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The Digital Party as a Vehicle for Transformational Political Change in Arab Spring Countries:
Opportunities for Syria
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Abstract

The Ba'ath Party has dominated the political sphere in Syria since the rule of Hafiz Al-Assad. It prevented any kind of social or political practices or organizational experiences at any level, except under the approval and full scrutiny of the regime. This kind of oppression continued after Bashar Al-Assad took over the presidency in 2000, which in turn played a crucial role in the opposition's evident inexperience after the 2011 Uprising. Supporters of the Uprising were looking for structured, organized leadership to represent and develop their movement, but the opposition formations, official and nonofficial, proved incapable of fulfilling that role.

Opposition political parties, whether longstanding or nascent, Islamist or secularist, have deep organizational problems. None has presented a clear vision, strategy, or project to help the people achieve their demands. In general, parties have been beset by poor institutionalization, with a lack of clear organizational structure, and an absence of lucid decision-making processes. While parties are supposed to be spaces for plural thinking and acting, individualism prevailed, with incoherence and inconsistency existing between parties' ideologies and their members' practices, and between members themselves, exacerbating the tribal and confessional loyalties and tendencies that served to undermine collective national identity. Therefore, instead of

taking their role in modernizing Syrian society, raising awareness, educating citizens, and building a common national identity, parties conceded those roles to follow narrow ethnic or ideological interests, and sometimes foreign agendas. As a result, they have been incapable of attracting and mobilizing grassroots, especially the young.

While those shortcomings differed in degree from one party to the other, all of them shared the factor of excluding grassroots whilst taking "cadre-party" form. In doing so, political parties have squandered the momentum of the Uprising and the vital power of organized masses. Not only that, but it also shattered the potential competencies of activists and participants, turning their zeal into total apathy. On the other hand, the mobilizational incapability of those parties was one of the reasons, along with the regime's brutal repression, that led to the Movement's militarization, followed by its radicalization at a later stage. Subsequently, parties lost the trust of the people and thus their legitimacy and representational capacity, which they replaced by seeking legitimacy from regional and international powers.

Syrian opposition parties, who appeared to be preoccupied with their intra- and inter-party struggles, should look for new resources and practices to re-legitimize their role. They need to grow into major players through grassroots engagement, rather than through foreign power endorsements. It is necessary for the Syrian people demanding democratic transition to be part of the discourse about key issues of their political future.

This paper advocates that using internet technologies towards adopting the digital party model might represent the solution to re-engage the masses in the political process, allowing for public participation and inclusiveness in the decision-making process. The format of the digital party could well precisely represent the

inclusive tool and innovative solution that is needed with its open, easy membership, participatory platform, allowing for transparent bottom-up policies and decision-making processes. Although using the digital party model will not instantaneously solve all the mounting problems of apathy and distrust, it might yet provide the type of organizational change that will help narrow the gap between the elites and grassroots and affect positively parties' roles and performance.

1. Background: Political Context before 2011 Uprising

1.1. Hafiz al-Assad (1970-2000)

Hafiz al-Assad took power in Syria in 1970 by a military coup. He ruled Syria with an iron fist, prohibiting public freedoms and political activities. The ruling party was the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Political regulations were monocratic, restricting all opposition parties and dissident movements, but tolerating the existence of mock parties under a "progressive national front."[1] These rules restricted opposition activities and prevented the establishment of opposition parties, which resulted in Ba'athists dominating the political sphere.

Ba'ath Party apparatus was one of the key instruments – in addition to the army, security services, and state bureaucracy – through which the regime controlled the country. Party members had priority over any other candidates in obtaining jobs or state-related positions. This allowed the party apparatus to take control of all key strategic functions within the state.[2] With more than 2 million members in 2000, and 2.8 million members in 2012, who were organized in a hierarchical structure, and spread all over the country, and nearly all the state institutions, the party controlled all state critical and non-critical occupations.[3] In addition to the

hierarchical arrangement of Ba'ath Party members, other citizens were also organized in syndicates, federations, unions and other associations, according to their profession or background. This system of organization operated regardless of whether citizens were members of the Ba'ath Party or not, though with a semi-mandatory condition that Ba'athists presided over those syndicates. The goal was to keep the masses under the full surveillance and dominance of the state and to extend the scope of the Ba'ath party's base.[4]

Indeed, the possibility of forming an institutionalized network independent from the state's control was slim to none. Efforts to create an active civil society, especially an organized one, were halted. Even syndicates, which were supposed to be potential focal points for organizing grassroots initiatives after the revolution, were rendered ineffective. While they were ostensibly created for people to network, organize their endeavours, and represent their interests, the purpose became subverted towards a means for the state to assert hegemony over the society, divide it, and prevent any vital movements or activities.[5]

As for the political opposition, like the conditions of oppositions under repressive regimes, the situation was ominous. Anyone engaged in any action associated with political opposition, or even suspected of being involved in such conduct, was incarcerated, tortured, or expatriated.[6] Hence, the opposition was completely deprived of practicing politics before the Revolution, except for some exiled individuals. This, to some extent, explains the debilitated performance of the opposition after the Uprising.[7]

1.2. Bashar al-Assad (2000 until the 2011 Uprising)

Bashar al-Assad's succession to the presidency in 2000, with his promises of reforms in his inaugural speech, generated optimism that the young president might represent a new era of political and economic improvements. Intellectuals and political activists started establishing political forums as free spaces for raising awareness, holding open discussions, and formulating civil and political demands. The objectives revolved around political freedom, including lifting the 1963 state of emergency, releasing political detainees, instituting regulations for establishing parties and a plural party system amongst others. However, this period, the so-called "Damascus Spring", did not last long; from July 2000 to February 2001 in fact, after which the regime cracked down on these forums and imprisoned participants.[8]

Another important vigorous surge of the opposition occurred during the years 2005-2006, with the announcement of the "Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change", signed by several opposition figures and formations. This was an attempt to unite the opposition and, inter alia, recommence the demands of the "Damascus Spring". The regime ignored the opposition demands of reform, arresting several leaders and members of the coalition, under the allegation that the opposition and its demands were a Western conspiracy aimed at weakening the Syrian state.[9]

The oppression of the opposition continued without any indication of imminent positive changes until the eruption of the 2011 Uprising, after which the regime initiated superficial reforms to quell popular demands.[10] Reforms involved lifting the emergency state and introducing some constitutional reforms, including the re-writing parts of the constitution. Most notably this involved the removal of Article 8 of the former 1973 constitution, which stated that the Ba'ath Party was the leading

party of the society and the state, replacing it with an inclusive article which granted political pluralism while discarding Ba'ath Party exclusivity to leadership of the state. Furthermore, it explicitly allowed the establishment of new parties under specific conditions.[11]

1.3. The Syrian Uprising of 2011

At the beginning of 2011, anti-government uprisings erupted in Syria after the Arab Spring swept through several Arab countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. People took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations but were confronted by brutal armed forces of the Syrian regime, resulting in hundreds of killings and arrests.[12]

In late 2011, the peaceful protesting developed into armed conflict as the spiral of the Syrian regime's violence continued unabated. The regime's viciousness triggered the masses to step-up their demands from general political and legal reforms into regime change.[13] The conflict worsened in the following years and developed into a mixture of civil and proxy wars involving regional and international powers.[14]

The brutality of Assad's regime forced a substantial part of the opposition, as well as civilians, to leave the country owing to the threat of arbitrary detention, execution, and enforced disappearance. According to the United Nations, there are over five million registered Syrian refugees in the year 2020.[15] While a significant number of those refugees, expatriates and displaced people could be opponents of the current Syrian regime, no official statistics exist on the political preferences of those refugees, despite it being worthy of study, bearing in mind refugees' relevant security concerns, especially when located in countries with positive bilateral relations with the Syrian regime.

Displaced opposition activists found themselves scattered in different countries, without being able to participate effectively in the political discourse anymore, rendering different social media platforms the only channels for participation. Meanwhile, the political scene had been seized by a few officially nominated opposition coalitions, starting with Syrian National Council (2011),[16] then National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (2012),[17] and more recently the High Negotiations Committee (2016).[18]

Various non-official political opposition formations have been established since the onset of the Uprising, but almost none can be described as "grassroots" organizations, in the sense of taking on the role of organizing the masses, mobilizing them, linking leaders and activists, and benefiting from the potential of opposition activists. Moreover, the opposition – official and non-official – failed to represent grassroots demands and were unable to achieve a framework of cooperation for advancing objectives during critical stages of the Uprising.[19] One could argue that an integrational outline for the opposition with a national agenda would have prevented any struggle over the question of grassroots representation, which many political opposition formations claimed without any established lines. Such an outline could have also reassured the international community, which was wary about the lack of a proper replacement for the current regime, a credible alternative that might have led the country during a critical transitional period.[20]

2.   Types of Political Parties after 2011 Uprising

At the onset of the Syrian Revolution of 2011, activists started to organize the popular movement through small coordination bodies (*Tansiqiat*), which acted as secret cells to cope with the

organizational needs of the popular movement, especially given the geographical and demographical breadth of the demonstrations. *Tansiqiat* used social media platforms to organize and spread information about gatherings and protesting points, among other activities. These activists, who articulated the demands of the Uprising, emanated from the middle-classes, from diverse professional backgrounds and ethnicities. Demographically, they were spread all over Syria and, in the case of dissident expatriates, also abroad.[21]

However, new sophisticated political configurations replaced these revolutionary-type civil networks and pre-political organizations. This replacement is ascribed to two fundamental reasons. First, the popular movement's demands for an organized political representation and leadership.[22] Second, the international community's pressure for organized and unified opposition. The transformation from grassroots-resistance style groupings into organized political-elite style configurations gave birth to what became termed "opposition". The replacement of a civil-revolutionary act with the organized-political act had the consequence of converting the conflict to revolve around a new power binary of "regime-opposition" instead of the binary "regime-people" as before.[23]

Away from the formal coalitions, unofficial formations were initiated under different designations – party, movement, current – without any clear basis for distinction.[24] In doing so, some of them simply tried to avoid the description "party" as it had negative connotations from the past, while others tried to avoid the entailed accountability.[25]

A party can be defined in numerous ways. According to Sartori, "In general, parties are defined in terms of (i) actors, (ii) actions (activities), (iii) consequences (purposes), and (iv)

domain. But parties can also be defined with exclusive respect to their function, to their structure, or to both; or in the light of the input-output scheme; and in still other ways."[26] For the purpose of this study, parties will include all these formations, except for self-declared civil society or non-political organizations.

Various parties have been founded based on ethnic, national, and religious identities, amongst others. For example, the Kurdish-nationalist formations – formal and informal – have manifested themselves noticeably on the political scene.[27] For the purpose of this paper, parties after the 2011 Uprising will be categorized in two ways. Firstly, chronologically, considering the Uprising as the focal event. Secondly, by the ideologies those parties embraced.

2.1. Parties' Classification on a Chronological Basis

2.1.1. Longstanding Parties (Initiated before the 2011 Uprising)

Longstanding opposition formations dominated the political sphere after the Uprising. They were comprised of old parties and political figures who were working covertly before the Uprising. Some of those longstanding parties kept their original formation, with some changing their names while keeping the same former structure and practices, while others entered new alliances and coalitions forming new bodies.[28]

However, those parties that retained their pre-Uprising structure found they were unable to interact with the grassroots or to guide them because of their old-fashioned practices and ideologically controlled attitudes towards key national issues. In addition, a legacy of leader-dominated parties frustrated the opportunity to build consensus across parties and political groups, which resulted in polarization among the opposition.

Nevertheless, there was the opportunity that those parties and figures could have served as the starting point for an institutionalized leadership of the masses if they had acted in an inclusive non-partisan manner. They had the basic requirements, such as political experience, rudimentary organizational structure, and wide networks inside and outside Syria however, they failed to act in a non-partisan manner.[29]

2.1.2. Nascent Parties (Initiated after the 2011 Uprising)

A growing number of nascent parties were initiated after the Uprising. Most of these newly established parties imitated older remaining parties with no modernization at any level. The old structures of leadership within the opposition parties had a palpable effect on those parties, to the extent of carrying on the legacy of enmities towards each other, viewing the "other" as a political enemy rather than political opponent. This caused deep polarization and fragmentation within the overall political opposition scene.[30]

Some of these organizations can be termed "couch parties", in that their membership was so small as to be able to fill only a single couch.[31] Such parties tended to be short-sighted, fragile, with short life spans, and prone to splintering. Notable characteristics included no political experience, vision or plan along with overlapping or similar announcements, initial declarations, objectives and policies.[32]

Not only were these parties characterized by such shortcomings, but many were also established with the support and financing of different regional and other international countries, rendering them mere branches or representatives of those powers and their agendas, rather than the interests of the Syrian people.[33] Consequently, any deficiency in the financial

resources of those parties' patrons often led to these parties' transformation or merging into other formations, or even vanishing.[34]

In general, both long-standing and nascent parties were beset by poor institutionalization, with no founding constitution nor bylaw or clear organizational structure, and with no binding statement of party principles or clear decision-making processes. Nevertheless, even when the principles of the founding statements and procedures of some parties were clear, the plans for delivery were absent. While parties are supposed to be spaces for plural thinking and acting, individualism prevailed with incoherence and inconsistency existing between parties' ideologies and their members' practices, and between members themselves. Both types were incapable of attracting and mobilizing the grassroots, especially the young, because of the tribal and confessional loyalties that served to undermine collective national identity. Yet, this did not prevent many of those parties from claiming a representational role without any clear basis.[35]

2.1.3. Parties' Classification on Ideological Bases (Islamist – Secularist)

2.1.3.1. Islamist Parties

The discourse about organized political Islamist formulation can be analysed through the prism of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a prevailing, global and long-established movement. Although many other Islamist formulations had emerged after the Uprising, the most organized and politically influential one was the MB, which remains one of the most prominent Islamist movements in Syria and most of the Middle East region.[36]

After the crackdown on the MB following the Hama massacre in 1982, most of the movement's members left Syria.[37] However, the movement continued its activities abroad, thereby retaining organizational abilities and gaining experience, which ensured the MB was in primary position vis-à-vis other Islamist formations to return to the Syrian political scene with the onset of the Uprising. Different elements accorded the MB a privileged status in the Syrian context. Amongst others, the MB maintained the discourse of grievances and injustices inflicted on the movement by Hafiz al-Assad's regime, and its concurrent history of struggle to appeal to the public. It also manifested its strategy of being part of the local society through its various not-for-profit organizations, which gave the movement an embedded presence in Syrian society. Indeed, such a code of conduct proved essential to gaining credibility and legitimacy within local communities. Finally, the stable financing of the movement has had a crucial impact on its ability to organize activities.[38]

The MB had the potential to lead the popular movement, but they failed drastically for a number of reasons, notably, prioritizing the regional project of the movement over the Syrian national agenda, and their attempt to enforce that project by manipulating the prevailing chaotic circumstances. The movement's partisan attitude towards other Syrian political components included consistent attempts to have the upper hand on every official opposition coalition by forming the majority using different methods, such as creating more than one formation under different names but with affiliation to the MB.[39]

2.1.3.2. Secularists Parties

On the other side of the ideological spectrum lie secular parties, who differentiated themselves by, theoretically, upholding the

Syrian national agenda, and declaring their sets of values mainly by excluding any religious ideologies – namely Islamic – from influencing the political future of Syria. However, these secular parties were the least capable of leading the popular movement, no matter which label assigned themselves, be it Intellectual Elites, Liberals, Leftists, and Nationalists. They were incapable of gaining people's trust for different reasons. These included leaning towards ideological advocacy instead of practicing politics; and trying to spread their ideologies and terminologies that were, in many ways, associated historically with the West, and the regime who claim secularity although manipulating the Islamic discourse, according to the circumstances, to maintain its structure. Secular parties were not sufficiently alert to the importance and influence of religious ideologies in respect to the people of the region. These parties adopted a subtle struggle against Islam, including both cultural and faith dimensions, despite Islam's authoritative popular appeal. In doing so, they employed Westernization approaches, but these had negative associations and were destined to be ineffective. Their ideologies did not attempt to pragmatically engage with Islam, but rather keep those secularist ideologies pristine through blaming Islam. As a result, those parties missed the opportunity to bring cumulative change to people's social and cultural legacies. Consequently, this caused those parties to turn into closed oligarchies, blaming grassroots and their culture for any complications, including later armament. Thus, instead of upholding popular responsibility and providing competent leadership with a clear project and strategies, these parties sustained their elitist status, losing their leadership role and blaming their failure on the ignorance of the people.[40]

In summary, both secularist and Islamist parties used religion to maintain their respective ideological narratives. Both are "Islam-centred", either for or against, using it as the base for their rivalry, ideology, and practices. However, neither has presented a clear vision, strategy or project to help the people achieve their demands.

3.   The Dilemma of Mass Leadership

After years of mass political passivity, Syria, since the beginning of the Uprising, has developed into a politicized society, which according to Sartori is:

"...a society that both takes part in the operations of the political system and is required for the more effective performance of the system."[41]

This politicized public created the challenge of organizing, representing, and leading in order to utilize this mass power effectively and turn it into an authoritative pressure tool. Usually, parties take on such roles and responsibilities, being the main vehicles for political participation and representation of the people by raising awareness and educating the population, articulating demands, recruiting political leadership and training them.[42]

One of the key predicaments the grassroots had faced since the Uprising was the absence of any kind of institutionalized structure to organize their activities on a large scale. Although local coordination committees tried to play this role at the onset of the Uprising, the increased span of popular participation required a more sophisticated form of organization and representation.[43] Even collective action institutions like syndicates, initiated during Hafiz al-Assad's presidency, which should have played the role of facilitating the organization of the masses, proved useless, if

not disruptive, because they were designed to play a different role. Consequently, after the Uprising, people faced a void of any organizational contingent to realize their demands.[44]

The grassroots looked for institutionalized incubators to organize and lead their popular activism and integrate them under unifying goals and a common national umbrella. They expected opposition leaders and formations to fulfil the institutional gap,[45] but these were not prepared to meet the challenge, falling short of popular expectations, subsequently asserting the anti-party sentiment originated by the Ba'ath party legacy. The opposition formations never developed sufficient grassroots organizational and mobilizational capacity. They ignored the fact that the power of the masses was not merely dependent on numbers alone, but also realized through forming an organized and mobilized mass movement aimed at applying constant pressure on the regime and international powers to respond to popular demands.[46]

The marginalization of grassroots, who were at the core of the Syrian Uprising, was exemplified by the total lack of coordination with activists inside and outside Syria, and with other components of Syrian society.[47] Additionally, interaction with civil society organizations was curbed because of the belief that providing humanitarian aid through NGO's would be sufficient to engage with the masses. This troubled relationship left no chance for grassroots organizations to participate effectively, depriving political parties of the potential power of its members.[48] Without such membership, parties cannot legitimately claim any representational role in deciding the future governmental structure of the country. On a more practical level, marginalization of party memberships weakens lines of financial and labour resources. On the other side, members also need parties in place as institutions for collective action. Only by

engaging membership effectively can popular demands be made against a powerful organized regime.[49]

During the critical period of the popular Uprising, and with the prevailing authoritarian practices of the governing monocratic regime, political parties and leaders have increased responsibility to cultivate democratic culture and values in society. The awareness-raising process has to start from within parties through practical adaptation and fostering of these values and practices, such as boosting the participation of all members and tolerating their diverse ideas and suggestions, as well as encouraging new views, coupling this with clear decision-making process and abiding by it. Notwithstanding the importance of a clear socially inclusive strategy aimed at including women and marginalized minorities from different socio-economic backgrounds,[50] which hitherto opposition parties had failed to achieve due to the internal organizational and structural problems from which they suffered.[51]

Previous failings have included using populist speeches without raising grassroots awareness of essential concepts. Similarly, instead of being socially inclusive, parties have further alienated themselves from broader society by demonstrating a discriminatory attitude especially towards women, excluding them from decision-making positions and involving them only to satisfy the requirements and conditions of the international community. This method of conduct was exhibited by political parties across the spectrum, from left to right, which resulted in discouraging women from political participation, who instead turned to civic activism in their search for meaningful participation.[52]

In general, the way the opposition parties dealt with the masses resulted from several factors. First, the historical oppression of

traditional opposition parties and political leaders, who were covertly working without any grassroots base or popular networks, resulted in a lack of experience in dealing with popular masses. This, in turn, created the tendency of many political personalities, who were involved in struggling with the regime before the Uprising, to claim leadership positions based on the sole merit of prior activism and struggle, regardless of any other necessary qualifications. Second, there was the inexperience of nascent parties, who were unready, structurally and organizationally, to engage the huge numbers of active masses. Instead, the only interaction these formations had was at the party level, which is characterized by competition and rivalry.[53] Finally, the problematic elitist nature of some formations, who considered themselves progressive elitists, denied any elemental role of the masses in politics. As a result, instead of actively interacting with grassroots and using the power of the organized masses as a tool to realize people's demands, parties sought power in two ways. Firstly, by using the tactic of being part of bigger coalitions and unions, and sometimes even splitting into more than one formation to count for more balloting power in any coalition or international conferences.[54] Secondly, parties tried to overcome inadequate popular representation by establishing relations with regional and international powers. This resulted in maximizing the role of those external powers in the Syrian conflict, additionally creating potential continuity of such influence in the future.[55] Thus, the generation of external-subordination dynamics rather than grassroots-representation was one reason for the failure to reach consensus on national principles in order to form a basis for any resolution of the Syrian conflict. More grassroots representation would have validated party power in any resolution or agreement. Besides, a

representational role in the current period would probably have increased parties' chances for future engagement in the transitional period, or even any foreseen democratic elections.

3.1. Consequences of Political Parties Position towards the Masses

The incompetence and attitudes of political opposition formations towards public masses contributed to serious consequences for the popular movement. These formations – formal and informal – are accused of being one of the causes of fragmentation in public opinion towards key issues, betraying grassroots confidence. Moreover, the transformation of the grassroots Uprising into regime-opposition struggle over power led to the prioritization of international and regional support over popular representation. This resulted in underestimating the grassroots and wasting the potential competencies of many activists inside Syria and in the diaspora, who were eager to use their qualifications and skills to participate actively in achieving the democratic transition, which caused the Uprising to lose its momentum. Likewise, those parties could not attract new members, restraining themselves to founding members only, and so they could not represent grassroots interests, aspirations, and expectations, especially those of young people. Not only that, but many also encountered the state of mass resignation of their membership.[56] However, the inability to mobilize and organize grassroots was one of the main reasons that led to one of the most serious consequences of the Uprising, which was the militarization followed by the radicalization of the Uprising.[57]

The militarization of the Syrian Revolution began at the end of 2011, with civilians starting to use light weapons to protect themselves against the regime. In addition, some regular army

officers and enlistees defected to the opposition upon refusing their commanders' orders to target civilians.[58] However, this development from peaceful demonstrations to militarization was the result of combined factors, including the increased brutality of the regime against protestors, the use of different kinds of armaments, denying the state of "uprising" in the first place, and declaring that what was happening was an international conspiracy, executed by a group of local terrorists, which implied the futility of any attempts to reach a political solution.[59]

Furthermore, the opposition's political leaders and formations were unable to save people from the regime's practices, and their concurrent incapacity to represent grassroots in the international fora further weakened any potential ability to do so.[60] In addition, there were discordant voices in the opposition, with some indifferent towards arms proliferation while others condemned protesters' resorting to militarism. The latter's denunciation of arming proved weak as they imparted no practical substitute action to those protesters. Armament was thus seen as a solution of sorts with some subsequently arguing that the problem was the chaos of armament rather than armament per se, in that it could have been used as a shield of the people's movement.[61]

At a later stage, with the regime losing control over some areas, and with resultant security vacuums, especially in border regions, radical groups started to rise, finding in those areas the perfect environment to control and expand. People found in those radical groups an alternative to opposition formations, since they provided what those formations could not. The fundamentalist organizations were more experienced in organizing and mobilizing youth, having a clear ideology, long experience gained from their involvement in other countries, generous funding, vast networks, strategic planning, and effective

leadership. Those factors qualified them to take the lead in absorbing and using youth energies to achieve their hidden agendas by exploiting the desire of those youth to defeat the regime at any price.[62]

4.   The Evolvement of Parties

LaPalombara and Weiner state that, "The creation of parties has been a continuous process. The historical graveyards are cluttered with parties which dominated the political scene, but which subsequently failed to adapt to new circumstances and therefore died, were absorbed by new more active movements, or withered into small marginal parties."[63]

The reasons for the emergence of political parties differ from one region to another, and there are different theories to explain the evolvement of parties.

4.1. Party Evolvement in Developed Countries

Western political scientists have generated a theory of evolution for the political party, with the cadre party of the nineteenth century transforming into the mass party that prevailed in the industrial era, then the catch-all party in the 1960s,[64] followed by the cartel party by 1990.[65] Most recently, we are witnessing the gradual emergence of the digital party.[66]

In the context of this paper, it is important to clarify the differences between cadre and mass parties, since parties in the region have rarely transformed into mass form, or any other party forms, so it is beneficial to consider the defining characteristics as set out below.

4.1.1. Cadre parties

A cadre party can be described as a primordial party structure that consists of a small group of matching social and political elites, exerting their influence over society with total apathy of the masses. With its individualistic tendencies, a cadre party is far from being a collective organization.[67]

4.1.2. Mass parties

Unlike a cadre party, a mass party can be identified as a collective action organization aiming at integrating a large segment of the population into politics by organizing them into a hierarchical structure, occupied by a huge bureaucracy of political professionals. This type dominated the industrial era reflecting the technological, economic, and social structure reflecting the concept of big factories. Mass parties bring together the public through gathering their demands and interests, and they depend on grassroots for their financial and human resources. Hence, they seek to widen their networks by recruiting more members, through whom the mass party derives its legitimacy and power.[68]

It is crucial to associate the legitimacy of a party with its respective roles, a legitimacy that is established on the popular base it develops; a legitimacy by which mass parties emerge both to strengthen and to control the access of the new masses into the political system.[69]

The critical transition from a cadre into a mass party[70] requires new party functions attuned to modernizing society, leading, mobilizing, and organizing masses and articulating their demands, in addition to providing the means through which the government and the people can communicate and connect.[71] The historical theory explaining the development of political parties from a modernization perspective looks at three "crises" as the

main reasons driving party evolvement; legitimacy, participation and integration. Legitimacy crises of regimes in power lead to the crisis of participation, parties evolve to be the vehicle for that participation, and through doing so parties play a crucial role in building a joint national identity while integrating different categories into that identity.[72]

In a simple comparison between a cadre and a mass party, we can identify core contrasts. A cadre party has a small number of members, seeking no recruitment. It is not open for membership except by formal nomination. Overall, it does not depend on numerical strength, rather, it counts on the influence of its members, and hence, it appeals to the elites and excludes the masses. A cadre party is reliant on the donations of the elite for its financial resources. The mass party by contrast has an open membership and it is dependent on its membership for financial resources and not a small number of private donors. It is essential for mass parties to raise the awareness of its members and educate them to prepare them for future official positions at both leadership and administration levels.[73]

4.2. The Evolvement of Parties in Underdeveloped Countries

As explained above, the evolution of the party in Western countries has gone through a number of stages; from aristocratic cliques, into a small group of notables, factions, cadre parties and developing into mass-participation parties with the advent of parliament, electoral systems and plebiscitary democracy.[74]

However, this parliamentary theory explanation cannot be applied to the underdeveloped countries, due to the differences in the historical conditions those societies went through. For underdeveloped countries in the Middle East, specifically Arabic countries, these went from being under Ottoman control at the

beginning of the twentieth century, into the colonialist era under the control of European countries. This legacy bequeathed no parliamentary existence or democratic institutions, with colonial mandate systems mostly focused on control and subordination, leaving a lack of democratic apparatus post decolonialization.[75]

Nonetheless, even with different historical conditions, both in developed and underdeveloped countries, preliminary formations were similar in that they were compounds of a small number of like-minded men, based on close relationships, common ideologies or common interests. The difference is that, according to Duverger, parties in Western countries continued their development from "cadre parties" into mass party forms.[76] By contrast, parties in underdeveloped countries persisted in the form of a cadre party, with rare exceptional cases. This was due to the conditions of the colonial system, which generally did not allow parliamentary or constitutional experience to exist or develop. One example is what happened in Syria in 1920, when the French bombed Damascus and forced their mandate instead of respecting the Syrian peoples' desire for an independent constitution.[77]

In summary, parties either retained their cadre nature or took the shape of liberation movements against external occupation and sometimes later on against internal post-colonial governments, who were seen as sympathetic allies of previous occupying powers but were deemed to be acting against the will or interests of the majority. Therefore, the legacies of occupation, foreign subsidies, and cultural hegemony are important background factors affecting the modernization of the region's countries in which parties could supposedly play a major role. Hence, political parties, instead of adopting the role of building integration and national identity or developing new systems, are more focussed simply on assuming a position of power.

5. Syrian Opposition Parties Case

Reflecting on and applying what is mentioned above with regard to Syria's popular uprising, it would be expected that opposition parties would assume the structure of a mass party to facilitate the participation process of the people. Mass parties would have been the most appropriate approach to organize, mobilize, and lead the grassroots. However, opposition parties opted for the cadre style of party, excluding the masses and discarding the importance of integrating them within the political realm. In doing so, parties have kept grassroots in a passive role and have limited their political influence in favour of party elites.[78] Moreover, there is another potential risk on the horizon. In discord with the framework of modernizing theory, in which crisis forms the stimulus by which parties emerge, there is by contrast a high expectancy that parties will fail to evolve and modernize after passing the crises. Thus, the type and track of development of those parties and the roles they may play in future could well remain static.

5.1. Future Prospects of Syrian Parties

Syrian parties, who appear to be preoccupied with their intra- and inter-party struggles, should look for new resources and practices to re-legitimize their role in the ten-year-long conflict. They need to grow into major players by attracting grassroots support, rather than seeking foreign power endorsements. It is necessary for the Syrian people demanding democratic transition not to be led by parties who, cynically, do not take on the burden of listening to their voices or engaging them in the discourse about decisions related to key issues of their political future. The excuses used for excluding masses, such as political turbulence and instability, or

the political ignorance of the masses proclaimed by the political elite are unjustified. These kinds of exclusionary policies have not yielded any political progress in a decade.

Syrian parties with their inept performance and abandonment of their role as vehicles of mass mobilization have evacuated more space for civil society organizations to play a more significant role. Unlike parties, those organizations have proved more able to attract young people from different walks of life because of their relative ideological neutrality. Those organizations have deployed youth talents and competences by providing the opportunity for participation, which parties could not offer.[79]

Thus far, parties' performances have proved disappointing to people, and no political formation has been created to fulfil the Syrian peoples' aspirations.[80] With their weak internal organization and the crisis of public confidence reflected in low membership, existing parties are in dire need of reform. It is vital for parties to find new ways to regain the trust of the masses in order to claim their legitimacy.

To begin with, for a political party to be responsive to the needs of society and to deal with its existing complications, it should have a clear perception of the nature of the relationship it will develop with the masses. Different tools to engage people, mobilize followers, and raise awareness should be developed. For example, it is important to have a popular platform, to interact with a wide variety of grassroots segments by addressing different aspects of their lives. In addition, it is essential to keep up with popular trends and the spirit of the times by utilizing available tools and technology. Similarly, political parties should be clear about the kind of relationships intended with other parties, organizations, and regional and international powers, to avoid

becoming a tool in the hands of any foreign bodies, especially in times of crisis.[81]

This paper advocates that internet and new technological advances might represent a chance for such reform. Digital technologies can play an effective role in shaping Syrian political parties' activities. Opposition political parties have not used internet technologies to their maximum capacity. Although using those technologies will not instantaneously solve all the mounting problems of apathy and distrust, they might yet provide the type of organizational change that will help narrow the gap between elites and grassroots, and to positively effect parties' roles and performance.

The following section seeks to advance models for digitizing parties in the Syrian context, including how technology might be used as a tool to regain the confidence of the grassroots and develop new possibilities for participation. In addition, it suggests opportunities to assist in challenging the status quo – engaging existing players and influencing their power. The key matter for exploration is therefore: What role can digital parties play in bringing about democratic transition in Syria and other Arab Spring countries?

6. The Internet in Syria

The internet was introduced in Syria when Bashar al-Assad was the head of the Syrian Computer Society before he took over the presidency. The introduction of the internet was done for multiple purposes including economic modernization, legitimization of the regime and the mobilization of its supporters.[82] However, the regime was also vigilant about the political risks and security concerns associated with introducing the internet. Yet, despite significant restrictions to control the usage of the internet in

virtual politics,[83] to prevent its use by the political opposition to coordinate or carry out deliberations, the opposition circumvented the limitations through a variety of different technical solutions.[84]

The use of the internet by opposition activists culminated in the era of the Arab Spring. Social media in particular played an important role: first, in transmitting the Uprising contagion to Syria after sweeping other Arab countries, and then by igniting the Uprising inside Syria, which was triggered by spreading news about peaceful demonstrations, mobilizing activists, organizing protests, and exposing the brutality of the regime forces against peaceful protesters.[85] This played a very important role since the regime evacuated all journalists from the country following the inception of the 2011 Uprising.[86]

Activists utilized the internet to its full capacity, unlike opposition political parties, who were unable to exploit the internet to engage people, or even to use it as a marketing tool in their favour. For instance, parties' websites have never been used in the Syrian context as a participatory or organizational tool. While some parties have websites, others settled for creating accounts on different social media platforms. Nevertheless, websites were limited to serve administrative purposes like displaying information about a party's founding members, activities, recent news, promoting the ideas and initiatives of party leaders, and to announce party positions towards political events and developments.[87] Such websites do have the potential to be an interactivity medium instead of limiting the message to one-way communication.[88] However, using the internet to its maximum potential requires, in the first place, a willingness from decision-makers in the party, which has previously been absent for different reasons, as Hague and Uhm argue, "This reluctance

no doubt derives from a nexus of psychological, structural, and institutional reasons."[89]

In the Syrian context, the internet has never been used as a tool for building and maintaining relationships with grassroots, and new communication and information technologies have never been used to build inter-party or party-grassroots relationships in a trial to regain their trust. Parties have failed to exploit potential participatory elements of technology. According to statistics, the number of internet users increased by 422,000 (+5.5%) between 2019 and 2020, and by January 2020 there were 8.11 million internet users in Syria. Around six million of these were social media users in February 2020.[90] These numbers are from inside Syria only, but might be substantially more if Syrians living abroad are considered. However, there is very little authoritative research, if any, on the internet usage in refugee camps and amongst internally displaced people, but then again it can be inferred that user levels are likely to be low considering the poor state of telecommunications infrastructure and generally appalling living standards for these people.

6.1. Scenario of Change: Digitizing Parties

The reassertion of Ba'ath party rule continues after more than forty years, and post-Revolution opposition parties' performances have done little to dispel the negative notion of party within Syria, although it should be noted that negativity towards parties is by no means an exclusively Syrian phenomenon.[91] Many studies show that people have increasing doubts about traditional parties and lack faith in them being a reliable representative of their demands, some doubting even the necessity of the party for organizing collective action. This negative notion is reflected by declining membership and decreasing voter turnout in general

elections. Consequently, parties are losing essential financial support and sources of volunteers, both on-the-ground supporters and activists.[92]

Moreover, recent distrust in political parties has been capitalised on and encouraged by the different alternatives that hold appeal for people, such as NGOs and social media platforms. Those alternatives experience the dilemma of not being parties, yet nevertheless needing to aggregate the numerous demands and interests of the people in organized programs.[93]

Nonetheless, the historical evolution of parties is a continuous process, and the roles of the party keep changing to fit the conditions of society. Driven by social and political movements requesting the change of current dominant systems,[94] the use of the internet by digital parties in response to the demands of change is a mere reflection of the technological advancement of the current era and a trial experiment to seek to address the prevailing socio-economic conditions of society.[95]

6.2. What is a Digital Party?

In his definition of digital party, Gerbaudo mentions that "The term digital party attempts to capture the common essence seen across a number of quite diverse political formations that have risen in recent years and which share the common attempt of using digital technology to devise new forms of political participation and democratic decision-making."[96]

In other words, a digital party is a new political formation that uses digital technologies to facilitate direct democracy instead of a representative one in which people choose their representatives to act on their behalf, and purportedly remain accountable to the people. However, with politicians retaining power in representative democracy, the aim is to devolve monopolistic

political power from the hands of politicians to ordinary people through mass participation via digital platforms, while replacing the bureaucracy of traditional parties with direct communication between membership and leadership.

6.3. Digital Party emergence

Digital parties emerged at the beginning of the millennium and were further boosted after the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08 alongside the growth of social media.[97] By utilizing such technology, digital parties promise to bring back people's control over their own political lives, and to respond to popular needs and aspirations. It involves them in shaping the political sphere through large-scale interactivity and participation in setting-up polices, and joining decision-making processes, while eliminating the huge bureaucracy of traditional parties. Such bureaucracy is seen as being an obstacle to direct contact between members and leadership and an impediment to holding their representatives accountable for political decisions and outcomes.[98]

Mimicking social media platform concepts, digital parties are trying to use the internet to bring about access to participation for a vast membership base. People are encouraged to participate in this direct democracy with zero cost membership. Using digital party platforms in expressing their day-to-day concerns and coming up with initiatives to solve them these platforms engage members to actively discuss problems and suggest solutions. Besides voting on crucial issues and policies, they also include party leadership positions and other details related to party strategy.

There are many parties, movements and campaigns that are described as digital parties, yet these formations differ in their

degree of adaptation to digital technology and structure, while they all share the common embrace of the digital democracy agenda to reach the change for which they advocate.

One of the earliest examples are pirate parties in North Europe, the first of which was established in Sweden in 2006 which gained two seats in the European Parliament in the European Parliament election. The Pirate Party International (PPI)[99] was established in Brussels in 2009 and coordinated with several other pirate parties in different North European countries – such as Germany, the Czech Republic and Iceland – with the latter becoming the third largest party in Iceland in the 2017 legislative elections. Nevertheless, some digital parties have achieved electoral results and others have not. Parties which failed include, for instance, the parties initiated in South America using the same pirate party concept but with different names, such as Partido de la Red (Party of the Net) in Argentina, and Wikipartido (Wiki Party) in Mexico.

One of the most successful manifestations of digital formations has been the MoVimento 5 Stelle M5S (Five Star Movement). After its initiation in 2009, with gradual success, it became the first party in the Italian parliament subsequent to the national election of 2018. Another example is Podemos in Spain. In 2014, shortly after its foundation, five members from the party were elected to the European Parliament after receiving eight per cent of the votes in the European elections. Moreover, it came third in the parliamentary elections of 2015-16.[100]

In the Syrian case, the concept of the digital party has the potential to end elite domination over the political process, and to convert grassroots political apathy into active participation by engaging them, and encouraging them to take part in the political future of the country. Arguably, one solution would be that

opposition parties transform themselves from their current cadre party form into mass party form. However, there are various obstacles to achieve such transformation. One of which is the geographical and physical barriers. With Syrians scattered all over the world, this represents financial and logistical challenges for any physical gatherings, making it difficult to implement a mass party format. On the other hand, it is important, as well, to reach out to people inside Syria, whether in areas under opposition or under regime control. Therefore, it is crucial to use innovative techniques of utilizing digital technologies, given that significant functions of traditional parties, such as interacting with people, educating them, and raising their awareness, are achievable by utilising the internet.

6.4. Digital Party Features

6.4.1. Membership

Digital parties have redefined and reshaped the political party's membership concept through mimicking the sign-in membership of social media platforms. By doing so, digital parties are ending their financial dependence on membership fees, which is the custom of traditional parties. This new shape of membership can be looked at as a sort of solution for declining party membership over the years.[101] In addition, new networks can be created, based on a relation with members in which communication is easy, efficient and cost-effective.[102]

This new membership aims to involve the greatest possible number of people, regardless of any socio-economic considerations. Hence, the target is to enhance the numerical advantage, which by implication promises the ability to mobilize and organize the masses. Furthermore, the large number of members constitutes an immense base of active volunteers who

can be enlisted as sources of free political assistance. This can engage even less active members to spread the word about the party through the minimal digital activity of 'liking' or 'sharing' a party's posts. Hence, digital parties evade the need for a paid cadre and bureaucracy by replacing the element of the 'apparatus' of traditional parties with a participatory platform, disintermediating the relation between members and leaders of the party.[103]

6.4.2. Platforms

According to Gerbaudo, "Platforms are digital systems that act as execution environments of various programs and applications."[104] The platform is essential for a digital party; in fact, it replaces the physical address traditional parties used to have. It is a cost-effective way of engaging people, cutting overhead costs like salaries, offices and other related expenses of the traditional party. It is a versatile tool used to promote the party's values, with the collecting of data constantly allowing for the adjustment of party strategy accordingly. It facilitates interaction between members and leaders by providing two-way communication channels, while offering the ability to control the level of feedback. It also facilitates decision-making processes by eliminating the vertical multi-layered method used by traditional parties, instead relying on more straightforward bottom-up processes. Platforms also create networks of specific structures with different degrees of privacy for members. However, such functions can be limited by the design of the platform which may qualify the extent of influence such platforms can have on promoting the political participation of the members.

Platforms are designated in diverse ways to serve the needs and goals of the party. Some parties would use purpose-built

platforms, while others would use different ready-made interactive platforms, including social media platforms. Nevertheless, even with the creation of a customized platform, digital parties should not neglect the importance of social media platforms in spreading their messages and values to the widest audience possible. Different formations use different platforms for involving the masses in politics, such as the Rousseau platform of the Five Star Movement or the pirate parties use of the LiquidFeedback application. The goal of using these platforms is to disintermediate both the relations between different members and also between the members and leaders, thereby dispensing with the usual bureaucracy.[105]

6.4.3. Participation

With the existence of new, easier to use, free-membership interactive platforms, participation is becoming a viable choice for members. Although there is a scarcity of studies – if any – about the correlation between internet use and political activism in politically unstable countries, including Syria, there are some studies in Western countries showing the rise of political participation amongst people who use the internet, even in the absence of political drive.

Digital parties promise direct democracy and open participation, enabling people to express their opinions on key issues about their lives, which is an essential task of the party since, as noted by Sartori "parties are channels of expression".[106] The internet provides a channel of freedom of expression and allows the right of ordinary people to freely exchange information and materials of interest. By using the internet as their main tool of communication, digital parties are enhancing mass participation by reaching out to grassroots wherever located,

interacting with them, and building and maintaining relationships with them. This, furthermore, allows various activities to take place, including soliciting people's opinions and receiving their initiatives, crowdsourcing their ideas, deliberating topics, balloting on different issues, enabling mass contribution, and accessing decision-making processes. These activities all contribute towards constituting the major cores of political participation.[107]

This kind of participation is driven by the advancement of internet communication technologies that provide the tools to facilitate these new methods, with social media platforms in particular providing a comparatively easy and inexpensive means of communication to reach the masses easily. However, the dependence on the internet for digital parties will also require them to be agile; to remain relevant they need to rapidly adapt policies to changing environments, especially paying attention to the aspirations of younger generations who are the majority users.

Furthermore, the internet is a tool for communication between the public and their political representatives to achieve democratic aims. This two-way open flow of information shapes the quality of representativeness of such parties. Therefore, reclaiming representation of the grassroots will be an important gain attained by digital parties. Similarly, the transparency of policies and decision-making strategies resulting from digital approaches is a step towards the accountability and good governance of those parties.

Finally, the easy, open, unconditional membership eliminates any discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, or socio-economic conditions. This results in the opportunity for more inclusiveness and equal participation, especially for women who have traditionally been politically underrepresented due to

challenges such as domestic responsibilities preventing participation in physical meetings.

6.5. Additional Benefits of Digital Parties in the Syrian Context

The opportunities of wide outreach of digital parties provided by the internet have the potential to facilitate the organizing and mobilizing of grassroots, making it easier for leadership to call people to action and to organize online and offline activities, making the digital party active in the public sphere. This would overcome the declining collective action through traditional representatives. Furthermore, there is the ability to organize online training sessions to spread knowledge and awareness about important issues to the party membership.[108]

There is also the ability to extend political reach via organized channels offered by the methods of digital parties. In Syria, the opposition may have the chance to promote the Uprising ideals throughout the country and around the world through the creative means of discussion groups and emails, to create networks of resistance to authoritarian state power and in support of democratic transition by using the internet as a communication tool to spread their message to build domestic and international support for reform.

Due to the relatively low-cost of the internet, resorting to digital form will enable parties with limited resources to increase their media representation and secure their existence.[109] Parties that previously received little or no coverage in the traditional media will have a platform from which to reach a much larger audience, replacing reliance on traditional media to spread their messages. This will be important given the modest existence of the opposition in traditional (non-social) media channels, and the

scarcity of opposition satellite channels, with some failing to continue after their inception,[110] and others prioritizing the private agendas and interests of their owners over any national agenda.

6..6. Challenges of Digital Parties

The challenges of digital parties include internet-related concerns such as cyber-security, lack of privacy, protection of sensitive data from third parties, absence of standards and regulations.[111] Yet, there are other challenges related to the ability of digital parties to commit to their pronounced objectives. One potential risk is that instead of instigating direct democracy, it instead shifts into plebiscitary democracy. The latter would be one in which the role of citizenry is limited to accepting or refusing referendums or initiatives proposed by party leaderships, without being part of the process of suggesting, deliberating and forming the policies of the party.[112] To avoid this, digital parties should involve people by interacting with members and providing the options for crowdsourcing, while being open to various ideas rather than trying to use people's votes to implement the vision of the party's leadership. Similarly, they need to use technology to advance participatory qualities that they currently lack and avoid using it simply to empower the party's existing practices.

Another challenge is that digital parties tend to attract a specific group of constituents who are not representative of the population as a whole. Those participants are commonly highly educated, with proficiency in using the internet, typically meaning the active, skilled younger population. This, in turn, would result in excluding people with few digital skills, and with no or little access to internet. To overcome this, digital parties have to come up with new mechanisms for engaging citizens and using offline approaches and innovative solutions. For example,

by using complementary non-digital resources this could attract a wider audience while avoiding the risk of nominal membership, turning members into mere spectators with diminished activism or commitment, which is usually associated with adopting social media membership styles.

However, the involvement of the masses in decision-making and the consequent necessity of adapting to the results of their demands and wishes would raise the risk of transforming parties' original principles and values, which could undermine a party's credentials in terms of what it stands for in the first place. Moreover, the open membership with an open platform of discussion and decision-making might expose the party to capture by opponents. In the Syrian case, because of the current conflict, the risk will be higher for anti-regime parties with the existence of the Assad regime's utilization of an electronic army.[113] Moreover, the high tension and sensitivity at this stage of the conflict will present the risk of increasing polarization of opinion among the opposition itself from one side, and all Syrians in general, since people tend to be attracted to others who share their opinions and values.

Finally, applying digital technologies is not the goal per se. Using them will not overcome the popular distrust of existing parties. Rather, they are tools that should be used to organize and combine online and offline activism to engage grassroots and overcome their exclusion from the political sphere. In addition, they offer the prospect of narrowing the gap between masses and elites.

Conclusion

Syrian parties suffer from many internal and external problems, with mass-exclusionary practices being one of the main roots of

the difficulties. By marginalizing grassroots elements, the political action of opposition parties appears to have lost direction during the Syrian conflict. Instead of being vehicles for collective action, mass participation, and public representation, they retreated to cadre- or elite-type formations, who only care about their own interests and share of the political scene. Additionally, instead of assuming their role in modernizing Syrian society, raising awareness, educating citizens and building a common national identity, they conceded those roles, instead following narrow ethnic or ideological interests, and sometimes foreign agendas. Consequently, opposition parties lost the trust and representation of the grassroots, and at the same time wasted the potential capacities and qualifications of those masses.

To re-engage the public in the political process, the format of digital party could well precisely represent the inclusive tool and innovative solution that is needed. With its open, easily accessible, participatory platform allowing for transparent bottom-up policies and decision-making processes, this might change popular apathy and distrust, and motivate the masses to participate again, while also holding those parties accountable. While digital parties alone will not be able to tackle pervasive complications of opposition formation, they should be deployed to restore trust and legitimacy in the political landscape.

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