

THE LEADERSHIP LANDSCAPE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Societies around the shores of the Mediterranean have evolved in different trajectories, thereby exhibiting different political cultures and regimes. Still, several similarities persist, which include patrimonial tendencies, clientelism of different forms, and leadership styles, among others. Accordingly, new actors have emerged and leadership paradigms have been challenged. However, this process has neither been consistent nor powerful enough to overcome entrenched habits. In this article, the author assesses these ongoing dynamics to provide more insight into significant changes taking place and their wider implications for the future of governance and leadership in the region.

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The current political discourse in the Mediterranean is shaped by two major developments: the Arab Spring (in which this article includes the Gezi Park protests that occurred in Turkey in 2013) and the economic crisis in the Euro-Med zone. Although the natures of the regimes, state structures, and political culture in North Africa and the Levant vis-à-vis Southern Europe, differ, nevertheless, some of the outcomes are distinctively common. There are at least three common and interrelated features:

- The role of youth and of civil society – either as actors initiating events and taking the lead in dealing with the consequences, or as the prime victims
- The dissatisfaction and disapproval of the way their respective states were governed and the demand by societies on both sides of the Mediterranean for structural and behavioral change
- The way those developments have affected the structures and relevant actors in the political field (domestically and regionally) and thus their leadership potential, especially in view of the demand for structural changes

Dealing with those features – especially the first two – has been the concern of many scholars and political analysts, even though the period under consideration is relatively recent. Still, some observations about the trends can be traced. This paper concentrates only on the last feature, i.e. on how those developments have influenced the leadership potential and structures, either giving birth to new paradigms or affecting the ethos of and approach to leadership. Hence, the level of analysis is the first issue to clarify.

The Leadership Issue

While the most relevant level to discussing leadership would be the domestic environment, i.e. political leadership in the Mediterranean states, regional/systemic considerations deserve a quick glance, especially in view of the interconnectedness between the domestic and the wider environment. Indeed, on the northern shores, the Eurozone crisis not only proved to be a serious threat to the EU's overall direction and even unity, but it also raised voices protesting or even challenging Germany's perceived hegemony in dictating the preferred solutions. Accordingly, the Middle East after the Arab Spring and its consequences, especially the civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is experiencing a reassertion of Russia's leading role and the diminishing of the American one, while a new Arab cold war setting is in the process of being shaped.¹

¹ Munir Shafiq, "Questions and answers for understanding Daesh," *MEMO*, 13 November 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/22248-questions-and-answers-for-understanding-daesh-part-1>

- Saudi Arabia has been flexing its muscle at the expense of Egypt’s power in the Levant: during the Morsi era they clashed over Egypt’s support of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in the region and because of Morsi’s Iran policy. Currently, they are clashing over Saudi Arabia’s support of the rebel forces in the Syrian conflict. Saudi Arabia’s role is also prominent in the Arab peninsula, where, as in the case of Bahrain and Yemen, the Kingdom (under a new leadership) illustrated its unwillingness to allow any serious regime restructuring in its backyard
- Qatar, as well as the United Arab Emirates have attempted to leave their footprints in other regions beyond the Gulf²
- Tunisia is proudly claiming a moral guardianship of the Arab Spring, and therefore a pioneer role for the democratization process in the Arab world

However, it is at the domestic level that developments have offered food for thought, with more or less new actors and possible paradigms evolving. To focus on the state level, this article makes three essential clarifications: (1) political leadership is not limited to the top layer, not even to the inner circle and the political elite, but to any institution that can influence and shape politics; (2) the focus is not on the personalities but on the structures that allow for leadership roles, and therefore the existence for such opportunities; and (3) the cultural and structural differences between the states in the north and south of the Mediterranean must be considered, as well as other particularities among the states within each region. Finally, the observations are made primarily in relation to Egypt and Tunisia as the South, and Greece, Italy, and Spain as the North; some references will also be made to other case studies.

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The European Shore: Participatory Democracy Re-Assessed

The Eurozone crisis and the consequent harsh austerity measures and rapid reforms that were adopted to deal with it – a top to bottom procedure with little, if any, social dialogue and discourse – as well as the way they were implemented, had a profound

² Joseph Bahout et al., “The Middle East in 2015: What to Watch,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 January 2015.

impact especially on the Mediterranean countries. This gave rise to the prominence of new political powers and phenomena while also reviving others:

- Protest and anti-austerity movements re-emerged with new vigor, and internationalized in terms of their appeal and networking
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) emerged as key actors in dealing with the social consequences of the crisis and its austerity measures
- The political and economic system that produced this crisis was discredited and challenged electorally

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Although the majority of the European Mediterranean countries had experienced the rule of authoritarian regimes, some of them even recently, a democratic culture is well embedded into their societies. In that respect, there are well-developed relevant institutions and mechanisms – like political parties, the function of checks and balances, civil society at large, labor unions, and the rule of law – that offer a wide range of

opportunities for active citizenship participation. Still, those Mediterranean societies are also plagued with certain features of underdevelopment as a result of their historical evolutions as states. The discredited political systems are characterized by three tendencies: statism, clientelism, and nepotism. They are dominated by inefficient and in many cases corrupt public sectors where meritocracy is the exception. The latter two tendencies found fertile ground to flourish as the state dominance of this political system was also matched by “partitocracy,” i.e. the predominance of political parties, not only in politics but also in society at large. This dominance of parties either effectively weakened or/and linked other crucial democratic institutions, like CSOs and labor unions, to their own function.³ Such an environment severely limited the opportunity for upward mobility, enhancing the rank and file membership and therefore obstructing reforms and change.

Inevitably, the crisis led to an initial reshaping of the political party map at the expense of traditional parties and in favor of new formations across the political spectrum. Elections have brought *SYRIZA* to a leading position in Greece, as well

³ This added a corporatist element to the political system. For “partitocracy” and its consequences in Greece but also with reference to the other Mediterranean countries, see: Asteris Houliaras, “The Dynamics of Civil Society in Greece: Creating civic engagement from the top,” *The Jean Monnet Papers on Political Economy* (October 2014), pp. 6-8.

as *Podemos* in Spain – both radical left-wing formations of the so-called New Left – and the Five Star Movement in Italy. However, there was also an impressive and alarming rise of the neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn, in Greece.

The other important feature is the rather successful intrusion into politics of CSOs and activists without any backing (at least officially) of the traditional parties. In that respect, *Podemos* was essentially a protest movement that turned into a political party, not only scoring high nation-wide but also winning major cities like Barcelona.⁴ Accordingly, the Five Star Movement is Beppe

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Grillo’s vehicle, himself an activist and a TV persona. Although this is not the case with *SYRIZA*, it is a party with a long tradition in protest and labor movements (especially in the education sector). Yet, Greece also demonstrates at least two impressive reference cases where in major cities, the reigning mayors of Thessaloniki (Yiannis Boutari, a former entrepreneur and environmental activist), and of Athens (Giorgos Kaminis, a university professor) easily secured their re-election without any official candidacy from the political parties.⁵

Still, a look at the leadership profile of all previous cases, and the competition for those positions, illustrate the importance of their leaders’ characteristics, that is, personalities that can illustrate a certain charisma. *Podemos* certainly owes a large part of its success to the personality of its leader, Pablo Iglesias, a university professor with powerful communication skills and a high profile.⁶ *SYRIZA* leader Alexis Tsipras enjoys a similar appeal, even though he tends to follow in the footsteps (some would argue in a process of imitation) of Andreas Papandreou, another charismatic Greek populist political leader. Accordingly there is also the flamboyant figure of Beppe Grillo in Italy, noted above. Most significantly, it is the charisma of leaders (like Tsipras and Iglesias, who also are relatively young) that contribute significantly to their appeal and parties’ success. This is the case with two other leaders: Matteo Renzi, who brought back the center-left to the premiership in Italy; and Albert Rivera, the leader of Ciudadanos, a centrist pro-European party that is rocketing up in the Spanish polls.

⁴ Ada Colau, an activist, was elected mayor under the flagship of *Podemos*, ousting the Catalan nationalists and therefore upsetting their bid for independence: “Catalan Independence Bid Hit by *Podemos*’ Barcelona Win,” *Bloomberg*, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-24/catalan-independence-bid-rocked-by-podemos-victory-in-barcelona/

⁵ Contrary to Boutaris, Kammenos emerged latter as a key figure in the new pro-European movement, “Menoume Evropi” [we stay in Europe].

⁶ A kind of manifesto of his views about what the *Podemos* are can be found in: Pablo Iglesias, “Understanding *Podemos*,” *The New Left Review*, No. 93 (May-June 2015), newleftreview.org/II/03/Pablo-iglesias-understanding-podemos/

“*The Arab uprisings (including the Gezi Park protests), which were instigated by youth, were a statement against autocratic behaviors and tendencies.*”

Such personalities and their appeal could not perform effectively without a political agenda, and, in the case of winning an election, still have to meet the expectations of their voters. In that respect, while the local level provided a successful paradigm, as the mayors met the public expectations, at the national level, there is a considerable degree of skepticism as to whether such personalities can deliver and perform effectively – hence, their not-so-impressive scoring

on the electoral ballot. This is due to these leaders’ inexperienced rank and file, compounded by the pressure to perform in a very demanding and technocratic environment. They are especially tested, whenever such electoral performance is based on a populist agenda, on how realistic their agendas are – this is most striking in the case of SYRIZA.⁷ In this case, regardless of its repeated electoral success, its performance as a government is far from efficient and effective. Under the burden of harsh realities, it has abandoned almost entirely its agenda’s main features and promises.

The South-Bank: The Land of Patrimonial Leaders

The authoritarian and personalized nature of most of the ruling regimes, and the consequent “democratic deficit” that characterizes those countries, have a profound effect on the nature of the political leadership and its structures. Furthermore, those regimes apply mechanisms other than coercive measures to legitimize their rule, hence producing distinctive types of leadership. Although those are not exclusive of each other, as any policy to promote legitimacy tends to have an expiration date if it is not accompanied by continuous effective performance in the eyes of the population. In that respect, three forms of governance are archetypal in the region:

- The *traditional*, in which maintaining power resides on tradition, such as tribal or religious
- The *charismatic*, based on a leader’s uniqueness, personal charm, and skills
- The *modern bureaucratic*, based on the promise of efficient governing performance and problem-solving through managerial skills.⁸

⁷ Hence, Iglesias has considered it useful to distance his party’s future policies, if elected, from those of SYRIZA’s. On the populist profile and performance of SYRIZA, with also references to Iglesias and Podemos, see: Leandros Leandros Fischer, “From Papandreou to Tsipras,” *Jacobin*, in www.jacobin.com/2015/09/tsipras-syriza-pasok-papandreou-austerity-elections-populism-podemos/

⁸ Roy R. Anderson, Robert F. Seibert, and John G. Vagner, *Politics and Change in the Middle East. Sources of Conflict and Accommodation* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993), pp. 193-206.

Regardless of the regimes' structure, republican or monarchist, their authoritarian nature implied that (1) political power was highly centralized, (2) the ruling elite tended to exercise a legitimate monopoly over political activities, and (3) the political institutions were deprived of any serious autonomy. These conditions limited the opportunities for leadership venues unless individuals are loyal to the top layer. Still, such tendencies also rest on a common feature characterizing most Islamic societies: the predominance of patrimonial patterns of leadership. This hierarchical structure, although it is based on a complex administrative network that does not exclude recruiting from wider society, implies a superiority of the *leader*. Change is not an inherit merit, but rather an imposed necessity, usually by a revolutionary process or serious existential threats to the regime. Nonetheless, it has acquired a cultural dimension, therefore enjoying wide acceptance by the public.

The Arab uprisings (including the Gezi Park protests), which were instigated by the youth, were a statement against those autocratic behaviors and tendencies. Demonstrators demanded a different, more inclusive, accountable, and democratic fate. In that respect, they did present a new paradigm, one that proved effective in initially generating momentum: a leaderless movement. Although this was the predominant perception, in reality it would be more accurate to describe it as a movement collectively led by activists and CSOs.⁹ Yet, while this worked during the heat of the uprisings, also allowing secular and liberal groups to dominate the streets in their confrontation with Morsi's presidency, it failed to produce a solid block that could successfully contest elections in which organized Islamic parties with well-entrenched leadership and a nation-wide network won office.

Egypt initially experienced a mushrooming of CSOs and political formations, many of which were youth parties, which contested elections rather unsuccessfully. However, these groups established a new process and a promising environment with diverse structures for political participation.¹⁰ Those two structures remain interrelated, with crossovers from the politicized NGO to the party sector. This has led to internal disagreements on whether to remain on the side of civil society and monitor the political process or becoming political parties contesting elections. Accordingly, the presence of such prestigious personalities like Mohamad El-Baradei, or even Amr Mousa, did not manage to unite the fragmented landscape in the secular block, proving that their appeal to the base was rather limited.

As the democratization process was interrupted by a military take-over, Egypt returned to autocratic rule – a tendency that was not absent from Morsi's short-lived

⁹ On Arab civil society, see: Stefanos Vallianatos, "Arab Civil Society at the Crossroad of Democratization: the Arab Spring Impact," *Centre for International and European Studies*, Neighbourhood Policy Paper Series, February 2013.

¹⁰ Nadine Abdallah, "Youth movements in the Egyptian transformation: strategies and repertoires of political participation," *Mediterranean Politics*, 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081445#.VmS8hPIA57k>

presidency either. General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's rule, in the absence of democratic legitimacy, renewed Anwar Sadat's nationalist agenda but flavored it with Gamal Abdel Nasser's social sensitivities. Yet, the resulting crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood followers and the so-called fight against Islamic terrorism greatly affected the political spectrum. The crackdown targeted many secular and liberal activists, whereas the introduction of a new framework for the function of civil society made it more difficult for them to function effectively:

- It alienated a large number of promising moderate activists, who retreated from politics
- It seriously affected the fragile framework of the newly established secular/liberal front; deprived of their leaders, they could hardly go back to their rank and file to look for replacements
- The only political formations that continued to function were those who were more or less on good terms with the ruling regime; therefore, this block is left with little credentials to function as a credible alternative for a renewed democratic dialogue¹¹
- While the Muslim Brotherhood's well-structured and functional mechanism has allowed it to elect new leaders to replace the imprisoned and exiled ones, many of those are more radical and in favor of a violent confrontation with the regime¹²

On the other hand, Tunisia followed a more consistent, albeit still bumpy, road to democratizing, although it shared many similarities with Egypt. Tunisia's initial uprising was also a revolution without leaders. Youth and civil society activists played a crucial role in it, and the outcome of the subsequent elections brought to office *Ennahda* – the Tunisian Islamist party.¹³ Yet, the different direction that Tunisia has followed was the result of, among other factors, the presence of influential and rather charismatic figures at the headship of *Ennahda*. Rachid Ghanouschi, and the secular Nidaa Tounes and Beji Caid Essebsi, contributed decisively to an inclusive approach for the new constitution, also allowing for other secular forces to be part of the transformation of Tunisia. Yet, their charisma would still be challenged and judged according to their capacity for managing their state.

¹¹ Ayah Aman, "Egypt elections runoff overshadowed by election fraud," *Al-Monitor Egypt Pulse*, 30 October 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/egypt-first-phase-elections-vote-rigging.html>

¹² Another consequence was the Brotherhood's loss of control due to internal conflicts and divisions, in favor of other more radical Islamist groups. Mokhtar Hashem, "Egypt's Escalating Islamist Insurgency," *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, October 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf

¹³ Anour Boukhars, "The Reckoning: Tunisia's Perilous Path to Democratic Stability," *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, April 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/tunisia_reckoning.pdf

Of paramount importance to this outcome was the function of better-structured political forces within civil society, which included NGOs, labor unions, and professional associations. It was the monitoring and interventions of the alliance of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT); the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA); the Tunisian Bar Association; and the Human Rights League – the Nobel prize-winning “Quartet” – that brokered a national dialogue process allowing for a consensus to be reached.¹⁴ Yet, while Tunisia enjoys a variety of institutions that can have a role in the political process, the current profile of the political parties’ leadership is an aging one. Those parties that are comprised of youth have a long way to go until they can secure the confidence of the electorate.

“[Following the Arab Spring] Egypt initially experienced a mushrooming of CSOs and political formations, many of which were youth parties, which contested elections rather unsuccessfully.”

The monarchies in the southern Mediterranean did not experience such an upheaval, due to their ability to partly accommodate the demands of their people and to their royal role. Still, in both Jordan and especially in Morocco, the operation of a vibrant civil society had a role to play. Yet, the Arab Spring outcomes in Syria and Libya were of intense civil strife and war. In that respect, and in the failure of the state to function effectively, the local level has provided the point of reference. Local community leaders – of tribal and sectarian origin, but also activists – have emerged as the driving force, contesting influences of those in the diaspora and exile. Turkey, on the other hand, a functioning democracy, under Erdoğan is on a slippery autocratic road, still enjoying electoral success. Yet, the Peoples’ Democratic Party’s (HDP) impressive electoral performance, owes a lot to the charismatic figure of Selahattin Demirtaş, a lawyer and politician, but also an activist.¹⁵

Similarities and Particularities

The Mediterranean Sea seems to both unite and divide two diverse regions. In relation to the leadership issue, certain common tendencies can be detected:

¹⁴ Within the Quartet, the UGTT had the leading role, with its non-partisan leadership maintaining a consistent monitoring stand vis-à-vis the governing Troika led by *Ennahda*, while its base played a unifying role in bringing together people from all political inclinations, secular and Islamists alike. Mohamed Kerrou, “Tunisia’s Historic Step Toward Democracy,” *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, April 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/22/tunisia-s-historic-step-toward-democracy/hd9t>

¹⁵ Christopher de Bellaigue, “The battle for Turkey”, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/29/selahattin-demirtas-kurdish-turkey>.

- The emergence of civil society, indirectly by providing skilled personnel and leadership opportunities, and directly by contesting elections and participating in the political process
- The relevance of charisma, yet also the ultimate test of good governance
- The resilience of autocratic tendencies, although contested
- The return of populism in different shapes
- The emergence of youth as a distinct group, hence a challenge to patrimonial structures
- Clientelism and partitocracy under scrutiny
- The emergence of locality

The role of leaders and leadership culture is essential in achieving the desired changes. Regardless of possible regional trends, local particularities will always determine the framework. Hence, the need for leadership opportunities and reshaping mentalities can only go through a process domestically instigated, taking advantage of existing global experiences, through the process of civic education. This is where civil society remains pivotal, but only along with the assistance (obligatory or otherwise) of the state and international institutions.