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**Progressive Politics in the Middle East and North Africa:
Analysing the notions of modernity and backwardness through their context**

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Abstract

This chapter critically examines ‘progressive politics’ in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), exploring its diverse interpretations and applications among various socio-political actors. It discusses how the concept of ‘progress’ has been appropriated by governments, political parties, and grassroots movements, both preceding and following the ‘Arab Spring’. The analysis focuses on three main themes. Firstly, entrenched authoritarian regimes in the region have strategically wielded the notion of ‘modernity’ as a vector of progress, utilizing it to bolster their legitimacy and project an image of forward-thinking governance. Secondly, the chapter explores the emergence of leaderless grassroots movements during the Arab uprisings, driven by fervent calls for social justice and equitable governance. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on the discourse surrounding ‘progressive Islamism’ and ‘Islamic feminism’, highlighting how these ideologies redefine traditional frameworks, seeking to reconcile religious principles with contemporary notions of progress and gender equality.

By situating ‘progressivism’ within the specific socio-political context of the MENA region, this analysis avoids a Western-centric perspective and instead highlights local political dynamics that shape its evolution. It ultimately demonstrates how the principles associated with progressivism are adaptable, not solely the domain of left-wing factions but also applicable to diverse political agendas. Ultimately, this chapter offers a comprehensive exploration of how progressive politics in the MENA region disrupts established Western categories. It emphasizes the pivotal role of progressivism in both catalyzing revolutions and shaping counter-revolutions, providing a critical understanding of its multifaceted nature.

Keywords: Middle East and North Africa, Arab Uprisings, Progressive Politics, Revolutions, Counter-revolutions, Islamism

Introduction

I reject the view that the Middle East or Muslim countries must have different values. The values I mentioned are universal human values and rights that should be upheld everywhere. Progressive politics should be dedicated to the full emancipation of human beings, men and women, as well as social justice and equality.

Gilbert Achcar, 2016.¹

This chapter aims to discuss the notion of progressive politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by taking the Arab Uprisings and the decade after as a paradigmatic timeframe to analyse the multiple meanings and uses of the term as well as the political processes around it.²

Progressivism is widely defined as a political movement aiming at advancing the human condition through social reforms based on advancements in science, technology, economic development, and social organisation. As such, the word ‘progressive’ is often used for a left-wing way of looking at the world, even though those who describe themselves as ‘progressives’ insist it is not an exclusively “left-wing club”.

According to Gilbert Achcar, Marxist intellectual and scholar of Middle East Studies, ‘progressive politics’ is one that upholds the whole set of the values that define *modernity* and *historical progress* since the revolutions in the eighteenth century with an emphasis on the key value of *social justice and equality* (Achcar, 2013).

Drawing on this definition, the MENA region represents an interesting case study for discussing the notion of ‘progressive politics,’ insofar as the last decade’s mass movements that occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain – the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ – despite their defeats and failures, showed collective ambitions of a ‘progressive’ change in the region.

Uprisings spread throughout the region. However, they were not drawn in by a specific ideology, yet they were mostly stimulated by the socio-economic grievances of marginalised strata of the population after decades of oppression during despotic regimes. Thus, progressive politics in the MENA region is concerned with advocating for social, political, and economic reforms that aim to improve the lives of marginalised and oppressed communities. This certainly included issues such as gender equality, (LGBTQ+) rights, freedom of expression, and the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. However, this set of demands was overshadowed by the more urgent demand for social and economic justice within the framework of a democratic order.

¹ Cfr. <https://newpol.org/towards-progressive-politics-middle-east/>.

² In Euro-American academy, the term MENA (Middle East and North Africa) has been used since the start of the 20th century. To criticise the Eurocentrism implied in the term, scholars have proposed the alternative acronym SWANA, which stands for Southwest Asian and North Africa. Although we agree with the need to counter the Euro-American and Orientalist perspective of the region, in this contribution we keep the term “MENA” to emphasise the asymmetrical power relationships involved when studying this region.

A peculiar aspect concerning politics in the MENA region is that most authoritarian regimes that governed until 2011 put forward their adherence to the Western culture as a progressive stand against Islamist backwardness, advertised as the main obstacle to regional development. Furthermore, several despotic regimes developed in close relation with international leftist organisations such as Mubarak, Ben Ali, and Bouteflika's regimes, respectively in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, which were part of the Socialist International. Bashar al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, and Mu'ammār Ghaddāfi's regimes developed upon an ideology inspired by international socialism and anti-imperialism. Finally, Western powers in the MENA region preferred to deal with despotic regimes instead of revolutions. At the time of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the EU and US' main concerns were to prevent them from radicalising, to keep them within narrow limits, and to keep the status quo.

Hence the need to rethink the category of "progress" and the notion of "progressive politics" in the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, this chapter has also another objective. As discussed by Rivetti and Cavatorta (2021), transnational developments in the region have influenced MENA policy research, highlighting a series of epistemological ruptures in the content and process of knowledge production. This chapter takes a step further by proposing to complexify the Western notion of "progressive" in the Western world starting from the social and political developments unfolding in the MENA region. In other words, it aims to discuss the category of progressive politics beyond a Western-oriented interpretation.

This chapter is organised into three parts. The first part disentangles the main revolutionary processes and counterrevolutions that occurred in the last decade in the MENA region by examining in-depth how these events and the main grievances emerging from protests relate to the notion of progressive politics in the MENA region. The second part illustrates how the failure of the traditional left as an ideological force led to progressive claims of younger generations taking the lead in the revolutionary process. This failure paved the way for the success of new Islamic movements. The third part explores the controversial evolution in "progressive" terms of those Islamist actors that re-emerged in the region after the fall of authoritarian regimes. Conclusions summarise the main points raised in the chapter and critically discuss the complex category of "progressivism" when it comes to its application to non-western contexts.

The 'progress-modernity' nexus in revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes

Between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, the so-called 'Arab Spring' opened a phase of profound political changes in the MENA region. The regimes challenged by the wave of popular mobilisation had been characterised by decades of authoritarian stability (Volpi 2013). In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak succeeded to the presidency in 1981; Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali first came to power in 1987; in Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh had occupied the presidency since 1990, having been the leader of the Republic of Yemen for a further twelve years before that; in Libya, Muammar Gaddafi had dominated political life since 1969. Meanwhile, in Syria, Bashar al-Asad became Syrian president in 2000 following the death of his father, who had, in turn, ruled the country since 1970. In Algeria, the rule of President Bouteflika, Foreign Minister between 1963 and 1979, had been uninterrupted since 1999. In Sudan, Omar al-Bashir had been in power since 1989. Elsewhere, unelected monarchies of various kinds ensured the maintenance of 'family' rule in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states.

Authoritarian regimes used to legitimise themselves in different ways, some of them through the construction of the nation-state upon the paradigm of *modernity*, intended as a synonym for *progress*. Notably, the latter was conceived as an ideal concept and a political myth, which the regimes use to construct a mirror-image, anti-modern counterpart and - through this - make themselves the interpreters of modernity against the supposed *anti-modern chaos* (Browers, 2005).

After the decolonisation, Tunisia was considered the most progressive country under the rule of President Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987). Since the inception of his regime, Bourguiba initiated a series of reforms to pursue an ideal of a 'modern state' from an anti-Islamist perspective. Among the first laws enacted was the *Personal Status Code*, one of the most progressive legal frameworks in the MENA region in terms of gender equality. The most important measures introduced ranged from the abolition of polygamy to the legalisation of divorce as a jurisdiction of the courts to which both sexes can appeal to the banning of the veil in schools, offices, and public establishments. However, during these years, the women's issue was heavily conditioned by the state and instrumentalised to meet the demands of the regime for the exclusion of related groups and challengers. The activities of trade unions formed before independence were banned, and women's groups were co-opted into the *Union Nationale de Femmes Tunisiennes* (UNFT) in 1958. Thus, the notion of 'state feminism' was used to describe the recognition of women's rights as an instrumental action of political legitimisation of the regime from an anti-Islamist perspective.

In the 1970s, on the one hand, the transformation in a neo-liberal direction led to the worsening of economic inequalities and to a series of popular protests led by left-wing movements in which women were an active part. The Tahar al Haddad Movement, for example, arose in 1978 to encourage the participation of women in the economic and cultural life of the country. The movement was the first Tunisian group to produce significant knowledge of gender studies and the notion of feminism in the national debate. On the other hand, the emergence of the Tunisian Islamist movement *Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, initially tolerated by Bourguiba in opposition to the left, saw Islamist women take an important role in an alternative identity claim to the country's 'secular' women.

When Ben Ali came to power in 1987, he embraced a women's rights policy like that of his predecessor. In the 1990s, more rights were granted to women, and two secular women's associations, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) were legalised. The renewed support for the gender cause ensured the regime's provisional collaboration with secular feminist groups from an anti-Islamist perspective. Beyond the progressive claim, Ben Ali's strategy often assumed that the rights of women and their emancipation could only be protected by authoritarian leaders through 'state feminism,' while the advent of more democratic mechanisms would ultimately lead to the implementation of regressive anti-woman politics. Moreover, by co-opting only part of the civil society and repressing any alternative, Ben Ali managed to confine the women's cause to a select group of activists belonging to an urban upper-middle class. This created a clash with other realities not necessarily belonging to the Islamist network, such as the rural and working class.

The stability of many regimes came under pressure by the end of 2010 when a series of uprisings began to sweep the region. Notably, 2011 was the year in which the demand for

human, civil, economic, and political rights in North Africa revealed its full potential through mobilisation for the rights of oppressed groups. In general terms, emancipatory movements entailed a focus on *democratic* participatory politics, democracy being understood as rooted on popular politics (Chalcraft, 2016) and centered on collective rights, equality, and social justice.

The protest movements that emerged in 2011 were able to climb over the fence within which the old powers confined the debate on civil and political liberties. Moreover, the aspiration for *social change* showed its autonomy from the foreign policies of Western states that, in the name of liberalisation and democratisation, had shaped their interventionism in the Middle East for decades. In this context, Islamist political groups have also re-emerged in the sociopolitical landscape to compete for power after 2011 by claiming their post-revolutionary engagement in opposition to the old ‘reactionary’ regime (Sinanović, 2012). In Tunisia, for instance, a wide variety of people were attracted by Ennahda’s decades-long history of activism against the regime. Indeed, no other opposition force had faced the scale of fierce repression and harassment that the Islamists had suffered. This gave Ennahda a certain degree of legitimacy, even in the eyes of people who had never formally supported it (Wolf, 2017).

Revolutionary contagion in 2011 did spread from Tunisia. The protest movements of the winter of 2010-2011, which led to the fall of the Ben Ali regime, put forward a series of socio-economic demands on the issues of employment, development, and justice. These were brought forward in particular by young people from the so-called marginalised regions of the interior and the south, from disadvantaged neighborhoods, and in general from social groups excluded from the economic and social development policies of the former regime, such as leftist and Islamist groups. In addition, since 2011, a multitude of new advocacy associations have emerged within Tunisia’s revitalised public sphere. These organisations served as dynamic expressions of a liberalised civil society, reflecting the transformative momentum of the post-revolutionary period (Sigillò, 2023).

By late January 2011, echoing the demands of the Tunisian protesters, thousands of people were taking to the streets in Egypt. As in Tunisia, the protests were initially driven by young people, often previously apolitical. They mobilised online, using social media to organise and communicate. Events in Tunisia and Egypt had then ramifications in Libya. The arrest on 15 February of human rights activist Fethi Tarbel provoked protests in the country that were suppressed by security forces. Anti-regime forces in Libya designated 17 February 2011 a ‘Day of Rage,’ during which major demonstrations took place in several cities (Durac and Cavatorta, 2022). But, unlike its North African neighbors, Libya was plunged into prolonged, violent conflict as the regime mustered its forces in an attempt to hold on to power. Despite the forces arrayed against the regime, Gaddafi held out until 20 October 2011, when he was killed in the last major battle of the conflict.

The fourth country to witness the departure of a long-standing autocracy in 2011 was Yemen. As elsewhere, the protests were led initially by a core of people who were largely previously apolitical, while established opposition political parties were slow to become involved. By March 2011, however, the Joint Meeting Parties— a coalition of opposition parties including leftists, Islamists, and others – had joined the anti-regime movement. The deaths of dozens of protesters at the hands of security forces on 17 March led to cracks in the regime. Yemen’s influential neighbor Saudi Arabia grew alarmed at instability on its southern border and spearheaded an initiative that ultimately led to Saleh’s departure from office.

Revolutionary attempts were met by counter-revolutions (De Smet, 2014). The latter were legitimised as the restoration of an order linked to the values of the West. Since most of the revolutions had brought Islamist movements to the fore, the counter-revolutions acquired the meaning of liberation from “obscurantist impulses” in the name of modernity and progress that were to be guaranteed by secular actors. For instance, the Egyptian grassroots movement *Tamarod* (in Arabic “rebel”) was founded to register the secular opposition to President Mohamed Morsi, the first-ever elected president – a member of the Muslim Brotherhood – and force him to call early presidential elections. The goal was to collect 15 million signatures by 30 June 2013, the first anniversary of Morsi's inauguration. On 29 June 2013, the movement claimed to have collected more than 22 million signatures (Pilati et al., 2021). The movement, supported by the army, soon developed into a “military-led counter-revolution from below,” helping to launch the Egyptian protests of June 2013, which preceded the Egyptian coup in 2013 (De Smet, 2021). As argued by scholars, the *Tamarod* movement contributed to preparing the terrain for cementing the counter-revolution (Slater and Smith, 2016). Indeed, if street-level mobilisation is often conceived as the domain of progressives and revolutionaries, in newly-born democracies such as post-revolutionary Egypt – characterised by a strong state apparatus and a teething civil society – generals and security apparatus instigated protests in a bid to roll back new forms of civilian authority and legitimate a military takeover.

The Egyptian example leads the reader to reflect upon the multiple meanings that the notion of progress linked to the idea of emancipation from unjust regimes might acquire, not only depending on the context but even on the historical moment in that specific context. Yet, the Egyptian case is not an isolated example. Tunisia, which since 2011 had been celebrated by scholars, media, and policymakers as the progressive exception in the region, starting from 2014, has been slowly engulfed in the process of reversal of freedoms and rights, justified by the fight against terrorism and corruption.

The revolutionary wave in the region has not subsided, as the 2019 protests in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq clearly show. More recently, since November 2022, Iran has been rocked by the biggest protests in years. In all these countries, revolutionary mobilisations met a setback. Indeed, protests were met with violent repression from security forces.

In Algeria, mass mobilisation sparked in February 2019 with the outbreak of the *Hirak* (‘movement’) when thousands of people took to the streets in several cities of the country to protest against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s decision to run for a fifth term in office. Protests, as in other countries, have been supported by the massive use of digital media, especially when during the COVID-19 restrictions street demonstrations were forbidden (Mattoni and Sigillò, 2022). Even after the former president stepped down under popular pressure, the *Hirak* continued to mobilise under the contested presidency of Abdelmadjid Tebboune. As in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the territorial dimension played a role in the mobilisations, albeit with varying intensity, the movement always remaining nationally based.

In Sudan, in April 2019, after months of protests and a military coup, al-Bashir was removed from power, and a transitional government was established in the name of modernity. However, protests continued to demand reforms and an end to military rule. In Lebanon and Iraq, protests began in October 2019. In Lebanon, people took to the streets to protest decades of corruption, clientelism, and bad governance. Progressive voices called for solidarity against inequality, oligarchy, and environmental degradation. In Iraq, protests quickly grew in size and

intensity, with thousands of people taking to the streets in cities across the country. Protesters demanded the resignation of the government and an end to the country's sectarian political system, which they saw as perpetuating corruption and inequality (Lovotti and Proserpio, 2021).

Recent protests in Iran reflect complex social, economic, and political issues, including the desire for greater personal freedom and democracy. The death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, while in police custody in Tehran, sparked protests across the country, with people demanding accountability for her death and more transparency from the government. The country's morality police, tasked with enforcing strict codes around dress and behaviour, had arrested the woman for allegedly not wearing her *hijab* correctly and sporting skinny jeans. In this respect, the demand for modernity is interpreted as the revolution against an authoritarian Islamic republic, thus linked to progressive claims from civil society. One of the main drivers of modernity in Iran is the young generation, which constitutes a significant percentage of the population.

Progressive politics and the failure of the traditional left

Revolutionary waves and counterrevolutionary setbacks showed to what extent traditional ideologies played a little role in the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. If, on the one hand, it was hoped that revolutionary processes would have given leftist parties the possibility to reorganise and retrieve their ascendancy among Arab citizens, ideologies that the Arab lefts embodied - namely Communism, Socialism, and Nasserism - had already started to lose their attractiveness decades ago due to endogenous and exogenous factors (Hinnebusch, 2017; Resta, 2018).

In light of the inefficacy of the partisan structures, progressive activists have chosen the pathway of engagement with a civil society barely tolerated by the regimes over the years. This trend led to the emergence of reform-oriented social movements such as *Kifaya* (in Arabic *Enough*) in Egypt (Clarke, 2011) or the creation of associations, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) in Tunisia. In this context, the shift of activists toward human rights advocacy allowed them to gain indispensable international support against political isolation and internal repression. Interestingly, the elites working in this sector have often been perceived by the local population as alienated from the local culture, values, and political context, as they find it difficult to put forward references that would have had a local authenticity (Boukhars, 2017). In particular, human rights associations were accused of acting to promote a Western post-colonial agenda (Challand, 2005). In certain contexts, such as in Palestine, the emphasis on human rights linked to the international donors' agenda could be problematic from the perspective of local activists and organisations because of the depoliticisation it engendered. Indeed, being defined as a 'victim of human rights violations' was not the same as being defined as a 'political opponent' (Arda and Banerjee, 2021). In other words, human rights frameworks promoted by international donors may focus on individual rights and humanitarian issues rather than addressing the political roots of the conflict, such as occupation and colonisation.

Therefore, in 2011, the calls for social justice emerged from new actors who were not part of any established or formal organisations (Durac, 2013). In essence, the push for social justice and equality against entrenched autocratic regimes was not led by leftist political parties and organisations but rather by grassroots groups, particularly young people. For instance, in

Tunisia, the revolution's spark came from widespread popular mobilisations. Then, the movements' scale and persistence were bolstered by the involvement of the trade union, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT). This traditional organisation provided significant resources for mobilisation, particularly in terms of organisation and articulating demands, leading to unprecedented levels of civic engagement (Yousfi, 2017).

It is important to note that the failure of the traditional left in the MENA region does not mean that leftist ideologies or movements have completely disappeared. In fact, after 2011, the political landscape witnessed a significant shift with the emergence of new actors, gaining prominence as the traditional left struggled to adapt to the changing dynamics.

The MENA region witnessed several leftist movements triggering protests and demonstrations. The Popular Front (Front Populaire) was formed in Tunisia in 2012. It is made up of various leftist and nationalist groups that came together after the 2011 revolution. The party has been involved in several protests and demonstrations in the country. The April 6 Youth is a leftist movement in Egypt that played a significant role in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The Libyan Socialist Group is a left-wing political group formed in 2022 after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi. The group advocates for socialist policies and has been involved in protests against the government. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a left-wing nationalist party, has been involved in the Syrian civil war and has been fighting against both the government and Islamist groups. The Yemeni Socialist Party was part of the government before the Yemeni civil war broke out in 2015. Since then, the party has been involved in the war and fighting against the government and Islamist groups.

While these movements have had some success in advocating for leftist policies and challenging authoritarian governments, they have also faced significant challenges and repression. Alternatively, in post-uprisings democratic elections in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, leftist parties – such as the Popular Front in Tunisia – have been largely marginalised to the advantage of Islamist parties. Thus, in the aftermath of the revolutionary momentum, after the results of elections that saw the victory of Islamist parties, the political debate was mostly catalysed by the role of Islam and democracy in public life. While Islamist parties tried to project the image of groups committed to pluralistic principles such as civil liberties and equality, most secular elites worried about the likelihood that, once in power, Islamist political groups would undermine civil rights and, in particular, women's rights. Left-wing groups were further overshadowed in the face of this social and political polarisation between secular forces belonging to the old regimes and Islamist parties.

While the traditional left in the region has often focused on issues of class struggle and labour rights, it paid less attention to the specific concerns of marginalised groups, including sexual minorities (Buehler and Jones, 2023). As progressive LGBTQ+ movements gained momentum, they faced strong opposition from conservative and religious groups within the region. To be sure, this backlash was not limited to conservative political factions but also included some segments of the traditional left that held conservative views on gender and sexuality. Such divisions within the left further weakened the movements' ability to present a united front against discrimination and oppression.

Islamism and progressive politics: a contradiction in terms?

According to the definition given by Achcar (2013), human rights imply the separation of religion from the state: “no state that claims to be inspired by divine scriptures can be free and democratic since religious institutions will want to impose what they see as their interpretation of the rule of God’s law instead of the rule of democratic human-made law”. This assertion seems to suggest that Islamism is incompatible with progressive politics. Indeed, the core premise of Islamism—an ideology that seeks to integrate Islamic principles and laws into politics—appears to be at odds with the foundational tenets of progressive thought, which emphasise human rights, secularism, and democratic governance. Islamism, by advocating for the primacy of divine law over human-made laws, inherently challenges the liberal principles of equality, freedom, and social justice that underpin progressive politics. However, the relationship between Islamism and progressive politics is more complex than a simple binary opposition.

While some groups view Islamism’s ideologies, moral codes, and political visions as conservative, regressive, or even fascist; others consider Islamism a force that might be considered progressive in the fight against imperialism and despotic regimes, and as such, with which progressive movements of the left can find some common ground (Safi, 2003;

). Moreover, some observers focused on the political economy of certain Islamist trends, concluding that it stands against neoliberal orthodoxy;³ some highlight Islamist movements’ welfare operations, focusing on Islamism’s proletarian character (Bayat, 2008).

Muslim scholars, such as Hanafi (2010), focused on the notion of ‘progressive Islamism’ based on a progressive Muslim interpretation of Islam that has real political implications. Unlike the vast majority of conservative forms of Islamism, progressive Islamism is cosmopolitan in outlook and embraces constitutional democracy and contemporary ideas on human rights, gender equality, and civil society.

Hanafi focused on the “progressive course of history, from conservatism to liberalism, from the old to the new, and from tradition to modernism” when discussing “liberal Islam” - originated as a reaction to Western Imperialism - and “socialist Islam”- which has its roots in the social predicaments of the Muslim world, namely the discrepancy between rich and poor and the necessity of wealth redistribution (Hanafi, 2010: 9).

Importantly for the proponents of progressive Muslim thought, adopting Islamic liberation theology also necessitates a radical rethinking of the traditionalist understanding of Islamic law, (*sharia*) in the light of God’s preferential option for the poor, downtrodden, and marginalised. This could involve issues as diverse as the reformulation of the very concepts, aims, and objectives on which Islamic theology, ethics, and law (especially Muslim family law) are premised; the transformation of Islamic finance and economics for the purposes of

³ Unlike other Islamist movements in the Arab world, which tack center-right on economic issues, the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda considered leftists and progressives worthy of emulation and drew from their ideology and organisational experience (Khiari, 2003).

real economic justice; and the recasting of Islamic politics in order to align them with the values, ideals, and objectives of Islamic liberation theology.

Post-Islamism

Islamism (Political Islam) is a broad political project born in the 1920s by the Muslim Brotherhood's intellectual Hassan al-Banna, who originally advocated the establishment of a state based on Islamic principles. Over time, Islamism has transformed to adapt to different times and contexts. In this regard, many Islamist intellectuals have interpreted Political Islam as an ideology promoting the notion of an Islamic society or an Islamic community within a secular state (Badran, 2001).

Olivier Roy (1992, 2004) argued that the move of Islamists to formal politics entails the “failure” of the Islamist ideological and political project and its evolution towards a conservative democratic agenda. In Bayat's words, post-Islamism “strives to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity” (2007:11). Authors subscribing to this theory have described Ennahdha as the “most prominent example of [...] post-Islamism” (Bayat, 2013: 27)

Recently, Muslim Brotherhood intellectuals referred to the notion of “civil state”. According to Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, the famous Egyptian cleric, the Islamic state is not only civil but also democratic. Indeed, he emphasises the importance of the accountability of the rulers to the ruled (al-Qaradāwī 2012). Another Islamist figure, offers a definition of a 'civil state' (dawla madaniyya) that encompasses features such as representation, separation of powers, popular mandate, and citizenship. Yet others argue that the Islamic principle of shūra (consultation) bears considerable similarity to 'modern democracy' (Bahlul, 2018).

Islamist parties, winners of the post-2011 elections in Morocco (PJD) and Tunisia (Ennahdha), have advocated the need to distinguish between politics and religion by asserting the ‘civil’ character of their political organisations. As proof of their ideological transformations, these parties emphasised their decision to distinguish political activities, considered the exclusive domain of the party, from preaching activities, whose mission has been mainly taken up by religious associations. Ennahdha's leaders have recently claimed the party's transformation from an Islamist to a Muslim Democratic party whose political action takes inspiration from religious values. To be sure, the Tunisian Islamist movement of the origins hosted a group of intellectuals known as the “Islamist progressives.” This breakaway faction articulated a progressive interpretation of Islamic doctrine and advocated for an explicitly Tunisian identity narrative distinct from Muslim Brotherhood doctrine (Meddeb, 2019).

Islamic feminism

Within what is generally referred to as “Islamic feminism,” there are different understandings and practices. There are, for example, secular activists who have realised that the promotion of gender equality policies has a better chance of success when it is formulated and justified in religious language. Then there are Islamist activists who argue that there is no need to link feminism and Islam because the latter alone provides for gender equality. Finally, there are

Muslim intellectual women who fight for the goal of gender equality without assuming that secularisation is a prerequisite for its achievement. The framework of “Islamic feminism” (Al-Sharmani, 2014) provides the theoretical tools necessary to explain women's engagement in Islamist politics.

The Egyptian Heba Raouf Ezzat (2002), an influential figure of the Islamic feminist movement, developed the notion of ‘Islamic secularism.’⁴ She posited, “what we mean by Islamic secularism is not that Islam is subject to secular restructuring, but that through Islam, we can arrive at a form of secularism which suits us.” This notion “provides us with an opportunity to force Islamists to be concerned with human rights, democracy, and social justice, rather than keeping them preoccupied with the overarching imperative of defending *sharia*” (Ezzat, 2002). Thus, ‘Islamic secularism’ would allow the combination of individual and women's rights and thereby distinguish the political project of Islamist parties from that of theocratic regimes without relinquishing the religious reference.

Furthermore, Tessler and Jesse (1996) suggested that women in Islamist movements see their political engagement as a vehicle to assert their autonomy outside the home. If a recent analysis of the Egyptian Muslim sisterhood confirmed this position (Biagini, 2020), other scholars have instead postulated that women’s activism might not have much to do with the desire for gender equality per se. It may, in fact, be that the modernising effect of the political activism of Islamist women is simply the by-product of a choice that has little to do with the goal of reinventing the role of women in Arab societies through religion. From this point of view, it is their policy preferences on a vast array of issues that drive women to support and become active in Islamist movements. Such policy positions do not necessarily have to do with gender-related questions (Durac and Cavatorta, 2022). Islamist movements attract members and command significant support from the population because of what they stand for and represent. Conversely, political projects that are secular in nature are not necessarily progressive per se.

Conclusions

From what has become apparent in this chapter, interpreting progressive politics in the MENA region is challenging as it is a complex and diverse region with varying political, economic, social, and cultural contexts. Despite the differences, there are some general themes and ideas that can be considered as part of progressive politics in this context when it comes to the analysis of the transformations occurred since the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings.

The chapter points out to what extent the link between progress and modernity has been instrumentalised by different political groups in different contexts of power reconfiguration, such as revolutions, regimes’ fall, and counterrevolutions. Moreover, this chapter showed how progressive politics have tended to prioritise issues related to democracy and social-economic justice. This includes advocating for free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, the rule

⁴ Ranked the thirty-ninth most influential Arab on Twitter, with over 100,000 followers, voted one of the hundred most powerful Arab women by ArabianBusiness.com, and elected a Youth Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, Ezzat has articulated and disseminated her Islamic politics in a global public sphere. Her writings and lecture developed an Islamic theory of women’s political participation but simultaneously address other contested questions about women’s leadership, work, and participation in the public sphere. See: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/lists/100-most-powerful-arab-women-2011-384182-htmllitemid384141>

of law, and the protection of civil and socio-economic liberties. Additionally, progressive politics in the MENA region often seeks to challenge traditional power structures, such as authoritarianism, and promote a more inclusive and participatory approach to governance. This can involve grassroots activism, social movements, and civil society organisations working to create change from the bottom up.

In addition, this chapter discussed how in the last decade, the MENA region was mostly the theatre of spontaneous participatory activism without leaders and a clear political connotation. After the revolutionary momentum, the scale of the grassroots movements and their durability resulted from the commitment of trade unions and some political organisations, including the so-called «progressive Islamists».

This chapter has occasionally discussed the role of technology in promoting progressive (and revolutionary) claims. The use of digital media undoubtedly was an important tool in shaping mobilisations since the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring. During the uprisings in 2010-11, in 2019 and 2022, young tech-savvy activists led protests. The Internet had a dual function in magnifying revolutionary messages claiming social justice and equality. First, activism went beyond the narrow confines of any country. Thanks to the combination of a mobile phone and a small video camera, or even a simple e-mail, it was possible to get raw testimonies out of the country. There was, therefore, the transmission of information to the rest of the world. The second function, which is more central to the success of mobilisations within countries, was the coordination between different actors. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube played a visible role in the Arab uprising.

However, it is also important to avoid falling into a kind of technology determinism (della Porta, 2021). First, on the one hand, social media platforms had a great role in fuelling protests, on the other hand, traditional modes of mobilisation, such as demonstrations and strikes, played the most important role in putting forward progressive claims. Second, technology has been used by revolutionary and counter-revolutionary mobilisations as well. Indeed, analysts emphasising the role of technology in fostering progressive movements have often missed the adaptations made by regimes and their proactive uses of modern technology in censorship and surveillance of the population. Repressive apparatuses used digital media either to provide counter-information or, above all, to block the information that circulated through these media. More recently, repressive authorities have learned how to either exploit digital media or control its effects (Jones, 2022). In doing so, they not only respond but also anticipate the actions of others. In this regard, some scholars mentioned an “authoritarian learning curve,” in which regimes figure out how best to respond to demonstrations and other pressures and thereby increase the chances of survival of *regressive politics* (my italics).

In conclusion, this chapter seeks to take a step forward in the analysis of progressive politics by starting with the in-depth investigation of the meanings and practices of "progress" and "progressivism" by different types of actors in a non-Western context. By critically contextualising the notion of progressive politics with respect to the MENA region, this contribution does not seek to question the universality of values that belong to the recognised definition of progressivism, such as the ideals of social justice and equality, including the emancipation of women and the rights of oppressed groups. However, a contextualised analysis, while generalising at the level of a regional macro-area, allows us to better understand

the multiple political and social dynamics that underlie different justifications for different progressive causes and thus make the notion of progressivism a complex category.

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