

Party systems and ideological cleavages in the Middle East and North Africa

Party Politics

2021, Vol. 27(4) 814–826

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DOI: 10.1177/1354068819894299

journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq

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Abstract

Previous studies have contrasted the political party systems in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with those in more democratic countries, raising three important points: (1) the religious–secular dimension, rather than the economic or social left–right, explains the underlying political party competition; (2) left-wing politics is relatively weaker than right-wing politics; and (3) parties that are traditionally known as rightist take left-leaning positions on numerous issue dimensions, and vice versa. Even though this particular literature on party politics in the MENA has greatly improved our understanding of political dynamics in the region, these studies have either lacked quantitative evidence to support these points or their evidence was limited to single-country cases. This study aims to address this issue by analyzing original expert survey data of the ideological positions of political parties in the MENA region. Results show that in addition to the religious–secular dimension, the economic left–right divide and the pace of political reforms are highly important dimensions. The study also provides numerous examples showing that the policy stances of leftist and rightist parties are significantly reversed when MENA countries are compared with more developed democracies.

Keywords

expert survey, ideology, Middle East, party competition, party systems

Introduction

Left–right politics resides at the core of political party competition.¹ Hence, a voluminous literature on comparative politics examines the ideological positions of political parties around the world (Bakker et al., 2015; Benoit and Laver, 2006; Bulut, 2017; Inglehart, 1997; Kitschelt et al., 2010; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Studies found that political party competition in most democracies is primarily determined by economic or social left–right dimensions. However, when it comes to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), former studies have not paid much attention on the nature of political party competition, mostly due to the region’s slow-moving democratic progress and the fragmentation of its party systems. Hence, much less is known regarding left–right politics—and whether it exists—in the MENA region. This has led to a significant gap in our understanding of party politics, especially given the fact that several MENA countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria have enjoyed long-standing political party traditions.

In fact, in more than two-thirds of Arab countries, political parties function at least some minimal, yet significant,

role in governance (Hinnebusch, 2017). In this respect, studies showed that, contrary to the widely accepted theories of clientelism to explain the role of parties, Moroccan political parties demonstrate significant amount of programmatic policy practices (Pellicer and Wegner, 2014; Shalaby and Aydogan, 2018).² Similarly, in their individual level analysis in seven Arab countries from 2006 to 2009, De Miguel et al. (2015) found that the evaluation of economy is even a better predictor of electoral turnout decision than having a clientelistic relationship with the government. Also, Wegner and Cavatorta (2018) found high level of ideological congruence between the elites and the party supporters in seven North African countries, and hence, they suggested existence of significant level of

Paper submitted 16 November 2018; accepted for publication 03 September 2019

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programmatic voting patterns in these countries. Furthermore, even though the Arab Spring failed to bring large-scale democratic transitions, political party systems significantly changed and parties gained more relevance over all (Storm, 2017).

Building on the left–right politics literature and the recent studies discussing the role played by the political parties in the region, this study examines the dynamics of political party competition in the MENA region. The existing MENA party politics literature provides several noteworthy theories and observations. For example, they argue that the religious–secular divide is the primary dimension of political party competition (Blaydes and Linzer, 2012; Hamid, 2014; Lust and Waldner, 2014, 2016) and that the remaining dimensions are not very useful in understanding political party competition in the MENA. Studies also show that the size of leftist politics is very small in the region. That is to say, generally speaking, the major parties are the traditionally conservative ones (Hamid, 2014). And finally, studies argue that left–right politics is, at least partially, reversed when compared with the Western norms of party politics (Aydogan and Slapin, 2015; Kucukomer, 2002). Namely, parties that are traditionally known as rightist may advocate leftist ideologies on various specific issues such as the government’s role in managing the economy or the extent of social welfare spending.

Even though the existing literature on MENA party politics has substantially improved our understanding of the political dynamics in the region, the studies generally lack quantitative evidence to support the validity of their theories, or the empirical evidence they present is generally limited to single-country cases. This article attempts to contribute to the party politics literature by addressing the following three questions: To what extent does the religious–secular dimension explain the nature of political competition in MENA countries? To what extent do rightist parties dominate the political spectrum? And to what extent is left–right politics reversed when MENA politics is compared with Western-style party competition?

In order to address these questions, this study examines originally collected expert survey data. Expert surveys are used frequently in the comparative politics literature to measure party ideology in Europe, Asia, and the Americas (Bakker et al., 2015; Benoit and Laver, 2006; Wiesehomeier and Benoit, 2009). They are regarded as one of the most reliable sources for determining parties’ ideological positions on predetermined scales (Slapin and Proksch, 2008), such as secular/religious, pro-social spending/antisocial spending, advocating immediate reforms/gradual reforms, and general left/right.

The data analysis provides interesting findings. First, the religious–secular dimension is important, but political reforms and the government’s role in regulating the economy are also very significant dimensions that heavily explain the primary axis of political party competition in

several MENA countries. Second, 79% of the main political parties in the MENA region are classified as rightist on a general left–right scale by the country experts. Only 21% of the major parties are categorized as leftist. Third, the “left–right reversed” theory holds true in numerous MENA countries. The analysis revealed several examples in which conservative parties in various MENA countries possess ideologies that are typically associated with left-wing ideologies in the West, and vice versa. The following sections will, respectively, discuss the MENA party politics theories, explain the survey measurement method and data, present the results, and offer conclusions.

Ideological cleavages in the West versus the MENA

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) compare the foundations of the current political party systems in developed democracies to the historical socioeconomic experiences of the Western world. Most specifically, they highlight the role of the industrial revolution and massive urbanization, which created various socioeconomic classes in Europe and North America. Studies show that the current political party competition in developed democratic societies in Europe and North America is overwhelmingly determined by parties’ ideological positions on social issues (such as abortion, homosexuality, and the environment) and on economic matters (such as the government’s role in regulating the economy) (Inglehart, 1997). Similar classifications apply to party systems in Latin America as well (Kitschelt et al., 2010). Comparative studies also show that leftist parties usually advocate for individual rights/choices and the government’s control on the economy, while rightist parties are usually antiabortion and anti-homosexuality, and support free market policies (Benoit and Laver, 2006; Budge and Klingemann, 2001).

While this type of political party system is prevalent in many parts of the world, studies also show that such a political system is not applicable in certain parts of the world. For example, Tavits and Letki (2009) argue that traditionally leftist parties tend to advocate rightist economic policies in various postcommunist countries for reasons such as their necessity to prove their disassociation from socialism and the level of loyalty among leftist voters who would not punish the parties even if they advocate fiscal austerity and tighter budgets. They also argue the traditionally rightist parties spent more freely so that they can alleviate economic difficulties originating from market reforms.

When it comes to the Middle East, the left–right politics presents even a stronger contrast. Studies argue that traditional party competition theories do not apply to political parties in this region for various reasons such as its colonial history and the associated top-down secularization/modernization processes (Gelvin, 2004; Göle, 1996; Hashemi, 2009).

Building on these historical developments, studies highlight three points to describe the nature of current political party competition in the Middle Eastern countries. First, the role of religion in politics is the top issue area that explains the structure of party competition in MENA countries (Blaydes and Linzer, 2012). In this literature, parties are generally separated as conservative/Islamist versus leftist/secular (Eyadat, 2015; Hamid, 2014; Hamzawy, 2017; Lust and Waldner, 2016). Even some global comparative studies support the significance of the religious–secular dimension in the MENA context. For example, in their research on 43 developed democracies, Benoit and Laver (2006) found that Turkey is one of the few countries in which the economic and social left–right dimensions fail to explain the primary axis of party competition. Instead, the religious/secular dimension is found to be the most important. Another exception is the other MENA country in the data set, Israel, where the primary dimension of party competition is best explained by parties' positions on Palestinian statehood and security issues.

The emergence of the secular–religious dimension as the primary dimension of conflict in Muslim-majority MENA countries is generally traced back to the 1970s, when left-wing socialist parties dominated governments and Islamist parties owned the issue of incorporating religion into politics. During this era, Islamist movements seized the opportunity to gain support among observant Muslims against repressive secular elites (Hinnebusch, 2017). Hamid (2014) compares this issue-ownership strategy to the strategies of niche parties (such as the Green Party) in Europe. He argues that as a result, the remaining parties were forced to respond to this issue of religion in politics, given the substantive portion of people in MENA countries who are observant Muslims and may naturally find an increased role of Islam on politics appealing.

This particular literature also claims that the economic left–right dimension is not a major factor in MENA political competition. Although economic problems have been widespread across the region for several decades, parties have failed to develop varying programmatic policies. Instead, both leftist and Islamist parties largely advocated a free market economy approach, subsidies for the poor, and social justice for all (Hamid, 2014). When economic issues mattered, parties generally used clientelistic strategies (Blaydes, 2011; Brownlee, 2007; Lust-Okar, 2006).

Nevertheless, some studies in the literature highlight the significance of the economic left–right dimension in the MENA. For example, according to Yildirim (2016), the interaction between the center–periphery cleavage and the economic left–right cleavage has been the main factor in the success of moderate Islamist parties over the last two decades. In his analysis on Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey, he demonstrates that moderate Islamist parties favored liberal economic policies along with higher social spending,

which are contrary to the policies of the more extreme Islamist parties.

The second point MENA studies have highlighted with regard to party politics in the region is the weakness of left-leaning parties. Two important proposed theories explain why the size of leftist politics is small in the region. First, the stark defeat of Arab countries by Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967 resulted in unprecedented soul-searching by regimes in the region. It eventually led to the conclusion that the socialist experiment had failed to attract large segments of the Middle East citizens (Hamid, 2014). Historically, as the Islamist parties started growing, leftist parties started weakening (Resta, 2018). Second, leftist policies did not appeal to the overwhelming majority of Middle East people who are observant Muslims (Hamid, 2014). In many societies, being leftist/secular was viewed as being against practicing religion. A statement from a liberal candidate who lost the 2011 elections in Egypt supports this perspective: “I did not run a political campaign; I was running a campaign that depended on me telling voters I’m not an atheist” (Brookings Report, 2012). Also, Wegner and Cavatorta (2018: 6) noted that pushing a leftist–secular political agenda on social matters is generally perceived as immoral among the Arab societies. Given the widespread weakness of leftist–secular parties in the region, policy experts started articulating recommendations for such parties to improve their popular support in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. For example, Muasher (2013) argues that the newly formed leftist–secular parties could overcome their low levels of electoral support by establishing clear grassroots networks, developing well-defined programmatic policies that address real societal needs, promoting what policies they support (instead of discussing which ones they are against), and strengthening their institutional structure.

The third point raised by the party politics literature is that the overall nature of left–right politics in Middle East countries may differ from European norms of left- and right-wing politics. By examining the electoral manifestos from 2002 to 2010, Aydogan and Slapin (2015) demonstrate that left–right political stances in Turkey are reversed when compared to Western-style party competition. Kucukomer (2002) argues that traditionally rightist parties in Turkey tend to be more reformist than the country’s traditionally leftist parties. Even in terms of voter profiles, studies associate leftist parties in Turkey with rightist ones in Europe (Ayata and Ayata, 2007). For example, Ciddi (2008) found that center-left CHP (Republican People’s Party) received the highest number of votes in Turkey’s most affluent districts, despite the fact that leftist parties in Europe mostly represent poor voters. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, the early Arab leftist (socialist) parties in the 1960s had strong nationalist ideology (Cavatorta and Storm, 2018; Resta, 2018), which is again in contrast to the traditional leftist party attitude in Europe

and North America. In fact, Arab socialism is defined as the synthesis of socialism and Pan-Arabism (Devlin, 1991). Additionally, former studies showed that rightist Islamist parties in the Middle East tend to combine various seemingly contradictory economic policies such as advocating both economic liberalization and larger social benefits to the poor (Lyra, 2017). Furthermore, Wegner and Cavatorta (2018) found that the voters of secular leftist parties and Islamist conservative parties in the North Africa have no significant difference in terms of economic policy stances. Pellicer and Wegner (2014) notes that Islamist/conservative parties in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt attract poor voters, possibly due to the welfare organizations their political party/movement is associated with.

In summary, the literature on MENA political parties suggest that (1) the religious–secular divide is the most salient ideological cleavage; (2) right-wing political parties dominate the political spectrum; and (3) left–right politics is reversed in the region. However, there is no regionwide empirical study testing these arguments to explore the extent to which these theories hold or fail. Does the religious–secular dimension explain the legal political party competition in all MENA countries, particularly considering the fact that some major Islamist parties are banned in countries like Egypt? If not, what is the top issue dimension in each country and what are the other major issue dimensions? Is the economic left–right dimension totally absent from the political party systems in MENA countries? In addition, while it is well-known that leftist politics does not appeal to large segments of the people in the region, little is known about overall size of the leftist politics. What percent of the major parties in MENA are known as leftist parties? Finally, is the “left–right reversed” argument unique to Turkey? If not, to what extent does it apply in other MENA countries? The following section explains the survey measurement method used to address these questions.

Measurement methodology and data³

Political science studies have used various measurement techniques to capture political parties’ ideological positions. The most prominent methods include public opinion surveys, elite (politician) surveys, political text analysis, and roll-call vote analysis. All of these methods have various advantages and disadvantages, and each becomes useful based on the nature of the research question.

This study uses expert survey analysis for two main reasons. First, such surveys have a higher level of accuracy in determining party placement along predetermined ideological scales. Second, expert surveys are less expensive to administer than the other methods of measurement. Public opinion surveys and elite surveys are very useful sources, but they are highly costly. Particularly, when the research

question requires examining an issue across a dozen countries, as in the case of the MENA, the cost may become prohibitive to the conducting research. Even more importantly, citizens are generally less knowledgeable on the positions of political parties on different ideological scales, making the findings less useful. Additionally, it is hard to ensure that politicians respond sincerely to survey questions about their ideological positions on different issues due to the fact that their responses may be a function of how they want to be seen by their constituency rather than who really they are. Both text analyses and roll-call vote analyses are relatively inexpensive to conduct; however, such data are generally not readily available. For example, some countries do not record roll-call votes of individual legislators, which is the case even in some more developed countries in Europe (Benoit and Laver, 2006).⁴ Even if we manage to find comparable roll-call vote or text data, there needs to be an extensive hand coding procedure so that the data are pre-classified in terms of their reference to different issue areas listed below to replicate the existing study.⁵

The country experts surveyed were mainly legislative politics scholars and policy experts with profound knowledge on regional political parties. Experts were identified from three main sources: a list of political scientists affiliated with Middle East Studies Association; experts affiliated with prominent think tanks that conduct research on Middle East politics, such as the Middle East Institute and Brookings Institute; and scholars who have published research on Middle East political parties in leading comparative politics journals such as *Party Politics* and *Electoral Studies* as well as in leading area journals such as the *Middle East Journal* and the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. A total of 205 experts were involved in this study.⁶

A total of 12 countries were included in this particular study. They included five Arab republics (Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Algeria, and Iraq), four Arab monarchies (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco), and three non-Arab republics (Turkey, Israel, and Iran). All of these countries feature political parties/groups in parliament that perform at least some minimal role in the governance. Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Palestine were excluded due to the level of conflict and/or state failure in these contexts, and Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia were excluded because they lack political parties. For each country, only the top-five political parties active in the current legislative session were selected. The decision to exclude smaller parties is truly practical, as doing so would substantively increase the length of survey and eventually lead to a decrease in the overall response rate.⁷

The survey included total of eight issue areas that could potentially explain the political competition in the MENA countries, as asserted in the Middle East politics literature and overarching studies of comparative politics.

Table 1. Issues selected as the top political competition dimension in each country (in %).

	Algeria	Bahrain	Egypt	Iran	Iraq	Israel	Jordan	Kuwait	Lebanon	Morocco	Tunisia	Turkey	Average
Economy	23	6	19	15	13	7	15	20	12	12	11	10	13.6
Social spending	18	12	19	9	7	14	9	18	18	16	16	8	13.7
Traditions	15	19	16	9	3	4	15	16	8	13	8	17	11.9
Political reforms	15	17	16	15	13	1	20	20	20	18	11	16	15.2
Religion	13	13	11	12	23	21	7	6	13	13	20	18	14.2
Nationalism	8	17	5	1	20	22	15	12	13	9	2	17	11.8
Extremism	8	12	12	0	20	8	2	6	8	7	15	3	8.4
Palestine issue	0	4	2	0	0	22	17	2	7	0	0	0	4.5
Foreign policy	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.1
Nuclear deal	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.1
Supreme leader	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Transitional justice	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	0	1.3
European Union	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0.8
Sahara conflict	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	1

Note: The numbers in boldface are the highest percentages for each country.

Additionally, previous expert survey studies (Bakker et al., 2015; Benoit and Laver, 2006) were used as a reference in selecting these specific issue dimensions in order to compare and contrast the findings. These issue areas include the following:

- Social spending: The level of social spending to benefit the less privileged in society.
- Role of the state in governing the economy: The extent of the state's involvement in regulating private economic activity.
- Religion (secularism): The role of religion in the design and implementation of laws.
- Traditional authority, institutions, and customs: The extent of state interference on individual liberties.
- National identity: Conflict between protecting minority rights and preserving national identity.
- Extremism: The extent to which the party advocates harsh measures against Islamic extremism.
- Political reforms: The need to implement immediate democratic reforms.
- Palestine issue: Stance toward Arab–Israeli conflict (except Israel); position on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state (only for Israel).
- Additionally, after consulting with country experts, the following country-specific issue areas were added:
 - The Sahara conflict: Stance toward the Sahara conflict (Morocco).
 - The nuclear deal: Adherence to the terms of the US–Iran nuclear deal (Iran).
 - Role of the supreme leader: Extent of (parties') support for the supreme leader's control over government affairs (Iran).

- Foreign policy: The nature of the relationship with the United States (Iran).
- Transitional justice: Extent of support for the implementation of transitional justice (Tunisia).
- European Union: The level of support for membership in the European Union (Turkey).

For the survey, experts first chose the top-five issue dimensions from the list above to indicate which issues they think are most relevant to political party competition in their country of expertise. They then ranked each political party's ideological position on each of the relevant dimensions, plus the general left–right dimension, along a scale ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). In order to improve the accuracy of the survey, the end points for each dimension were clearly defined. For example, the extreme left position in the secular/religious dimension represents a party that believes religious texts should play no role in the design and implementation of laws, while the extreme right position means a party believes that laws should conform to the rules and codes of conduct presented in religious texts. The end point definitions for each dimension can be found in the Online Supplemental Material. The next section discusses the survey results.

Results

Table 1 presents how frequently each category was chosen for each country based on the top-five issue areas respondents selected for their country of expertise. Just to name a few, the economy was the top issue for Algeria, picked by 23% of the experts on Algerian politics, while traditions was the primary issue for Bahrain, selected by 19% of participants who focus on Bahrain. The bolded numbers

indicate the highest issue scores for each country. Of these, the most frequently chosen issues across all countries were the economy, reform, and religion dimensions. The final column represents the averages for each dimension across countries. Very surprisingly, political reforms garnered the highest average score, followed by the religion dimension. On average, 15.2% of the experts selected political reforms as a top issue area, while 14.2% chose the religion dimension.

Table 2 presents the results of the factor analyses performed on each country. In political science literature, factor analysis is frequently used to uncover which variables, among a set of correlated variables, explain underlying latent political concepts, including the effectiveness of international organizations (Gray and Slapin, 2012), level of democracy (Pemstein et al., 2010), to measure political Islamism (Achilov, 2016), and the ideological positions of political parties (Benoit and Laver, 2006; Clinton et al., 2004). It also provides the degree of dimensionality in each case—that is, the number of different dimensions explaining political competition in a country.⁸ As the first column in Table 2 indicates, in Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia, policy spaces are three-dimensional, that is, made up of three different factors. In the rest of the region, they are two-dimensional.

To begin with, the religion dimension weighs most heavily on the first factor in a total of three countries: Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. The nationalism dimension in Egypt, the social spending dimension in Jordan, and the traditions dimension in Turkey are the second-most influential dimensions on the first factor. On the one hand, finding that the religious/secular divide is the primary dimension of party competition in Turkey provides a validity check for this survey when comparing the findings to the results of the expert survey conducted by Benoit and Laver (2006).⁹ The order of the parties for Turkey's political party system, from left to right, is also consistent across these two surveys.¹⁰ On the other hand, the fact that this result only holds true for 3 (of the 12) countries in the survey is contrary to the findings in the qualitative literature that claims the religious–secular dimension dominates party politics in the MENA. The results indicate that, particularly in countries like Algeria, Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon, the factor loading of the religious/secular dimension is quite small, which suggests an even lower significance of this dimension in explaining political competition in the region.

Furthermore, the fact that religious/secular dimension is the one with highest factor loading in Egyptian politics demonstrates that failure to include banned political Islamist Muslim Brotherhood party did not result in underestimation of the religious/secular dimension, at least on the Egyptian example.¹¹

Secondly, the economic left–right dimension is the primary influence on the first factor in five countries: Bahrain,

Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, and Lebanon. In three of these countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon), the signs of the coefficients are negative. This suggests a negative correlation between this particular dimension and dimensions with positive coefficients, such as nationalism dimension for Lebanon. Thus, parties tend to be ranked in opposing order on the nationalism and economic left–right dimensions in Lebanon. Figure 1 visually elaborates on this finding. As shown, more nationalist parties tend to advocate a larger role of government in regulating the economy. Specifically, Hezbollah, the party in Lebanon with the strongest nationalist sentiments, is positioned as the most leftist party on the economic left–right scale. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, the Future Movement and Lebanese Forces Party were positioned on a certain region in the graph, which represents advocating free market as well as minority rights. Reforms dimension in Bahrain and traditions dimension in Kuwait also have similar relationship with the economy dimension in these countries. All these findings support the left–right reversed argument explained above. Furthermore, these particular results also overlap with the findings of earlier studies showing how traditionally leftist parties advocate rightist economic policies in postcommunist Europe, and vice versa (Tavits and Letki, 2009).

Table 2 also presents that Algeria is unique in the list in terms of mimicking Western style left–right politics. All of the variables including the economic left–right load positively on the latent dimensions. This suggests that traditionally leftist parties are placed on the left in all dimensions while the traditionally rightist ones are placed on the right. It will be interesting to see how will the recent development such as large-scale street protests and the removal of the president after military pressure will influence this dynamic.

Third, the political reforms dimension weighs most heavily on the first factor in three countries: Algeria, Iran, and Morocco. The second-most influential dimensions are nationalism in Algeria, religion in Iran, and social spending in Morocco. The coefficients for both social spending and political reforms are negative in Morocco, while nationalism has a positive sign. This suggests that parties that were scored as more rightist on the nationalism dimension such as Justice and Development Party (PJD) were scored as more leftist on the reforms and social spending dimensions by the experts on Morocco. This confirms earlier research discussing the conservative PJD's reformist political stance in the Moroccan context (e.g. see the work of Wegner and Pellicer, 2011). This also supports the theory on how left–right politics in MENA is different when compared with the West.

Fourth, Tunisia stands as a unique case among the 12 countries surveyed for two reasons. For one, the extremism dimension is the most influential on the first factor, rather than religion, economy, or reforms, which were the only

Table 2. Factor analyses results with varimax-rotated loadings.

Country	Factor	Eigenvalues	Variance explained	Social spending	Economy	Religion	Tradition	Nationalism	Extremism	Reforms	Nuclear deal	Supreme leader	Foreign policy/ Palestine issue/ Transitional justice/ European Union*
Algeria	1	4.16	0.503	0.790	0.125	0.169	0.958	0.970	0.128	0.989			
Algeria	2	2.15	0.399	0.134	0.906	0.973	0.238	0.116	0.965	0.091			
Bahrain	1	5.18	0.741	-0.372	-0.999	0.975	0.981	0.507	0.954	0.983			
Bahrain	2	1.79	0.256	0.927	-0.042	-0.191	0.188	0.862	-0.293	0.178			
Egypt	1	5.74	0.563	0.386	0.198	0.930	0.663	0.927	-0.867	0.915			
Egypt	2	1.06	0.409	0.921	0.980	0.233	0.737	0.263	-0.492	0.386			
Iran	1	8.15	0.804	-0.224	-0.910	0.985	0.956	0.889		0.986	0.951	0.977	0.922
Iran	2	0.81	0.192	-0.974	-0.383	0.163	0.285	0.458		0.167	0.311	0.206	0.386
Iraq	1	3.64	0.411	0.212	0.985	0.786	-0.137	0.955	-0.546	-0.117			
Iraq	2	2.28	0.305	-0.034	-0.132	-0.130	0.984	-0.255	0.836	-0.607			
Iraq	3	1.08	0.284	0.977	0.113	-0.605	-0.111	0.152	-0.053	0.786			
Israel	1	5.31	0.656	0.976	0.980	0.250	-0.246	0.971	-0.963	0.669			0.946
Israel	2	2.04	0.263	0.046	0.038	0.959	0.935	0.113	0.220	0.470			0.160
Jordan	1	4.64	0.570	-0.967	0.617	0.970	0.154	-0.419		-0.905			0.844
Jordan	2	1.39	0.292	-0.130	-0.727	-0.123	0.840	0.668	0.531	0.361			-0.449
Kuwait	1	5.03	0.652	-0.982	-0.985	0.942	0.968	0.607	0.800	0.397			0.892
Kuwait	2	1.60	0.294	-0.072	-0.174	0.336	0.044	0.774	0.800	-0.819			0.098
Lebanon	1	5.16	0.497	-0.917	-0.936	0.103	0.700	0.934	-0.180	-0.248			0.408
Lebanon	2	1.51	0.259	0.322	0.351	-0.265	0.034	-0.279	0.964	0.871			
Lebanon	3	1.10	0.215	-0.090	-0.024	0.956	0.705	0.194	-0.044	-0.304			
Morocco	1	5.10	0.687	-0.932	0.093	0.876	0.898	0.896	0.766	-0.985			
Morocco	2	1.12	0.202	0.201	0.986	0.325	0.177	0.223	0.433	-0.166			
Tunisia	1	3.93	0.358	-0.086	0.128	0.899	0.820	-0.167	0.931	-0.114			-0.671
Tunisia	2	2.63	0.319	0.350	0.033	-0.244	0.553	0.972	-0.268	0.867			0.544
Tunisia	3	1.33	0.309	0.925	0.990	0.351	0.143	0.031	-0.247	0.426			0.500
Turkey	1	6.23	0.658	0.970	0.143	0.995	0.975	0.665	-0.566	0.879			0.910
Turkey	2	1.70	0.332	0.066	-0.988	-0.039	0.223	0.746	-0.823	0.474			0.409

Note: Numbers in boldface represent the coefficients for the dimensions that most heavily weigh on the first factor in each country.

*In this category, the survey measured the following dimensions: foreign policy for Iran, transitional justice for Tunisia, European Union membership for Turkey, and Palestine issue for Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.

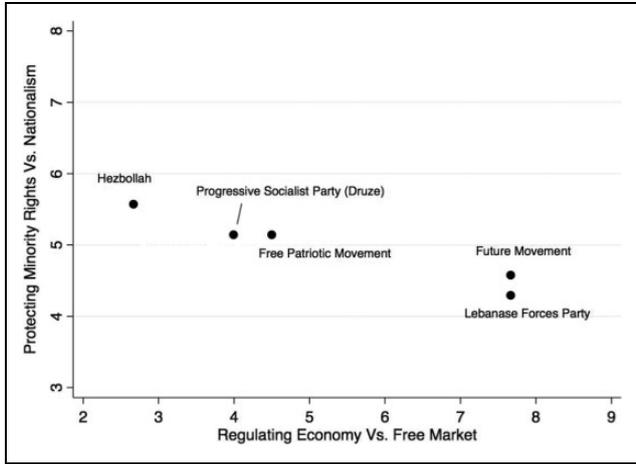


Figure 1. Lebanese parties placement on the economy versus nationalism dimensions.

dimensions that weighed most heavily onto the first factor in at least one country. This finding largely supports the former research on the relevance of extremism and ISIS recruitment in Tunisia. In fact, Tunisia is the pioneer in recruitment of fighters for the extremist organizations like ISIS (Benmelech and Klor, 2018). Parties’ placement on this dimension from left to right is Nidaa Tounes, Afek Tounes, Free Patriotic Union, Popular Front, and Ennahdha. Second, even the third factor explains more than 30% variance within the observed variables. The nationalism and economy dimensions are the most influential on the second and third factors, respectively. The relative insignificance of the religious–secular divide in these results is consistent with findings by Hamid (2014), who argues that the importance of the religious–secular divide decreased in Tunisia partly due to the fact that Islamists, liberals, and leftists formed a coalition during the post-revolution era.

As the third column in Table 2 illustrates, the first factor explains more than 60% of the variance in the underlying latent dimension of party competition in several countries. In Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan—where the policy space is two-dimensional—the second factor also explains substantively wide variation in competition among political parties. The second factor was most heavily influenced by religion in Algeria, the economy in Egypt, and traditions in Jordan.

As noted above, the survey also asked the experts to rank the political parties along a general left–right scale. This allowed testing of the hypothesis that MENA parties’ positions on a general left–right scale is best explained by their positions on the secular–religious dimension. For this analysis, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was conducted, using the party positions on general left–right scale as the dependent variable and their positions on the religion, economy, and reform dimensions as the

Table 3. Explaining the general left–right ideological dimension in the Middle East.

Variables	General left–right scale
Economic left–right dimension	0.338* (0.184)
Religious–secular dimension	0.403*** (0.082)
Political reforms dimension	0.357*** (0.085)
Constant	0.148 (0.868)
Observations	70
R ²	0.583

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1.

independent variables. I selected these three independent variables due to their relatively higher importance, as indicated above. In this analysis, each observation represents an expert placement of a party from a country. Hence, I used robust standard errors clustered around countries. The results, presented in Table 3, show that the religious–secular issue dimension best explains the parties’ placement on a general left–right ideological scale. However, the political reforms dimension is also a very important determinant, and the impact of the economic left–right dimension is not negligible. This finding suggests that while the religious–secular issue dimension is important, it would be simplistic to argue that it alone explains the nature of left–right party competition in the MENA region.

Figure 2 illustrates the party positions on a general left–right ideological scale across all of the countries included in the survey.¹² The results show that right-wing politics overwhelmingly dominates the political party systems in the region, particularly when the non-Arab countries (Iran, Israel, and Turkey) are excluded. According to the experts, in countries like Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco,¹³ there is no single leftist party among the top-five legislative parties. Only 12 of the 56 political parties in the MENA are scored on the left half of the left–right ideological scale. This particular finding provides solid quantitative support for previous theories in qualitative studies regarding the overall size of leftist politics in the MENA region.

Algeria is, once again, unique in the data set, as it has highest number of leftist parties. In fact, it has three leftist and two rightist parties. In Turkey, Tunisia, and Lebanon, the political spectrum seems to be balanced, as they each have nearly equal number of parties on both sides of the ideological spectrum. The leftist parties in Turkey, according to the experts surveyed, are the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and the Republican People’s Party (CHP), which is consistent with previous studies (Benoit and Laver, 2006). In Lebanon, the leftist parties are the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and Hezbollah, an Islamist party.¹⁴ Hezbollah’s positioning as left-of-center may be attributed to the fact that it is the most leftist party in the country on the left–right economy scale, as shown in Figure 1. It is also possible that in placing Lebanese parties on

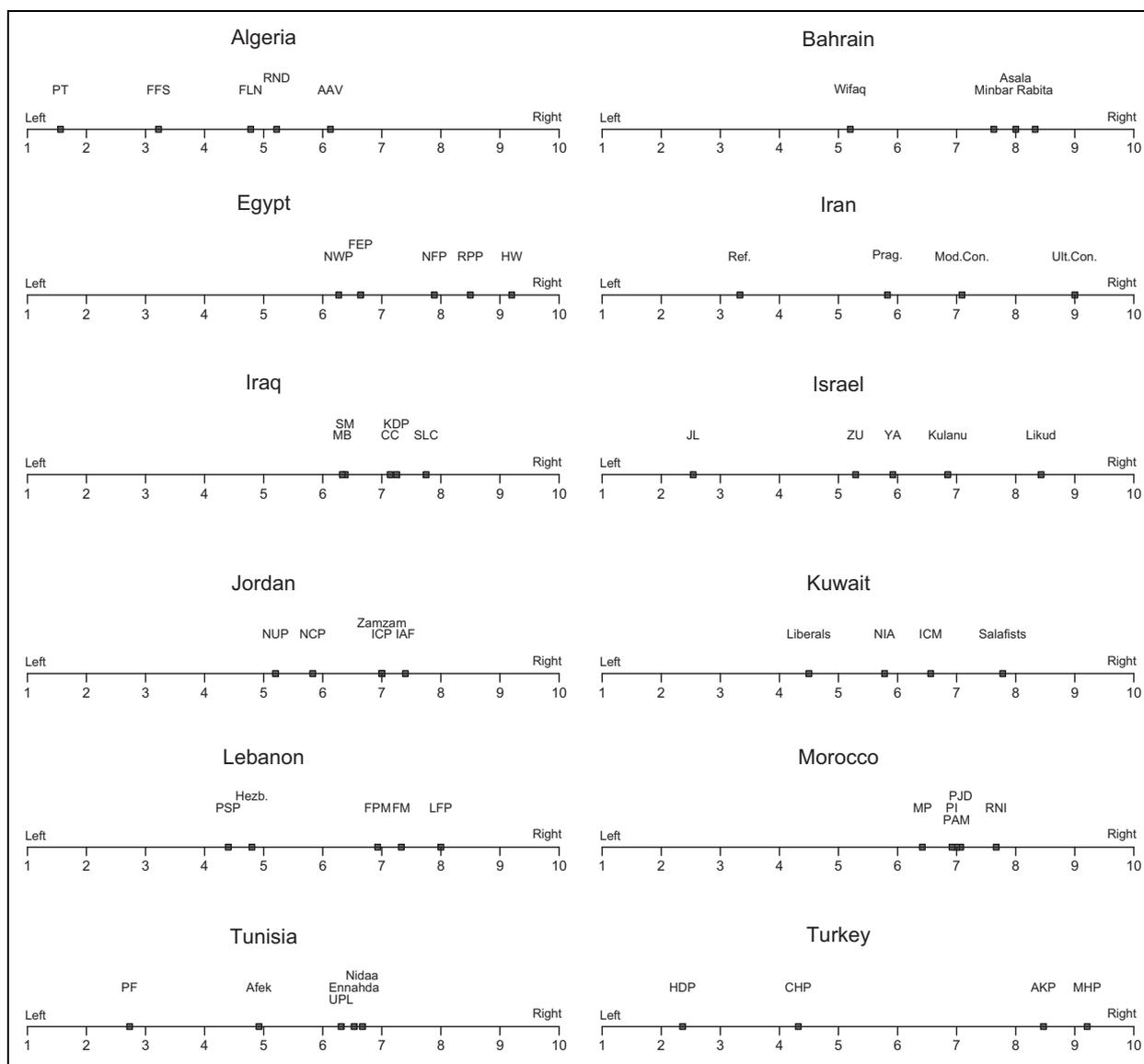


Figure 2. General left–right ideological positions of political parties in MENA countries. MENA: Middle East and North Africa.

the general left–right scale, the experts surveyed gave greater consideration to the economic left–right dimension more than to the religious–secular dimension. This is supported by the results in Table 2, which show that the factor loading for the economy dimension is higher than the coefficient for the religion dimension in the first factor. The religion dimension only heavily weighs on the third factor.

In Tunisia, the leftist parties are the Popular Front (PF) and Afek Tounes, while the rightist parties are the Free Patriotic Union (UPL), Ennahda, and Nidaa Tounes. It is surprising to see Nidaa Tounes (a well-known secular party in Tunisia) on the right end of the spectrum next to Ennahda (a well-known religious party in Tunisia).¹⁵ This finding can be attributed to Tunisia’s three-dimensional

policy space, whereby all three factors explain at least 30% of the variance, as presented in Table 2. As noted above, the first factor in Tunisia is most heavily shaped by the extremism dimension. Table 4 presents that Nidaa Tounes is placed on the left of Ennahda, as expected. However, when it comes to the dimension that most heavily influences the second factor—nationalism—Nidaa Tounes is placed on the right end of the spectrum, while Ennahda is on the left end. This suggests that the secular party in Tunisia is highly nationalist, while the religious party advocates for minority rights. This particular example also supports the hypothesis that left–right politics is reversed in the MENA region. Regarding the third factor, both parties are positioned on the right side of the economic left–right spectrum.

Table 4. Tunisian parties' placement on key dimensions.

Party	Dimension	Mean expert placement
Nidaa Tounes	Regulating economy	6.67
Ennahdha	Regulating economy	6.83
Free Patriotic Union (UPL)	Regulating economy	5.00
Popular Front	Regulating economy	2.17
Afek Tounes	Regulating economy	6.00
Nidaa Tounes	Religion	1.75
Ennahdha	Religion	7.42
Free Patriotic Union (UPL)	Religion	2.45
Popular Front	Religion	1.75
Afek Tounes	Religion	2.00
Nidaa Tounes	National identity	8.00
Ennahdha	National identity	3.00
Free Patriotic Union (UPL)	National identity	10.00
Popular Front	National identity	4.00
Afek Tounes	National identity	3.00
Nidaa Tounes	Extremism	1.63
Ennahdha	Extremism	4.50
Free Patriotic Union (UPL)	Extremism	3.00
Popular Front	Extremism	3.33
Afek Tounes	Extremism	2.29
Nidaa Tounes	General left–right	6.67
Ennahdha	General left–right	6.53
Free Patriotic Union (UPL)	General left–right	6.31
Popular Front	General left–right	2.73
Afek Tounes	General left–right	4.92

Conclusion

This article aimed to expand the literature on left–right politics beyond established democracies by focusing on party systems in the MENA region. The above analysis showed that the religious/secular dimension is one of the most important factor explaining the political competition in the region. However, political reforms and the economic left–right divide are also substantively important.¹⁶ In fact, this finding builds on an emerging literature on Arab political parties. For example, Abduljaber and Kalin (2019) noted that the recent globalization trend in the Middle East transformed the unidimensional political competition based on religious–secular divide into a multidimensional one in which economic left–right has been an increasingly important political dimension in the MENA. Wegner and Cavatorta's (2018) recent study also challenged the claim that the Islamist–secular divide systematically organizes the entire political completion within Arab party systems. Additionally, the study found that leftist parties constitute only 21% of all the major parties in the MENA region. Recent scholarship on Arab parties attributes this outcome to the cultural norms and prejudices toward leftist/secular ideologies in Muslim societies (Hamid, 2014). Finally, the results provided evidence supporting the notion that the left–right ideological scale is significantly reversed in MENA countries, when compared with Europe and the

North America. This may be largely driven by Islamist parties' economic policies supporting redistribution for the poor as well as secular leftist parties' nationalist ideological leanings as described by the contemporary research (Kurzman and Naqvi, 2009; Lyra, 2017; Pellicer and Wegner, 2014; Resta, 2018).

This analysis serves as an essential step in explicating the bedrocks of political party competition in the region. Given the fact that this research provides a comprehensive data set for the ideological positions of regional parties on various issue areas, it will lay the foundation for future scholarship on topics such as representation (when combined with public opinion data), comparative electoral behavior, and legislative issue prioritization.

It is worth noting that in some Middle East countries like Libya, tribal affiliation determines the main political cleavages, while in other cases like in Iraq, ethno-religious affiliation is the main dimension of competition (Cavatorta and Storm, 2018). Similarly, in many countries of the region, parties may be divided based on their support and opposition to the ruling regime (such as a royal family, religious oligarchy, or authoritarian president). Although such cleavages are highly important in understanding the party systems in the Middle East, detecting parties' affiliations in such contexts is relatively straightforward. For example, experts all agree that Hezbollah in Lebanon is a Shia party, the Kurdistan Democracy Party in Iraq is a Kurdish party, and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties generally oppose the regime. Indeed, an extant literature highlights this aspect of party competition and classifies parties along these cleavages. However, what is more interesting, harder to detect, and missing in the literature is how parties align on ideological scales, regardless of their tribal or ethno-religious affiliations. Hence, this particular study focused on how parties are distributed on ideological scales, instead of examining nonideological alienations. Future research should combine ideological and nonideological cleavages.

In this research, the party systems in MENA were compared with the “traditional” left–right politics in the western countries, rather than the political systems that we very recently started observing. In fact, with the rapid spread of populist right-wing movements, it is apparent that the nature of left–right politics has been evolving, if not disappearing, in some developed European countries. For example, the French lower class voters have been increasingly voting for Marine Le Pen (and her party The National Rally/Front National), while the poorer segments of Italy supports populist anti-immigration parties like the League and the Five Star Movement. Similarly, Donald Trump received a sizable support among the working class voters in 2016 US presidential elections. These are contrary to the norms of the traditional left–right politics. If the populist movements expand in the western societies, it would be even more interesting to compare and contrast the political structures across the regions including MENA.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. This article is part of the project, "Confronting the Governance Crisis in the MENA Region: Re-writing the Social Contract Post-Arab Spring," funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The two-year project aimed to identify effective and lasting policy interventions that foster more inclusive and pluralistic states in the MENA region and was developed by Dr. Marwa Shalaby, Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, and Kadir Yildirim. The author(s) wish to give special thanks/acknowledgment to Dr. Shalaby for her contribution in securing funding for the study, conducting relevant fieldwork, and collecting public opinion and expert surveys data with Abdullah Aydogan for this project. Also very special thanks to anonymous Middle East experts who participated in the expert survey.
 2. Shalaby and Aydogan (2018) showed that the citizen priorities and the parliamentary question topic areas largely overlap for the major Moroccan parties, while Pellicer and Wegner (2014) showed that clientelism has almost no role in electoral support of the Moroccan Islamist party.
 3. Please cite the data introduced in this study as follows: Abdullah Aydogan and Marwa Shalaby. Dataset on Ideological Placements of Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa.
 4. As all methods, expert surveys have certain potential limitations. The most important one deals with the fact that experts may be unsure about the placement of certain political parties on certain issue areas. To deal with this issue, the country experts in this study are carefully selected, the analysis is limited to the top-five legislative parties, and also each expert responded only the top-five issue areas that they believe the primary dimension of conflict in their respective countries. We discussed all of these three strategies below in more detail. Additionally, in the survey design, experts were given opportunity to skip the placement of parties in case they are not sure. That is to say, "force answer" option was never used in the survey design. Also, in each of the placement question for each party, "don't know" category was added.
- Also, at the very beginning of the survey, experts are encouraged to select don't know option in case they do not wish to answer the question. With this strategy, I aimed to receive party placement information from the experts only if they are fully aware of the party positions. In fact, in a significant number of cases, experts either skipped the question or selected don't know category. For example, the experts placed parties on social spending scale in total of 282 times, while they selected don't know option or skipped the question for 31 times. Overall, an expert selected don't know category or simply skipped the placement of a party on a dimension in 26% of the time.
5. Curini (2010) recommends being cautious while using expert surveys like Benoit and Laver (2006), due to bias of experts placing center-right parties, and recommends using predetermined ideological scales and data reduction methods like factor analysis. This recommendation was largely followed in this study. For text scaling methods employed in the Middle East research, see the work of Resta (2019) on Egyptian political parties and Aydogan et al. (2019) on Turkish parties.
 6. A total of 739 experts were contacted. Overall response rate is 28%.
 7. Because the experts were not provided with any incentives to complete the survey, the survey was kept less than 15 min and this length was specified upfront. Inclusion of smaller parties likely would have added only a marginal improvement to the survey results. Additionally, in some countries, the political groups in the parliament are not called "parties." Instead, there are societies in Bahrain, factions in Iran, and blocs in Kuwait. I used this set of terminology in the expert survey design, but I treated these groups as parties in the survey analysis. In Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, and Bahrain, there were only four legislative parties in the current legislative session. Hence, the total number of parties was kept in four, rather than five, in these cases.
 8. As a rule of thumb, dimensionality is estimated by looking at the number of eigenvalues that exceed unity (i.e. higher than 1, lower than -1) for each factor. For example, if two factors have eigenvalue that are greater than 1, the dimensionality is assumed to be 2 and the first and second factors are assumed to be the major latent factors. Hence, the remaining factors are neglected. For the purpose of this study, the remaining factors were not presented in the table.
 9. Turkey is the only country that is included in both surveys with the same party lists. Israel's party system has substantively changed since 2006. Hence, I was not able to compare party systems of Israel in these surveys. For further validity check, I compared the results with Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2015) and found that both surveys place the Turkish political parties in exactly the same order from left to right on various issue dimensions including general left-right, traditional authority, nationalism, and religion. On dimensions like European Union membership, there are minor differences between the two surveys, which can be attributable to Justice and

- Development Party's (AKP) strong ideological shift since 2014, when the Chapel Hill expert survey was conducted.
10. Kitschelt (2013), Çarkoğlu et al. (2019), and Aydogan et al. (2019) also located AKP and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) at the right of the political spectrum while Republican People's Party (CHP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) at the opposite end.
 11. See the work of Resta (2019) for discussion on the prominence of secular–religious dimension in Egypt and ideological placements of Egyptian political parties based on automated text scaling methods on 2012 election manifesto data. Due to the significant political developments starting with the 2013 military coup, only two parties (Free Egyptians Party and the New Wafd Party) are in common in Resta's (2019) study and this study. Both research located them near the center of the political spectrum.
 12. See Table A2 in the Online Supplemental Material for the parties' mean ideological positions and the associated measurement errors on a general left–right scale. These results are largely confirmed by former country-case studies. For example, see the work of Navot et al. (2017) for Israel results and Abduljaber and Kalin (2019) for Jordan results.
 13. Kitschelt (2013) largely confirms this particular finding on Morocco, as all of the four common parties in these two data sets are placed as rightist in both studies, National Rally of Independents being the most rightist.
 14. Kitschelt (2013) also locates these two parties at the left side of the political spectrum. The ordering of Lebanese parties in Kitschelt (2013) is also very similar with the above finding. The only difference is that the positions of the leftist parties are switched. This may be attributed to the 10-year difference in between the data collection for these studies.
 15. Also see the work of Wolf (2018) in which Nidaa Tounes is defined as *rightwing* secular, Ennahda as religiously conservative, and Free Patriotic Union as leftwing. For more discussion, see the work of Yerkes and Yahmed (2019).
 16. Also note that the analysis is based on existing legal political parties in the Middle East and North Africa, excluding the banned political parties.

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