Rethinking Islamist politics in North Africa: a multi-level analysis of domestic, regional and international dynamics

(Article begins on next page)

03 May 2024

Rethinking Islamist politics in North Africa: a multi-level analysis of domestic, regional and international dynamics

Giulia Cimini and Beatriz Tomé-Alonso

Introduction

Considerable upheavals in domestic politics, shifting regional power balances and international turmoil have been shaking the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the 2011 anti-authoritarian uprisings. The protest wave has given way to democratic transitions (Tunisia), military dictatorships (Egypt) or top-down political liberalisation processes (Morocco), while civil conflicts have turned into proxy wars (Syria, Yemen, partly Libya). The threat of the terrorist networks related to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its international outreach, as well as the rivalries between Qatar and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, are but two of the most striking features of an ever-changing regional scenario, increasingly defined by multipolarity, ethno-sectarian securitisation (Del Sarto et al., 2019), 'liquid alliances' (Soler iLecha, 2017) and a growing role of non-state actors. The reconfiguration of the regional geopo- litical order and the plurality of political trajectories and actors involved have contributed meaningfully to the heterogeneous Islamist movements and parties that have experienced relevant changes since 2011.

Islamist parties came on the scene as powerful political actors in the 1970s and have since been, to a great extent, context specific (Ayoob, 2004) while being part of 'a single but not homogenous Islamist field' (Lynch & Schwedler, 2020, p. 5). They have evolved over time (Mandaville, 2014), in the Arab world and outside of it. At various points in time, these parties have fielded candidates for parliamentary elections eitheras independents, under their own banner or that of other parties, and even won remarkable victories (such as the Islamist Salvation Front in Algeria and Hamas in Palestine). However, it is the strong showing they made in the first post-Mubarak and post-Ben Ali elections in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively, as well as in the 2011 early elections in Morocco that represent the most striking turning point in the recent history of Islamic politics, as they finally came to power through electoral politics. These victories and the subsequent Islamist-led governments in Egypt (2012–2013), Tunisia (2011–2014) and Morocco (since 2011) aroused curiosity, disorientation and fierce opposition. In parallel with the multiplicity of national political trajectories, Islamist parties and movements soon took very different paths from one country to the other and even within the samecountry. After the favourable momentum enjoyed in the aftermath of the 2010–2011 uprisings, Islamists found themselves in an increasingly hostile and polarised environment. The 2013 military coup in Egypt against President Mohamed Morsi and the crackdown on the *Ikhwani* (the Muslim Brotherhood) mercilessly proved how easily democratically elected institutions could be toppled as a result of domestic polarisation and social discontent, as well as of external pressures. For its symbolic value, the Egyptian coup can be rightfully considered a 'critical juncture' as it represented the triumph of counter-revolutionary forces and the frustration of the hopes of democratisation in one of the pioneering countries of the uprisings. At the same time, and when looking at the evolving sphere of political Islam more precisely, the coup also exposed the vulnerability and the precariousness of the Islamists' condition, even when in power. Moreover, Islamist parties and movements had to reckon with the emergence of ISIS, the deteriorating regional environment torn by civil war, and the authoritarian drift of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), which became more apparent after the crackdown on the Gezi Park protests. ISIS brought the violent jihadi groups centre stage in dramatic fashion – not unlike Al-Qaeda and September 11 (Ayoob, 2004) – thus representing for the majority of Islamist political formations the most extreme counter-example to distance from. Meanwhile, the AKP – long praised as the Islamist champion of democratic and economic reforms – fell from grace in the eyes of the Western world particularly. With the eclipse of

Turkey's 'excellent model' that many regarded as 'the alternative to radical Islam' (Peterson, 2002, September) for the credentials it possessed (Kirişci, 2013) and the misfortunes of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, from which several movements and parties claim their ideological roots, each Islamist movement and party struggled to rebuild its own identity. This effort implies a process of adaptation and/or resistance to external pressures in order to avoid the return to the pre-2011 status quo as in the case of Ennahda in Tunisia, to seize new opportunities to the detriment of competing actors such as the Salafists in Egypt, to consolidate inclusion in the domestic political system as the Justice and Development Party (PJD) is doing in Morocco, or to circumvent the constraints imposed by the regime through the externalisation of activities and narratives such as the Moroccan Justice and Spirituality Movement (AWI).

Against this backdrop, to what extent have Islamist parties and movements changed in response to evolving domestic, regional and international scenarios? What actors and experiences affect them the most? How have Islamists integrated external influences into their own set of practices, behaviours and ideas?

The primary aim of this Special Issue is to chart and explain many of the critical changes and continuities of Islamist movements and parties in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco that occurred as a result of the interplay of multiple dimensions: domestic, regional and international. More precisely, we focus on the domestic mediation of regional and international factors by Islamist actors – in other words, how they react to altered conditions within and beyond national boundaries. This approach involves placing the decisions, narratives, and practices of Islamists within a broader regional and international framework of understanding. In addition to the national peculiarities and constraints, this Special Issue takes into consideration how the externalities produced at the regional and international levels play out in their decision calculus. By 'regional', we mostly refer to the MENA countries, including Turkey, whereas by 'international', we mean those factors, events and actors outside of the previous dimension, particularly the European Union and the United States. This multilevel approach allows us to develop a more fine-grained understanding of Islamist politics, as an exclusively domestic or external perspective is not enough to explain the cascade of events and the decisions made by the actors involved.

In short, this Special Issue focuses on:

(a) Islamist actors as active agents of change, whether they are in the government or not, fully immersed in intertwined domestic, regional and international scenarios;
(b) The need to rethink their politics in light of the interweaving of these factors and the subsequent integration of these factors into their development.

We start from the assumption that international and regional factors help explain the evolution of Islamist actors, especially in the context of regional (or sub-regional) system reconfiguration. These factors have to be considered not only in the analysis of regime change or political continuity but also when studying the evolution, development and action of specific actors such as Islamists that have returned to the forefront of national politics since 2011, experiencing both remarkable successes and drawbacks.

However, little is known about how Islamist actors domestically incorporate international and regional factors into their strategies. One of the reasons for our lack of understanding is that domestic and non-domestic arenas are usually regarded as different spheres that need different tools to be understood. Hence, comparative scholars set these arenas apart and preferably focus alternatively on domestic or exogenous factors. Second, whenever exogenous factors are present and the role of external actors is taken into account, existing studies pay attention to the impact they have on regime outcomes or transition outcomes, addressing specific domestic actors more indirectly. Third, at the analytical level, while the influence of regional/international actors on domestic scenarios can be easily observed or detected, it is less obvious

to identify a stable causal link between foreign-generated influences and various actors' decisions. In other words, it is difficult to produce decisive evidence and identify the sources of change, not least because of the many possible intervening variables and alternative explanations (Zito & Shout 2009, p. 1104; quoted in Hall & Ambrosio, 2017).

Empirically, all contributors open the 'black box' of Islamist thinking and strategies by relying principally on their own personal and press interviews with party members, cadres and activists; on party statements and bylaws; and on voting procedures. The simultaneous access to multiple first- and second-hand sources allows the authors to triangulate the information gathered and reach a more nuanced understanding. Methodologically, most of the articles draw upon process-tracing readings, which are 'well-suited to the puzzle' of diffusion (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019), defined as 'the transfer among countries of an innovative idea, product, policy, institution or repertoire of behaviours' (Koesel & Bunce, 2013, p. 753). In so doing, they trace the decisions of Islamists back to specific events and others' experience.

In this introduction to the Special Issue, we will first review the main paradigms and theoretical frameworks used to shed light on Islamist politics and identify the gaps in the present state of knowledge. Then, we will introduce the conceptual categories running through all the articles to finally sketch out each of the contributions with some preliminary remarks and insights that can be valuable for a broader understanding of Islamist parties and movements.

Islamist politics in context: what is the missing piece?

Academic studies have traditionally focused on the state's domestic and external arenas as two distinct and differentiated spaces. For a variety of reasons, comparative politics has tended to screen out international factors from the political, institutional and legal reform processes at the national and subnational levels, whereas international relations scholars concentrated on phenomena beyond state borders (Magen & Morlino, 2009). Since the end of the Cold War, growing attention has been placed on the linkage between internal dynamics and international (and regional) factors, especially in terms of democratisation prospects and regime change (Pridham, 1991; Schmitz & Sell, 1999; Whitehead, 2001) or in order to explain the evolution of authoritarian polities wherever democracy failed to take roots as in the Arab world (Ambrosio, 2010; Brownlee, 2012; Cavatorta, 2005, 2009; Heydemann, 2007). Other strands of literature connected to policy-making and social movements theories are devoted to isolating the forms, contents and mechanisms for the diffusion and coevolution of either policies and collective action from one set of actors to another, and more importantly, beyond national borders (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2012; McAdam, 1983; Oliver & Myers, 2003; Weyland, 2005). However, 'a kind of "methodological nationalism, where the borders of the nation-state are assumed to be a natural pre-given container of social relations"' (Hanieh, 2019, p. 26), and thus a self-sufficient framework to explain inner dynamics, largely prevails. In the last decade, the 'snowball' effect triggered by the Arab uprisings made the shortcomings of an exclusively domestic perspective more apparent, as well as the increasing interconnectedness region-wide and beyond. Nonetheless, the literature grappling with the close interweaving of these dimensions preferably focuses on the transnational diffusion of protest behaviour or, alternatively, on their counter-practices, regarded as the most recent forms of authoritarian response (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011, 2014).

In regard to Islamist parties and movements, and somewhat paradoxically, whereas cross-national comparisons among them abound, little causal weight has been given to the fact that the ways they adapt, resist or partly do both in response to altered circumstances reflect similar examples, counter-examples and other external factors.

Conceptually, Islamist or Muslim-oriented parties and movements have been fully incorporated in the debates about democratisation and authoritarian resilience in the region. In particular, much attention has been given to the relation between Islam and democracy (Esposito & Voll, 1996) and to parties and

movements' increasing abandonment of more radical positions to embrace the pillars of representative democracy, liberal human rights, and market economy along a 'moderation path'. This moderation has been linked to Islamist participation in – or exclusion from – formal politics in therespective political settings (Clark, 2006; Schwedler, 2006, 2011; Wickham, 2004). With regard to this, the conceptual framework of 'post-Islamism' (Bayat, 2007; Nasr, 2005) captured the increasing detachment of Islamist actors from their grassroots movements and from more orthodox claims in favour of more pragmatic stances. The so-called greenwave of Islamist victories at post-2011 polls re-energized the interest in Islamist politics from a variety of perspectives. Some works reconstruct the history of Islamist partiesthrough their relationship with the founding Islamist organisation and draw attention to their members' experience during the years of exile and clandestinity (McCarthy, 2018; Wolf, 2017). Others focus on the parties and movements' participation in the political and electoral game (Masoud, 2014; Pellicer & Wegner, 2014; Szmolka, 2015, 2019; Wegner & Cavatorta, 2019), the nature and characteristics of parties' membership (Cimini, 2020; Tomé-Alonso, 2016) or a more far-reaching comparative perspective (Esposito et al., 2018; Kraetzchmar & Rivetti, 2018). More recently, some researchers have turned to the foreign relations of Islamist actors (Abouzzohour & Tomé-Alonso, 2019; Adraoui, 2018; Azaola-Piazza, 2019; Fernández-Molina et al., 2019; Schraeder et al., 2019). When the failure to bring about 'either the breakdown of authoritarian regimes or transition to some form of post-authoritarian governance' (Heydemann, 2016) became clearly apparent, researchers more vocally explored the impact of the closing of democratic horizons on Islamist politics in terms of the repression-radicalization hypothesis[1] (Lynch & Schwedler, 2020). This was in contrast with the early post-uprising scholarship on Islamist politics focusing on the role of Islamist actors in political transitions and in authoritarian survival (Desrues, 2020; Lynch & Schwedler, 2020; Maghraoui, 2020).

Analytically, multiple factors are likely to affect Islamist parties' choices, and the direction of the influence is not necessarily one way, nor are these interactions static; rather, they change over time. For instance, Wegner's (2011) heuristic model of Islamist parties' choices towards the regime and in the electoral game in authoritarian settings includes three clusters of factors: organisational development and institutional constraints – both standard elements in political party literature – and third, the linkage with the founding religious organisation, a peculiarity of Islamist parties.

Although this literature uncovers critical developments within a multifaceted political Islam, it nonetheless underestimates the extent to which the interweaving of the domestic, regional and international dimensions is an essential driver in the changes of social and political actors domestically and abroad.

In fact, from the above, two dominant traits emerge. First, what we could deem as the 'compartmentalization' of the analysis inasmuch as the bulk of extant works alternatively focus on the domestic, regional or international level. Whenever these linkages are scrutinised as interrelated arguments, scholarship concentrates on democratisation, regime practices and policy reforms. As a consequence, very little systematic attention has been given to the incorporation of external factors into the reasoning of Islamist parties and movements and its interaction with domestic structures, agents and processes. Second, with respect to these parties and movements, there exists a kind of 'obsession' with their moderation, or the lack thereof, as if it were the only defining and framing notion. As a result, other ranges of behaviour that can be related but not necessarily limited to moderation are obscured. This Special Issue is a preliminary and partial effort to address this missing linkage and largely undertheorized issue.

To fill this gap, the contributors to the Special Issue delve into the interconnectionsbetween domestic, regional and international arenas in Islamist politics. Our objectiveis to systematically investigate how Islamist movements and parties, be they incumbent or not, frame and shape their discourses and practices in the face of new challenges. Our main contention is that Islamist actors selectively appropriate and incorporate external factors through a variety of mechanisms, namely, adaptation, learning, competition, and collaboration.

An analytical framework for domestic, regional and internationaldynamics

This Special Issue aims to renew the debate on political Islam from a different and more comprehensive angle, combining a more theoretical reflection upon the triple interaction of domestic, regional and international factors on the development of Islamist parties and movements, with an empirical focus on their organisational and ideological changes.

This Special Issue is distinguished by two main features.

First, the contributions adopt a clear inside-out perspective. External factors – events, norms, ideas, practices from abroad – are not relevant per se, but what matters is how Islamist actors (re)interpret them by taking into account the constraints and opportunities of their respective environments. This implies that Islamist parties and movements are not passive recipients. By contrast, they select and incorporate some ideas and strategies while rejecting others (Schmitz & Sell, 1999). In this sense, there is no mere transpositionbut rather a re-elaboration of discourses and practices, with a new transformative potential. If anything, we may wonder to what extent their rationality is bounded (Simon, 1957).This inside-out approach blending multiple layers of analysis allows us to grasp a more nuanced analytical frame where Islamist actors are decision-maker subjects.

Second, the authors adopt an actor-centered approach that, while recognising the rolethat structures play, emphasises the importance of the actors' agency. We assume that international and regional influences become relevant when actors integrate them into their thinking at the domestic level. As Marsh and Sharman (2009, p. 275) argue, although'structures provide the context within which agents act and they constrain or facilitate theagents' actions, […] agents interpret those structures and, in acting, change them'. In this way, we focus on the mutual inputs produced by agency and structure, thereby accounting for a dialectical relationship.

From a theoretical perspective, we borrow from the categories first identified by the literature on social movements, policy-making and authoritarian resilience in regard to describing the mechanisms that facilitate the dissemination and incorporation of external influences: in other words, mechanisms of 'diffusion'.

In the attempt to conceptualise the dynamics between domestic, regional and international factors, and especially the way they influence actors' actions, studies on authoritarian survival and democratisation, for example, take into account the origins of the drivers for action. These studies extrapolate two broad categories: direct or externally- driven mechanisms (Cavatorta, 2009; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013; Manea & Rüland,2020) and indirect or internally-driven mechanisms (Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2005). The first group includes, for instance, conditionality and coercion, premised on power asymmetries (Cavatorta, 2009; Simmons, Dobbin and Garret, 2008). The latter group encompasses mechanisms such as competition, learning, and emulation.

Whereas externally-driven mechanisms put the external actor centre stage and focus on the ways it causes others to adopt a particular item or innovation (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019), internally-driven mechanisms shift the focus to the 'adopters' or 'resisters', too often overlooked (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). As mentioned above, this Special Issue aims to detect Islamist actors' transformations and continuities in their strategic and/or normative thinking and behaviour as a response to foreign-generated factors.

In light of this, internally-driven mechanisms of diffusion are considered, whereby the 'primary impetus' comes from within the actor adopting – or eventually resisting – the policy innovation, idea or repertoire of behaviour (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019). In this process, and to paraphrase Acharya's words (2014a), domestic actors play a crucial role as they do not only 'reinterpret' and 're-represent outside norms' but also make them more 'congruent with a preexisting local normative order' (p. 244). Not only do the origins of the drivers matter for describing diffusion but also the different causal logics leading the adopters/resisters to make changes or not (Elkins & Simmons, 2005) according to what we may refer to as the 'logic of consequences' and the 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 1989). These two logics apply to both externally and internally-driven mechanisms.

When focusing on internally-driven mechanisms, the *logic of consequences* is brought into play, for instance, to describe decision-makers' cost–benefit analysis in the adoption of certain policies, as well as in the evaluation of other actors' successful and failed experiences to search for similar or opposite outcomes (Ambrosio, 2010; Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019; Manea & Rüland, 2020). From this rationalist perspective, action is driven by actors' preferences and expectations according to 'conscious instrumental calculations' (Checkel, 2017, p. 597). In this case, strategic calculations and rational thinking are the main drivers of diffusion. The discriminant is rather the availability of information from abroad (Elkins & Simmons, 2005) and how it impacts domestic actors' interests (Bank, 2017).

By contrast, the logic of appropriateness evokes a kind of 'rule-based' action (Bank, 2017), in which the adoption (or rejection) of new norms, ideas or rhetorical devices is shaped by their perceived normative value (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019), that is very time and context specific. This reflexive perspective emphasises the relevance of certain ideas and norms in a given situation or context, making them the epicentre of the diffusion process (Manea & Rüland, 2020). Although the distinction between these two logics has a clear analysis value, in reality, they often overlap and are even intertwined. Suffice it to consider the literature on international socialisation that, while distinguishing between the rational-choice impetus and the reflexive impetus, also acknowledges the deep interconnection between the processes of social construction – of norms, preferences and identities – and strategic bargaining (Fernández-Molina, 2021; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 910–911).

In this collection of papers, we therefore consider the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness as complementary. The actors under scrutiny shift between them and their related mechanisms. As mentioned in the introduction, we mainly focus on adaptation, learning, competition, and collaboration.

Adaptation is a key mechanism cross-cutting the different analyses. Whereas Elkins and Simmons (2005) clearly distinguish adaptation and learning as two different modalities of diffusion, having suboptimal and optimal results, respectively, we opt for a less parsimonious reading. In our understanding, adaptation simply refers to a reorientation of priorities, means and rhetoric above all and in response to changing or altered circumstances. However, some authors will further nuance this concept and complement it with its opposite: resistance.

Learning is also a useful lens of analysis, as Cimini (2021) and Tomé-Alonso (2021) underline. Often seen as a rational behaviour in the footsteps of the logic of consequences (though not exclusively), it can be described as the process where actors' decisions are influenced by the example(s) of other actors, examined in terms of advantages and drawbacks (Elkins & Simmons, 2005). Proximity, be it geographical or cultural, not only facilitates learning but also allows higher levels of interaction (Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010).

Azaola-Piazza and Hernando de Larramendi (2021) explore two other, opposite mechanisms: competition and collaboration. The former can be defined as the process whereby actors anticipate or react to the behaviour of others with which they compete for resources, mainly financial and economic (Gilardi, 2016) but not necessarily. In the case Azaola-Piazza and Hernando de Larramendi (2021) analyse, resources are not only material but, perhaps even more notably, linked to recognition, legitimacy and the very survival of the actor itself. By contrast, actors may decide to set aside their divergences and collaborate for a shared goal, as the Salafi party of al-Nour and the Muslim Brotherhood did in the very aftermath of the 2011 uprising revolution in Egypt.

The contributors to this Special Issue move from this theoretical framework to systematize and analyse the decisions of Islamists on the ground. At the same time, they problematise these mechanisms by highlighting their conceptual and empirical limits or by developing other notions with greater descriptive and explanatory power. For instance, Cimini (2021) recalls how learning can be understood as both a process and the outcome of that process. Moreover, given the lack of unified theories of learning, this concept is often incorporated as one of the modalities of the broader notion of diffusion, used as a synonym for that same

notion or even in opposition to it. This points to the fact that these categorizations are not watertight compartments but also oscillate between their underlying logics. Tomé-Alonso (2021) notes how actors may learn from others' experiences, abiding by a rationalist logic at first and adapting their rhetoric accordingly, but then interiorise the change in light of its perceived normativevalue. Azaola-Piazza and Hernando de Larramendi (2021) draw attention to the strategic and even opportunistic behaviour of some parties at the expenses of other 'fellow' Islamists, thus confirming the heterogeneity and rivalry across the Islamist spectrum. Casani and El Asri (2021), instead, consider the diffusion mechanisms typical of social movement theory but also look at the externalisation of a set of narratives and practices aimed at circumventing domestic constraints.

Contributions and preliminary findings

Islamists are often considered extremely pragmatic and chameleonic. However, while this feature is definitely true for some of them, it much less so for others. Post-2011 Egypt is a case in point. In their contribution, for instance, Azaola-Piazza and Hernando de Larra- mendi (2021) explore intra-Islamist competition in the country and illustrate how the Salafi party of Al-Nour adapts to and exploits the conjunctural regional environment to gain relevance within the domestic arena at the expense of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). By showing a greater extent of flexibility and strategic thinking, Al-Nour first broke with the strictly religious, cultural and social agenda dictated by the Salafi tradition and contested elections in 2011 to enter formal politics. It then joined a short-lived alliance with the FJP but finally supported the military golpe against elected president Morsi and the Brotherhood he represented. This decision, as argued by the authors, is reflective of the regional rivalry within the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis's hostility towards the Brotherhood, sponsored instead by Qatar. By acting as a proxy of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Salafists seized the opportunity to outnumber their rivals in the domestic Islamist field and ensure their survival.

While Egypt is an example of multipolar Islamist settings, the confinement of Salafism outside the institutional arena in Tunisia did not urge Ennahda to compete against other Islamist actors. In Cimini's (2021) contribution, Ennahda, trapped between expectations and suspicions, engaged in styling and refashioning its identity and practices, mostly drawing on hijacked third experiences of other Islamist parties and post-uprising experiences. In this sense, the self-restraint the party opted for even when it took power testifies to a learning process faced with regional counter-examples and a delicate domestic balance.

Remarkably, the heterogeneity of Islamist movements and parties plays out not only from one country to another or among competing actors in the same country but also within the same current in its variants abroad. Casani and El Asri (2021) address this issue by pointing to the mutual interaction between the Moroccan Salafi-inspired Justice and Spirituality Movement (AWI) and its spinoffs in France, Belgium and Spain across the diaspora community. In particular, whereas these associations abroad act as a transmission belt of the frames and narratives of the mother organisation at the international level, the original aims and scopes as developed in Morocco are also filtered and adapted to the specificities of local contexts. However, if the original political claims against the Moroccan monarchy lag behind in this process of adaptation, the moderate image of Islam promoted by European associations positively impacts and counterbalances the negative and more radical perspective on AWI issued from Morocco.

For Morocco, Tomé-Alonso (2021) sheds light on how the interaction of domestic, regional and international variables has impacted the Party of Justice and Development's (PJD) inclusion process into the political fold. More specifically, she claims that the PJD has integrated into its reformist strategy lessons drawn from the experiences of other Islamist political parties in the region. The PJD has also increasingly adopted an internationally legitimised rhetoric based on the transparency and democratisation of internal operating procedures to face accusations of connivance with radicals and of having a hidden agenda. In contrast to

the other Islamist players examined here, the PJD has a longer record as an officially recognised and institutional actor. This expanded timeframe dating back to 1997 allows the author to pinpoint the learning and adaptation dynamics during the different stages of the party's inclusion process, which proceed along a non-confrontational stance with the monarchy.

By way of conclusion, we can make some preliminary considerations and remarks.

First, all the countries under scrutiny have since 2011 undergone, though to various extents, a process of power reconfiguration or partial adjustment. Islamist actors, far from being a monolithic entity, have been part and parcel of this process while also undergoing substantial internal transformations. Egyptian contexts offer fertile ground for intra-Islamist competition. Not by chance, Islamist actors exploit external networks, resources and linkages to negotiate more space domestically and at the expense of their counterparts with whom they contend for influence and legitimacy. The case of Morocco illustrates Islamists' diverse strategies vis-à-vis a regime that has thus far resisted major shifts. While AWI works from the margins to gain support and improve its international image, the PJD confirms its pragmatism, gradualist path and non-confrontational ethos. Tunisia stands alone, as Ennahda's Islamists have to compete more with past phantoms and current contingencies, increasingly demarcating themselves from those negative connotations that weigh on the broader Islamist realm.

Second, and remarkably, foreign-generated counter-examples provide powerful inputs. The fate of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is undoubtedly and currently the most striking turning point in the collective imaginations of Islamists elsewhere, not unlike the Islamic Salvation Front in the 1990s in Algeria. Although from different premises, the AKP similarly moves from being a reference point to a counter-example. Their lack of inclusiveness, if not authoritarian tendencies, has been regarded as increasingly dangerous and counterproductive for other Muslim-oriented political parties. In light of this, for example, the Moroccan PJD tends to prudently emphasise its commitment to pluralism, its ability to compromise with other domestic actors and its pragmatic, non-confrontational character, not unlike Ennahda in Tunisia.

Third, for the sake of clarity, this Special Issue is not interested in establishing whether regional or international factors account for more than domestic factors or, vice versa, to posit any sort of 'hierarchical' order whatsoever. If anything, it draws attention to the timeliness of an event or set of events occurring beyond national boundaries, which become more relevant – or are perceived as such – given the specificities of domestic contexts. The impact of the 2013 Egyptian putsch on Tunisia and Morocco's Islamists, or in Egypt itself, is a case in point.

Fourth, whereas contingency may have an impact on the opportunity structure, the agency of Islamist parties and movements is the crucial factor in processes of adaptation or resistance. This has a twofold implication. Firstly, their decision-making is anything but self-evident or unavoidable, as Cimini (2021) argues when inscribing Ennahda's reorientation under the impulse of contingent events and its current leadership. Additionally, all the contributions show that the decisions made by Islamist stakeholders are not mere byproducts of overlapping factors from multiple spatial dimensions but a composite process – as well as the outcome of that process – through which information, ideas, and practices are carefully and critically elaborated, not simply transposed from one level to the other.

Fifth and in relation to the above, in this composite process, Islamist actors adapt their discourses and strategies at home or in their 'branches' abroad, with the result that something new takes shape and something else eventually gets lost. This is clearly evident in Casani and El Asri's (2021) contribution, as the 'internationalization' of AWI amplifies the outreach of the organisation along with its message but also finds that its original, context-specific political claims are diluted if not absent altogether outside Morocco. After all, they argue that the appeal of moving beyond national boundaries also lies in what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call the 'boomerang effect': when domestic avenues of influence are closed off, local actors move to the international sphere or approach international actors to circumvent domestic constraints, not least

with the goal of lobbying or bringing pressure on their own regime.

Sixth, regional order and its reconfiguration dramatically affect the windows of opportunity for domestic actors, not least in terms of resource allocation. As Azaola-Piazza and Hernando de Larramendi (2021) describe, initial solidarity and intra-Islamist cooperation may fade away in favour of intra-Islamist competition by capitalising on broader regional dynamics. In this sense, the rivalry between Egyptian Islamist parties clearly reflects the regional intra-Sunni rivalry typical of the new Arab cold war (Gause, 2014; Hazbun, 2018; Khoury, 2013; Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). Nine years after it was founded, the Al-Nour Party has managed to survive and to show a highly pragmatic character that has led it to support the 'neo-authoritarianism' of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and to become a stabilising element for the Egyptian regime. The changing geopolitical context has also played a role in the Moroccan legalist Islamists' inclusion process. Since the 1990s, the PJD has paid attention to the experiences of other Islamist political parties and learned that (a) it is safer to follow a pragmatic, gradual and progressive strategy rather than to engage in deep and comprehensive reforms, and (b) it is less risky to prove itself to be a reliable domestic and international partner. Therefore, the PJD inclusion process and non-confrontational strategy is marked not only by domestic constraints and the monarchy's supervision above all but also by the information and ideas that the Islamist party imported from the region, especially from its counterparts in Algeria in the 1990s and in light of the rise of international terrorism after 9/11.

Furthermore, Islamists increasingly demonstrate themselves to be rational rather than uniquely ideological actors, whose choices have to be understood as responses to political and social challenges and opportunities.

In a context of crisis of the global liberal order (Nye, 2007) that sees many challengers to 'Western dominance of global rule-making and order-building in the twenty-first century'(Acharya, 2014b, p. 78), the evolution of different Islamist actors offers a privileged field of analysis. It does allow us to observe the interplay of domestic, regional and international factors and to debate about the reconfiguration of contemporary political orders.

To conclude, this Special Issue acknowledges the challenges as well as the opportunities to overcome the traditional compartmentalisation of the levels of analysis to fully address the complex dynamics underpinning the transformation of Islamist movements and parties in North Africa and possibly beyond it. Drawing on theoretically rich and empirically informed contributions, we aim to better contextualise and make sense of the ongoing changes to trace common trends or, conversely, divergent trajectories, further confirming the heterogeneity of political Islam. It is our hope that the ways in which all these actors deal with the recalibration of power in their respective national arenas, but not in isolation from external factors, will broaden the horizons for more systematic, comparative studies.

Note

1. Some researchers, particularly since the 2013 military coup in Egypt, have explored how hardened repression increases the propensity for radicalisation and violence of non-violent and moderate groups.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Notes on contributors

Giulia Cimini is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Department of Political and Social Sciences – University of Bologna (Italy) with a Fellowship supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. In 2019, she was awarded a POMEPS TRE Grant for her research on marginalised communities and the challenges of decentralisation in Tunisia. She has been Teaching Assistant of Politics at the University of Naples L' Orientale, and Visiting Fellow at the Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies Institute at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Her research interests include Maghrebi political parties, dynamics of contention and security assistance.

Beatriz Tomé-Alonso is lecturer in the Department of International Studies at Universidad Loyola Andalucía and associate research fellow at the Study Group on Arab and Muslim Societies (GRESAM) at Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha. She has been Visiting Fellow at NIMAR, Netherlands Institute in Morocco, Rabat. Her research focuses on islamist movements in the Maghreb, especially Morocco, the interlink between international, regional and domestic arenas, international actors foreign policies towards the Middle East and North Africa states and responses to these from domestic actors.

References

Abouzzohour, Y., & Tomé-Alonso, B. (2019). Moroccan foreign policy after the Arab Spring: A turn for the Islamists or persistence of royal leadership? The Journal of North African Studies, 24(3), 444–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1454652

Acharya, A. (2014a). How ideas spread: Whose norms matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian regionalism. International Organization, 58(2), 239–275. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582024

Acharya, A. (2014b). The end of American world order. Polity Press.

Adraoui, M. A. (2018). The foreign policy of Islamist political parties: Ideology in practice. Edinburgh University Press.

Al-Anani, K. (2012). Islamist parties post-Arab Spring. Mediterranean Politics, 17(3), 466–472. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.725309

Al-Anani, K. (2016). Inside the Muslim brotherhood: Religion, identity, and politics. Oxford University Press.

Ambrosio, T. (2010). Constructing a framework of authoritarian diffusion: Concepts, dynamics, and future research. International Studies Perspectives, 11(4), 375–392. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2010.00411.x

Ambrosio, T., & Tolstrup, J. (2019). How do we tell authoritarian diffusion from illusion? Exploring methodological issues of qualitative research on authoritarian diffusion. Quality & Quantity, 53 (6), 2741–2763. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-019-00892-8

Ayoob, M. (2004). Political Islam: Image and reality. World Policy Journal, 21(3), 1-14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40210231

Azaola-Piazza, B. (2019). The foreign policy of post-Mubarak Egypt and the strengthening of relations with Saudi Arabia: Balancing between economic vulnerability and regional and regime security. The Journal of North African Studies, 24(3), 401–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 13629387.2018.1454650

Azaola-Piazza, B., & Hernando de Larramendi, M. (2021). The interplay of regional and domestic politics in Egypt: The case of Salafism. Contemporary Politics. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020. 1858565.

Bank, A. (2017). The study of authoritarian diffusion and cooperation: Comparative lessons on interests versus ideology, nowadays and in history. Democratization, 24(7), 1345–1357. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1312349

Bayat, A. (2007). Making Islam democratic: Social movements and the post-Islamist turn. StanfordUniversity Press.

Brownlee, J. (2012). Democracy prevention: The politics of the US-Egyptian alliance. CambridgeUniversity Press.

Burnell, P., & Schlumberger, O. (2010). Promoting democracy - promoting autocracy? Internationalpolitics and national political regimes. Contemporary Politics, 16(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569771003593805

Casani, A., & El Asri, F. (2021). Between national and international interests: Morocco's Al-Adl wa-l-Ihsane from an international perspective. Contemporary Politics. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 13569775.2020.1854966

Cavatorta, F. (2005). The international context of Morocco's stalled Democratization. Democratization, 12(4), 548-566. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500226101 Cavatorta, F. (2009).

The international dimension of the failed Algerian transition. Democracy betrayed?
Manchester University Press.

Checkel, J. T. (2017). Socialization and violence: Introduction and framework. Journal of Peace Research, 54(5), 592–605. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317721813

Cimini, G. (2020). Parties in an era of change: Membership in the (re-)making in post-revolutionaryTunisia. The Journal of North African Studies, 25(6), 960–979. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2019.1644918

Cimini, G. (2021). Learning mechanisms within an Islamist party: Tunisia's Ennahda movement between domestic and regional balances. Contemporary Politics. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 13569775.2020.186810

Clark, J. (2006). The conditions of Islamist moderation: Unpacking cross-ideological cooperation inJordan. International Journal of Middle East Studies, 38(4), 539–560. https://doi.org/10.1017/ S0020743806412460

Del Sarto, R. A., Malmvig, H.,& Soler iLecha, E. (2019). Interregnum: The regional order in the Middle Eastand North Africa after 2011 (Final Reports N. 1). https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_1.pdf

Della Porta, D., & Tarrow, S. (2012). Interactive diffusion: The coevolution of police and protestbehavior with an application to transnational contention. Comparative Political Studies, 45(1), 119–152. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011425665

Desrues, T. (2020). Authoritarian resilience and democratic representation in Morocco: Royal interference and political parties' leaderships since the 2016 elections. Mediterranean Politics, 25(2), 254–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1543038

Dobbin, F., Simmons, B., & Garrett, G. (2007). The global diffusion of public policies: Social construction, coercion, competition, or learning? Annual Review of Sociology, 33(1), 449–472. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.090106.142507

Elkins, Z., & Simmons, B. (2005). On waves, clusters, and diffusion: A conceptual framework. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 598(1), 33–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716204272516

Esposito, J. L., & Voll, J. O. (1996). Islam and democracy. Oxford University Press.

Esposito, L., Rahim, L. Z., & Ghobadzadeh, N. (eds.). (2018). The politics of Islamism: Diverging visions and trajectories. Palgrave Macmillan.

Fernández-Molina, I. (forthcoming 2021). International socialization in reverse, international resocialization? Democratization.

Fernández-Molina, I., Feliu, L., & Hernando de Larramendi, M. (2019). The 'subaltern' foreign policiesof North African countries: Old and new responses to economic dependence, regional insecurityand domestic political change. The Journal of North African Studies, 24(3), 356–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1454648

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamic and political change. International Organization, 53(4), 887–917. https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789

Gause III, F. G. (2014). Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East Cold War. Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers, 11. http://brook.gs/2bl1yS3

Gilardi, F. (2010). Who learns from what in policy diffusion processes? American Journal of PoliticalScience, 54(3), 650–666. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00452.x

Gilardi, F. (2012). Transnational diffusion: Norms, ideas, and policies. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, & B. Simmons (Eds.), Handbook of international relations (pp. 453–477). SAGE Publications.

Gilardi, F. (2016). Four ways we can improve policy diffusion research. State Politics & Policy Quarterly, 16(1), 8–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532440015608761

Hall, S. G. F., & Ambrosio, T. (2017). Authoritarian learning: A conceptual overview. East EuropeanPolitics, 33(2), 143–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2017.1307826

Hanieh, A. (2019). Thinking critically about regional uprisings. Roundtable, by J. Schwedler. Middle EastReport 292/3 (Fall/Winter).

Hazbun, W. (2018, September). Regional powers and the production of insecurity in the Middle East. MENARA Working Papers, 11.

Heydemann, S. (2007). Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world. The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/10arabworld.pdf

Heydemann, S. (2016). The political ecology of authoritarian learning. POMEPS Memo. https://pomeps.org/the-political-ecology-of-authoritarian-learning

Heydemann, S., & Leenders, R. (2011). Authoritarian learning and authoritarian resilience: Regime responses to the Arab awakening. Globalizations, 8(5), 647–653. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 14747731.2011.621274

Heydemann, S., & Leenders, R. (2014). Authoritarian learning and counter-revolution. In M. Lynch (Ed.), The Arab uprisings explained: New contentious politics in the Middle East (pp. 75–92). Columbia University Press.

Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics. New York: Cornell University Press.

Khoury, N. A. (2013). The Arab Cold war revisited: The regional impact of the Arab uprising. MiddleEast Policy, 20(2), 73–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12021

Kirişci, K. (2013). The rise and fall of Turkey as a model for the Arab world. Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-rise-and-fall-of-turkey-as-a-model-for-the-arab-world/

Koesel, K., & Bunce, V. (2013). Diffusion-proofing: Russian and Chinese responses to waves of popular mobilizations against authoritarian rulers. Perspectives on Politics, 11(3), 753–768. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713002107

Kraetzchmar, H., & Rivetti, P. (eds.). (2018). Islamists and the politics of the Arab uprisings: Governance, pluralisation and contention. Edinburgh University Press.

Lynch, M., & Schwedler, J. (2020). Introduction to the special issue on "Islamist politics after the Arab uprisings". Middle East Law and Governance, 12(1), 3-13. https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375- 01201008

Magen, A. A., & Morlino, L. (2009). Hybrid regimes, the rule of law, and external influence on domestic change. In A. A. Magen, & L. Morlino (Eds.), International actors, democratization and the ruleof law: Anchoring democracy? (pp. 1–25). Routledge.

Maghraoui, D. (2020). On the relevance or irrelevance of political parties in Morocco. The Journal of North African Studies, 25(6), 939–959. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2019.1644920

Mainwaring, S., & Pérez-Liñán, A. (2013). Democracies and dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, survival and fall. Cambridge University Press.

Mandaville, P. (2014). Islam and politics. London: Routledge.

Manea, M. G., & Rüland, J. (2020). The diffusion of parliamentary oversight: Investigating the democratization of the armed forces in Indonesia and Nigeria. Contemporary Politics, 26(2), 165–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2019.1703067

March, J., & Olsen, J. (1989). Rediscovering institutions: The organizational basis of politics. The Free Press.

Marsh, D., & Sharman, J. C. (2009). Policy diffusion and policy transfer. Policy Studies, 30(3), 269–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442870902863851

Masoud, T. E. (2014). Counting Islam: Religion, class, and elections in Egypt. Cambridge UniversityPress.

McAdam, D. (1983). Tactical innovation and the pace of insurgency. American Sociological Review, 48 (6), 735–754. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095322

McCarthy, R. (2018). Inside Tunisia's Al-Nahda: Between politics and preaching. Cambridge UniversityPress.

Nasr, V. (2005). The rise of 'muslim democracy'. Journal of Democracy, 16(2), 13–27. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2005.0032

Nye, J. S. (2007). Power in the global information age: From realism to globalization. Routledge. Oliver, P., &

Myers, D. (2003). The coevolution of social movements. Mobilization: An International

Quarterly, 8(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.8.1.d618751h524473u7

Pellicer, M., & Wegner, E. (2014). Socio-economic voter profile and motives for Islamist support inMorocco. Party Politics, 20(1), 116–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811436043

Peterson, L. (2002, September). The Pentagon talks Turkey. The American Prospect. https://prospect.org/features/pentagon-talks-turkey/

Pridham, G. (1991). Encouraging democracy: The international context of regime transition in SouthernEurope. St. Martin's Press.

Roy, O., & Boubekeur, A. (2012). Whatever happened to the Islamists? Salafis, heavy metal Muslims andthe lure of consumerist Islam. Columbia University Press.

Schimmelfenning, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2005). Introduction. In F. Schimmelfenning, & U. Sedelmeier(Eds.), The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe (pp. 1–28). Cornell University Press.

Schmitz, H. P., & Sell, K. (1999). International factor in processes of political democratization. Towardsa theoretical integration. In J. Grugel (Ed.), Democracy without borders: Transnationalization andconditionality in new democracies (pp. 23–41). Routledge.

Schraeder, P. J., Endless, B., Schumacher, M. J., & Dobbs, K. L. (2019). Revolutionary diplomats? Introduction to the study of north African foreign policies within the context of the Arab Spring. The Journal of North African Studies, 24(4), 540–557. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1525000

Schwedler, J. (2006). Faith in moderation Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen. Cambridge University Press.

Schwedler, J. (2011). Can Islamists become moderates? Rethinking the inclusion-moderationhypothesis. World Politics, 63(2), 347–376. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887111000050

Schwedler, J. (2013). Islamists in power? Inclusion, moderation, and the Arab uprisings. Middle East Development Journal, 5(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793812013500065

Simon, H. (1957). Models of man. John Wiley.

Simmons, B. A., Dobbin, F., & Garrett, G. (2008). The global diffusion of markets and democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Soler iLecha, E. (2017). Liquid alliances in the Middle East. Notes Internacionals CIDOB, 169. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/ n1_169

Szmolka, I. (2015). Inter- and intra-party relations in the formation of the Benkirane coalition govern-ments in Morocco. The Journal of North African Studies, 20(4), 654–674. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2015.1057816

Szmolka, I. (2019). Bipolarisation of the Moroccan political party arena? Refuting this idea through an analysis of the party system. The Journal of North African Studies. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 13629387.2019.1673741

Tomé-Alonso, B. (2016). El PJD en política local: Perfil del representante y estrategia electoral. Ladiferenciación como argumento político. The PJD in the local arena: Demographic profile, differenciation as political strategy. Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos, 20(2016), 145–168. https://doi.org/10.15366/reim2016.20.008

Tomé-Alonso, B. (2021). What the PJD learns from the outside? The international factor and Islamistpolitics in Morocco. Contemporary Politics. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1868102

Valbjørn, M., & Bank, A. (2012). The new Arab cold war: Rediscovering the Arab dimension of Middle East regional politics. Review of International Studies, 38(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000283

Wegner, E. (2011). Islamist opposition in authoritarian regimes: The party of justice and development inMorocco. Syracuse University Press.

Wegner, E., & Cavatorta, F. (2019). Revisiting the Islamist–secular divide: Parties and voters in the Arab world. International Political Science Review, 40(4), 558–575. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 0192512118784225 https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118784225

Weyland, K. (2005). Theories of policy diffusion: Lessons from Latin American pension reform. World Politics, 57(2), 262–295. https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2005.0019

Whitehead, L. (ed.). (2001). The international dimension of democratization. Europe and the Americas. Oxford University Press.

Wickham, C. R. (2004). The path to moderation: Strategy and learning in the formation of Egypt's Wasat party. Comparative Politics, 36(2), 205–228. https://doi.org/10.2307/4150143

Willis, M. J. (2002). Political parties in the Maghrib: Ideology and identification: A suggested typology. The Journal of North African Studies, 7(3), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380208718471

Wolf, A. (2017). Political Islam in Tunisia: The history of Ennahda. Oxford University Press.

Zito, A., & Schout, A. (2009). Learning theory reconsidered: EU integration theories and learning. Journal of European Public Policy, 16(8), 1103-1123. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903332597