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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: The methodological challenges for a systematization of our knowledge about parties and party systems in the MENA region.

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: VALERIA RESTA AND MARYAM BEN SALEM

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

When debating about the political crises that puzzle the MENA region, there is often a missing piece, that is political parties, which are indeed key – and sometimes controversial- political players. On the one hand, they are portent of democratization in as much as they contribute to integrate the masses into politics, but, at the same time, they are also crucial for the resilience of authoritarianism. On the other hand, beyond regional specificities, political parties in the MENA are not immune from the illnesses political parties worldwide are undergoing, namely the crisis of trust, reduced membership, populism and so on. Despite the saliency of political parties in the region, the lack of data regarding their functioning, the ideological cleavages driving the political competition and their positioning on a variety of key political issues hampers any meaningful advancement in the comprehension of Arab politics, which otherwise will continue to be pinpointed to as characterized by immutable chaos. The present panel seeks to bring to the light new venues of research to overcome this gap.

Despite the poor democratic credentials of the MENA region, political parties are quintessential for the politics and the governance of the MENA (Hinnebusch 2021), where, despite some niches of clientelism and networks of kinship, ideology and programmatic competition play a crucial role in structuring party systems and parties' politicking. Yet, it is not yet clear along which dimensions political competition occurs and how party systems in the MENA region are structured.

The traditional comparative political science literature understands party politics in developed democracies as occurring within a left-right unidimensional space whose foundations have to do with the historical socio-economic experiences of the Western world. Parties' placement on this ideological continuum – which is important in order to understand the format of party systems and its consequences in terms of governability and policy making – depends on their positioning on social issues (e.g. abortion, LGBT+ rights and environment) and economic matters (e.g. the role of the state in economy). Even though this categorization presents some flaws in accounting for current politics, it is still the main working framework to understand party politics in many parts of the world.

However, when coming to the MENA region, the traditional left-right scheme (RILE) appears largely inapplicable in reason of the fact that the historical socio-economic experiences of the region differ from those of the Western world. Hence, the nature and the structure of party politics is a debated question.

In the MENA the RILE is deemed to be replaced by a religious-secular cleavage (Resta 2018). Some studies surmise that it conceals a divide between opponents (the Islamists) and supporter of the authoritarian status quo (which foment from the secularist side the Islam/secular divide) (Lust 2011), a centre-periphery rift (Yıldırım 2016), or a class divide (Merone 2015; Elsayyid and Hanafy 2014; Van Hamme, Gana and Maher 2014), and some others limit its scope to the role of religion in politics and gender issues (Wegner and Cavatorta 2018).

As for the tiers structuring political competition, in a recent study Aydogan (2020) has found that throughout the MENA the political space is two-dimensional (with the exception of Tunisia where it appeared to be three-dimensional) and that these dimensions are different depending on the country considered. For large part of the literature these can be conceived as a socio-economic left-right dimension and a 'moral' social liberal-conservative one (Abduljaber and Kalin 2019; Çarkoğlu, Krouwel and Yıldırım 2018). Even though this might appear similar to the RILE used for studying consolidated democracies, its employment would be misleading. First, some scholars contend that also the political reforms dimension is substantively important (Abduljaber 2020; Aydogan 2020). Second, it has emerged that many of the left-right political stances are significantly reversed in the MENA region (Aydogan 2020; Aydogan and Slapin 2010). Lastly, the political dimensions that

emerge as important to define the political space prove to be lowly inter-correlated thus demonstrating that the stemming ideological space has poor internal coherence (Abduljaber 2018).

The confusion that characterizes any endeavour at defining the nature of the political cleavage in the MENA region is at the base of the difficulties, and thereof the scarcity of attempts, in placing MENA parties on a political space (Resta 2019, 2022; Aydogan 2020) and, with, the possibility of having a first-hand idea of the party systems in the region.

In light of this promising but still puzzling state of the art, the present panel welcomes any work that tries to contribute to the systematization of our knowledge of parties and party systems operating in the MENA region. In particular, the panel will welcome papers that:

- Offer new insights on the comprehension of parties and party systems in the region;
- Present an account of how parties' structures influence the functioning of political parties in the MENA region;
- Present new data dealing with parties and party systems in the region;
- Reason on the compatibility of existing tools for studying parties and party systems (like the CMP) in the MENA region;
- Offer new typologies for categorizing parties in the MENA region;
- Analytically frame the cleavages structuring party systems in the MENA region;
- Contribute empirically, theoretically and meta-theoretically to the state of the art in the study of parties and party systems in the region.

The panel does not privilege a particular methodology and encourages the submissions of works using different methods - qualitative, quantitative or mixed ones.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Valeria Resta is adjunct professor at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. Her research focuses on the role and functions of political parties in authoritarian and transitional settings across the MENA region. She is the author of *Tunisia and Egypt after the Arab Spring: Party Politics in Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Routledge: forthcoming) and of the *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa* (with Francesco Cavatorta and Lise Storm). She has also published several journal articles and book chapters.

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