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On Their Own? Women Running as Independent Candidates in the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper considers examples of women successfully running as independents at the national level in the Middle East, investigating how existing electoral systems impacted their ability to contest political office. Women in the region face a host of challenges when it comes to launching political campaigns outside of sociocultural norms. Most extant literature on political participation focuses on parties as the primary vector for female participation in the Global North and South. However, women in the Middle East often cannot rely on this mechanism due to the absence of political parties or existing parties' unwillingness to back women for cultural reasons. Yet, the region hosts many female independents holding office at the national level. Through the cases of Jordan, Egypt, and Oman, I unpack this phenomenon using an institutional argument and assess what the emergence of such candidates bodes for the future of women in the Middle East.

Keywords

women – Middle East – elections – independents – gender quotas

The adoption of electoral gender quotas by a number of Arab states in the last two decades has encouraged ever more women to enter politics in the new millennium.¹ By virtue of gender quotas, the Middle East and North Africa

¹ The following Arab League member states have adopted electoral gender quotas at the national level in the last two decades: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Somalia, Sudan (north), and Tunisia. Jordan, Morocco, the

(MENA) experienced a 300% increase in women's legislative representation since the year 2000.² In fact, the region is no longer the laggard in terms of women's legislative representation, jumping ahead of the Pacific states when it comes to the presence of women in elected lower houses of parliament.³

In one surprising respect, the MENA actually leads the world outright: the number of countries that host independent female members of parliament (MPs) in their national legislatures. I classify as "independent" women MPs or political candidates operating without explicit political party support for their campaigns and without party support or affiliation once they enter office.⁴ Out of 22 Arab League member states, seven currently have women serving who were elected to their positions without the help of a political party: Algeria, Lebanon, Oman, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Egypt.⁵ Why do we see more women successfully running as independent political candidates in Arab states—known for a decidedly paternalistic brand of authoritarianism—than in more established democracies?⁶

Palestinian Authority, Tunisia, and Mauritania have adopted gender quotas at the local level. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is not counted here because it has appointed, rather than elected, women to its national council.

- 2 The number rose from an average of 3.8% in 2000 to 18% in 2018 for women present in the lower/single house across all MENA national assemblies. I choose to focus on the lower house because it tends to be elected, while the upper house/senate is more likely to be appointed by the executive in the MENA and worldwide.
- 3 The Arab states have 18% relative to the Pacific states' 15.5% for the lower house (the world average is 23.8%)—however, the MENA is still behind when it comes to average levels of women's representation across both houses combined. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), "Women in National Parliaments (Statistical Archive)," <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>.
- 4 The Irish scholar Liam Weeks defines an independent as "someone who is neither a member of, nor affiliated with, a political party' effectively campaigning 'on their own'". This simple definition belies the complicated ways "independence" can manifest in non-partisan politics in the Global North and Global South. Many nominal independents still have ties to political parties (for example, Joe Lieberman in the U.S.) or connections to the government in power (see the work of Grigori Golosov on Russia). However, there is limited evidence that these ties *by default* prevent independents from engaging in autonomous agenda-setting within parliamentary assemblies; rather, "programmatic autonomy" varies from context to context as well as on the kinds of issues individual MPs choose to promote. Liam Weeks, "Why Are There Independents in Ireland?" *Government and Opposition* Vol. 51 (2016): 582.
- 5 Countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia are not included in this list because female MPs are effectively state appointments, and/or these countries do not have elected (or lower) houses of parliament.
- 6 Dawn Brancati proffers that transitioning regimes are more likely to host more independents in their assemblies due to weak parties. However, this observation still does not wholly explain the higher number of women running as independents in settings where their candidacies face significant cultural and political challenges. Dawn Brancati, "Winning

Mainstream literature still focuses on political parties as the primary conduit for women's political participation and inclusion in local and national legislatures worldwide, regardless of regime type.⁷ Yet, many candidates run for national office without political party support—especially in transitioning regimes or countries where party organizations are weaker than in OECD democracies.⁸ The MENA countries bear out this latter trend at the national and local level. In the 2018 Tunisian municipal elections, independent candidates gained a third of the vote and effectively beat out candidates from the top two parties.⁹ Analyst Selim Kharrat opined, “These results show a real emergence of independent lists as a new actor that will inevitably shuffle the cards.”¹⁰ In fact, Tunisia's capital saw its first independent woman mayor take office in 2018: Souad Abderrahim who ran as an independent on the Ennahda party ticket.¹¹

While this may be a shocking development in North Africa where local and national legislatures tend to be dominated by political parties, independents running for office are nothing new in the states of the Levant and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Across the MENA, women run and win seats as independents at the local and national level, both in countries where political parties are banned as well as where parties are regular features of the political landscape. In the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections, the majority of the final 82 women who ran for office were independents, though the six who ultimately won did so with party support.¹² Many of these female independents also ran on lists affiliated with civil society organizations and movements (for example, the “Kulluna Watani” movement) aiming to challenge status quo politics in Lebanon. This could hint at the emergence of more anti-establishment

Alone: The Electoral Fate of Independent Candidates Worldwide,” *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 70 (2008): 648–62.

7 Lena Wängnerud, “Women in Parliaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation,” *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol. 12 (2009): 51–69.

8 Pippa Norris “Recruitment,” in *Handbook of Party Politics*, eds. Richard S. Katz and William Crotty (London: Sage, 2006).

9 Ennahda garnered 28.6% of seats and Nida Tounes won 22.1% of seats.

10 *Middle East Eye*, “A New Actor’: Tunisia’s Independents Beat Main Parties in Municipal Elections,” May 8, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/new-actor-tunisia-independents-beat-main-parties-municipal-elections>.

11 *Middle East Eye*, “Tunisia ‘Making History’ as Capital’s First Female Mayor Takes Office,” July 3, 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunis-elects-first-female-mayor-souad-abderrahim-ennahda-tunisia-908700994>.

12 Hanan Hamdan, “Lebanese Women Determined to Continue Fight for More Political Representation,” *Al Monitor*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/lebanon-2018-election-women-in-parliament-obstacles-quota.html>.

agendas in Arab politics led by a new brand of female independents,¹³ but it also has symbolic import as illustrated by the work of Fiona Buckley in another context: Ireland.¹⁴

Buckley explores the unprecedented number of Irish women running as independent candidates after Ireland's adoption of parliamentary gender quotas. Strikingly, these female independents were barred from taking advantage of the quota itself, which only applied to partisan women. However, independent women candidates still ran in droves. Buckley maintains that the adoption of gender quotas in Ireland had a symbolic diffusion effect, which encouraged women to consider themselves to be viable candidates regardless of party membership and led them to run for office. In the Lebanese case, female independents were slated as unlikely to win by the local press and political establishment, but many went ahead and ran anyway. Although the campaigns of female independents were unsuccessful, they demonstrated a need and interest in providing women with more opportunities to run for office. Furthermore, in the run-up to the 2018 Lebanese elections, women's and civil rights activists actively pushed for gender quotas as part of their electoral programs. The outcries of these activists effectively resulted in the Shiite Amal Movement and the Sunni Future Movement fielding more female candidates than ever before, and, in fact, female candidates from both parties ultimately won office. What may now look like a symbolic (and even futile) gesture on the part of these female independents who ran for office may yet bring concrete results in the future. It has certainly put women in the spotlight.

This paper investigates how a cohort of elected women independents emerged across the MENA in the last decade and what it may signify for Arab women participating in politics in the future. An institutionalist lens sheds light on how changes to electoral systems in conjunction with decreasing partisanship incentivized these new actors to enter the political scene. In particular, the preponderance of mixed and plurality systems in conjunction with gender quotas have bred a kind of personalist politics, which allows for women to enter politics in unexpected ways, often by virtue of informal institutions,

13 Thirty percent of Kulluna Watani's candidates were female, and one other civil society group ran an all-women list in the city of Akkar. Rayane El-Amine, "The Lebanese Elections and Their Consequences," *The Middle East Report Information Project* (merip), June 14, 2018, <https://www.merip.org/mero/mero061418>; and Alex Rowell, "Lebanon's Elections: Independents' Day?" *Al Jumhuriya Net*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/lebanon's-elections-independents-d>.

14 Fiona Buckley, "Diffusion Effects of Gender Quotas: Increasing the Supply of Independent Women?" paper prepared for the Electoral Integrity Project, University of Sydney, May 2018.

such as women's social networks. It is important to note that the number of women independents running and winning office is still relatively low globally as well as in the MENA. That number is also lower relative to the number of women running as partisan candidates overall in the region. However, the unintended consequences of electoral engineering through gender quotas and other institutional innovations point to a shift in how women gain access to heretofore closed-off political spaces.

1 The Emergence of Independents

The question of independent candidates running for office, much less female independent candidates, has received scant attention in the broader academic literature. In the last decade, there have been more and more independents cropping up in high-profile national elections worldwide, as seen with the election of French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron who initially ran as a non-party candidate. The number of independents in elected legislatures worldwide has been steadily rising since the 1990s. This is possibly due to increasing disenchantment in the West with political parties, but is also likely a byproduct of a trend toward personalizing politics.¹⁵ In 2013, Liam Weeks observed that there were some 32 elected independents in the national assemblies of 36 OECD democracies.¹⁶ And, while independent candidates are less common in advanced democracies, this is not the case in other types of regimes, where political parties are not always the dominant form of socio-political organization within national and local assemblies.¹⁷

When independents are broached in the academic literature, they are usually connected with a type of personalist politics that is interpreted as veering into clientelist and identity-driven politics in non-Western contexts.¹⁸ Weeks' and Buckley's research finds that countries in which the political cultures exhibit high levels of personalism, dynastic politics, and localism are more oriented toward such candidate-centered voting and, consequently, tend to host more independent candidates and MPs. Electoral personalism and localism can be readily translated into the "competitive clientelisms" of the MENA—especially when political parties become an afterthought, completely co-opted

15 Liam Weeks, *Independents in Irish Party Democracy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 11.

16 Weeks, "Why Are There Independents in Ireland?" 582.

17 Brancati, "Winning Alone."

18 Henry Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

or weakened by the regime in power.¹⁹ Thus, it is unsurprising to see independents run and win office in the Persian Gulf states, where political parties are banned or circumscribed in their operations, or in the Levant where parties are often undermined by the state and/or internal factionalism.

Outside of the socio-cultural factors of localism and personalism influencing the rise of independents, such candidates are also associated with a specific type of electoral system—plurality and mixed-majoritarian electoral regimes with open-lists.²⁰ These systems play to the strengths of individual candidates, rather than political parties. Plurality/majoritarian electoral systems happen to be common across the GCC and, up until recently, were the norm in the Levant as well.²¹ While independent politicians may be seen as “radical” or “anti-establishment” in the western context, candidate-centered politics is not a surprise in the MENA and it usually serves to reify the status quo of tribe or sect, depending on the social cleavages activated by the state.²² However, it is surprising to be discussing successful *female* independent candidates in the same breath as the more ubiquitous male independent candidates in a region often associated with patriarchic values and significant barriers to women’s political participation.

Table 1 illustrates the world regions with the highest percentage of countries featuring elected women independents in their national assemblies from 2015 to 2017, and clearly reveals that the MENA leads the pack. There are only a handful of female independents currently serving in legislatures across the Middle East, but, as the number of independent women candidates in Lebanon illustrates, there seems to be ever more interest for women to “go it alone” in their campaigns. Furthermore, in many Arab states there are now institutional mechanisms that facilitate their candidacy: parliamentary gender quotas.

For female candidates in the MENA, getting on the ballot, much less getting elected, remains no small feat—especially if there are no pre-existing mechanisms in place to bolster their campaigns, such as gender quotas²³ or support

19 Vickie Langohr, “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics: Egypt and Liberalizing Arab Regimes,” *Comparative Politics* Vol. 36 (2004): 181–204.

20 Brancati, “Winning Alone.”

21 Lebanon switched its electoral system from a plurality-driven one to PR in 2017, and Jordan switched its system to PR in 2016. Iraq has been PR since 2003.

22 Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (3rd edition) (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007).

23 Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerup, “Sustainable Representation of Women Through Gender Quotas: A Decade of Experience in Morocco,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 41 (2013): 132–42; and Aili Tripp, “Do Arab Women Need Electoral Quotas?” *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/19/do-arab-women-need-electoral-quotas/>.

TABLE 1 Women Independents in Global National Assemblies (2015–2018)^a

Global Region* (number of Countries)	Percentage of countries with female independents	Countries with female independents
Middle East and North Africa (19)	36%**	Algeria, Oman, Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon**
Europe (42)	14%	United Kingdom, Croatia, Ireland, Slovenai, Lichtenstein, Romania
Latin America and Caribbean (33)	14%	Panama, Chile, Honduras, Guyana
South Asia (8)	12%	Bangladesh
Central Asia (11)	9%	Armenia
East Asia (16)	6%	Myanmar
Pacific (12)	8%	Australia
Sub-Saharan Africa (45)	6%	Uganda, Eswatini, Cape Verde
North America (3)	33%	Canada

* The World Bank's regional descriptors were used for filtering 186 countries into global regions. A different ordering of the countries in each world region can yield slightly different results, but overall the unique status of the MENA holds.

** With the results of the May 2018 elections in Lebanon, the country was dropped from this list, bringing the new percentage total to 32%.

*** The number of female independents relative to partisan women in elected assemblies across the MENA for 2017; Algeria (5/119); Oman (1/1); Jordan (17/20); Bahrian (3/3); Egypt (12/89); Kuwait (2/2); Lebanon (1/4).

^a These statistics were compiled on elected assemblies (lower or unicameral houses) from information derived from the International Parliamentary Union, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, as well as the information present on individual country's assembly websites.

from women's NGOs, which are often associated with feminist social movements.²⁴ Especially when it comes to the GCC, one could speciously argue that

24 Valentine Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement* (2nd edition) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

men and women face the same obstacles in authoritarian states that restrict political parties, so there should be nothing unique about women running for office without party support. This logic ignores the immense challenges faced by women campaigning in countries that have only recently extended suffrage to both genders, have long infringed on women's mobility via antiquated personal status codes, and where politics are often driven by conservative and kin-based solidarities.²⁵

As with Arab men, independent female candidates still tend to rely on ties to prominent tribes and/or come from families with high socio-economic or political statuses, and this often, but not always, becomes a primary social conduit to political office. Effectively the tribe, family, or sect take on the party's role of the primary social, but also ideological, mobilizer of the campaign where there is less institutionalized party mobilization. The experience of former Lebanese MP, Nayla Tueni, is a case in point. Although part of the March 14 political bloc in the Lebanese assembly, Tueni actually campaigned and won office as an independent in the elections of 2009 and stayed on in her role until the 2018 parliamentary elections.²⁶ Coming from an established political family—her father was the slain former MP, Gebran Tueni—her electoral win followed the Lebanese trend of women entering politics via ties to powerful family members, although this usually proceeded through access to the infrastructure of a pre-existing political party or movement.²⁷ Importantly, Tueni was also the heiress to the an-Nahar newspaper dynasty formed by her great-grandfather and was a member of the paper's executive board as well as a deputy manager at one point. This familial and professional heritage looms large in Tueni's one-time electoral success. The existence of political dynasties such Tueni's (or those of Bahia Hariri, Solange Gemayel, and Sethrida Geagea) has been shown to actually advantage women running for office across nine democracies in much the same way it did with Nayla—even relative to *male*, non-dynastic candidates.²⁸

25 Mounira Charrad, "Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, and Agency," *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 37 (2008): 417–37.

26 Mona Alami, "Parliamentary Presence Sticking Point for Lebanon's Women," *Al-Monitor English*, March 19, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2015/03/lebanon-women-access-parliament-death-relative.html#ixzz4ypRUeSnq>.

27 This was the case with female MPs Solange Gemayel, Bahia Hariri, and Sethrida Geagea. Rola El-Husseini, *Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Post-War Lebanon* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 256.

28 In his 2018 book entitled *Dynasties and Democracy: The Inherited Incumbency Advantage in Japan*, Daniel Smith found that across multiple democracies first-generation female legacy MPs were more likely to be widows, sisters, or wives of prominent politicians, while later generations of women entering politics were more likely to be politicians' daughters. See

Such dynastic politics also play into female candidates leveraging pre-existing patronage networks (*wasta*) to enhance their bid to enter and stay in the political sphere. It is not untoward to presume that this plays an even greater role when it comes to the candidacies of female independents. The Arabic term *wasta* captures “an implicit social contract, typically within a tribal group, which obliges those within the group to provide assistance (favorable treatment) to others within that group.”²⁹ Through an analysis of Arab Barometer survey data, Buttorff and Welborne found that Arab countries where women reported having similar levels of *wasta* to men tended to have more women serving in political office; essentially, these women had comparable abilities to provide services and access to intercessory networks as their male counterparts in the political arena.³⁰ Yet, recent literature finds that female representatives are more resistant to using *wasta*,³¹ appealing to pre-existing ideas that women are somehow less corruptible than men, though more recent research challenges this view.³² Benstead further reveals that in such clientelist regimes, women MPs are more likely to be responsive to female citizens than their male counterparts—especially if they attained their position through a gender quota.³³

table and figure 7.1 in Daniel Smith's *Dynasties and Democracy The Inherited Incumbency Advantage in Japan* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

- 29 Andy Barnett, Bruce Yandle, and George S. Naufal, “Regulation, Trust, and Cronyism in Middle Eastern Societies: The Simple Economics of ‘Wasta,’” *The Journal of Socio-Economics* Vol. 44 (2013): 41–6.
- 30 This is a particularly striking development since most male independent candidates in the region are typically seen as emblematic of the political establishment, rather than disruptors of the status quo. In Lebanon, women reported having the same levels of *wasta* as men, but still had low levels of legislative representation relative to their counterparts in North Africa who also benefit from parliamentary gender quotas. Gail Buttorff and Bozena C. Welborne, “Working Those Connections: Exploring Arab Women's Differential Access to Opportunity in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Issue Brief no. 09.25.15*. Rice University's Baker Institute, September 25, 2015, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/0669afc2/BI-Brief-071715-WRME_Wasta.pdf.
- 31 David Jackson, Sarah A. Tobin, and Jennifer Philippa Eggert, “Women, Corruption, and Wasta in Jordan,” in *Corruption and Informal Practices in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Ina Kubbe and Aiysha Varraich (New York: Routledge, 2019), 172–87.
- 32 Björn Frank, Johann Graf Lambsdorff, and Frédéric Boehm, “Gender and Corruption: Lessons from Laboratory Corruption Experiments,” *The European Journal of Development Research* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2011): 59–71; and Justin Esarey and Gina Chirillo, “Fairer Sex” or Purity Myth? Corruption, Gender, and Institutional Context,” *Politics & Gender* Vol. 9 (2013): 361–89.
- 33 Lindsay Benstead, “Why Quotas are Needed to Improve Women's Access to Services in Clientelistic Regimes,” *Governance* Vol. 29 (2016): 185–205.

Importantly, independent female candidates tap into both old and new patronage networks for their campaigns. Some stem from the traditional powerbrokers in a given Arab society, while others have emerged with the international community's political and, more importantly, financial commitment to gender empowerment as part of broader efforts at democratization.³⁴

Much of the current literature on women's political participation in developing countries focuses on the importance of the aforementioned socioeconomic and cultural factors in promoting women's representation in national legislatures rather than the typical institutional factors that are seen as primary determinants in the West, such as proportional electoral systems and the presence of political parties.³⁵ However, as the following section discusses, the emergence of independents in the MENA reveals that electoral systems have distinct impacts in non-Western settings. Electoral changes, such as the shift to mixed or plurality electoral systems, alongside the adoption of gender quotas can create unique political opportunities for women that enable them to run for office and succeed as independent candidates despite the endemic paternalism of Arab politics.

2 Institutions, Institutions, Institutions...

Electoral systems can play a key role in determining the emergence of political parties in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, but they also condition non-partisan behavior. Current research shows that a party-list proportional (PR) system allows for parties and voters to focus less on finding a single candidate that appeals to a broad range of voters and more on an array of candidates (i.e. women and minorities)—especially in bigger districts—that can appeal to a greater variety of interest groups represented in society. The decision for female candidates to run for office, or for political parties to field women, is also sensitive to an array of factors including, but not limited to electoral

34 Sarah S. Bush, "International Politics and the Spread of Quotas for Women in Legislatures," *International Organization* Vol. 65 (2011): 103–37.

35 Jocelyn Viterna, Kathleen M. Fallon, and Jason Beckfield, "How Development Matters: A Research Note on the Relationship between Development, Democracy and Women's Political Representation," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* Vol. 49 (2008): 455–77; Richard Matland, "Women's Representation in National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (1998): 109–25; and Pamela Paxton, "Women in National Legislatures: A Cross-National Analysis," *Social Science Research* Vol. 26 (1997): 442–64.

system type,³⁶ electoral threshold,³⁷ district size, and, newly, the adoption of gender quotas.³⁸ In conjunction with larger district sizes, party-list PR systems seem to encourage the election of more women according to extant cross-national research in OECD countries.³⁹

A wider literature also speaks to the role of political parties in creating opportunities for women in the political arena in both developed and developing states. Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes note that “parties are the real gatekeepers of office [...] Because they play such an important role in the composition of parliament, we must understand how parties differ in encouraging or discouraging women’s access to parliament.”⁴⁰ Kunovich and Paxton, Lovenduski and Norris, Reynolds, and, of course, the individual works of Wilma Rule and Pippa Norris speak to how party-list PR systems allow women greater access to the political arena through political parties.⁴¹ Parties provide women and men with an immediate source of funding and campaign support, and a built-in network of potential constituents in democratic and authoritarian regimes.

36 Lane Kenworthy and Melissa Malami, “Gender Inequality in Political Representation: A Worldwide Comparative Analysis,” *Social Forces* Vol. 78 (1999): 235–68; Wilma Rule “Women’s Underrepresentation and Electoral Systems,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* Vol. 27 (1994): 689–92; Rob Salmond, “Proportional Representation and Female Parliamentarians,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* Vol. 31 (2006): 175–204; and Frank C. Thames and Margaret S. Williams, *Contagious Representation: Women’s Political Representation in Democracies Around the World* (New York City: NYU Press, 2013).

37 Richard Matland, “Enhancing Women’s Political Participation: Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems,” in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, eds. Julie Ballington and Azza Karam (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2005).

38 Miki Caul-Kittelson, “Political Parties and the Adoption of Gender Quotas: A Cross-National Analysis,” *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 63 (2001): 1214–29; Mona L. Krook, *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Aili Mari Tripp and Alice Kang, “The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation,” *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 41 (2008): 338–61.

39 Kenworthy and Malami, “Gender Inequality in Political Representation.”

40 Pamela Paxton, Sheri Kunovich, and Melanie M. Hughes, “Gender in Politics,” *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 33 (2007): 270.

41 Sheri Kunovich and Pamela Paxton, “Pathways to Power: The Role of Political Parties in Women’s National Political Representation,” *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 111 (2005): 505–52; Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, *Gender and Party Politics* (Sage Publications, 2003); Pippa Norris, “Recruitment,” in *Handbook of Party Politics*, eds. Richard S. Katz and William Crotty (London: Sage, 2006); Andrew Reynolds, “Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World: Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling,” *World Politics* Vol. 51 (1999): 547–72; Wilma Rule, “Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women’s Opportunities for Election to Parliament in 23 Democracies,” *Western Political Quarterly* 40 (1987): 477–98, and “Women’s Underrepresentation and Electoral Systems,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* Vol. 27 (1994): 689–92.

In the OECD-focused scholarship, of course, the political party is the primary vector for women's participation and ultimate election. Much as in the West, some MENA states exhibit similar patterns when embracing party-list PR systems. We see the highest proportions of women in elected office (in 2017–2018, on average 18% of the legislative assembly) in North Africa, which is exclusively PR and has a history of more partisan politics.⁴² In fact, political parties in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco actively field female candidates, and thus national parliaments have tended to have a larger number of female MPs than in other parts of the MENA. In the case of Tunisia and Algeria, elected assemblies have even hosted small numbers of female independents, though their numbers dwarf in comparison to the numbers of male and female MPs with a party affiliation (see table 2 below). Thus, parties—albeit weak ones—still loom large as mechanisms for organizing political interests in the Maghreb.

Still, one would be hard pressed to assume the existence of parties is why there are more women in North African politics—especially considering there were hardly any women in North African parliaments before gender quotas were adopted in the early 2000s, despite the existence of political parties since decolonization. Shalaby and others actually see fragmented and disinterested political parties as the primary setbacks to women's political access in the region.⁴³ In Arab countries where semi-autonomous political parties do exist and can fund candidates, many parties consider the fielding of women to be risky in the absence of a gender quota to guarantee a female candidate's seat, especially since public opinion data shows that both genders tend to prefer male politicians.⁴⁴ Amal Sabbagh argues that counter-productive female tokenism was actually even more pronounced within Arab political parties than in state institutions, with many government policies appearing to be “more gender sensitive” than generic party messaging: further hinting at parties' unwillingness to recruit and field women as viable candidates.⁴⁵

42 Phillip C Naylor, *North Africa, Revised Edition: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

43 Marwa Shalaby, “Women's Political Representation and Authoritarianism in the Arab World,” prepared for the Women and Gender in Middle East Politics Workshop, *Project on Middle East Political Science* (POMEPS), April 14, 2016, https://pomeps.org/2016/04/14/womens-political-representation-and-authoritarianism-in-the-arab-world/#_ftnref14.

44 Amaney A. Jamal, “Democratic Governance and Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA),” report for Department for International Development (DFID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), 2010, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c6d1/db07be94d171ddd8c95eb7061326249612fa.pdf>.

45 Amal Sabbagh, “The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation,” in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, eds. Julie Ballington and Azza Karam (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2005).

TABLE 2 Independent MPs in Arab League Elected Assemblies (2019)

Country	Independents in Parliament	Percentage of Independents in Parliament	Total Members of Parliament	Legislated Gender Quota	Last Parliamentary Election
Algeria	30	6.4 %	462	yes	2017
Bahrain	40	100%*	40	no	2014
Comoros	3	9%	33	yes	2015
Djibouti	0	0%	65	yes	2018
Egypt	351	58%	596 (28 appointed)	no	2015
Iraq	14	4.20%	329	yes	2018
Jordan	99	76.20%	130	yes	2016
Kuwait	44	74.6%*	65 (15 appointed)	no	2016
Lebanon	4	3.10%	128	no	2018
Mauritania	0	0%	157	yes	2018
Morocco	0	0%	395	yes	2016
Oman	86	100%	86	no	2019
Sudan	19	4.4%	426	yes	2015
Tunisia	17	5.5%	217	yes	2019
UAE	40	100%	40 (20 appointed)	no	2019

Data are derived from Inter-Parliamentary Union, countries' parliamentary websites, and the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's Gender Quotas Database. Somalia, Syria, Palestine, and Yemen are excluded from this table due to long-standing conflicts, while Qatar and Saudi Arabia exclusively appoint the members of their national assemblies.

* The Kuwaiti and Bahraini assemblies both host political organizations that mimic the functions of political parties, even though parties are technically banned in both kingdoms.

However, the adoption of gender quotas in North Africa with the new millennium incentivized political parties to consider women as viable political candidates for the first time. In fact, previously marginalized Islamist parties eagerly embraced quotas as a means of entering parliament and broader governance structures by promoting Islamist women on their electoral lists (for example, the *Partis du Justice et Development* (PJD) in Morocco, *An-Nahda* in Tunisia, and the *Islamic Action Front* (IAF) in Jordan).⁴⁶ In the last decade,

46 Many Islamist parties will use gender quotas to place their female acolytes into political positions while simultaneously disavowing the need for their existence or criticizing

TABLE 3 Electoral Systems in Arab League Member States

Appointment/ Limited Election of MPs	Majority/ Plurality election of MPs*	Mixed election of MPs (MMP and parallel)	Proportional election of MPs
Qatar	Bahrain [‡]	§Djibouti [†]	§Algeria [†]
Saudi Arabia	Comoros	Egypt	§Iraq
§Somalia	Kuwait [†]	§Libya	§Jordan [†]
UAE [†]	Oman [†]	§Mauritania	Lebanon [†]
	Yemen [‡]	§Palestine	§Morocco [†]
		§Sudan (north)	Syria [†]
			§Tunisia [†]

SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE 2020; INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION 2020. JORDAN SWITCHED FROM A MIXED SYSTEM TO LIST-PR IN 2016, WHILE LEBANON SWITCHED FROM MAJORITY ELECTIONS TO LIST-PR IN 2017
 * Simple and two-round; [†]multi-member districts; [‡]single-member districts; [§]parliamentary gender quotas

Arab women have slowly but surely been elected outside of the gender quotas. Furthermore, this is happening across mixed, plurality, majority, and proportional electoral systems.⁴⁷

This brings us to the importance of electoral system in creating political opportunity structures that open doors for the election of independent female candidates. Most MENA electoral systems veer toward some form of majoritarian election. In plurality, majority, or mixed systems, as well as open-list PR systems, women have the dual opportunity to contest politics both through party membership and as independents—the latter usually through affiliations with a tribe, a sect, or even a social movement or political bloc as in Lebanon. In the West, the candidate-centered politics of majoritarian electoral systems penalizes female candidates since men are usually perceived to be more competitive for a given seat in single-member districts.⁴⁸ However, the combination

their use and the perceived Western feminist agenda behind them. Lihi B. Shitrit, "Authenticating Representation: Women's Quotas and Islamist Parties," *Politics & Gender* Vol. 12 (2016): 781–806.

47 Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerup, "Sustainable Representation of Women Through Gender Quotas: A Decade of Experience in Morocco," *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 41 (2013): 132–42.

48 Tatiana Kostadinova, "Ethnic and Women's Representation Under Mixed Election Systems," *Electoral Studies* Vol. 26 (2007): 415–31; and Weeks, "Where Are the Independents in Ireland?"

of weak or non-existent parties and the presence of gender quotas actually results in more women independents running for office and winning at the national level in Arab parliaments with plurality electoral systems than is common elsewhere. With many Arab states newly embracing mixed electoral systems as well as list-PR, we can expect to see an increasing number of women running as independents alongside those who run under the auspices of a political party—as mentioned before, effectively granting women two means of electoral access.

Mixed systems offer unique opportunities for women entering politics in the MENA—especially if there are gender quotas in place alongside open lists. Surprisingly, a mixed system coupled with a smaller district size, gives women the ability to campaign without party support and for them to more easily make actual political inroads through other forms of existing social networks. This is in stark contrast to the experience of women in the West who have largely accessed politics through the discretion of parties. In most OECD countries, women fair better in large, multi-member districts because parties are more willing to field a wider array of candidates to appeal to a broader range of groups that may be present in a community. In the MENA, women often fare better in smaller districts where personal outreach is more successful as well as less socially compromising of women’s “honor,” whether they are running as independent candidates or with party support. This suggests that there is more than one way for women to gain access to the political arena even in conservative, non-democratic regimes. In particular, women do not always have to rely solely on political parties to build the relevant networks to successfully run for office.

The following section touches on three cases which represent the continuum of women’s successful bids as independents across varying partisan and electoral systems, ranging from the flagging partisanship of Jordan and Egypt to Oman’s banned political parties. All three cases have seen women successfully launch independent campaigns, but in electoral ecosystems with slightly different levels of institutional support for women—but the ability to leverage informal networks in campaigns and office is common to all of these women.

3 The Case of Jordan

In 1993, the first woman to win a parliamentary seat in Jordan—Toujan Faisal—was elected through a Circassian quota and ran as a *de facto* independent. Since then, the majority of female MPs have won seats running as independent candidates through an explicit gender quota, often supported by minor

tribes vying for a seat at the table by any means possible.⁴⁹ In fact, Bush and Gao reveal that small Jordanian tribes were much more likely to field female candidates than larger tribes in a bid to take advantage of the gender quota and finally get a seat at the legislative table for heretofore institutionally marginalized tribes—a strategy not unlike that of Islamist parties in Jordan and elsewhere in the MENA.⁵⁰ In general, there has been an uptick in women running for office since the quota was first put into place in 2003, culminating in some 191 women running for office in 2013 and 250 in 2016.⁵¹ In the 2013 Jordanian elections, 15 women won their posts through this quota while three additional women won seats outright. More recently, in 2016, five women won seats outside of the quota and some 17 women ran as independents, with three winning through the support of the IAF.

In the recent past, both genders ran for political office as independents as a by-product of the one-man-one-vote electoral system (single non-transferable vote), which discouraged the formation of political parties. This system also motivated strategic voting that penalized female candidates—i.e. voters were fearful of “wasting votes” on a candidate that was unlikely to win for social and cultural reasons, not unlike the patterns for majoritarian voters in the West. The adoption of gender quotas changed the popular calculus and incentivized political parties as well as smaller tribes to field female candidates. Former Jordanian MP Nuha Maita elaborated, “[...] because they [the small tribes] can’t push a man into the parliament. They say, ‘We have to use this chance, we have women.’”⁵² Essentially, gender quotas coupled with a mixed electoral system have allowed Jordanian women two modes of access to the political arena: through political parties (most often Islamist parties such as al-Wasat and the IAF) and as independents with support from district tribes.

Thrice-elected MP Falaak Jamani represented a departure from the standard trope of the “tribal token” with her outright win of an electoral seat in

49 Janine A. Clark, “The Conditions of Islamist Moderation: Unpacking Cross-Ideological Cooperation in Jordan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 38 (2006): 539–60; Janine A. Clark and Jillian Schwedler, “Who Opened the Window? Women’s Activism in Islamist Parties,” *Comparative Politics* (2003): 293–312; and Lihi B. Shitrit, “Authenticating Representation: Women’s Quotas and Islamist Parties,” *Politics & Gender* Vol. 12 (2016): 781–806.

50 Sarah S. Bush and Eleanor Gao, “Small Tribes, Big Gains: The Strategic Uses of Gender Quotas in the Middle East,” *Comparative Politics* Vol. 49 (2017): 149–67.

51 National Democratic Institute (NDI), “Jordan Accomplishes Inclusive Election with Expanded Role for Women,” <https://www.ndi.org/Women-in-Jordan-2016-Election>; and NDI, “Increased Success for Women in Jordanian Elections,” 2016, <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/increased-success-women-jordanian-elections>.

52 Nuha Maita, interview with author in Amman, Jordan, November, 2008.

2007 and her unique blend of a military and a medical background, working as a dentist in the military's health division. Her mixture of cross-cutting professional experience and personal *wasta* granted her the unique ability to place people in jobs across two key sectors and win the favor of local tribes to the point where they invited her to participate in their *diwans* (tribal councils) as a full member.⁵³ This also occasionally invited ridicule on the "street" that she was basically "a man." Nameem al-Ajrama was the second female MP to follow in Falaak's footsteps as a retired colonel heading up medical services in the Jordanian Armed Forces. Former MP Nuha Maita again observed, "This is what we lack as women: that we didn't serve in the public or in the army. Falaak, she served in the army [...] this is what women need [...] there is not a political party to serve them [...]."

Stephanie Nanes' research highlights that the ability to engage in "public service provision" as Falaak did was, and is, imperative to wielding any political influence in Jordan, which applies equally to women (and men) in other Arab states.⁵⁴ It is no accident that the majority of the women who attain posts in the Jordanian parliament tend to be well-connected and often independently wealthy with close ties to the local and international NGO and business communities. Certainly, the former has been the case for the two women—both independents—elected outside of the quota prior to the 2013 elections. Reem Badran, the second woman to win an MP slot outright after Falaak, is emblematic of the importance of such networks. The daughter of the former prime minister, Mudar Badran, Reem ran her own consultancy company (al-Hurra) and was a board member for both the city of Amman and Jordan's Chamber of Commerce. Prior to running for office, she had been appointed the chief executive of the Kuwaiti Jordanian Holding Company and also spent 10 years at the Jordan Investment Board. In the last crop of female MPs, Hind Sultan al Fayez also had similar corporate experience working for the Sakhr Advertising Agency, the Sama Oman Company for Advertising, and for Mazdan Real Estate Development. However, not all successful independent candidates were well-heeled. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, retired school-teacher Mariam

53 Falaak Jamani won her first mandate through the quota for the governorate of Madaba in 2003 and was later re-elected in a landslide victory in 2007.

54 Assaf David and Stephanie Nanes, "The Women's Quota in Jordan's Municipal Councils: International and Domestic Dimensions," *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy* Vol. 32 (2011): 275–304; and Stephanie Nanes, "The Quota Encouraged Me to Run: Evaluating Jordan's Municipal Quota for Women," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* Vol. 11 (2015): 261–82.

Losi won her seat outright because she was perceived, “as a decent, traditional Jordanian women living the same life as other Jordanians.”⁵⁵

The fact that women could actively enter Jordanian politics as independents—i.e. without the support of the “expected” political party networks—is certainly a byproduct of the presence of gender quotas. Especially when it came to women winning outside of the gender quota itself—tribes often played the role of vote mobilizers much like political parties would in a more partisan state.⁵⁶ Consequently, the combination of an electoral system, which disincentivized parties but incorporated gender quotas which were seen as political opportunities by smaller tribes, yielded independent female MPs in Jordan.

4 The Case of Egypt

Amidst much turmoil, Egypt’s post-Arab Spring electoral engineering has also offered more opportunities for women to enter politics. In 2015, a spate of laws restructured the electoral recruitment process, establishing a mixed electoral system with 448 members elected as independents (some 80 percent), 120 as party-based candidates, and 28 (or five percent) as presidential appointees. Article five and 27 of the law effectively stipulated a gender quota for candidate lists, requiring some 56 women to be placed on electoral lists, while also introducing a clause mandating that 50 percent of presidential appointments must be female.⁵⁷ Consequently, a record-breaking 89 women entered the parliament in January 2016, with 75 of them being directly elected and the remaining 14 appointed.⁵⁸ Though the largest number of the 75 women who ran for office ran under the flag of a political party (in particular, al-Wafed Party), 12 of them

55 As mentioned previously, a surprising majority of female candidates have a teaching background, giving them a built-in and easily accessible constituency across multiple generations and genders. In addition, a substantial proportion of the women who have filled the MP seats over the last 20 years have had doctoral degrees in stark contrast to their male counterparts who tend to be less educated overall. Mona Christophersen, “Jordan’s Elections: A Further Boost for Tribes,” noref *Report* Norwegian Peacebuilding Research Center, March 29, 2017, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162496/3cfcb191c3644dd32cda0c2c343d149.pdf>.

56 Bush and Gao, “Small Tribes, Big Gains.”

57 Women’s United Nation’s Report Network, “Egypt-Women in 2015 parliamentary elections – Overview and Analysis,” February 2016, <http://wunrn.com/2016/02/egypt-women-in-2015-parliamentary-elections-overview-analysis/>.

58 Ibid.

succeeded as independents.⁵⁹ In a country dominated for decades by the political apparatus of the National Democratic Party (NDP), parties are still a primary mechanism through which women enter politics. However, the success of female independents speaks to some shifts in Egyptian women's paths to political office.⁶⁰

As in other countries, women independents face many unique challenges: first and foremost, the issue of obtaining campaign funds. Current female MP, Mona Mounir, observed, "Political money plays a central role in campaigning, media and publicity, which constitutes a financial burden for women, especially those running for independent seats."⁶¹ Furthermore, Egyptian women are stymied in their access to the political arena by their limited ability to engage in vote-buying: a by-product of a lack of funding alongside cultural expectations of "appropriate" female behavior when campaigning. In an interview with the *al-Ahram* newspaper, Salma al-Naqqash, director of the Women Political Participation Academy at Nazra, noted, "I personally attribute this [low numbers of women winning office] to the majority-based system in elections, that lead to the control of political capital in elections as it was quite evident in the field that a lot of candidates relied on buying votes [...] such a system never really gives space for diverse political groups to participate equally in elections and the less empowered groups such as women are less visible."⁶²

While many male independents were accused in the media of using their financial and political capital to muscle into the parliament, this same accusation was not lodged against any women—many of whom ran shoe-string campaigns canvassing their communities door to door. Dina Abdel-Aziz—the youngest MP currently in the parliament—largely adopted this strategy in her district. Zeinab Abdel-Rahman, another independent candidate who campaigned in Cairo, noted that her campaign volunteers were largely female and supported her because they wanted to see a woman entering politics. However, she also observed this might have been specific to the more "privileged classes" in her district stating, "Among the less privileged, political capital [*wasta*] is the key player."⁶³

59 Ibid.

60 The five Egyptian female independents who ran in the first phase of the 2015 electoral cycle all succeeded in the run offs.

61 Mariam Mecky, "Egyptian Women in Parliament Polls: Hopes and Hurdles," *Al-Ahram English*, November 18, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/164/166619/Egypt/Egypt-Elections-/Egyptian-women-in-parliament-polls-Hopes-and-hurdl.aspx>.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

In the Egyptian case, a combination of appointments and a de facto candidate (electoral list) gender quota led to more women entering the national assembly overall. Consequently, much as in Jordan, a mixed system with a gender quota paved the way for the few independent candidates who made it into the parliament; though, in contrast to Jordan, the majority of female MPs in Egypt are actually still partisan and, arguably, partisanship is still an integral part of Egyptian parliamentary politics.

5 The Case of Oman

The GCC countries represent somewhat unique cases since these states effectively ban political parties, thereby turning everyone into an independent. In fact, there is some evidence that GCC governments are actively encouraging men and women to run exclusively as independents rather than partnering with sanctioned “political associations,” as the national governments hope to “re-orient parliamentary life [...] away from religious-based groups.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, none of the GCC states have broached the subject of parliamentary gender quotas as a real possibility, though gender quotas exist for certain sectors of the labor force, often in the guise of labor nationalization policies.⁶⁵ Despite the lack of political parties, we still see women elected, not appointed, to national assemblies. Both male and female candidates largely rely on private funds and networks to secure office, which would lead us to expect an absence of women in the political arena, except for those who rise to political positions through executive appointment. In the last decade, with suffrage extended across almost all GCC states, this has actually not been the case. While the number of women winning seats directly is still very small, it is surprising that they can win seats at all considering that there are neither gender quotas, nor any other real form of party-like support. Furthermore, there is only a limited international NGO or associational presence, with the organizations that often

64 Andrew England and Simeon Kerr, “Bahrain’s Shia Loath to Give Sunni Rulers Election Credibility,” *Financial Times*, October 21, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/f969idac-bb64-1e8-94b2-17176fbf93f5>.

65 Emilie Rutledge, Fatima Al Shamsi, Yahia Bassioni, and Hend Al Sheikh, “Women, Labour Market Nationalization Policies and Human Resource Development in the Arab Gulf States,” *Human Resource Development* Vol. 14 (2011): 183–98; and John Willoughby, “A Quiet Revolution in the Making? The Replacement of Expatriate Labor through the Feminization of the Labor Force in the GCC Countries,” American University Department of Economics Working Paper 18, 2004, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277221553_A_Quiet_Revolution_in_the_Making_The_Replacement_of_Expatriate_Labor_through_the_Feminization_of_the_Labor_Force_in_GCC_Countries.

provide leadership training and campaign workshops for women in the Levant and North Africa either banned or their operations heavily circumscribed.⁶⁶ Despite these challenges, there are GCC women directly winning political office and, while the majority of them come from notable families, there are surprising outliers to this trend as well.

In the Omani case, one woman, Nemah bint Jamiel bin Farhan al-Busaidiya, has been the female political stalwart of the parliament until the 2019 elections.⁶⁷ Busaidiya was re-elected for a second term as a representative for the Seeb district—a locality that has also elected a female municipal councilor. The elementary school teacher allegedly won her seat for a second term by stumping door to door in her neighborhood and through her recognition in the community as an educator. Omani political analyst and journalist, Ahmed Ali Mukheini, claimed Busaidiya led a “clean campaign” that appealed to her community in ways similar to retired school teacher Mariam Losi in Jordan.⁶⁸ Both Busaidiya in Oman and Losi in Jordan hint that the social networks independent female candidates rely on do not always have to be tribal (as in Jordan) or sectarian (as in Lebanon), but can sometimes be related to their professions in unique ways. In fact, teachers’ unions have a history of politicization across the MENA, and thus it is not surprising to see women as well as men from teachers’ ranks successfully entering politics.⁶⁹

Mukheini was also the primary advisor to Tawasul, an organization that attempted to offer political training to female candidates in the prior election cycle (2015). He observed that most female candidates actually came from middle-class backgrounds, often working in low- to mid-level jobs in education or other branches of the public sector—a departure from the typical male candidate profile.⁷⁰ Mukheini believed these women were largely motivated by a

66 American development contractors such as NDI, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) do much of this work alongside similar government-sponsored European organizations. Sarah Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

67 Justin Vela, “One Woman Elected in Oman’s Shura Council Elections,” *The National*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/one-woman-elected-in-omans-shura-council-elections>; and *Muscat Daily*, “Lack of Trust in Majlis a’Shura Hindering Women, Say Activists,” October 27, 2015, <http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Lack-of-trust-in-Majlis-A-Shura-hindering-women-say-activists-4dv6>.

68 Ahmed Ali Mukheini, interview with author in Muscat, Oman, January 2016.

69 Fida Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith, and Progress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

70 Fatima, Al-Balushi, “The Role of Social Institution in Supporting Omani Women Political Candidates: A Case Study of Majlis A-Shura Elections (1998–2011),” master’s thesis presented to Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman, 2014.

wish to hear more women's voices in the system, but did not display much knowledge on how to campaign for office or on the intricacies of the political process.⁷¹ However, Omani women's activists have lamented the low showing of women in the past elections (2016). Per Sharifa al-Barami, a women's activist quoted in the *Muscat Daily*, "There is also a need for a quota for women because men tend to campaign as representatives for their tribes and regions."⁷² Al-Barami highlighted how women's campaigns often narrowly centered on individual communities, "These are important, but don't get votes. This discourages women for entering the elections." This may also explain why women seem to do better campaigning at the municipal (*wilayat*) level in Oman than at the national level.⁷³

While the Omani case may seem a strange one to select considering the sheer dearth of women in the political system, the presence of Busaidiya and the insights behind the way she ran her campaign are trenchant. A woman winning without party or tribal backing, without a gender quota in place to facilitate her entry into parliament, and in a male-dominated majoritarian electoral system is not insignificant. Her win hints at the new social networks women can tap into, but also at the power of a female personalism even within plurality systems.

6 Conclusion

The pattern that emerges from Jordan, Egypt, and Oman, as well as across the MENA, is one in which we see women independents largely running in majoritarian or mixed systems where parties are not as dominant, with gender quotas often facilitating their election, but not necessarily determining it. Importantly, this pattern has been specific to the GCC and Levantine states in the past, since up until recently, list-PR electoral systems were more characteristic of North Africa. However, countries that have closed list-PR systems at the national level, often host mixed systems at the local level with evidence of both

71 In contrast, it is an open secret that Omani men use parliamentary office as a way to set up lucrative business arrangement during and after their tenure.

72 *Muscat Daily*, "Lack in Trust."

73 Two of the women who ran successfully at the local level were members of the Omani Women's Association (OWA)—Rahma al-Ghufailiyah (Liwa municipality) and Rahma al-Noufli (Mussanah municipality)—the only NGO allowed in the country to represent women's interests. Deeba Hasan, "Oman Polls: The Women Who Stood for Election to Make a Difference-and Won," *Times of Oman*, December 27, 2016, <http://timesofoman.com/article/99395>.

men and women running successfully as independent candidates—an area of research which merits further study.⁷⁴

More generally, I hope this manuscript can make a small contribution to illuminating the diversity of mechanisms women rely on to access the political arena in non-Western countries and the pitfalls of presuming one-size-fits-all (and in the same way) when it comes to institutional adoption and diffusion across country contexts. At a time when the role of political parties is increasingly questioned by the popular press in the West itself, and when we see declining trust in the political party apparatus, the emergence of parallel structures to political parties for political recruitment and mobilization—even in authoritarian regimes—is a point of interest. Political participation and representation exclusively through parties is often billed as a uniquely Western conceit, usually spread through colonial or neo-colonial rule. But, the vectors for “political access” and even “independent agenda-setting” may look very different in non-European contexts where other organizational mechanisms abound and may offer richer opportunities for representation and even eventual inclusion. Especially in states where political parties are completely co-opted by the regime, alternate modes of political mobilization may be the only real tools for change or, at the very least, representation if not always active voice. The emergence of independent women candidates in the MENA may be a sign of the times along with the waning of political parties as the single model of a more “inclusive” representation in the Global South. Overall, this paper reveals yet another aspect of how women’s political recruitment and election is different in the MENA from the West, but potentially in ways that are not exclusively tied to cultural difference. In the MENA, list-PR electoral systems have an undeniable positive effect on women’s numeric legislative representation, much as they do within the West. However, plurality and mixed systems offer some surprising opportunities for a different array of female candidates to emerge: non-partisan women affiliated with other, and often rival, social networks (whether tied to the reigning regime or otherwise). Furthermore, when it comes to more independent agenda-setting, women may fare better when elected through non-partisan mechanisms if they opt to promote more radical gender-related reforms. It may not be an accident that some of the most far-reaching changes in rape legislation (specifically, the repeal of laws allowing the acquittal of rapists if they marry their victims) have been

74 The scale and size of countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and Egypt make it more challenging to mobilize constituents as an independent at the national level for both men and women.

pushed forward by independent female MPs in Jordan⁷⁵ alongside the activism of feminist organization such as Sisterhood is Global.⁷⁶ It is important to note that similar changes to rape laws in Algeria, Lebanon, and Tunisia were also the product of decades of lobbying from grassroots feminist organizations.⁷⁷

Overall, the jury is still out as to whether these independent women are clients of the state or genuine pioneers, but their ability to successfully contest male-dominated electoral regimes whether in non-partisan or partisan settings signals an important shift in cultural and institutional understandings of the seat of authority and service provision in the Middle East.

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75 Zena Tahhan, "Meet the Woman Who Pushed to Repeal Jordan's Rape Law," *Al Jazeera Online-Women's Rights*, August 4, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/meet-woman-pushed-repeal-jordan-rape-law-17080311944315.html>.

76 Ibtisam Al-Atiyat, "Repealing Jordan's Rape Article 308," *Confluences Méditerranée* Vol. 3 (2019): 99–111; and Rana Hussein, "Rape Cases Drop, Thanks to the Abolishment of Article 308—Activists," *The Jordan Times*, May 20, 2019, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/rape-cases-drop-thanks-abolishment-article-308-%E2%80%94activists>.

77 Alma Alqawasmi, "Sposa il tuo stupratore! Cambiamenti nelle legislazioni dei Paesi arabi: riformare le culture o riscoprirle?" *Dialoghi Mediterranei* Vol. 28 (2017); and Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerup, "Introduction: The Arab Uprisings and the Rights of Women," in *Double-Edged Politics on Women's Rights in the Mena Region* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–46.