeated and extended pressure."[21] Prayer marks appear on a Muslim's forehead as hyperpigmentation after many years of praying in the prostrated (*sajda*) position, when the believer forcefully presses his forehead into the prayer rug during prayers, repeated five times daily.[22] During prostration prayers, some Muslims press their foreheads against a small stone or piece of clay (known as a *turbah*) to enlarge and darken their marks. Thus, a Muslim with a forehead prayer mark may be perceived as more religious than one without, as it signals that they pray more regularly.

Politicians with traits signaling greater nationalism (coded by a mustache in their photos) could be seen as capable leaders, because they are perceived to be dedicated to patriotically serving their country. For example, in the United States, experiments have shown that citizens see politicians with American flag symbology in their advertisements as more suitable for leadership positions than those without.[23] Other scholars have found that politicians who wear American flag lapel pins are perceived as more suitable leaders than those who do not.[24] These dynamics are termed "symbolic patriotism."[25]

Historically, many nationalist politicians in the Middle East had

mustaches—here, we mean the 1970s-style solo mustache (e.g., Burt Reynolds, Tom Selleck). Nationalist politicians with mustaches, such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and Syria's Hafez al-Asad, were military officers who received their professional training in the armed forces (not in civilian universities). From the 1950s until today, many Arab militaries have promoted the mustache in their hair-grooming regulations as signs of "machismo" and "authority" for officers.[26] Thus, in the MENA region, the mustache has symbolically been connected to nationalism due to its close association with the military. The history behind the mustache's pervasiveness in military hair-grooming regulations probably originates from the Ottoman period, when it was "the facial ornament of the most powerful people in the empire."[27]

A politician's modernization traits also shape his perceived leadership suitability (coded by a Western-style tie in his photo). This link between modernization and suitability for leadership closely relates to what has been termed "role congruity theory."[28] One takeaway from role congruity theory is that current leaders are perceived as more fitting if they exhibit the same outward traits as historic leaders. For example, Benstead et al. found that Tunisian voters perceived secular-appearing, modernized politicians as more suited for leadership due, in part, to the historical legacy of Tunisia's first autocrat, Habib Bourguiba.[29] An avid francophone, Bourguiba was committed to modernizing and secularizing Tunisia, ending practices he viewed as antimodern and detrimental to economic development (such as polygamy, Ramadan fasting, tribalism, traditional dress, and religiosity).[30] A similar secular, modernizing elite—including the country's previous monarch, King Hassan II—has traditionally ruled Morocco.[31] They are of high "social prestige" and generally eschew traditional dress, speak French, attend francophone universities, and favor closer ties with Western countries than Arab ones.[32]

Finally, several other outward traits could affect whether peer politicians perceive a male politician as a fit leader, including wearing eyeglasses and baldness. Several studies show individuals equate spectacle-wearing with intelligence.[33] Morocco's state specifically launched active efforts to recruit local politicians with higher levels of educational attainment to serve as elected local representatives after the 2002 municipal charter reforms.[34] In contrast, baldness signals a male politician's perceived physical deterioration and weakness.[35]

**Theory Two** relates to a male politician's political party affiliation and that party's local electoral strength following Morocco's 2015 local elections. There are beliefs that politicians from certain ideological orienta-

tions and political parties are more likely to exhibit certain outward traits than others. In both the Middle East and the West, for example, one pervasive stereotype is that Islamists have beards.[36] For example, Berman's scholarship on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood demonstrates this belief,[37] whereas Stacher and Shehata's work disputes it (claiming that many Islamists are, in fact, clean-shaven).[38]

Similarly, there are stereotypes that male politicians from ruling and proregime parties (like the Iraqi or Syrian Ba'ath parties) often have mustaches, given such parties' commitment to secular nationalism and military rule.[39] Given these stereotypes, commune leaders might be more likely to exhibit certain outward traits related to their party affiliation or their party's local electoral strength. For example, if more Islamist-party-affiliated politicians are elected, Islamists should be more likely to become commune leaders; thus, according to these stereotypes, they may also be more likely to have facial hair or beards. Thus, Theory Two argues that commune leaders should look like stereotypical leaders of the parties that dominate the commune.

**Theory Three** concerns the political representation of a given community's social groupings. Morocco has demographic and societal divides, including, most notably, differences between Morocco's predominately Arab and Amazigh communities.[40] Key social cleavages also exist between rural versus urban communities and between those with varying levels of education and impoverishment. At a basic level, leaders' outward traits may vary, given the intrinsic differences among Morocco's different community types. Commune members may prefer to support leaders with outward traits representing their community's local traditions and customs. Politicians who have physical features signaling their affiliation with locally dominant social groups in a given commune should fare better in commune leadership-selection contests.

**Theory Four** hinges on the community prevalence of certain outward traits among elected politicians. In certain communities, a greater proportion of elected male politicians may have certain outward traits, and other traits may be lacking. This *a priori* fact about the community increases the likelihood that a leader selected from the councillors will exhibit this trait. For example, if 90 percent of all male politicians elected for the commune's council have beards, then it is highly likely that the leader chosen from among them will have a beard. In other words, a commune's male politicians may have a more (or less) uniform baseline trait composition, which may influence the outward traits of the politicians selected as leaders.

This section has postulated four main theories for why and how male

politicians' outward traits may correlate with the attainment of leadership posts, considering signaling, political party affiliation, community social cleavages, and prevalence of a trait within a given commune. Next, we test the plausibility of these theories using original data from Morocco.

## 3. Methodology and Results: Findings from Two Empirical Tests

Our dataset codes the outward traits of 3,848 councillors from 168 communes across the Casablanca-Settat region's nine provinces. The data only covers politicians who won a council seat after the 2015 election because, unfortunately, losing candidates' photos are not collected. If losing candidates' photos were available, we could examine correlations between politicians' outward traits and electoral success. Such data would allow us to assess how outward traits may link to underlying voter preferences and how candidates' physical features may provide cues for citizens on the ground. Regrettably, the Moroccan electoral commission does not collect photos of unsuccessful candidates, so we are only able to examine differences between councillors who received leadership posts and councillors who did not get posts (i.e., male councillors sitting on the communal council but not in positions of power).

Male politicians who received leadership posts within the communes constituted about 22.9 percent of the total sample of all councillors who won a communal council seat in 2015. By contrast, women constituted about 5.1 percent of the sample. As discussed in Shalaby and Barnett's chapter, Moroccan electoral law reserves a quota of 12 percent of elected seats for women after local elections. Yet this does not guarantee that female politicians will receive *leadership* posts within communes; only negotiations among politician peers determine which councillors obtain leadership posts as mayor or deputy mayor.

This analysis focuses on male commune council members only, for three reasons. The first reason is that—especially in the MENA context—men and women often possess distinct outward traits, which are not easily comparable when coding their photos. For example, men can be coded for different types of facial hair with culturally specific meanings; while women rarely have facial hair, they might wear an Islamic veil (*ḥijāb*). Moreover, the fact that many women wear the *ḥijāb* presents another coding obstacle, as it prevents the accurate identification of gray hair in the photo.

Second, because men are more active than women in the public sphere in Morocco, it is more reasonable to assume that the outward traits they

adopt (e.g., having a beard) are public acts intending to accentuate or signal a value (such as religiosity) to their peers. In contrast, women's traits are often more concealed, and thus more likely to be considered private. Third, much of the existing research on gender in the MENA centers on women, especially around the outward trait of the *hijāb*.[41] But if we genuinely care about the study of gender in the MENA, scholars ought to similarly devote attention to examining the outward traits of men, an understudied research area. Since this study's two empirical tests look only at male politicians, the sample size is reduced to 3,031 politicians in the final models.

Commune members voluntarily choose whether to submit their photos to Morocco's electoral commission for online public posting. In 2020, we successfully downloaded, organized, and archived all such photo files for Casablanca's 168 communes. The Moroccan electoral commission posts these photos online so that citizens, journalists, and researchers can more easily identify elected representatives and contact them with questions or for constituent services. This partly explains why the electoral commissions do not retain losing candidates' photos—losing candidates cannot perform constituent services for citizens, so there is little value in collecting their photos. In our dataset, each politician is completely anonymized and only recorded by a numerical identifier, without his photo shown. We hand-coded each outward trait photo by photo, employing a strict rubric defining each trait (e.g., beard, mustache).

### 3.1 Analyses and Results

The first test isolated the outward traits correlated with commune council leadership, compared with all other ordinary commune councillors. Because the outcome was dichotomous, a logit model was used. Test One partially supported Theory One, as outward traits signaling seniority and intelligence—the presence of gray hair and eyeglasses in their photos— were significantly correlated with councillors who obtained leadership positions. Councillors with gray hair had a 0.25 predicted probability of winning a leadership post versus 0.21 for those without gray hair ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, councillors wearing glasses had a 0.31 predicted probability of becoming leaders, while those without had only a 0.22 predicted probability ($p < 0.1$).

Test One also demonstrated that political party affiliation, specifically a councillor's membership in a leftist or proregime party, reduced his likelihood of becoming a leader. Besides traits signaling seniority and intelligence, no other characteristics in the politician's photo predicted his likeli-

hood of getting a commune leadership post. See table 8.1 and figures 8.1 and 8.2.

Although Test One's result regarding the link between a politician's perceived intelligence (judged by whether he is wearing eyeglasses) and his peers' support for his leadership is somewhat unsurprising, the seniority-related result (judged through the presence of gray hair) is less expected. It is difficult to fully understand the mechanisms behind this link between seniority and leadership fitness without additional interpretation. Consider three potential explanations. On the one hand, the result lends credence to arguments from the "classic" literature of modernization theory—and also, perhaps regrettably, some Orientalist works—that depict MENA societies as bastions of premodern conservatism, where individuals respect elders, admire their wisdom, and defer to their traditionalist authority.[42] Traditionally, elders have played a critical role in Arab societies because, as Hourani notes, they preserve "the collective memory of the group," regulate "urgent common concerns," and reconcile "differences which threatened to tear the group apart."[43]

On the other hand, however, the seniority result may indicate other competencies. Compared to younger councillors, senior politicians may be more embedded in the traditional networks of notable families and extended kinship or tribal groups that order politics through patron-client ties in many areas of the country.[44] Given such experience, they might have more familiarity with and wield greater authority over these traditional clientelist networks. As Shalaby and Barnett's chapter in this volume underscores, access to such networks is key for political success in the MENA at the local level.

A third possible explanation—entirely separate from tradition or networks—might be that more communal councillors know these gray-haired leaders because of their likely longer political experience. In this vein, Lau and Redlawsk find that people similarly tend to have better, more accurate memories of politicians "who have been on the political scene for extended periods."[45] However, all three of these potential explanations are speculative, and more research is needed to fully explain the positive association between councillors with seniority traits and their capacity to win leadership support from their peers.

Finally, we should acknowledge that the mostly null results from the first test suggest that other variables omitted from this study—especially those unrelated to an individual's outward traits viewable in a photo—carry more weight in predicting which male politician becomes a leader. Outward traits signaling a politician's seniority or intelligence to his peers may make

TABLE 8.1. Outward Male Traits Correlated with
Leadership (Mayor/Deputy Mayor Posts)

| | |
|---|---|
| Dichotomous dependent variable | |
| (Male Politician Gets Leadership Post) | |
| *Theory 1: Politician's Outward Traits* | |
| Gray hair | .244** |
| | (.098) |
| Facial hair (any type) | .067 |
| | (.203) |
| Islamic trait (beard or prayer mark) | −.194 |
| | (.193) |
| Mustache (solo-stache) | −.194 |
| | (.201) |
| Tie | −.276 |
| | (.269) |
| Bald | .100 |
| | (.145) |
| Glasses | .420* |
| | (.250) |
| *Theory 2: Party Affiliation and Electoral Strength* | |
| Islamist affiliation | .096 |
| | (.142) |
| Leftist affiliation | −.361** |
| | (.143) |
| Proregime party affiliation | −.216* |
| | (.112) |
| PAM strength | .009 |
| | (.026) |
| PI strength | .023 |
| | (.031) |
| PJD strength | .008 |
| | (.031) |
| USFP strength | .019 |
| | (.064) |
| RNI strength | .027 |
| | (.029) |
| UC strength | .022 |
| | (.039) |
| MP strength | .021 |
| | (.028) |
| PPS strength | .006 |
| | (.060) |
| *Theory 3: Community-level Attributes* | |
| Rural | .045 |
| | (.189) |
| Rate of no formal education | .005 |
| | (.010) |
| Rate of poverty | −.003 |
| | (.006) |
| Amazigh area | −.015 |

*Theory 4: Trait Prevalence in Community*

| | |
|---|---|
| Prevalence of politicians with gray hair | −.002 |
| | (.004) |
| Prevalence of politicians with facial hair | −.001 |
| | (.002) |
| Prevalence of politicians with Islamic trait | .002 |
| | (.005) |
| Prevalence of politicians with mustache | .008 |
| | (.007) |
| Prevalence of politicians with glasses | −.005 |
| | (.012) |
| Prevalence of bald politicians | .003 |
| | (.006) |
| Prevalence of politicians with tie | −.006 |
| | (.011) |
| n = male politicians | Log likelihood |
| 3,018 | −1,600.49 |

*Note:* *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$. Positive coefficients denote higher likelihood of obtaining leadership post; standard errors in parentheses.
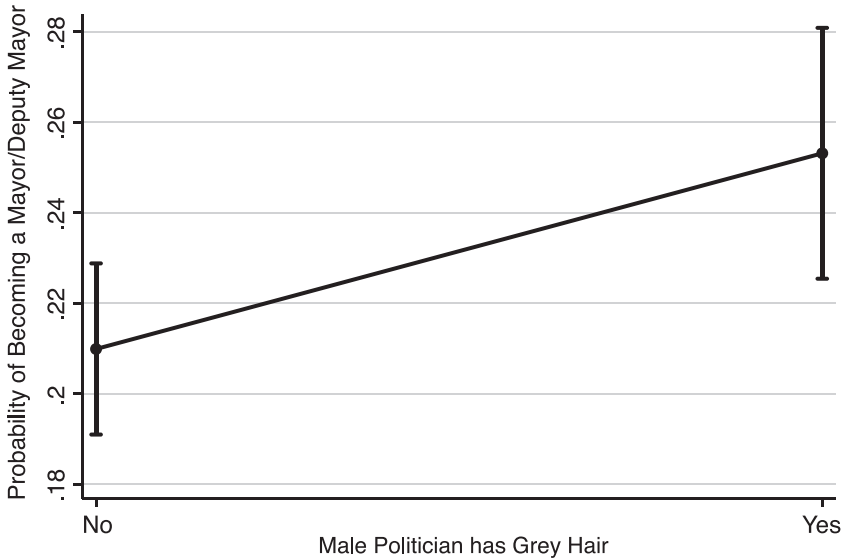


Figure 8.1. Male Leadership in Communes, Correlating with Gray Hair
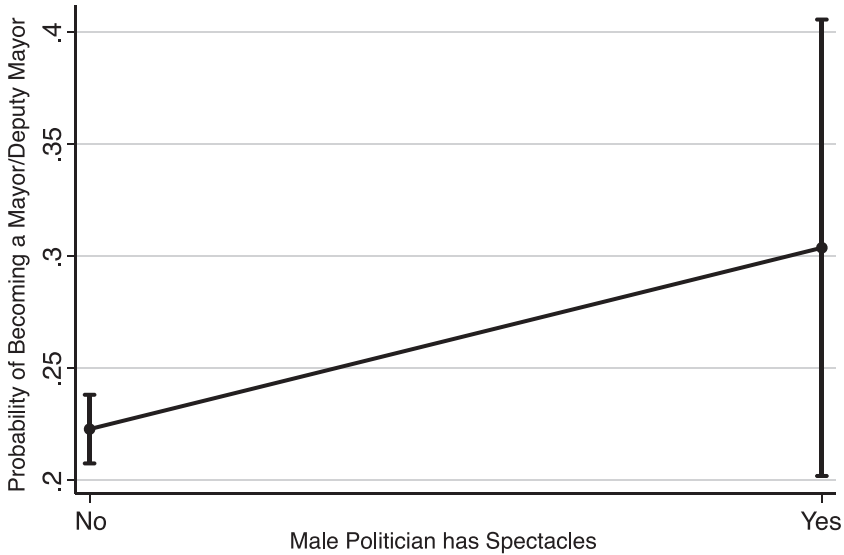
Figure 8.2. Male Leadership in Communes, Correlating with Wearing Glasses

him appear as a more adept leader and, thus, more suitable for leadership posts, but these variables are probably of secondary importance alongside other, non-mutually-exclusive variables also driving this outcome.

Having demonstrated the positive correlation between seniority and intelligence traits and a greater likelihood of obtaining leadership posts among local councillors, we now turn to a second analysis. Here, we took the independent variables from our first model and turned them into dependent variables in additional models. We then explored whether councillors who attained leadership posts (mayor, deputy mayor) and exhibited specific outward traits (seniority, religiosity, intelligence, or nationalism) were likelier to do so within certain types of communities or political parties.

Below, table 8.2 shows what percentages of male mayors/deputy mayors possessed these outward traits within the sample, compared with all other councillors in our sample. The second analysis included five main dependent variables: Male mayor/deputy mayor has a seniority trait (gray hair: yes or no), has any facial hair (yes or no), has a religious trait (Islamic beard/prayer mark: yes or no), has an intelligence trait (glasses: yes or no), or has a nationalist trait (mustache: yes or no). Since all of these outcomes were dichotomous, logit models were utilized. Because very few mayors or deputy mayors had outward traits potentially signaling weakness (baldness) or modernization (tie), these outcomes were omitted from the second

TABLE 8.2. Percentages of Male Mayors/Deputy Mayors Exhibiting Outward Traits

| Gray hair | Facial hair (any) | Islamic trait (beard/prayer mark) | Glasses | Mustache | Bald |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9.11% | 16.03% | 7.82% | .86% | 8.22% | 2.71% |

*Note:* n = 3,031 total male electee politicians (about 23 percent are male mayors/deputy mayors).

test. This allowed us to test, for example, whether Islamist councillors who became mayors/deputy mayors were more likely to have beards.

The independent variables, communities' attributes and political party affiliations, came from various sources. Data on a commune's modernization level came from Morocco's 2014 census and special reports from its high planning commission (Haut Commissariat au Plan). Councillor party affiliations were included in the electoral results posted to the electoral commissions' websites, providing a measure of local party strength. Community-level variables from the census included each commune's rural/urban designation, education rate (percentage of residents without formal schooling), poverty rate, and ethnic Amazigh (Berber) composition (percentage of residents speaking one of the three main Tamazight dialects). Recording a commune's ethnic composition is essential, as the Arab-Berber divide is a major cleavage in Morocco's domestic politics.

These independent variables allow us to examine, for example, if male politicians who were mayors/deputy mayors exhibiting religious traits are more likely to appear in less modernized communes (i.e., rural ones with lower education and higher poverty rates). Or, concerning ethnicity, it allows us to test if male politicians who are mayors/deputy mayors based in Amazigh areas are less likely to have religious traits, as Berber Moroccans are often considered more secular-leaning than Arab Moroccans.[46] This perception of Berbers' lower religiosity stems from the historical importance of the College of Azrou (le collège d'Azrou), a finishing school of public administration that provided a highly secular, Francophone education for Berber elites who were made the core of Morocco's civil service in the postcolonial period.[47]

Results from the second analysis (see table 8.3) examine whether mayors/deputy mayors exhibiting specific outward traits were more (or less) likely to come from certain types of communities or political parties. Results provided support for Theories Two and Four and limited support for Theory Three. Generally, the analysis confirms the importance of party strength and affiliation for predicting the outward traits of male mayors/

deputy mayors. Affiliations with Islamist, leftist, or proregime parties were found to be differently associated with outward traits, whether concerning seniority, religiosity, or nationalism. Leftist mayors/deputy mayors were less likely to have a seniority trait (gray hair) than other male councillors. This probably derives from the historical importance of youth activists within Morocco's leftist parties and movements. Indeed, leftist mayors/deputy mayors in the communes had only a 0.06 predicted probability of having gray hair; this climbed to 0.09 predicted probability for commune leaders affiliated with nonleftist political parties (p < 0.1).

As figures 8.3 and 8.4 show, mayors/deputy mayors of communes controlled by leftist and proregime parties were far less likely to have outward Islamic traits (i.e., beards or prayer marks), with a 0.05 predicted probability ($p < 0.05$) for each, compared with 0.07 and 0.08 for mayors/deputy mayors without leftist or proregime affiliations, respectively. They were also less likely to have any kind of facial hair.

By contrast, as figure 8.5 shows, Islamist mayors/deputy mayors were much more likely to have such religious traits, such as a beard or prayer mark, at a 0.11 predicted probability ($p < 0.001$) compared to 0.06 for non-Islamist councillors. Both Islamists and leftists, however, were far less likely to have a mustache, given its cultural association with the nationalism and secularism of Arab militaries. Indeed, as figure 8.6 illustrates, Islamist mayors/deputy mayors of communes had only a 0.03 predicted probability of having a mustache, while non-Islamist counterparts had a 0.07 predicted probability ($p < 0.001$). Leftist mayors/deputy majors similarly had only a 0.05 predicted probability of having a mustache, but this rose to 0.07 for all other councillors.

The second analysis found broad support for Theory Four. Generally speaking, whether the mayors/deputy mayors had seniority, religious, intelligence, or nationalist outward traits, they were statistically more likely to be in communities where the underlying prevalence of these traits among all councillors was greater. Figure 8.7 gives an example of this relationship, showing the prevalence of facial hair among male mayors/deputy mayors.

Finally, for Theory Three, a slight positive correlation exists between communes with higher rates of no formal education and mayors/deputy mayors with any kind of facial hair. However, this positive correlation did not replicate for the other outward traits, so this finding should not be overinterpreted. Indeed, these results suggest that community context did not matter as much as initially theorized: The levels of socioeconomic development and community modernization did not seem to affect the outward traits of the mayors/deputy mayors selected by their peer politicians.

TABLE 8.3. Community, Party, and Trait Prevalence Correlations with Mayor's/
Deputy Mayors' Outward Traits

| (Mayor/deputy mayor has trait) | Dependent variables | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Gray hair | Facial hair (any) | Islamic trait (beard or prayer mark) | Glasses | Mustache (solo-stache) |
| *Theory 2: Party Affiliation and Strength* | | | | | |
| Islamist | .222 | .181 | .569*** | .468 | −.816*** |
| | (.201) | (.157) | (.195) | (.618) | (.287) |
| Leftist | −.360* | −.374** | −.435* | .265 | −.343* |
| | (.218) | (.163) | (.246) | (.672) | (.206) |
| Proregime party | −.037 | −.316** | −.465** | −.189 | −.144 |
| | (.163) | (.127) | (.235) | (.608) | (.161) |
| PAM strength | .054 | .016 | .040 | −.205 | .046 |
| | (.038) | (.030) | (.040) | (.230) | (.049) |
| PI strength | .076* | .028 | .060 | −.066 | .047 |
| | (.045) | (.036) | (.049) | (.190) | (.057) |
| PJD strength | .059 | .020 | .042 | −.186 | .021 |
| | (.048) | (.036) | (.049) | (.242) | (.056) |
| USFP strength | .136 | .034 | .039 | −.489 | .099 |
| | (.101) | (.072) | (.091) | (.475) | (.125) |
| RNI strength | .075* | .028 | .042 | −.140 | .052 |
| | (.045) | (.033) | (.042) | (.226) | (.055) |
| UC strength | .089 | .013 | .020 | −.382 | .087 |
| | (.055) | (.045) | (.057) | (.381) | (.080) |
| MP strength | .047 | .023 | .054 | −.341 | .059 |
| | (.037) | (.032) | (.045) | (.283) | (.049) |
| PPS strength | .130 | .014 | .022 | .322 | .096 |
| | (.091) | (.069) | (.089) | (.378) | (.115) |
| *Theory 3: Community-level Attributes* | | | | | |
| Rural Area | .181 | .020 | −.025 | −1.15 | .075 |
| | (.290) | (.217) | (.304) | (.028) | (.301) |
| Rate of no formal education | −.006 | .018* | .008 | .068 | .018 |
| | (.014) | (.011) | (.015) | (.028) | (.015) |
| Rate of poverty | .001 | −.005 | .003 | −.035 | −.006 |
| | (.008) | (.006) | (.009) | (.028) | (.009) |
| Amazigh area | −.015 | .007 | −.022 | −.019 | .019 |
| | (.038) | (.029) | (.039) | (.028) | (.042) |
| *Theory 4: Trait Prevalence in Community* | | | | | |
| Percentage of male politicians with trait | .032*** | .020*** | .027*** | .196*** | .028*** |
| | (.005) | (.005) | (.005) | (.044) | (.006) |
| n = Male politicians | 3,031 | 3,031 | 3,031 | 3,018 | 3,031 |
| Log likelihood | −891.54 | −1,307.91 | 790.76 | −121.32 | −812.73 |

*Note:* *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$. Positive coefficients denote higher likelihood of leadership; standard errors in parentheses.
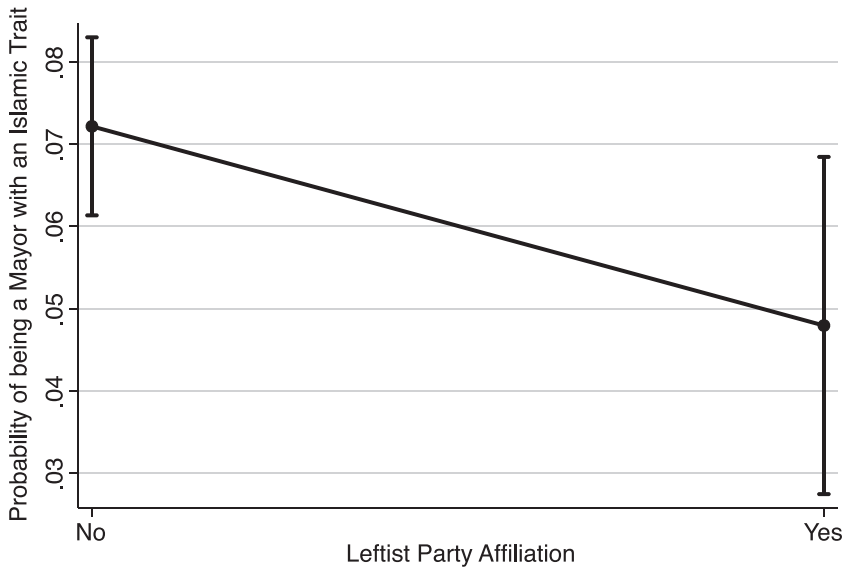
Figure 8.3. Mayors/Deputy Mayors with Islamic Traits, Correlating with Leftist Affiliation
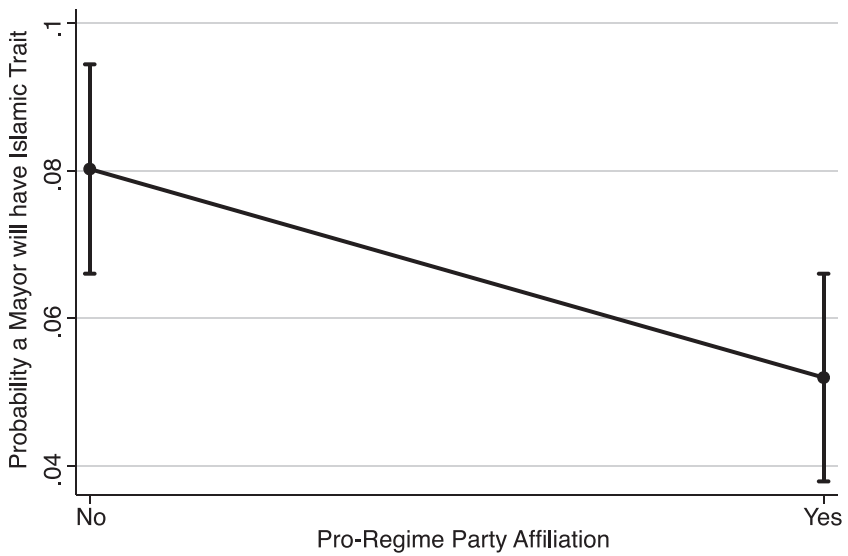


Figure 8.4. Mayors/Deputy Mayors with Islamic Traits, Correlating with Pro-Regime Affiliation
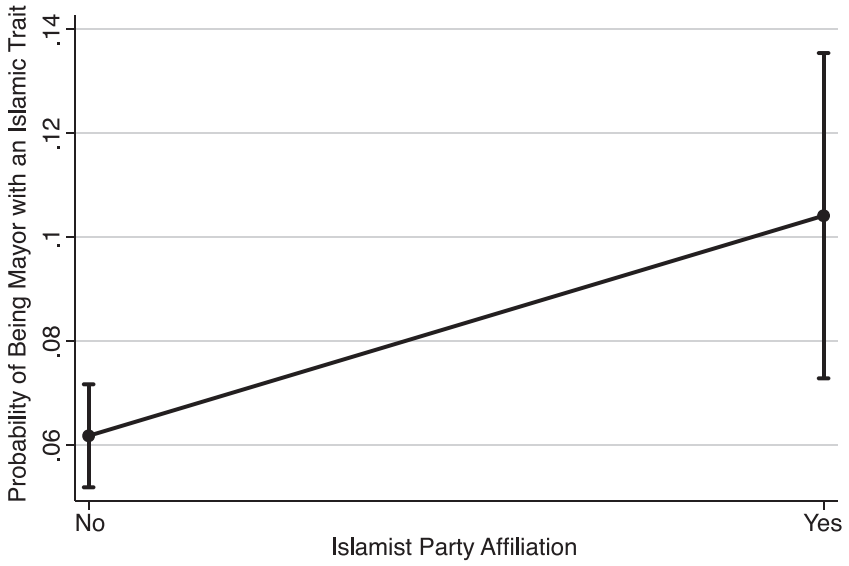
Figure 8.5. Mayors/Deputy Mayors with Islamic Traits, Correlating with Islamist Party Affiliation
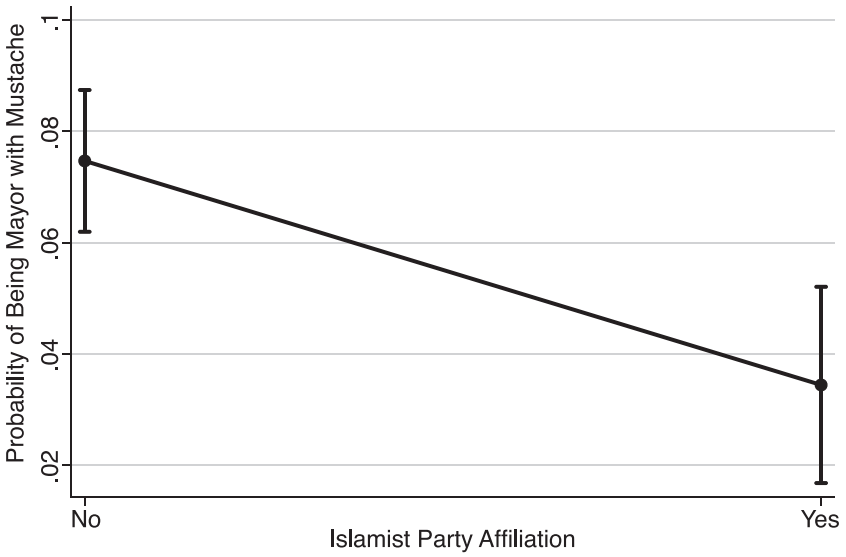


Figure 8.6. Mayors/Deputy Mayors with Mustaches, Correlating with Islamist Party Affiliation
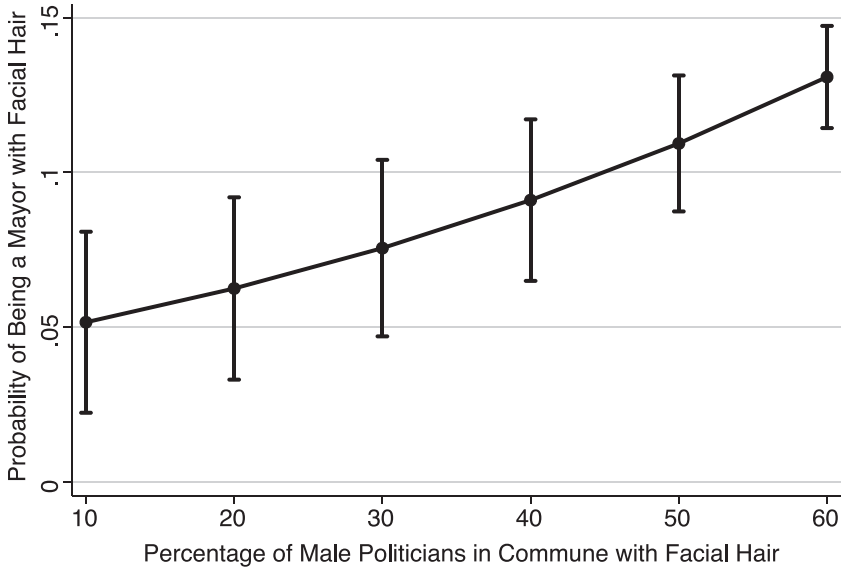
Figure 8.7. Prevalence of Facial Hair in Commune Politicians and Mayors/Deputy Mayors with Facial Hair


## 4. Conclusion: Limitations and Future Research

Results from this study advance scholarly understanding of how politicians' outward traits influence politics in information-poor environments. They also have significance for research on local governance in the MENA. In a landmark study, Benstead et al. examined the importance of candidates' outward traits in elections, showing that voters in the MENA generally favor politicians when they have outward traits that give the perception of being "capable leaders."[48] In Tunisia, which served as the setting for their article's survey experiment, citizens preferred voting for a male candidate with modern-looking, secular traits over a religious-looking male candidate with a beard. Because these Tunisian voters operated in an information-poor environment, without having much information on these candidates' policies or beliefs, they used outward traits as a cognitive shortcut to make inferences about their suitability for leadership.

This chapter advances their research but takes it in a new direction. Unlike their study, ours doesn't look at voters or elections in information-poor environments—it looks at elites and elite negotiations among commune-level peer politicians. These are information-rich environments

where peer politicians often know each other professionally and personally and have interacted and competed in local politics for years. Yet this study finds that even in these information-rich environments, commune elites (councillors) are still likely to make inferences about an individual's suitability for leadership posts based partly on his perceived seniority and intelligence. Even in contexts where individuals probably know each other well and have information about each other's competency, background, and beliefs, their outward traits may still subtly (probably subconsciously) influence whether a politician is considered fit for leadership posts within local governance institutions. This finding is critical for enhancing scholarly understanding of what types of politicians become communal leaders. This topic has increased in significance following the waves of decentralization across the MENA, as previously detailed in this book, that have further empowered local governments vis-à-vis the central authority.

Our findings have important implications for understanding political inequality. As Colin and Bergh also discuss in this volume, certain subgroups within society have significant advantages in local politics, demonstrating how entrenched elites keep power even through political transitions aimed at increased democratization. In their study, those who have more resources and are more educated are better able to get their voices heard through the petitioning process; here, those *perceived* as having more experience, connections, and education have advantages when it comes to gaining positions of real power in local councils. These outcomes draw our attention to the need for decentralization processes to be coupled with safeguards to ensure that the more marginalized can gain real power if these processes are to accomplish at least descriptive representation of local communities.

This study faces three main limitations, highlighting areas for potential future research. Most importantly, we limited the analysis to male politicians and how their outward traits correlated with leadership attainment. Female politicians and their outward traits were not examined due to the above-mentioned problems. Future researchers, however, could explore this topic, investigating whether similar patterns appear for female politicians' outward traits. The second limitation concerns generalizability. The data included in this study are comprehensive for Morocco's Casablanca-Settat region, as only a small percentage of councillors declined to post their photos on the electoral commission's website; our findings are nearly complete for this region. Yet it is of course unclear how generalizable these results are to other Moroccan regions and neighboring countries. Given the uniqueness of the data source, moreover, it is unclear whether such data

would be available from neighboring countries' electoral commissions. But at the very least, it would be possible for future studies to compare results found in Casablanca to other Moroccan regions or, perhaps, from a randomly selected national sample of communes.

The third limitation relates to the nature of the data source itself—the councillors' photos. It is conceivable that a politician could strategically stage his photo for his political advantage. He could have, for example, grown a beard for the photo but not have one during his negotiations with his peers. Similarly, a politician could dye his hair white to appear more senior and distinguished during negotiations. Indeed, before being deposed in 2011, both Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali were known for dyeing their hair from gray to black to appear more youthful and robust to their citizenries.[49] In sum, there is much about these councillor photos we do not know and cannot easily determine without additional research.

Finally, this study concludes with a discussion of future research opportunities. We have concentrated on examining the importance of outward traits for politicians that, historically, have had cultural resonance in the MENA region—gray hair for seniority, beards for Islamic religiosity, eyeglasses for intelligence, and mustaches for nationalism. Yet it is probable that additional outward traits might influence perceptions of leadership aptitude, which remain unincorporated in our statistical analysis or do not clearly appear in the photos. In addition to a person's height,[50] a variable correlated with perceptions of leadership aptitude in numerous studies across a range of cultures and social contexts, recent research has pointed to facial symmetry[51] (suggesting aesthetic beauty) and mouth width[52] (indicating a propensity for dominance in social competition) as correlating with perceptions of leadership ability. Many of these traits differ from those examined in this study as they are more difficult to strategically stage; while someone could easily choose to strategically grow a beard or dye his hair, it is more challenging to manipulate one's facial symmetry or mouth width. Moreover, many of these traits are far more difficult—if not impossible—to code for within our photos and may be far more culturally subjective. Future researchers, however, might seek to assess their importance (or nonimportance) within this regional context.

## NOTES

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University of Tennessee. Mr. Freddy Gergis, Undergraduate Alumnus, Department of Political Science, University of Tennessee.

2. We only consider males in this study due to data limitations. See section 3 for a fuller discussion of why we limit our analyses and discussion to males.

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4. Morocco's electoral commission hosts photos of communes' elected public officials on a publicly accessible website for journalists, citizens, and researchers. All photos were anonymized in our final dataset and written analysis. Politicians voluntarily chose to submit photos to this website; only about 1.62 percent in our sample declined to do so. See "Resultats des Elections Communales (in Arabic)," Moroccan Electoral Commission, last modified 2021, http://www.elections.ma/elections/communales/resultats.aspx

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# Conclusion

## Decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa

*Findings and Implications*

Ellen Lust and Kristen Kao

### 1. Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have largely overlooked decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), seeing the region as exceptional in its centralized authoritarianism.[1] Work thus has focused on more "attention-grabbing" topics at the national or international levels, such as how democratic institutions imposed on nondemocratic ones may be structured to sustain authoritarianism,[2] the rise of political Islam and Islamist influences,[3] politics during and after the 2011 Arab Uprisings,[4] and most recently, the effects of transnational refugees and migrants from the MENA on host societies.[5] When regional experts addressed decentralization—or indeed, when they examined local governance more generally—their primary goal was to better understand national-level politics.[6]

*Decentralization, Local Governance, and Inequality in the MENA* redirects our attention to local politics under decentralization. The volume draws on studies of Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia to explore how decentralization is "lived locally" by citizens of the MENA region. To what extent do local conditions shape the design and implementation of decentralization policies? How do citizens participate politically under decentralization?

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How do they seek services in such contexts, whether from state providers or others? What is the nature of representation? And, consequently, how might decentralization processes exacerbate (or ameliorate) social and geographic inequalities?

In answering these questions, the studies presented here contribute to our understanding of decentralization, local governance, and MENA politics. Where findings are consistent with those from previous studies of decentralization in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, they lend confidence regarding the generalizability of these studies, and where they are not, they provide insights into the importance of context. The contributions also extend previous research on decentralization in the MENA. Earlier studies offer important insights into how decentralization has been implemented, arguing that decentralization upgrades rather than diminishes authoritarianism in the MENA experience.[7] However, they do not fully explore how local conditions shape decentralization, how citizens engage in political processes, and the extent to which their interests are represented. Finally, the studies in this volume deepen our understanding of local politics, examining issues such as local political party structures, citizens' engagement with municipal councils or services, and other citizen-state linkages. In doing so, they extend to our knowledge of MENA politics, contributing to a much-needed turn to the "local."

In this conclusion, we bring together key insights from this volume, highlight open questions, and consider policy implications. Section 2 examines the lessons learned regarding the center-periphery dynamics of decentralization processes, political participation under decentralization, and the nature of representation. Section 3 raises broader, cross-cutting themes regarding decentralization, focusing on the importance of resources, governance beyond the state, and the (in)stability of the *ancien regime*. Section 4 discusses the implications of the studies for policymakers and practitioners concerned with decentralization, the provision of local governance, and the amelioration of inequalities. The final section concludes, briefly summarizing key findings and paths forward.

## 2. Implementation, Participation, Representation, and Inequalities

The volume's chapters contribute new insights into local governance and decentralization across three main themes. The first theme considers negotiated and contested areas of influence between central governments and local actors. How do legacies of the past and connections with *ancien*

*regime* elites influence decentralization? Alternatively, how are citizens responding to decentralization processes and developing innovative ways to claim agency over politics in their locales? The second theme focuses on citizen engagement with state and nonstate institutions (e.g., local councils, mosques, etc.) at the local level. Who engages with whom, when, and why? Finally, the volume interrogates the determinants of local political representation. Who gains representation, and how? What do citizens want from their local representatives, and to what extent do local officials represent their demands? Taken together, this research provides insights into decentralization processes, local politics under decentralization, and inequalities.

## 2.1 Decentralization Processes

The contributions in this volume point to the gaps between the goals and envisioned processes of decentralization vis-à-vis the outcomes realized. Decentralization is often ostensibly borne from a desire to alleviate inequality and thereby reduce political tensions. Morocco expanded decentralization to tamp down rising tensions during the Arab Uprisings; Lebanon saw decentralization as a tool to alleviate post–civil war political inequalities; and Tunisia expected decentralization to be a key mechanism for reducing social inequalities, undoing decades of disadvantage in interior regions. Yet decentralization processes often diverge significantly from expectations, at times reproducing the very inequalities they intend to resolve.

Existing economic, social, and political imbalances influence decentralization processes. Kherigi's chapter draws our attention to how attempts to decentralize and democratize power in Tunisia led to various social, political, economic, and cultural exclusions. These were closely linked to historical patterns of territorial inequalities and political and economic centralization, which can be traced back to the process of state formation. Similarly, examining Lebanon's postconflict setting, Parreira demonstrates how the sectarian peace agreement entrenched leaders who instigated and perpetuated the civil war, even decades after its signing. She characterizes this persisting dominance of the *ancien regime* in local politics as "party cartels," arguing that key players in these cartels have long historical roots as gatekeepers of the country's resources and influencers of national-level politics. Decentralization, in this case, allowed members of the *ancien regime* to extend their national reach by dominating local elections, even while offering poor service provision.

Importantly, decentralization—the shifting of power from the center to the periphery—is not always the result of intentional, state-driven processes. Conflict may lead the central state to cede some of its governance roles, whether formally or informally, intentionally or not.[8] Conflict creates a power vacuum that loosens the state's grip over certain realms, creating space for customary leaders, militia, and others to exercise control. Sosnowski's chapter illustrates this, showing the back-and-forth between the enforcement of order and service by customary leaders or local militias versus the state. Nonstate actors exerted local-level influence, both before and after the height of the Syrian Civil War, at times when Syria's central state sought to extend its control. Perhaps particularly during the war, strengthening customary leadership brought a modicum of rule of law and local-level service provision. Such a finding aligns with large-n quantitative research finding that formal incorporation of traditional authorities (in this case, tribal chiefs) in local-level governance reduced the outbreak of violence across Africa, "particularly in the midst of politically unconsolidated periods."[9]

The studies raise important questions. Under what conditions do local actors contest central control, as seen in Tunisia and Syria, and when do they cooperate, as Parreira highlights in Lebanon? Which among the various actors—party elites, tribal families, imams, and militias—hold influence? And does the contestation among forces lead to improved local governance or elite capture? Some scholars argue that the answer lies in the form of postconflict peace settlements, such as the power-sharing agreements after the Lebanese Civil War, which have been shown to "give a political role to and preserve the organizations of those who achieve power during a civil war."[10] However, the chapters in this volume point to a large set of actors shaping local governance under decentralization, suggesting the need for further research on which actors matter most and when.

## 2.2 Participation

Decentralization might be expected to increase participation and, simultaneously, reduce inequalities in who participates. Moving opportunities for meaningful engagement closer to citizens might encourage more people to vote, sign petitions, or attend local council meetings. Moreover, to the extent that a lack of knowledge drives gender, class, or age gaps in participation, contestation over issues closer to home might increase efficacy and spur participation. To what extent, then, do citizens participate in the

context of decentralization? And are inequalities across geographic regions or demographic groups reduced?

The studies in this volume show that participation is often unequal. Colin and Bergh find that citizens with greater wealth and more education were more likely to engage in petitioning. They argue that this is because petitioning requires knowledge and resources that many citizens lack. In contrast, Brooke and Komer demonstrate that the gender participation gap for citizens turning to the mosque for services narrows in more marginalized areas. Men were more likely than women to turn to mosques for service provision in areas near Tunis, but they were not more likely to do so in more distant neighborhoods, where state reach is reduced and needs are greater. This may be disconcerting for those seeking gender-equal participation in state activities. Incentives for participation may be high in more marginalized areas—high enough for women to seek services at the mosque—but to the extent that marginalization is associated with the weak reach of the state, it may lead to participation equality in nonstate arenas only.

Incentives matter in other ways that may foster inequalities in participation. Several studies highlight the importance of clientelism—the quid pro quo exchange of goods and services for political support between actors of unequal status. There is reason to believe that clientelism remains equally important in the context of decentralization, if not more. Parreira suggests this is at work in Lebanon, where party cartels with links to the center are better placed to maintain clientelistic relations. Shalaby and Barnett allude to this regarding Morocco, where women may struggle to gain seats beyond the mandated quotas, given their weak placement in clientelist networks.

These studies suggest that the extent to which decentralization affects participation may depend on competing sets of authorities and obligations (or what Lust refers to as arenas of authority and social institutions[11]). For instance, women may be less likely to turn to the mosque for assistance in communities where expectations over gender roles discourage women from doing so. Similarly, where citizens' voting decisions are based on loyalty or the obligation to vote with the family patriarch,[12] women may be more likely to support male candidates—the patriarch's like-minded representatives. Understanding how decentralization will shape political participation and inequality requires that studies consider competing authorities and social institutions. It also raises additional questions about when and where decentralization disrupts or reinforces these arenas and how such dynamics may change participation over time.

## *2.3 Representation*

The studies in this volume also demonstrate how inequalities in representation may be perpetuated under decentralization. Decentralization processes affect both sides of democratic representation: descriptive and substantive. Perhaps most notably, gender and youth quotas for local councils aim to enhance descriptive representation of these traditionally marginalized groups. Decentralization may also improve substantive representation, as drawing representatives from a pool of candidates geographically more proximate to citizens may increase the likelihood that elected representatives will share their voters' concerns. However, studies in this volume show these expectations frequently go unmet.

Historical inequities in the MENA often shape participation and, relatedly, local-level descriptive representation, leading decentralization to reinforce, rather than upend, existing power imbalances. Buehler and Gergis correlate success in gaining leadership posts in Moroccan local councils with age or seniority. All too often, we equate winning elections with obtaining power. Yet their chapter makes a unique contribution in studying not just which representatives are elected, but which elected officials gain positions of real power on the council once in office. They argue that outward symbols and associated stereotypes can confer (un)desirable characteristics on a politician, leading to political gains (or losses) once in office. Age and seniority, often associated with power in existing structures, appear to facilitate council members' election to leadership posts. Similarly, Blackman, Clark, and Şaşmaz highlight how local councils have remained dominated by actors representing patrimonial interests in Tunisia, while Shalaby and Barnett show similar findings in Morocco.

If male elders dominate local councils, does this matter for substantive representation? Or, put differently, will quotas and other mechanisms to promote descriptive representation of youth, women, and other marginalized groups affect their substantive representation? The chapter by Blackman, Clark, and Şaşmaz, like other studies in political science, demonstrates that politically marginalized populations, such as women and youth, have different priorities than their more senior male counterparts.[13] Among both local council candidates and voters, females are more likely than males to prioritize waste management and environmental protections. Moreover, class differences between voters and representatives are associated with differences in preferences, leading to gaps between the preferences of average (lower-class) voters and (upper-class) representatives. Thus, citizens' interests remain unrepresented, even when descrip-

tive representation is improved. Decentralization's democratizing effects are undermined by principal-agent problems that occur when local representatives' perceptions, interests, and priorities are misaligned with those of their constituents.

This suggests another reason women may fare worse than men. As noted above, if men dominate the voter pool and/or have control over the female votes in their families, voters are likely to support males because they expect them to be more like-minded representatives. Similarly, clientelistic networks may play a role in mobilizing support, and women tend to be disadvantaged in such networks.[14] Decentralization—and greater power accorded to local councils—may further undermine the local-level electability of female candidates, as granting greater power to local councils heightens their importance. As Buehler and Gergis caution, the distribution of real power in local councils is thus likely to follow historical trends and favor traditional leader types (i.e., more senior males).

The contributions in this volume also raise important questions about the role party organizations and partisanship play in shaping representation. The studies offer instances in which partisanship is influential and others in which it is more limited. Partisanship does not account for differences in citizen or candidate priorities in Tunisia, while outward signaling by elected local councillors in Morocco is linked to political party affiliation. In the Lebanese case, national-level partisan organizations dominate local politics and, importantly, the elections, preventing the devolution of power. Under what conditions, to what extent, and in which ways do political parties play a role in decentralization?

Finally, the studies prompt us to ask how changing the influence of local representative bodies affects inequalities, and if there are innovative ways to overcome them. For instance, can women overcome entrenched logics around family voting patterns and clientelist practices in elections? This volume suggests that inequalities are not immutable; quotas intended to remedy inequalities in political representation affect descriptive and substantive representation, despite the fact that inequalities remain. Other mechanisms, too, can be designed, considering the ways in which decentralization and sets of authorities and obligations shape representation.


## 3. Cross-Cutting Themes


The contributions raise three cross-cutting themes that deserve consideration. They point to the importance of resources, the nature of gover-

nance beyond the state, and the difficulties of dismantling the *ancien regime*. These themes resonate with extant studies of decentralization, suggesting that decentralization in the MENA has much in common with decentralization elsewhere. They also raise new insights and questions, demonstrating the value of bringing the MENA into the study of politics under decentralization.

### 3.1 The Importance of Resources

The chapters in this volume demonstrate the paramount importance of access to resources for effective local governance, highlighting central control over periphery areas as a significant hindrance to effective decentralization. Central governments employ fiscal control and power deprivation to nominally promote decentralization without losing political power.[15] This finding is particularly true in a region where "access to resources is less a right guaranteed by citizenship than the outcome of constant daily struggles."[16]

Several chapters speak to the need for fiscal autonomy if decentralization policies are to succeed. Parreira shows that Lebanon's central elites maintain control through local partners in the absence of local fiscal autonomy. Colin and Bergh find that, although decentralization efforts have afforded citizens a new right to petition municipalities in Morocco, this right is meaningless if local governments lack the resources to pursue priorities brought to the council's attention. Barnett and Shalaby also suggest a need for resource independence for women and other marginalized populations to overcome inequities embedded within existing patronage networks. Building on Lust's work on competitive clientelism in the MENA,[17] they argue that Moroccan voters are swayed by perceptions of local leaders' networks and connections to those with resources in the central government. Independence from central resources remains key to effectively decentralized governance, giving strength to conclusions from other regions that go as far as to argue for "fiscal decentralization as a principal precondition for the success of local government reforms."[18]

These findings are not unique. The World Bank advocates fiscal decentralization in developing countries, arguing that lower local-level information requirements and transaction costs allow citizens to more easily hold officials accountable.[19] Cross-national work also finds that the increased competition for resources created by fiscal decentralization diminishes the ability of local elites to engage in rent-seeking behavior.[20] Multiple studies demonstrate the benefits of reducing the dependence of lower governance levels on transfers from the center by linking fiscal decentralization with

several desirable welfare outcomes, including poverty reduction, lower infant mortality rates, improved service provision, higher literacy rates, and economic growth.[21]

The studies here, however, emphasize the political downsides of decentralization in the absence of a strong fiscal basis. Parreira points to the emergence and maintenance of party cartels when local elites depend on centrally controlled resources. Colin and Bergh highlight how weak local resources undermine participation, potentially leading to citizen discontent. They suggest, along with Barnett and Shalaby, that decentralization in the absence of resources may exacerbate social inequalities. The nature of politics under decentralization depends, at least in part, on local resources and fiscal autonomy.

### 3.2 Governance Beyond the State

This volume also points to the role of nonstate actors and institutions in local politics under decentralization. Local communities are political microcosms of their own, varying in their actors and institutions, hierarchical structures, community cohesion, and capacity for collective action.[22] These factors affect the implementation of decentralization, nature of local governance, and extent of inequalities.

This volume's contributions highlight the importance of networks, actors, and institutions. Sosnowski, for instance, shows how variation in local networks affected the Asad regime's ability to reassert dominance in Daraa, while Kherigi illustrates how some communities were able to activate their community, successfully mobilizing to reject municipal boundaries that negatively affected them. Brooke and Komer demonstrate how the extent to which individuals turn to the mosque for assistance depends, in part, on the individual's gender and expectations around women (or men) attending the mosque. Similarly, Buehler and Gergis argue that representatives' physical features matter because they reflect behavior that fulfills social obligations—for instance, the prayer marks and beards associated with Islamic practice.

Moreover, the types of people deemed capable leaders are subjective to localized hierarchies and ideologies. These insights are consistent with a burgeoning literature on the MENA region and elsewhere showing that nonstate networks, actors, and institutions play an important role in governance and outcomes.[23] Thus, studies must consider how nonstate institutions shape decentralization processes and politics under decentralization. This entails recognizing local networks, actors, and institutions and

questioning the extent to which their influence extends across subnational groupings of citizens—whether these be different geographic areas (e.g., regional, rural/urban) or imagined communities (e.g., religious, tribal), which may even span the borders of nation-states. Doing so opens the way to considering how the local legitimacy of tribal, religious, or other leaders might not only influence politics but be leveraged in implementing decentralization policies.

### 3.3 Dismantling or Reinforcing Ancien Regimes?

A common thread tying the chapters in this volume together is the extent to which elites seek to shape decentralization to maintain the *ancien regime*. Much of the work within this volume suggests that political elites can use decentralization to reinforce central authority and replicate power imbalances. These findings align with other work demonstrating how decentralization can be employed to maintain elites' authority and entrench traditional patron-client relationships.[24] Yet, far from showing decentralization as a tool by which *ancien regimes* can unilaterally maintain control and "upgrade authoritarianism," the studies in this volume highlight the continued contestation of actors at the local and central levels.

Incumbent elites use various mechanisms to manipulate the decentralization processes to maintain and extend their power. Here, Kherigi points to the role of administrative boundary-making, while Parreira and Colin and Bergh highlight the importance of fiscal control. Others have argued that decentralization can even expand the *ancien regime*'s reach, giving it a new bureaucracy for monitoring and gathering information about locales and ensuring loyalty by multiplying salaried patronage positions.[25]

Yet the contributions in this volume also demonstrate effective contestation. We see this between local actors and central powers in Kherigi's study of boundary-making in Tunisia. Local communities not only contested boundary-making but at times made it impossible for the center to impose its will. Similarly, we find effective contestation in Colin and Bergh's study of petitions in Morocco. Petitioning is not widely used, but it is employed as a mechanism to exert rights. Decentralization thus opens the door to contestation, at times leading to local victories.

However, key questions remain regarding when and where local communities exert their will vis-à-vis the center. This is particularly important in the MENA, where for decentralization processes to foster participation, ensure democratic representation, and enhance equality, the *ancien regime* must be dislodged. What explains when entrenched elites can per-

petuate their power by selectively rewarding loyalists and punishing opponents with access to resources at the center, and when these strategies fail? To what extent does this depend on historical conditions, socioeconomic endowments, local networks, non-state authorities, or institutions?

## 4. Future Research: Leveraging the MENA

Further studies on politics under decentralization in the MENA can provide leverage for understanding decentralization, local governance, and MENA politics. Decentralization studies have been rare in the MENA, in part because the region has been characterized as exceptional in its centralization and authoritarian resilience. This has led scholars to discount and even ignore decentralization processes there. The perception that hard data on the impact of decentralization in the MENA is unavailable is likely another reason such studies are rare. The contributions in this book demonstrate the potential gains from further research, however, and they illustrate how it can be done.

The studies in this volume showcase the wide range of approaches to studying local politics under decentralization. They employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, including municipal boundary maps; election results; images of elected officials; surveys of citizens, candidates, and elected officials; and in-depth interviews with current and former elected officials, nonelected officials, community leaders, NGO representatives, and citizen petitioners. They examine how various actors—from voters to local council members to bureaucrats—engage in decentralization processes and local politics. They ask various questions—from how bureaucrats and local communities engage in boundary-making to whether representatives reflect citizens' preferences and how local community contexts shape who turns to the mosque for support. Each of these studies contributes to a better understanding of decentralization, local governance, and MENA politics.

Research beyond the issues and countries studied in this volume would enrich this picture. Studies of governance in the MENA provide insights into how politics under decentralization in authoritarian regimes may differ from politics in democratic ones. Some scholars believe that decentralization processes cannot be sincere in nondemocracies, a hypothesis that should be further studied.[26] The MENA offers a wide range of nondemocratic regime types—hybrid regimes, monarchies, military dictatorships, personalist regimes, oligarchies—and varied reasons for pursuing decen-

tralization. Within each, there are also important local and regional variations that shape local governance. Moving beyond Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Morocco to include other middle- and high-income countries of the region could enrich the study of the MENA and serve as a counterpoint to studies in lower-income regions, which are more generally the sites of donor-driven development programs.

Fruitful avenues for understanding the implications of decentralization may come from comparisons between wealthier, oil-rich autocracies that have either long held local elections and included local governance institutions (e.g., Kuwait), and those that are just beginning to implement such processes (e.g., Qatar), as well as between decentralization processes rolling out in more versus less wealthy countries or those with higher and lower wealth inequality. The MENA region is also considered one of the most unequal in the world in terms of income distribution.[27] Might high levels of wealth inequality constitute an underlying reason for the pernicious and enduring role of clientelism, even in the face of decentralization? Or is the persistence of clientelism due to the strength of various authorities and social institutions outside the state?

More generally, researchers should explore how authority and power are gained and maintained locally. The works in this volume provide analyses of the role of a wide range of nonstate actors in local politics—such as tribal families, armed groups, political parties, international donors, and religious institutions. Recent work in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that customary leaders are more successful at gaining community engagement in local initiatives that match their geographic scope and field of expertise, as conceived locally.[28] The relationship between traditional authorities and other actors—including central authorities and aid agencies—may also play a role. Yet further work is required to understand the conditions under which nonstate actors and institutions are influential. How and why are some local leaders better positioned to provide services or security? Are they more powerful in certain realms because they can better monitor and sanction group members? Are they more effective at coordinating citizens for collective action? And how do processes of decentralization affect their influence? Recognizing the basis of authority and the role of social institutions will provide the foundation to better understand how decentralization impacts local governance.

What is needed, and what this volume did not fully engage with due to its limited number of country cases, is a systematic application of a formal framework for assessing how changes in state authority and institutions interact with others in local contexts. It is worth pursuing a compara-

tive study across cases in the region contrasting how differing changes in political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization shape decentralization processes and politics.[29] Another way forward might be an application of Agrawal and Ribot's framework for analysis of four countries in Asia and West Africa to the MENA. These scholars seek to go beyond "identifying decentralization simply as an institutional reform in the political, fiscal, or administrative realm as is commonly done" and instead to understand "how a particular reform can be analyzed by referring to changes in actors, powers, or accountability."[30]

## 5. Policy Implications

The studies in this volume also have several implications for policies concerning decentralization and local governance. Some of these are unsurprising and aligned with current best practices. Others emerge from expanding our focus from the state to authorities and institutions beyond the state. All are worth noting.

First, the studies highlight the need for clear legal and institutional frameworks that define local governments' and central authorities' roles, responsibilities, and powers. Both Bergh and Colin's study of petitioning in Morocco and Kherigi's analysis of border-making in Tunisia emphasize this point. Their findings align with other work on decentralization in the MENA, where scholars emphasize "the importance of delineating clear roles for each level of government—a key concern, given that governments may intentionally leave legislation vague."[31] Lack of clarity over who should be doing what confuses not only citizens but elected officials, who may themselves feel frustrated and may disengage from the hard work of good local governance.[32] Revenue-sharing schemes also need to be clarified and made more transparent for local bureaucrats. Importantly, "[t]he impact of decentralization depends on how it is designed . . . clear rules [are needed] for the division of powers and resources in a way that makes it in the interests of national and local elites to cooperate."[33]

Policies and programming should address the pernicious tenacity of historical inequities. Many of the chapters in this volume underscore enduring social inequalities. The studies by Colin and Bergh, Shalaby and Barnett, and Buehler and Gergis underscore how those who have—or are perceived to have—greater education, resources, and experience are better positioned to both have their voices heard and gain positions of real power in the context of decentralization. Targeting funding and technical train-

ings toward civil society organizations that facilitate local engagement and representation of marginalized groups (i.e., the poor, less educated, youth, and women) and instituting quotas for local elections are two approaches. International aid programming should try to ensure it does not support the replication of *ancien regime* power hierarchies by, for instance, instituting first-past-the-post electoral institutions that promote the cultivation of a "personal vote," by clientelistic practices, or by aiding organizations close to the *ancien regime*.

Shifts in institutional structures should be paired with civic education campaigns to help citizens and representatives comprehend their new roles vis-à-vis the central state.[34] Decentralization policies require civic education around three themes: (1) understanding the local-level social contract; (2) knowing how citizens can exercise the rights afforded them under decentralization; and (3) recognizing local governments' roles and responsibilities, particularly concerning central institutions.

Decentralization implies the adoption of a redefined social contract between citizens and their governance institutions. Particularly during political transitions, citizens are accustomed to the central state playing an outsized role in governance; the state has encouraged their passivity and even ignorance. Decentralization imposes expanded and at times wholly different rights and responsibilities on citizens, local government representatives, and the central state. For decentralization policies to strengthen democratic governance, all must reconceptualize their relationship with each other and actively participate in governance. Broad public understanding of and engagement in the critical public role of local-level oversight is needed to ensure that decentralization measures do not suffer from elite capture.[35]

Citizens also must be able to recognize their rights and understand how and why nepotistic, clientelistic, and corrupt practices lead to poor service provision. This is particularly important as politics becomes more localized, where personalized politics and clientelistic practices may be exacerbated. Thus, decentralization programming should include civic education programs that teach citizens how rule- and merit-based systems strengthen accountability in local governance processes. Through combatting entrenched clientelistic mentalities, civic education programs may create a sense of efficacy and empowerment among citizens who have long been oppressed by authoritarianism, help overcome class, gender, and other inequalities, and enhance the possibility that decentralization fosters democracy.[36]

Citizens also need skills to meaningfully influence the political process in newly decentralized systems.[37] Education in this realm, targeting

the specific pathways through which citizens can engage with their local governments, must be tailored to local contexts, as Colin and Bergh's chapter illustrates. The constitutional amendment allowing local council agendas to be set through petitioning has potentially meaningful impacts. For instance, it has been shown that the engagement of informed citizens in decisions about spending locally sourced funds is a key component in successful fiscal decentralization.[38] Yet, as the authors underscore regarding Morocco, "In cases where citizens do not have the expertise needed to manage the whole petitionary process, training is required to reinforce their capacity" and allow them to fully seize their newly accorded rights. Making the petitioning process fairer and more effective requires citizens to understand how to participate in civic initiatives. Inexperience and lack of education often impede the ability of citizens—particularly marginalized ones—to take advantage of decentralization measures.[39]

Third, citizens and officials need to understand local governments' roles and responsibilities, particularly concerning central institutions. Frustration and disengagement are likely when there is a disconnect between citizen expectations of their local government and the actual powers of local officials. Blackman, Clark, and Sasmaz's chapter empirically demonstrates informational gaps between citizens and their local government representatives concerning the latter's mandates, resources, and responsibilities. Therefore, awareness campaigning around the roles and responsibilities of local governance structures (e.g., municipal councils) and how these local institutions work in concert with national ones should accompany decentralization.

Civic education is not a panacea for challenges of decentralization, but it does help set realistic expectations. Recent field experiments testing the effects of civic education show that such programs may increase participants' political participation, sense of efficacy, tolerance for opposing views, and normative support for decentralization. However, they may also lead to negative effects on satisfaction with decentralization processes and democracy when conditions within a given country are not ideal. Scholars caution that "no democracies are perfect, and civic education programmes need to be cognizant of modulating to some degree the discrepancy between democracy in theory and in practice."[40] Nevertheless, as recent work from Tunisia demonstrates, even when the citizenry grew up under autocracy and experienced a difficult transition period, something as simple as a short, online civic education program can enhance feelings of democratic values, political efficacy, and intended political participation, while reducing nostalgia for the *ancien regime*.[41]

## 6. Conclusion

*Decentralization, Local Governance, and Inequality in the MENA* fills gaps in the existing literature on decentralization on the one hand, and politics in the MENA on the other. The MENA is far too often overlooked in the study of decentralization. The Arab Spring drew attention to poor governance in the peripheries, the resulting local grievances, and how this can affect politics at all levels. Decentralization was a key demand during the Arab Spring. Its aftermath led to decentralization reforms—in various forms and degrees—throughout the region. As a result, it is time for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to shift away from equating governance in the MENA with the centralized state and to consider how local politics affects individuals' engagement, representation, and ultimately their ability to solve everyday problems.

The studies in this volume interrogate the shifting power dynamics between local and central elites, citizen engagement, and local political representation under decentralization in the MENA region. They uncover greater levels of local-central contestation than descriptions of political reform as authoritarian upgrading would have one believe, and they show significant subnational variation in the level of contestation. Similarly, they show citizens engage locally by participating in elections, petitioning local councils, and seeking service provision. However, many also continue to do so in line with social institutions outside the state, or they seek redress from nonstate actors. So, too, the studies demonstrate how local councils and council presidents reflect the interests of some constituents, while leaving aside others.

Decentralization has meaningful implications for governance, but it does not easily resolve inequalities. In some cases, political decentralization is paired with the adoption of equalizing institutions, such as gender or age quotas for local elections. These have expanded descriptive representation, but evidence from Morocco and Tunisia suggests that advances in substantive representation may be more limited.

The MENA is not unique in this respect. The literature on decentralization elsewhere points to the issues discussed throughout this volume. Decentralization is often hindered by local governments' narrow mandates and insufficient resources, both for lower-income democracies and the autocracies studied here. Citizens' confusion about local government mandates often affects their ability to participate effectively. Social inequalities are also often replicated at the local level, with decentralization reinforcing rather than resolving social and geographic inequalities.

These findings have important implications for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. For scholars, they suggest the need to examine politics under decentralization more closely. We encourage scholars to closely examine subnational variation and to consider the findings in regional and cross-regional comparative perspectives. For policymakers and practitioners, these perspectives provide insights into program design and implementation. We call for close attention to the design of decentralization policies—considering local networks, social structures and institutions, and the resultant power balances, as well as education for citizens and officials alike to understand their rights and responsibilities. Only by unpacking governance at the local level can we understand how decentralization policies affect citizens' lives and, ultimately, the welfare and stability of their nation-states and communities.[42]

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# Appendix A

## *Overview of Decentralization in Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia*

Brief overviews of the four countries' post-2011 administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization are outlined below and summarized in table A1.

### 1. Lebanon

Lebanon has a long history of decentralization, primarily at the municipal level; however, implementation has been hamstrung by limited local capacities. The initial two tiers of governance—Muhafazat (governorates) and Qada (county)—lack legal personality or autonomous authority and remain under the direct purview of the central government.[1] In contrast, governed by the Municipal Act of 1977 (Decree Law 118), municipalities have been granted legal and moral personalities (they have rights and duties similar to natural persons)[2] and financial and administrative autonomy (Arts. 1 and 2). Decentralization efforts entail strengthening local municipal capabilities more than devolving greater de jure powers to municipalities.

Before examining constraints on local authorities, it is useful to consider the main responsibilities of Muhafazat (8) and Qadas (25). As outlined in the Administrative Organization Law of 1959 (Decree Law 116), Muhafazat and Qada have been given the responsibility of implementing the

TABLE A1. Legal Foundations of Varying Types of Decentralization Across Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, and Syria

| Country | Fiscal Decentralization | Administrative Decentralization | Political Decentralization |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tunisia | **2014 Constitution**<br>Art. 135 (2)—This article stipulates that powers transferred to local governments will be accompanied by the corresponding financial resources (principle of correspondence). Art. 65–66—Municipality budgets depend heavily on state transfers. The power to regulate tax rules, percentages, and collection procedures largely sidelines local government because almost all tax income is based on the federal tax system and is thus governed by federal laws.<br>**2022 Constitution**<br>Art. 75—The regulation of tax rules, percentages, and collection procedures is still governed by the federal tax system.<br>Art. 135 (2) of the 2014 Constitution has been removed. | **2014 Constitution**<br>Chapter VII—Local Governance: Consists of 12 articles (131–142).<br>Art. 131—Tunisia is divided into a three-tier local system: regions (5), districts (24), and municipalities (350).<br>Art. 132—Local governments have legal personality.<br>Art. 134—Three categories of local government powers are determined. Local authorities possess their own powers; powers are shared with the central authority; and powers are delegated to them from the central government. The principle of subsidiarity distributes the joint and delegated powers. Local authorities enjoy regulatory powers in exercising their mandates.<br>Arts. 138 and 14—*Posteriori* Oversight: Certain levels of control over local governments to guarantee that their autonomy will not transform into complete independence.<br>**2022 Constitution**<br>Art. 56—The people, who hold the sovereignty, delegate the legislative function to a lower parliament called the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, and to a higher parliament called the National Assembly of Regions and Districts.<br>Art. 67—The Assembly of the Representatives of the People exercises the legislative function within the limits of its powers in this constitution. | **2014 Constitution**<br>Chapter 5 Local Government Code, Art. 139—This article is dedicated to ensuring wide participatory democracy among citizens.<br>Art. 133—Extends electoral process to all levels of local government.<br>Art. 8—The state seeks to provide the necessary conditions to develop youths' capacities, to realize their potential, and to participate in all areas of development.<br>Art. 34—The rights to election, voting, and candidacy are guaranteed in accordance with the law. The state seeks to guarantee women's representation in elected bodies.<br>**Organic Law 7 (2017)**<br>Art. 117—A women's quota is set at the municipal level (50% of lists must be females).<br>**Tunisian Electoral Law (2019)** Chapter 20—Youth quotas are established at the municipal level. Every electoral list in a constituency with four or more seats must include among the first four candidates one under 35 years old.<br>**2022 Constitution** Art. 51—The country seeks to achieve gender parity in the elected local assemblies.<br>Arts. 58–60—This article regulates the public election of members of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People.<br>**Amended Electoral Law (2022) Decree No. 55**<br>Chapter 21—Applications for candidacy are submitted individually. Potential candidates must submit 400 signatures of registered voters from their constituencies to run for office. Half of the signatures must be women, and at least 25% must be under 35 years old. Earlier provisions on gender parity and youth quotas have been eliminated. |

| Morocco | 113–14 OL | The 2011 Constitution | The 2011 Constitution |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Art. 85—Municipalities are responsible for setting up and updating a coherent and comprehensive addressing system, allowing for better tax collection; the central government collects most local taxes. | Art. 1—"The territorial organization of the Kingdom is decentralized."<br>Art. 135—This article identifies three levels of local government in Morocco: the regions, the prefectures (for urban areas) or the provinces (for rural areas), and the communes. "They constitute moral persons of public law, which democratically administer their affairs."<br>Art. 136—This article deals with "administrative freedom" and disposal of *tutelle*.<br>Art. 140—This article identifies three types of mandates for municipalities: their own competencies, competencies shared with the state, and competencies transferred from the state.<br>**The 113–14 Organic Law**<br>Art. 118—The key budget deliberations of the municipal council need only a visa rather than approval from the governorate, and they can become enforceable after a 20-day deadline.<br>Title 2—This title provides details that differentiate types of mandates the municipality can handle on its own, the mandates that are the responsibility of central government but can be transferred to municipalities to handle, and the mandates that are implemented jointly with central government (shared competencies).<br>**The 111–14 OL "Advanced Regionalization"**<br>Art. 94—This article defines the areas of "transferrable" competencies from the central government to the region.<br>**The Administrative Deconcentration Charter** (adopted in 2019 but not yet enforced). | Art. 60—The Parliament consists of two chambers: the Chamber of Representatives and the Chamber of Councillors.<br>**113–14 OL**<br>Art. 6—A public vote (not secret) is the rule for all municipal council decisions.<br>Art. 11—This article outlines the conditions to run for mayor, allowing for more public involvement.<br>Art.38—Local associations and citizens can submit petitions to municipalities. Chapter V of Title III—Municipal councils are to set up participatory arrangements to enhance dialogue with citizens and NGOs.<br>Arts. 273 and 275—The mayor is to make public the deliberations of the municipal council, including the budget.<br>Art. 277—Financial statements are to be published in the local Governance Official Gazette.<br>**The 111–14 OL "Advanced Regionalization"**<br>Art. 9—Regions' executive assemblies are elected through direct universal suffrage.<br>**Organic Law No. 20–16 (Electoral Law)**<br>Art. 23 (2)—There is a youth quota (30 seats) and a women quota (30 seats) in the House of Representatives. |

| Lebanon | **Municipal Act 1977 (Decree 118)** | **Taif Accord (1989)** | **Municipal Act 1977 (Decree Law 118)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Art. 49.5—Municipalities are responsible for overseeing the municipal budget and determining the municipal tax rate. | Section III—Level of Local Administrative Units Decentralization. | Art. 11—A municipal council is elected according to the Municipal Act of Lebanon's election laws. |
| | Art. 59.6—Collecting municipal taxes is not subject to central government authentication. | **Administrative organization 1959 (Decree Law 116).** Art. 1—Determines the numbers of Muhafazat (8) and | Art. 9—The number of council members is determined by the number of citizens of each municipality. |
| | Art. 133—This article deals with municipal unions' financial sources. | Qada (25). | Art. 47—The municipal council is obligated to act in the interest of citizens. |
| | **Law 60 of 1988** | Art. 4–26—Lays out the responsibilities of the Muhafiz. | |
| | Arts. 86–98—This article identifies taxes and tariffs; municipal surtaxes and value-added tax (VAT) are to be collected by public, semipublic, or private institutions on behalf of municipalities. | Art. 27–46—Outlines the duties of the Qaimaqam (subregion head). | |
| | | Art. 47—Stipulates that an appointed council (advisor body) assists the Muhafiz. | |
| | | Art. 48. Explains the responsibilities of the Council. | |
| | | **C. Municipal Act 1977 (Decree Law 118)** | |
| | | Art. 1–2—Explicates legal personality as well as financial and administrative autonomy to municipalities. | |
| | | Art. 8—Stipulates that a municipal council shall hold the decision-making authority. | |
| | | Art. 114—Gives municipal unions administrative and financial autonomy and moral personality regarding rights and duties. | |
| | | **D. Administrative Decentralization Draft Law 2015 (not yet approved).** | |

| Syria | **Local Administrative Law (Decree 107) 2011** | **Local Administrative Law (Decree 107) 2011** | **Local Administrative Law (Decree 107) 2011** |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Art. 2 (3)—This article aims to enhance the financial revenues of the administrative units.<br><br>Art. 34 (1)—States that the governorate council has an independent budget not included in the state's general budget. Its revenues and expenditures are determined by Law No. 35 of 2007.<br><br>Art. 34 (2)—The governorate council approves financing development investment projects with revenues not to exceed 25% of the independent budget. Chapter 10 (Art. 134–143) provides a list of funding means for city, town, and municipal councils, including regulations related to the taxes they collect and the taxes they can determine. However, the ways of spending and distributing the total revenues are decided by the minister according to Art. 153 below.<br><br>Art. 153—The minister of local administration (representing the central government), in coordination with the minister of finance, makes decisions concerning spending and distribution of collected revenues among beneficiaries. | Art 73—Syria consists of governorates (regions) divided into districts, each district into subdistricts, and each subdistrict into cities, towns, or municipalities, the last-mentioned being divided into neighborhoods.<br><br>Art. 30–31—The local councils are responsible for managing the affairs of the local administration and all the works that lead to the development of the governorate "economically, socially, culturally, and urbanly." "Local councils" are governorate councils, city councils, town councils, and municipality councils.<br><br>Art. 32–33—Determines the responsibilities of the governorate councils, including, for instance, setting up plans and following up on their implementation to ensure balanced and sustainable development in the governorate.<br><br>Art. 60–70—Lays out the functions and responsibilities of the city, town, and municipality councils. These include administrative tasks such as establishing, managing, investing in, and maintaining cities, buildings, stadiums, and sports centers; granting licenses; and monitoring local transportation, among other tasks. | Art. 8.2—The voters in the administrative unit hold power over the legal personality of the administrative unit, and elections under the General Elections Law are the basis through which the voters express their will.<br><br>Art. 12—Each administrative unit shall have a council composed of members elected by the provisions of the General Elections Law.<br><br>Art. 13—The number of council members is determined by the number of citizens of each administrative unit.<br><br>Art. 23—The local council's sessions shall be public, and the council chairman may invite whomever he deems appropriate to attend unless the chairman or one-third of the members request to make them confidential.<br><br>**Local Council Election Law No. 91 of 1971:**<br><br>Art. 44 (1)—Members of local councils are elected through a plurality voting system. |

central government's policies and directives. Muhafazat have an advisory council, appointed by the Ministry of Interior. The council is expected to assist the Muhafiz (governor) and offer advice on public policies (Art. 47–58, Decree Law 116, 1959), but cannot affect policy.

Municipalities have greater autonomy. Each municipality (1,059 in total) consists of an elected municipal council (Art. 11, Decree Law 118) endowed with decision-making authority (Art. 8, Decree Law 118) and the obligation to work in the best interests of the citizens (Art. 47). Smaller municipalities possess the capacity to form municipal unions, thereby augmenting their operational efficiency. Like municipalities, each municipal union is recognized as a distinct legal entity, possessing administrative and financial autonomy, a provision outlined in Article 114 of the Decree Law 118.

Members of municipal councils, the number of which is based on the size of the municipality, are elected in a bloc-vote list system. Every voter submits a single ballot with as many names as there are open positions, and the candidates with the most votes get elected. This promotes the formation of electoral coalitions that transcend specific religious or sectarian groups, as candidates need support from a broader range of voters to secure their seats (see Parreira in this volume). The system also permits voters to select candidates from various lists and party affiliations. This system has the potential for a winner-takes-all scenario, where a single electoral list can dominate the council if its candidates receive the highest number of votes.[3] In practice, the freedom and fairness of local elections are low. According to the Varieties of Democracies' (V-Dem) scoring on fairness and freedom of subnational elections, coded from 0 (not at all free and fair) to 4 (yes, free and fair), Lebanon scored 0.71 in 2022.[4]

When it comes to fiscal decentralization, Decree Law 118 gives municipalities a degree of fiscal autonomy. For instance, municipalities oversee their own budgets and determine municipal tax rates (Art. 49 [5]). Furthermore, the collection of municipal taxes is exempt from central government authentication (Art. 59 [6]). Subsequently, through Law No. 60 of 1988, municipalities are granted the right to directly collect sixteen categories of taxes and tariffs. However, public, semipublic, or private institutions collect value-added taxes (VATs) and other taxes on behalf of the municipalities (Arts. 86–98). The municipalities lack control over these institutions and cannot ensure the complete transfer of collected revenues to their coffers due to their lack of access to accurate information regarding the collected amounts. These constraints collectively impede the realization of full municipal fiscal autonomy.[5] In practice, municipalities have limited autonomy in spending their funds; they face difficulties getting their significant

purchases approved by the central government, and most are unlikely to proceed without this approval.

Lebanon has made little progress in addressing these constraints. An Administrative Decentralization Draft Law for Lebanon that would reduce the involvement of the central government and enhance municipalities' ability to generate their own revenues was first proposed in 2015. However, as of 2023, it has not yet been approved.

## 2. Morocco

In 2011, Morocco adopted a new constitution in response to nationwide protests calling for local and regional development. The constitution's opening article explicitly affirms that "the territorial organization of the Kingdom is decentralized" (Art. 1, Morocco Constitution, 2011). The 2011 constitution introduced substantial provisions for decentralization on both the municipal and regional tiers, forming the key pillars of Morocco's local governance (Art. 135, Morocco Constitution, 2011). The 2011 constitution also introduced the principle of "advanced regionalization" to bolster decentralization at the regional level.

The focal point of administrative decentralization lies at the municipal level. Morocco's administrative system is structured across three hierarchical tiers, including (1) regions (12); (2) provinces (62) for rural areas and prefectures (13) for urban areas; and (3) municipalities (also called communes) (1,503). The first two tiers, however, are essentially extensions of the central government rather than autonomous entities. Thus, municipalities were the key focus of decentralization, and a pivotal change ushered in by the 2011 constitution was the principle of administrative freedom, which curtailed the previously exercised *tutelle* (supervision) of municipalities by the central government (Art. 136, Morocco Constitution, 2011).

The constitutional declarations were translated into action through the 2015 Organic Laws (OL) 113–14 on municipalities and 111–14 on advanced regionalization. OL 113–14 endowed municipal councils with increased administrative authority. Now, municipal councils only required a "visa" rather than *tutelle* from the central government to sanction significant budgetary deliberations, which gain enforceability after a twenty-day interval (Art. 118, 113–14 OL, 2015). Importantly, however, *de facto* decisions made by municipalities may not be effectively executed without approval from higher authorities, as "visas" are subject to rejection at higher levels.[6]

These laws also established regulations governing municipal mandates and contributions across domains within their jurisdiction. Municipal mandates included public transportation, electricity, water, municipal markets, and waste management. Other competencies transferred from the central government to municipalities included safeguarding cultural and historical structures and developing and maintaining small- to medium-scale hydraulic works and equipment (Art. 90, 113–14 OL). OL 113–14 also outlined shared competencies between municipalities and the central government in areas such as local economic development, employment promotion, and encouragement of private investments (Art. 88–89, 113–14 OL).

In terms of political decentralization, the new laws extended legal personality and autonomy to both regions and municipalities. Members of municipal councils would be elected directly by the people under a mixed electoral system (majoritarian and party-list systems). Members of the provincial councils were subsequently elected by members of the municipal councils.[7] The kingdom's parliament would consist of an upper (Chamber of Councillors) and a lower chamber (Chamber of Representatives) (Art., 2011 constitution). The lower chamber members were to be elected through proportional representation, while the upper chamber members were elected through indirect votes by local councils, professional organizations, and labor syndicates.[8] However, a decade after the reforms, elections appeared neither free nor fair (–0.29 points on the 0–4 scale on the V-Dem Institute ranking in 2022).[9]

The 2015 OLs contained other provisions aimed at promoting public participation in political life and increasing transparency. For instance, Article 38 facilitated the submission of public petitions to municipal councils and obligated councils to address the petitions during subsequent council sessions (see Colin and Bergh in this volume). Furthermore, the OLs mandated that all municipal council sessions be open to the public (Art. 273) and that all votes be conducted publicly, including those for electing the council's president and deputies (Art. 6). Moreover, the OLs required financial statements to be published in the local Governance Official Gazette (Art. 277).

Measures to increase public involvement are also found in the conditions for running for mayor (Art. 11). For example, the article stated that in municipalities where council members are elected through a party-list system, a mayoral candidate must be the head of their electoral list and be endorsed by their party. Additionally, the party must be among the top five in the total number of seats obtained in the municipal council.[10]

The new laws, at least theoretically, constituted significant advances on

the administrative and political fronts, but fiscal decentralization remained limited. Municipalities remained circumscribed in establishing and maintaining a system to enhance tax collection efficiency. Thus, they continued to rely heavily on taxes collected by the central government (Art. 85, OL 113–14, 2015).

In 2019, "advanced regionalization" also remained limited. The government adopted the Administrative Deconcentration Charter in 2019 to put "advanced regionalization" into practice. The Charter's main aim was to provide the regions and provinces with more powers to provide services and access human and financial resources.[11] If enforced, this charter would particularly promote fiscal decentralization. As the International Monetary Fund noted, the Charter would "introduce transparent criteria for intergovernmental transfers, mitigate contingent liability risks, and, in the longer term, enhance local taxation."[12]

### 3. Syria

Decentralization in Syria has been limited and uneven. The foundation for decentralization rests on Legislative Decree 107, a decentralization law introduced in August 2011 as a response to the nationwide protests in Syria. This decree was never fully implemented because, having failed to quell unrest, Syria erupted into civil war in the following months. As Sosnowski discusses in this volume, as of 2023, a great deal of variation remained in Syrian local governance. Often supported by international humanitarian aid, decentralization efforts in Syria have materialized through diverse regional approaches and varying legal frameworks aimed at sustaining essential public services and stability across different regions.[13] These initiatives gained footing through local councils,[14] which have emerged as significant governance structures since 2011, particularly in Kurdish regions and areas under opposition control.[15] Little to no movement toward decentralization occurred in areas controlled by the Assad regime. Thus, keeping in mind the gap between the legal framework and implementation, the law is worth describing, as it has the potential to serve as a foundational framework for a postconflict Syria.

The 2011 Local Administrative Decree 107 (Art. 73) broke Syria into four administrative units: regions (governorates); districts; subdistricts and cities; and towns or municipalities (Art. 73, Decree 107, 2011). According to news articles, by 2022, Syria had 14 governorate councils, 158 city councils, 572 town councils, and 726 municipal councils.[16] In theory, the system

entails a significant degree of fiscal, administrative, and political decentral-ization. Importantly, however, the law has never been implemented.

The 2011 Local Administrative Law (Decree 107) establishes fiscal rights and responsibilities. Article 2 (3) underscores the law's objective of enhancing the financial revenues of administrative units. Article 34 (1) delineates that governorate councils possess independent budgets distinct from the state's general budget. Article 34 (2) empowers governorate coun-cils to approve financing for development projects, using revenues of up to a quarter of their independent budgets. Law No. 35 of 2007 guides these independent budgets, determining revenues and expenditures of governor-ates. According to this law, each governorate should have its own annual budget for local projects, independent of the governorate budget in the state's general budget law. The governorate council is to set the indepen-dent budget, which must be approved by the Minister of Local Administra-tion (Art. 3, Law No. 35, 2007). The sources of this independent budget are, for instance, imposed local fees, grants from the central state, savings from the previous year's budget, donations, and gifts, among others (Art. 7 of the 2007 Law).

Regarding the municipal level, Chapter 10 (Arts. 134–143) of the Local Administrative Law establishes regulations related to taxes. It grants city, town, and municipal councils the authority to determine the amount of some revenues, such as those coming from imposed fines (Art. 140). Yet the utilization and distribution of total revenues fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Local Administration, in coordination with the Minister of Finance, as stipulated by Article 153.

Administrative decentralization in Syria is explicitly addressed within the 2011 Local Administrative Law (Decree 107). The responsibilities of managing local administration affairs and promoting various governor-ate development dimensions—economic, social, cultural, and urban—are vested in local councils, according to Articles 30–31. The responsibilities of provincial councils are further expounded on in Articles 32–33. Addition-ally, the functions of city, town, and municipal councils are stipulated in Articles 60–61.

Political decentralization is theoretically addressed within the 2011 Local Administrative Law (Decree 107). Article 8 (2) posits that voters in administrative units represent the legal personalities of these units, with elections under the General Elections Law serving as the platform for expressing citizens' wills. Article 12 underscores that each administrative unit has an elected council, with membership determined by the General Elections Law. The size of the council is contingent on the population

of the administrative unit, as outlined by Article 13. Furthermore, Article 23 ensures transparency in the functioning of local councils, asserting that their sessions are generally public. However, confidentiality may be invoked at the request of the chair or one-third of the council members. According to Local Council Election Law No. 91 of 1971, members of local councils are elected through plurality voting systems (Art. 44). However, those elections to date have been far from free and fair. According to the V-Dem Institute, Syrian local elections' freedom and fairness score was –1.34 in 2022.[17]

## 4. Tunisia

Significant steps toward decentralization took place in Tunisia following the Arab Spring Uprisings in 2011. The decentralization framework was rooted in Tunisia's 2014 Constitution. Chapter VII (Arts. 131 to 142) elucidated the contours of local governance in Tunisia. The nation is divided into three tiers: regions (5), districts (24), and municipalities (350), each of which was endowed with distinct roles and responsibilities. Decentralization was also shaped by Article 139, which demonstrated the country's constitutional commitment to open governance and participatory democracy by underscoring the goals of engaging citizens and civil society in development planning and implementation.

The country's transition from two to three levels of local government constituted administrative decentralization. This transition reflected the nation's determination to extend localized governance across its entire territory, addressing the "under-municipalization" prevalent in rural and border regions.[18] Article 134 (3) of the 2014 constitution empowered local government with regulatory authority, although the regulatory landscape required harmonization with national laws. The introduction of posteriori oversight mechanisms, as specified in Article 138 of the 2014 constitution, provided for observation and control by the central government to guarantee municipal autonomy but did not lead to complete independence of local administrative institutions.

Regarding fiscal decentralization, the 2014 constitution conferred on local authorities both legal personality and financial independence (Art. 132). Local governments gained the capacity to autonomously manage their budgets, thereby expanding their administrative sovereignty. This was accompanied by the principle of correspondence, ensuring that transferred powers were paralleled by commensurate financial resources (Art.

135). However, a significant portion of municipal budgets continued to depend heavily on state transfers, indicating the ongoing political interplay between central and local finances. The powers to regulate tax rules, percentages, and collection procedures remained primarily within the realm of the central government. Pervasive reliance on the national tax system, as governed by federal laws, significantly constrained the fiscal autonomy of municipalities in Tunisia.

The 2014 constitution extended the scope of democratic representation, taking significant steps toward political decentralization. Article 133 affirmed that municipal and regional councils would be elected through universal suffrage. Provisions were introduced to promote youth representation, acknowledging their pivotal role in the nation's transformative journey (Art. 8). A youth quota was enshrined in Chapter 20 of the Tunisian Electoral Law (2019), requiring every list running for elections in a constituency with four or more seats to include a candidate under thirty-five years old within its first four candidates. Legislation also included gender parity measures, including a women's quota (Art. 34). This was regulated by Organic Law No. 7 (2017), requiring half of the municipal election lists to be comprised of female candidates.

Until 2022, the country employed a proportional representation closed-list system for elections at municipal and regional levels, with district council members elected by members of the first two levels (Art. 133, 2014 constitution). According to the V-Dem Institute's fairness and freedom of subnational elections scoring, Tunisia increased from –2.79 in 2010 to 1.95 between 2015 and 2019, and then decreased to 1.7 between 2020 and 2022.[19]

Intissar Kherigi's chapter on Tunisia's boundary-drawing experience refers to the period of democratic decentralization, but it is important to note that a major shift in Tunisia's political decentralization process occurred after 2022. The 2022 constitution preserved the fiscal status of the previous constitution, leaving fiscal decentralization unchanged, but other changes represented a step backward in the Tunisian decentralization process.

The 2022 constitution significantly weakened the powers of Tunisian local governments in several ways. First, structurally, the new constitution centralized power in the hands of the president.[20] In legislative terms, two chambers are now responsible for legislative functions: a lower parliament (the Assembly of the Representatives of the People) and a new upper chamber (the National Assembly of Regions and Districts) (Art. 56, 2022 Constitution).

The adoption of a new electoral system also reversed steps toward greater representation. Decree No. 55 moved from a proportional representation party-list system to a first-past-the-post, single-candidate system. It also required each candidate to submit 400 signatures of registered voters from their constituencies to run for office. Half of the signatures needed to come from women and at least 25% from those under thirty-five years old (Chapter 21, Decree No. 55, 2022). Furthermore, it waived public funding previously available for financing campaigns; going forward, candidates would be required to finance their campaigns privately. The new electoral system also removed gender- and youth-promoting provisions. These developments are expected to lead to reduced gender and age parity in local representation, given that women and youth are less likely to be able to privately finance their campaigns or have the broad local networks required to sponsor their candidacy to the same extent as their older, male counterparts.[21]

NOTES

1. Mona Harb and Sami Atallah, "Lebanon: A Fragmented and Incomplete Decentralization," in *Local Governments and Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World*, eds. Mona Harb and Sami Atallah (Beirut: Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2015), 189–228.

2. For more on legal and moral personality, please see Frederic William Maitland, "Moral Personality and Legal Personality," *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation* 6, no. 2 (1905): 192–200, https://www.jstor.org/stable/752035

3. Ziad Abu-Rish, "Municipal Politics in Lebanon," *Middle East Report* 280 (2016), https://merip.org/2016/10/municipal-politics-in-lebanon/

4. V-Dem Institute, "Country Graph."

5. Harb and Atallah, "Lebanon."

6. Lamia Zaki, *Decentralization in Morocco: Promising Legal Reforms with Uncertain Impact*, Report (Paris: Arab Reform Initiative, 2019).

7. Sarah Feuer, "Local Elections in Morocco: A Bet on the Kingdom's Reforms," PolicyWatch 2481 (September 2015) (Washington, DC: Washington Institute), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/local-elections-mo rocco-bet-kingdoms-reforms

8. Election Guide, "Morocco," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, https://www.electionguide.org/countries/

9. V-Dem Institute, "Country Graph," accessed September 28, 2023, https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

10. Zaki, *Decentralization in Morocco*.

11. USAID, *Comparative Analysis of Mena Subnational Governance: Governance Integration for Stabilization and Resilience in the Middle East and North Africa*, United States Agency for International Development, 2020), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_do cs/PA00X83Z.pdf

12. International Monetary Fund, *Morocco: 2018 Request for an Arrangement Under the Precautionary and Liquidity Line-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Morocco*, IMF Country Report No. 19/24 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2019), 10.

13. Ammar Kahf, "Decentralization as an Entry Point to Peacebuilding in Syria," in *The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations*, ed. Dania Koleilat Khatib (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 213–33.

14. The Syrian Decentralization Decree No. 107 refers collectively to the councils of each administrative unit as "local councils." These include governorate councils, city councils, town councils, and municipality councils (Art. 13, Legislative Decree 107, 2011).

15. Samer Araabi, "Syria's Decentralization Roadmap," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 23, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/68372

16. Alaraby Al-Jadeed, "The Syrian Regime's Local Elections: Meaningless Theater" (in Arabic), *Alaraby Al-Jadeed*, September 19, 2022, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/

17. V-Dem Institute, "Country Graph."

18. Lotfi Tarchouna, *The Tunisian Experience of Decentralization Since 2014*, Report (Paris: Arab Reform Initiative, 2019), https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-tunisian-experience-of-decentralization-since-2014/

19. The question to experts was: Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the postelection process into account, would you consider subnational elections (regional and local, as previously identified) to be free and fair on average? The responses are translated as follows: 0: No, not at all. The elections were fundamentally flawed and the official results (who won office) had little if anything to do with the "will of the people." 1: Not really. While the elections allowed for some competition, the irregularities in the end affected the outcome of the elections (who won office). 2: Ambiguous. There was substantial competition and freedom of participation but there were also significant irregularities. It is hard to determine whether the irregularities affected the outcome or not (who won office). 3: Yes, somewhat. There were deficiencies and some degree of fraud and irregularity, but these did not ultimately affect the outcome (who won office). 4: Yes. There was some human error and logistical restriction, but these were largely unintentional and without significant consequences. See V-Dem Institute, "Country Graph."

20. Elie Abouaoun et al., *Tunisia's New Constitution Expands Presidential Power: What's Next for Its Democracy?* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2023), https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/tunisias-new-constitution-expands-presidential-power-whats-next-its-democracy

21. Salsabil Chellali, "Tunisia Tramples Gender Parity Ahead of Parliamentary Elections," *Human Rights Watch*, November 2, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/02/tunisia-tramples-gender-parity-ahead-parliamentary-elections

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# Appendix B—Table from Chapter 3

TABLE B1. Summary of Fieldwork Data

| Period | Target | Data |
|---|---|---|
| December 2018 | - Local and national Moroccan NGOs working on petitions<br>- International NGOs and donors working on petitions | - 1 semistructured interview<br>- 1 semistructured interview<br>- 1 semistructured interview |
| August–December 2020 | - Follow-up on petitionary experiences explored in December 2018<br>- Petitionary experiences in the context of an International NGO project | - 1 semistructured interview<br>- 1 semistructured interview<br>- 1 semistructured interview |
| January–May 2021 | - Petitionary experiences in Fez and Tangiers | - 7 semistructured interviews |
| February 2022 | - Follow-up on petitionary experiences explored in December 2018 and 2020 | - 1 semistructured interview |
| Total | | - 27 semi-structured interviews<br>- 1 participant observation<br>- 2 focus-group discussions |

# Appendix C—Tables from Chapter 6

TABLE C1. Summary Statistics for Regression Variables

| Statistic | N | Mean | St. Dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral system | 1,538 | 0.899 | 0.301 | 0 | 1 |
| Higher education | 1,534 | 0.027 | 0.033 | 0.000 | 0.428 |
| Unemployment | 1,534 | 0.138 | 0.092 | 0.000 | 0.662 |
| Public sewage | 1,534 | 0.171 | 0.310 | 0.000 | 1.000 |
| Participation | 1,538 | 0.672 | 0.110 | 0.254 | 0.932 |
| Competitiveness | 1,538 | 0.214 | 0.179 | 0.0003 | 1.000 |
| MP magnitude | 1,538 | 9.705 | 19.254 | 0 | 100 |
| PAM magnitude | 1,538 | 21.413 | 25.646 | 0 | 100 |
| PI magnitude | 1,538 | 16.882 | 22.940 | 0 | 100 |
| PJD magnitude | 1,538 | 13.781 | 18.390 | 0 | 88 |
| PPS magnitude | 1,538 | 5.678 | 14.087 | 0 | 100 |
| RNI magnitude | 1,538 | 14.842 | 22.329 | 0 | 100 |
| UC magnitude | 1,538 | 4.374 | 12.520 | 0 | 95 |
| USFP magnitude | 1,538 | 9.042 | 18.247 | 0 | 100 |
| MP majority | 1,538 | 0.101 | 0.301 | 0 | 1 |
| PAM majority | 1,538 | 0.239 | 0.426 | 0 | 1 |
| PI majority | 1,538 | 0.153 | 0.360 | 0 | 1 |
| PJD majority | 1,538 | 0.120 | 0.325 | 0 | 1 |
| PPS majority | 1,538 | 0.044 | 0.204 | 0 | 1 |
| RNI majority | 1,538 | 0.148 | 0.355 | 0 | 1 |
| UC majority | 1,538 | 0.040 | 0.195 | 0 | 1 |
| USFP majority | 1,538 | 0.078 | 0.268 | 0 | 1 |

*Note*: Table C1 provides summary statistics for the variables included in the regression models discussed in the chapter and presented in Table 6.5.

*Appendix C*

TABLE C2. Case Municipalities for Qualitative Interviews

| Commune | Arbaoua | Mnasra | Biougra | Sidi Bibi |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Province | Kénitra | Kénitra | Chtouka-<br>Ait Baha | Chtouka-<br>Ait Baha |
| Electoral system | SMD | SMD | PR | PR |
| Reserved seats | 4 | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| Women elected | 5 | 4 | 7 | 6 |
| Population | 32,690 | 34,429 | 37,933 | 39,042 |
| Illiteracy rate | 0.45 | 0.51 | 0.27 | 0.35 |
| Higher education | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.08 | 0.03 |
| Unemployment | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.13 | 0.09 |
| Rural population | 0.24 | 0.49 | 0.00 | 0.02 |
| MP party magnitude | 62 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| PAM party magnitude | 24 | 0 | 38 | 0 |
| PI party magnitude | 0 | 10 | 0 | 48 |
| PJD party magnitude | 7 | 17 | 31 | 31 |
| RNI party magnitude | 0 | 72 | 10 | 0 |
| USFP party magnitude | 0 | 0 | 21 | 0 |

*Note*: Table C2 presents information on the institutional, socioeconomic, and partisan characteristics of the four municipalities selected as sites for the qualitative interviews. The two municipalities in Kénitra province both have SMD electoral systems. In comparison, the two municipalities in Chtouka-Ait Baha both have PR electoral systems, but all four municipalities are within a few thousand inhabitants of the dividing line (of 35,000) that determines which electoral system is used. In each province, one of the chosen municipalities elected a woman beyond the reserved seats mandated by law. The municipalities are otherwise relatively similar in observable characteristics. Party magnitude variables indicate the percentage of local council seats held by each of the parties listed. Percentages may not add to 100 where other parties are represented.

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Steven Brooke is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His work on religion and politics, social movements, and Middle East politics has been published in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Perspectives on Politics*, and the *British Journal of Middle East Studies*. He is the author of the award-winning *Winning Hearts and Votes: Social Services and the Islamist Political Advantage* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

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Matt Buehler is chair of Middle East Studies and an associate professor of political science at the University of Tennessee. He is also a Senior Global Security Fellow at the Howard H. Baker Jr. School for Public Affairs and Public Policy. He has held fellowships at the Middle East Initiative at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University in Qatar. Buehler is the author of *Why Alliances Fail: Islamist and Leftist Coalitions in North Africa* (Syracuse University Press, 2018), which received the 2019 Best Book Award from the Southeast Regional Middle East and Islamic Studies Society. His research has appeared in *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and other journals. He is coeditor of the journal *Mediterranean Politics* and of an Edinburgh University Press book series, *Edinburgh Studies on the Maghreb*. Buehler received his doctorate in political science in 2013 from the University of Texas–Austin.

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Julia Clark is a senior economist for the World Bank. She works extensively on the use of digital technology for development, including in the Middle East and North Africa. Clark holds a BA from Tufts University in international relations and an MA in governance and development from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

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Francesco Colin is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies and a senior fellow at the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis in Rabat. His doctoral research focuses on civic engagement and active citizenship through local petitions in Morocco. He also collaborates with different research projects on political participation, social accountability, decentralization, and the impact of technology on local governance. Before his research activities, Colin graduated from the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's degree program with his thesis, "Crossing the Mediterranean: Towards Investment and Integration." He has also worked for the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Rabat as a junior democratization expert.

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Freddy Gergis is a twenty-nine-year-old Egyptian-American and first-generation college graduate. After earning a BA in political science and graduating summa cum laude from the University of Tennessee, Gergis grew more interested in academic research involving the politics of the MENA region and the different electoral systems implemented by MENA governments. He is currently pursuing a degree in cybersecurity.

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Intissar Kherigi is an associate researcher at Sciences Po University, Paris, and a visiting scholar at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul. Her research focuses on decentralization and local governance in the Arab world, and she was recently awarded a Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship to pursue further research on local governance in Tunisia. She has contributed to several publications and research projects on decentralization and local governance and has published articles in *Middle East Law and Governance*, *Tumultes*, *Siyassat Arabiyya*, and other journals. She is a qualified lawyer in England and Wales and has practiced law in several jurisdictions. She holds a BA in law from Cambridge University, an MSc in human rights from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a PhD in political science from Sciences Po University, Paris.

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Christiana Parreira is an assistant professor of international relations and political science at the Geneva Graduate Institute. Her research examines how local political institutions and elites shape broader patterns of state-building in the Middle East. Her current book project focuses on how patterns of local political competition affected governance outcomes in Lebanon during and after its civil war. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, and *Party Politics*. She holds a PhD in political science from Stanford University and a BA in public and international affairs from Princeton University.

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Aytuğ Şaşmaz is an assistant professor of political science at Bryn Mawr College. He received his PhD from the Government Department at Harvard University. During the 2021–2022 academic year, he was a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. His book project explores the organization-building and electoral performance of secular parties in the Middle East and North Africa. In other research projects, he focuses on social welfare policies in the contexts of ethnic and organizational diversity, political participation, and democratic backsliding, primarily in the MENA region. His research has appeared in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of Development Economics*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and other journals.

**Marwa Shalaby**, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*

Marwa Shalaby is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Shalaby's work focuses on the intersection of the politics of authoritarianism and women in politics. Her research also explores the microdynamics and outcomes of electoral institutions under competitive authoritarianism, mainly in the MENA region. Shalaby's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, *Governance*, *Politics and Gender*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Parliamentary Affairs*, among many others. She has coauthored an edited volume, *Empowering Women after the Arab Spring*, with Valentine Moghadam (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Shalaby is currently working on a book manuscript on gender and authoritarian politics in MENA.

**Marika Sosnowski**, *Melbourne Law School*

Marika Sosnowski is an Australian-qualified lawyer, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Melbourne Law School, and a Research Associate at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg. Her work sits at the intersection of socio-political-legal anthropology. Her primary research interests are in the fields of critical security studies (mainly ceasefires), local/rebel governance and legal systems (particularly issues around citizenship and belonging) with a geographical focus on Syria.

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