



Arab parliaments: better than their reputation?

by Beatrice Berton and Florence Gaub

After decades of executives amassing power, often in a single pair of hands, 2011 appeared to mark the beginning of a 'legislative moment' in the Arab world. The largely free and transparent parliamentary elections subsequently held in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco and Jordan granted greater powers to legislatures and began the process of a democratic opening.

But the dissolution of the Egyptian parliament in 2012 and the split of its Libyan counterpart two years later called these developments into question. At first glance, Arab parliaments seem now to have reverted back to their role as empty shells, rubber-stamping the government's decisions and serving as little more than talking shops. But a closer look reveals a more nuanced state of affairs.

Why have parliaments anyway?

Considered to be a key feature of a democratic system, the modern form of parliament was born in medieval Europe as a means to constrain the power of the monarch. Today, however, parliaments are more of a logistical answer to the fact that most states are too large to be governed by direct democracy. As an intermediary between the regime and the citizenry, a parliament's task is to check the power of the executive on behalf of the people. Traditionally, its main tasks include enacting laws, ensuring the accountability of government and approving a country's budget.

But parliaments as institutions existed long before the emergence of this particular European model. Earlier incarnations were not necessarily elected by *all* people, nor were they representative of the population they claimed to serve. The term 'parliament' comes from the French *parler* (to speak) and indicates first and foremost a place where discussions take place. This is often taken literally in undemocratic systems where toothless fora play a largely symbolic role.

Not all legislatures have the same degree of control, even in democratic systems: in a parliamentary system of government, members of the executive are appointed by parliaments, while in a presidential or semi-presidential system, parliaments have limited control over the appointment of ministers, even though they may oversee certain activities of the executive (e.g. budget). Parliaments, therefore, tend to serve different purposes, vary in terms of representativeness, and exercise different levels of control depending on the national context.

The problem with Arab parliaments

Arab citizens generally presume that their parliaments have little or no influence on the political process: only 48% believe their parliaments monitor the activities of government, while only 36% believe them to be trustworthy. Although this figure is slightly higher than for those who trust political parties (23%), it is significantly less than the

levels of trust enjoyed by the armed forces (77%), the judiciary (57%), the police (55%), or even the government itself (47%).

There are several reasons for this distrust. First, parliamentarians in the Arab world are often closely associated with political elites and therefore with authoritarian regimes. Second, they are suspected of bribing voters with money, jobs and other privileges. Third, with an average age of 55, Arab MPs are among the oldest parliamentarians on earth. Given the region's youth bulge – in Egypt, for instance, two-thirds of the population are under 30 – this both reflects and exacerbates the generational gap between politicians and voters.

As a result, voter turnout is low: in Egypt, since the re-introduction of parliamentary elections in 1976, it has hovered between 18% and 30%, and even the free elections of 2011 attracted only 56% of those eligible to vote. In Tunisia, voter turnout has consistently remained around 50%-65% since the 1980s, and rates are similar in Lebanon. Generally, voter turnout is higher when citizens feel that their vote has an actual impact, while low rates indicate that citizens are alienated from the system. In 2014, participation in Libya's second legislative elections since the fall of Qaddafi was a mere 16%, whereas in Jordan it has ranged from 26%-44% since the introduction of parliamentary elections in 1989.

Iraq, a highly polarised society, experienced a comparatively high turnout of 77% during last year's elections. But this occurred after Sunnis boycotted the first vote in 2005, only to realise that this robbed them of any influence on the political process.

What's my role again?

Today, all Arab states have some type of parliament, even though their members are not all elected in a democratic manner. Strangely enough, what Arab parliaments seem to lack in democratic legitimacy, they make up for in size: globally, the average MP represents 146,000 constituents, while an Arab MP represents only 67,000.

In the Gulf, parliaments have corresponded more to the Koranic idea of Shura (consultation), which does not necessarily entail elections. As a result, members of these assemblies are either entirely (Saudi Arabia and Oman) or half (United Arab Emirates) appointed by the regime and play only a consultative role. Kuwait's parliament, *Majles Al-Ummah*, is the most powerful in the Gulf: it is directly elected, has the right to initiate legislation, and controls the government's budget. A majority in the Kuwaiti parliament can remove ministers from office and even refuse to

work with the prime minister, thereby forcing the emir to either dismiss the government or dissolve parliament.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, the first independent assemblies were either abolished or turned into consultative bodies following a wave of coups and the establishment of authoritarian systems after the Second World War. Over the last two decades, however, these parliaments have progressively accrued more power.

Lebanon's civil war ended with an accord between the surviving parliamentarians in 1990. In accordance with this political agreement, all seats in the country's parliament are earmarked for representatives of certain religious confessions – a quintessential case of 'consociational' democracy. Jordan's lower house can now withdraw confidence in ministries and exert influence over the composition of the cabinet, and has brought down two governments to date. In Morocco, the 2011 constitution also strengthened its parliament: the largest party now appoints the prime minister and the assembly must approve the cabinet and has greater oversight of civil rights and electoral issues.

In Iraq, where infighting has weakened what should, on paper, be a strong legislature, representatives are growing into their roles. In a major step for the country, the defence committee now holds the executive accountable in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

However, parliaments with too much power can also destabilise a country. Libya is one such case: the mandate of its transitional parliament of 2012 was so robust that MPs were able to undermine the government using direct executive powers.

In Egypt (where the first Arab parliament was set up in 1866), parliamentary elections have been postponed until the end of 2015. Should they occur at all, they look unlikely to be either transparent or pluralistic: parties based on religion have been barred, as have party lists. In an attempt to avoid this ban back in March, parties even toyed with the idea of running on a collective list – in a manner reminiscent of dictatorial systems. Three years since the national assembly was last convened, the strong Egyptian parliament of 2011 now seems a distant memory.

Beatrice Berton is a Junior Analyst and Florence Gaub is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

