

# Social Policy after the Arab Spring: States and Social Rights in the MENA Region

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**Summary.** — We examine prospects for the shift from an *authoritarian corporatist* social policy regime to a democratic and developmental one, in light of popular socio-economic and political grievances and demands. Social policy can bring about a sense of inclusion, belonging, and rights on the part of beneficiaries, and is necessary for a well-functioning and dynamic economy. Democratic and developmental political systems in the region will largely depend on the social policy regime that emerges from social dialogues among different interest groups. References to recent debates in Tunisia suggest both prospects and challenges.  
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**Key words** — Arab Spring, social policy, welfare, democratic, developmental, Middle East and North Africa

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines opportunities and constraints for the development of social policy in light of popular demands for *social and economic rights* expressed during and after the 2011 protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco. The Arab Spring and the contentious nature of subsequent social and political developments give rise to key questions regarding the role of social policy in the trajectory of socio-political and economic transformation of, and stability in, the region. At the same time, new possibilities have emerged for policy-making that were absent under the autocratic regimes. Social policy can have a powerful effect on inclusion in the national community; it can help bring about a sense of participation and rights on the part of beneficiaries; it can prevent or alleviate social conflict; and it is a key ingredient for a labor market that functions fairly and effectively. The emergence and sustainability of political systems in the region that can be both democratic and developmental will to a large extent depend on the social policy regime that emerges. In turn, any new social policy regime will have to be the outcome of social dialogues between and among different interest groups. Here we underline the main contours of the issues to be addressed in such a social dialog in these early stages of the democratization process, and present Tunisia as a test case for the kind of crafting of social policy that we recommend.

We begin by contextualizing the social policy regime in the region, in terms of the literature on social welfare and the rights of citizenship, and provide a broad outline of the evolution of the existing social welfare regimes over the past few decades. We argue that the *authoritarian corporatist* social welfare regime that emerged in the region during the 1950s and the 1960s—the main characteristics and limitations of which are discussed—became increasingly dysfunctional under conditions of globalization and economic reform. We then turn to the education and health systems in the region, followed by social insurance and labor market issues, including those pertaining to women and youth in the labor force. Policy conclusions are presented in the final section, where we highlight the need for a *democratic-developmental* social contract and

policy regime. With a focus on the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and some comparative references to Iran and Turkey, the paper draws attention to the political as well as economic imperatives of social policy making. This paper is based on past and on-going research by the authors, including interview and documentary data collected in Tunisia in March 2014, and relevant primary and secondary sources.

## 2. THE AUTHORITARIAN CORPORATIST SOCIAL WELFARE REGIME

The rights-based social policy regimes in the Western industrialized countries were instituted in the 20th century as the culmination of three centuries of the development of citizenship rights in a gradual democratization process that started with popular struggles for civil and political rights between the 18th and 20th centuries. Marshall (1950, 1964) famously referred to the 18th and 19th centuries, with their democratic revolutions and elite pacts, as the centuries of civil and political rights, respectively. The emergence of the welfare state, social insurance, and the social power of trade unions turned the 20th century into the century of social rights. For Marshall, social rights were understood as ranging from “the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (Marshall, 1950, p. 72). Subsequently, public schooling, healthcare, social security, family allowances, and so on have been seen as part of the bundle of social rights of citizens (e.g., Janoski, 1998).

Theorization of the “three worlds of welfare capitalism” (Esping-Andersen, 1990) distinguished among the social democratic model exemplified by the expansive welfare

\* We gratefully acknowledge the helpful suggestions of three anonymous reviewers. V. M. Moghadam also thanks professors Khedija Arfaoui, Leila Hjeije, Samia Charfi, and Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, along with Samia Letaief and Nadia Chaabane, for their cooperation during research travel in March 2014. Final revision accepted: July 9, 2014.

regimes of the Nordic countries; the corporatist model typical of much of continental Europe, with its conservative and family-oriented elements; and the residual or liberal model found primarily in the Anglo-American world as well as in Switzerland, where the state played a far smaller role in social provisioning. Other models of the welfare state may include the former socialist bloc's model of cradle-to-grave social provisioning; here, the social/economic rights of citizens were elevated above civil and political rights. Such policies and norms were emulated by some developmental states in the Third World (Mkandawire, 2004).

In MENA countries, social welfare regimes emerged in the latter half the 20th century under different circumstances. Despite the existence of modern constitutions in many MENA countries, political rights were severely limited under authoritarian regimes, and civil rights, to the extent that they were at all present, were circumscribed by religious laws and *raison d'état* to lesser or greater degrees in different countries. For women, political and civil rights were even further restricted (Joseph, 2000; Moghadam, 2003). The social welfare regimes of the post-colonial or modernization period had the key objectives of nation-building and consolidation rather than being driven by demands from grassroots social movements and democratically mobilized social forces. Although nation-building and developmental aspects of social policy were arguably paramount, states also were keen to create a social base of support. Beneficiaries of the new and fairly generous social policies were principally employees of the expanding state sector, in industry and the military as well as public services, although free schooling and health clinics for the poor did expand the coverage of social benefits. In Egypt, Syria, and Iran, land reform programs were added to the panoply of policies to expand the rights of citizens, in this case, peasants. Over time, legitimization and the preservation of state power became the driving force of social policy, thus making it increasingly incongruent with economic realities, newly adopted economic strategies, and demographic trends (Karshenas & Moghadam, 2006).

As noted, Esping-Andersen (1990) identified a *conservative corporatist regime* in the context of continental Western Europe, in contrast to the liberal capitalist model associated with the United States or the social democratic model of the Nordic welfare state. In the context of MENA, we refer to the social policy regime that developed between the 1950s and 1970s as *authoritarian corporatist*.<sup>1</sup> By this we mean that most countries in the region were able to provide free schooling, healthcare, subsidized staples and public utilities, and pension plans for state employees; at the same time, the model was characterized by top-down decision-making as well as a conservative gender ideology that was reflected in Muslim family law and in social norms that regarded men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. By the mid-1990s, the large and diversified countries in MENA had such social security/welfare programs for employees as old age, invalidity and disability; sickness and maternity; and work injury (Estes, 2000). The system was made possible by revenues accruing from the regional natural resource-based economy, but the scope of the system was limited. The main beneficiaries were the largely male employees of the public sector and their families. Domestic workers, agricultural workers, the self-employed, and informal workers remained outside of the social policy system and relied principally on the family support system.

#### (a) *The rise and decline of a social contract*

While a social contract of sorts may be said to have existed, in a kind of "authoritarian bargain" between the state and the

citizenry (see Richards & Waterbury, 1996), it was a top-down arrangement and uneven in scope and application, leading to major gaps in social development over time. As noted, the emerging middle class and a relatively small section of workers employed by the government and in the formal sectors of the economy, which in many MENA countries were predominantly government owned, benefited from generous social protection packages including subsidized housing and utilities, lifelong employment, free education and healthcare, and pensions. The policy of guaranteed employment of graduates by the governments in MENA countries was part of the logic of state-building and only secondarily associated with creating incentives for educational attainment aimed at bolstering the productivity of labor. Early transformative measures such as Nasser's land reform program in Egypt were important social policy measures with significant economic consequences, but the immediate aim had more to do with building support for the new regime against the established ruling elite (Bayat, 2006, Chap. 5), rather than with either establishing a productive agricultural sector or establishing property rights for peasants. Redistributive measures such as subsidies on basic goods (e.g., food staples and energy) were among other populist measures aimed at appeasing a broader section of the population.

At the time, however, the social welfare regime was not incongruent with the region's economic realities. The most urgent task during the 1950s and the 1960s appeared to be the setting up of the required social and economic infrastructure for a modern economy, under very adverse conditions in terms of social development. Life expectancy in most MENA countries was at or below 50 years, with under-5 mortality rates of over 300 per 1,000 live births. During the 1960s and 1970s, the region's health and literacy outcomes were far behind other countries with comparable income levels (Karshenas & Moghadam, 2006, pp. 5–10). With improved sanitation and preventive measures and relatively high levels of expenditure on tertiary health, the MENA region steadily bridged that gap. Free universal education helped to create the labor force for new industries and other modern bureaucratic institutions, though schooling was not available for all or even compulsory. In the case of the non-oil exporting countries, protected and regulated home markets ensured that social benefits could be afforded to the new middle classes and sections of the working class in the modern sectors without threatening the profitability of the new industries, and oil exporters relied on oil subsidies to finance social development. The benefits of social development were not equally distributed. Even in the self-declared "Arab Socialist" states from Egypt to Syria and Iraq, vast sections of the population in the rural areas and the urban informal sectors were excluded. Policymakers no doubt assumed that through time and with the growth of the modern sector the rest of the population would be gradually incorporated into the social welfare regime. This may not have been an unreasonable assumption during the long period of robust growth in the region between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s.

From the early 1980s, however, cracks appeared in the form of unsustainable budgetary and balance-of-payments imbalances. Over the next two decades, MENA countries moved to new development strategies based on more liberal trade and financial policies and more competitive private sector development. The timing of this process and its final shape in each country was different, depending on the severity of economic imbalances, the nature of external pressure by foreign creditors, and the internal socio-economic realities which set limits to the effectiveness of authoritarian regimes to implement the new reforms.<sup>2</sup> The oil-rich Gulf countries had the

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