الباروميتر العربي
ARAB BAROMETER

Political System Preference in the Middle East & North Africa

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Overview

In a recent report, Arab Barometer examined how citizens across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) understand democracy. The results suggest that support for democracy remains high, despite ongoing concerns about its limitation, in large part because MENA publics perceive democracy as being very similar to the concept of dignity (*karāma*). In effect, support for democracy is the hope for a broad range of reforms, including guaranteed civil rights; political equality; personal safety; an absence of corruption; and the provision of basic necessities for all to a greater extent than it is about elections.

This understanding diverges from most textbook definitions of democracy that hold free and fair elections as absolutely essential to the system and the bare minimum for qualifying as a democracy. Other attributes may be included as well, such as political rights and protections for minorities, but elections remain essential. For MENA publics, the outcomes of the system are more essential for defining the system as democratic compared with the process of inputs. Yet, it is well-established that certain types of political structures are more likely to promote positive outcomes than others. The underlying question thus remains, what political arrangements would be most likely to lead to what MENA publics see as democratic outcomes or, put another way, would deliver them the dignity they seek.

To evaluate, Arab Barometer included four questions that described different types of political systems that have existed in MENA and around the world in various countries. The four systems include a liberal parliamentary democracy; an authoritarian system; a system governed by Islamic law; and benevolent dictatorship. There remain many additional systems of governance that were not included in the list, but these four can be indicative of the type of government that citizens in MENA want for their countries.

When compared, the results are somewhat inconclusive. None of these systems is widely supported across all countries nor as any one fully rejected across MENA. However, support for a liberal parliamentary democracy generally is the most preferred while systems that provide for a strong leader but do not provide input to citizens tend to receive less support. A partial exception relates to a system governed by the *shari'a* or Islamic law. In certain countries, Mauritania and Jordan, majorities say they would support a system governed in this manner even if it excluded political parties and elections. Elsewhere, support for this system tends to be lower than for a parliamentary democracy.

These results suggest that while citizens in MENA want a system they call democracy that will yield them personal dignity, there is not a consensus on the institutional arrangements that would deliver such a system. For example, sup-

port for a liberal parliamentary system and a strong leader are nearly equal in Tunisia, highlighting the frustration of citizens in the country that its nascent democratic experiment after the Jasmine Revolution didn't deliver outcomes that met the hopes and expectations of citizens. Many are now looking for a system that can cut through the red tape and provide tangible results. Yet, in other countries such as Morocco, there is a clear commitment to a plural system and rejection of a strong ruler. Morocco's recent economic growth and improvements to the effectiveness of government may have led to a greater support of a political system of this manner as the most effective way to include citizens in the country's development.
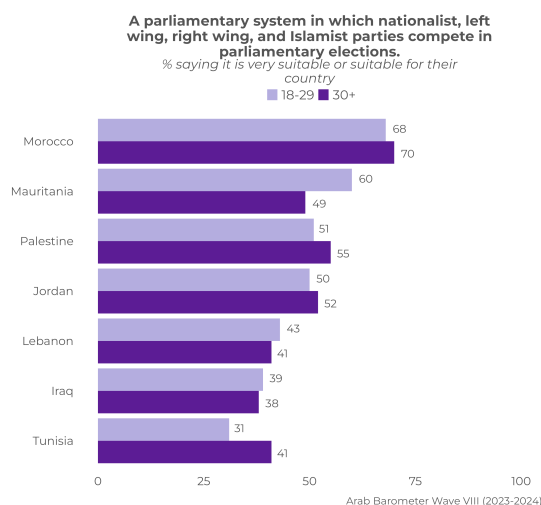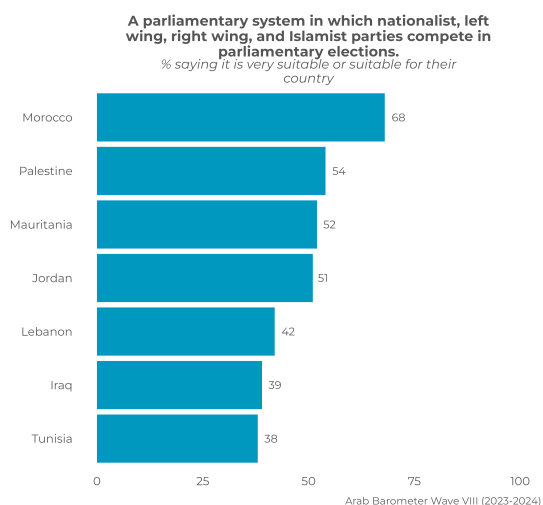
Ultimately, these findings reveal a region that is still searching for the best system of governance. Citizens want dignity, but years of non-democratic rule have, in much of the region, not led to this outcome. Yet, the limited democratic experiments, as democracy is defined in the technical sense, have also not produced desired outcomes. The result appears to be uncertainty about how to realize this aspiration. Citizens will continue to look to the region, and perhaps beyond, for a clear model of a system that produces the outcomes they want while also providing them a say in how their country is governed. Until that time, it is unlikely that citizens in most countries will coalesce around a single governance model.

Political system preference

A major challenge to democracy in MENA is that citizens are not sure what type of system would bring about their definition of democracy, which is revealed by another set of questions in Arab Barometer's Wave VIII. To gauge perceptions of political system, the questionnaire included a battery asking about the degree to which different types of political systems would be a suitable way to govern their country. Four regime types were described: a liberal democracy; a strongman authoritarian system; a system governed by Islamic law; and a benevolent dictatorship. All four systems have been implemented within MENA at various times and in different countries, meaning respondents should have some familiarity with all four types.

Support for a democratic political system, described to respondents as, "a parliamentary system in which nationalist, left wing, right wing, and Islamist parties compete in parliamentary elections", garners moderate support. A clear majority (68 percent) in Morocco say this type of system is very suitable or suitable for their country. However, elsewhere support is lower. In Palestine (54 percent), Mauritania (52 percent), and Jordan (51 percent) about half find a liberal democratic system to be appropriate. However, in Lebanon (42 percent), Iraq (39 percent), and Tunisia (38 percent), a minority of citizens favor this type of system. Each of these three countries has engaged in meaningful parliamentary elec-

tions over the past decade, but fewer than half in each believe this system is appropriate.

A parliamentary system in which nationalist, left wing, right wing, and Islamist parties compete in parliamentary elections.
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

Country	Value
Morocco	68
Palestine	54
Mauritania	52
Jordan	51
Lebanon	42
Iraq	39
Tunisia	38

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

A parliamentary system in which nationalist, left wing, right wing, and Islamist parties compete in parliamentary elections.
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

■ 18-29 ■ 30+

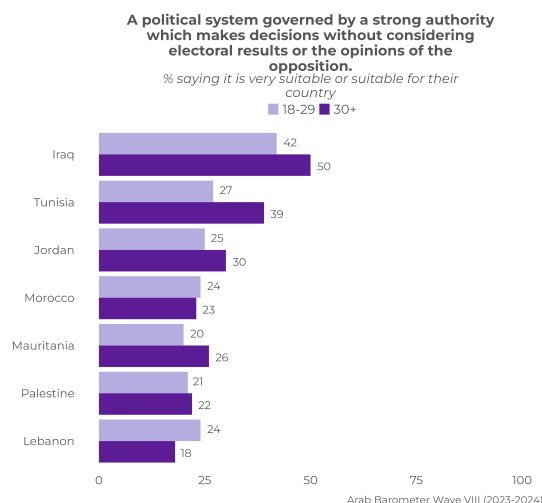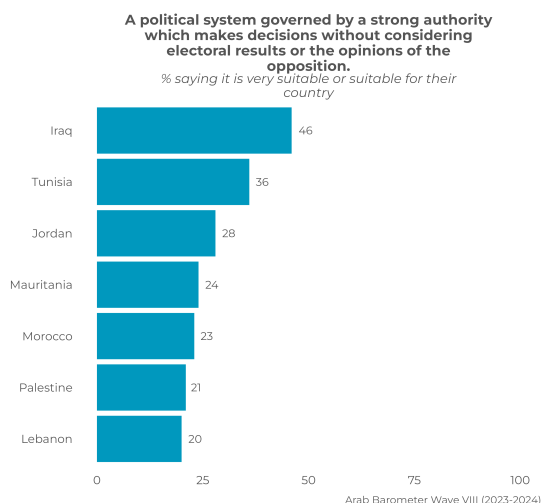| Country	18-29	30+
Morocco	68	70
Mauritania	60	49
Palestine	51	55
Jordan	50	52
Lebanon	43	41
Iraq	39	38
Tunisia	31	41

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

In Tunisia, youth are particularly disinclined toward this system. Only 31 percent of Tunisians ages 18-29 say that a liberal democratic system is suitable for their country, which is ten points lower than those who are old enough to have come of age before the 2011 Jasmine Revolution. It appears that those socialized during the economic challenges that followed the revolution are particularly disinclined toward such a system.

Yet, this does not mean that citizens want a system without any say. When asked about the extent to which strongman governance, defined as "a political system governed by a strong authority which makes decisions without considering electoral results or the opinions of the opposition", fewer than half indicate support in all countries surveyed. Moreover, only in Iraq does the percentage who favor this form of government exceed that who support liberal democracy (46 percent vs. 39 percent). Tunisia is another exception where authoritarian and democratic governance are effectively equal (36 percent vs. 38 percent). Elsewhere, relatively small minorities believe strongman rule is suitable form of government ranging from 28 percent in Jordan to 20 percent in Lebanon.
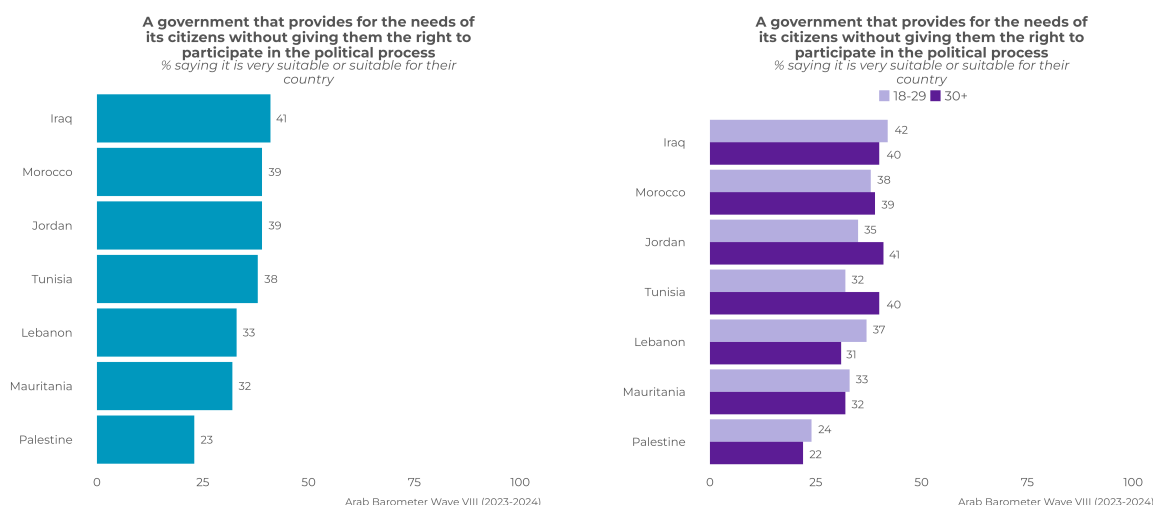
A political system governed by a strong authority which makes decisions without considering electoral results or the opinions of the opposition.

% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

Country	%
Iraq	46
Tunisia	36
Jordan	28
Mauritania	24
Morocco	23
Palestine	21
Lebanon	20

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

A political system governed by a strong authority which makes decisions without considering electoral results or the opinions of the opposition.

% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

■ 18-29 ■ 30+

Country	18-29	30+
Iraq	42	50
Tunisia	27	39
Jordan	25	30
Morocco	24	23
Mauritania	20	26
Palestine	21	22
Lebanon	24	18

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

Notably, youth are typically less supportive of strongman rule than those who are older, including in Tunisia. In Tunisia, citizens ages 18-29 are 12 points less likely to favor authoritarian governance compared with those who are 30 and older. In Iraq the gap is eight points, in Mauritania six points, and in Jordan five points. Only in Lebanon are youth more likely to favor strongman rule than those who are older (24 percent vs. 18 percent).

There is also limited support for a benevolent dictatorship, defined as "a government that provides for the needs of its citizens without giving them the right to participate in the political process". Fewer than half say such a system is suitable or very suitable in all countries surveyed. Iin most countries, support for such a system ranges between about three-in-ten to four-in-ten. The lone exception is Palestine where only 23 percent favor this system. In most counties, there is no age difference. The two exceptions are Tunisia, where youth are eight points less likely to favor such a system, and Jordan where youth are six points less likely to do so.

A government that provides for the needs of its citizens without giving them the right to participate in the political process
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

Country	%
Iraq	41
Morocco	39
Jordan	39
Tunisia	38
Lebanon	33
Mauritania	32
Palestine	23

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

A government that provides for the needs of its citizens without giving them the right to participate in the political process
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

■ 18-29 ■ 30+

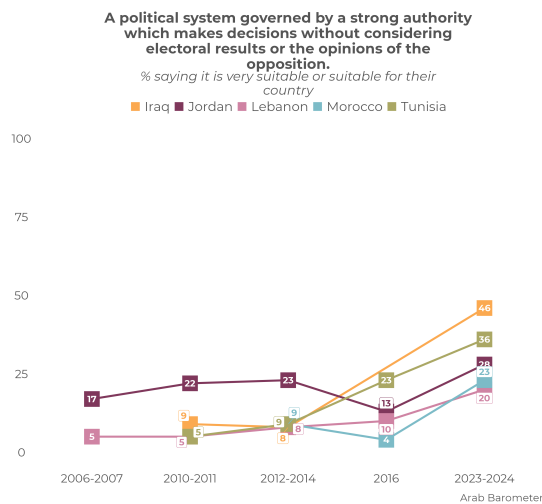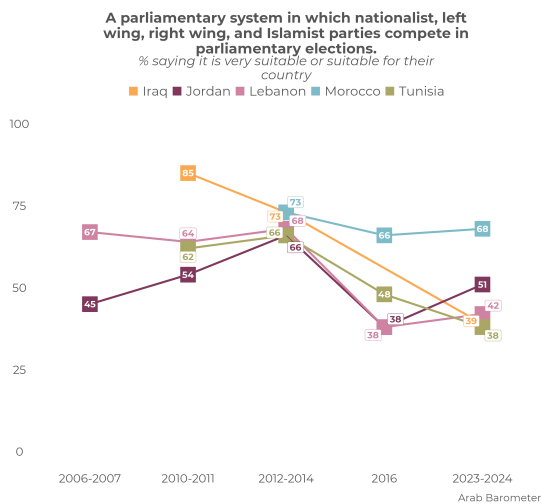| Country	18-29	30+
Iraq	42	40
Morocco	38	39
Jordan	35	41
Tunisia	32	40
Lebanon	37	31
Mauritania	33	32
Palestine	24	22

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

Although support for liberal democracy is still greater than for other systems, support for this system has largely declined since the Arab uprisings. In Arab Barometer Wave III (2012-2014), which was the one immediately following the uprisings, support for a parliamentary system in which all parties can compete in elections was held by clear majorities in MENA. At least two thirds favored this system in Iraq (73 percent), Morocco (73 percent), Lebanon (68 percent), Tunisia (66 percent), and Jordan (66 percent). The level of support observed for this system approximately one decade later is substantially lower in nearly all countries where data is available for both years. The largest drop is found in Iraq (-34 points) followed by Tunisia (-28 points), Lebanon (-26 points), and Jordan (-15 points). Only in Morocco is the level relatively similar with a decline of just five points during this period.

At the same time, support for a system governed by a strong authority gained increasing popularity during the same period. In the 2012-2014 wave of surveys, support for an authoritarian strongman system was low with about one-in-ten saying it was suitable or very suitable in Morocco (9 percent), Tunisia (9 percent), Iraq (8 percent) and Lebanon (8 percent). Among the five countries, only in Jordan stood out from this trend with 23 percent supportive of this type of system.
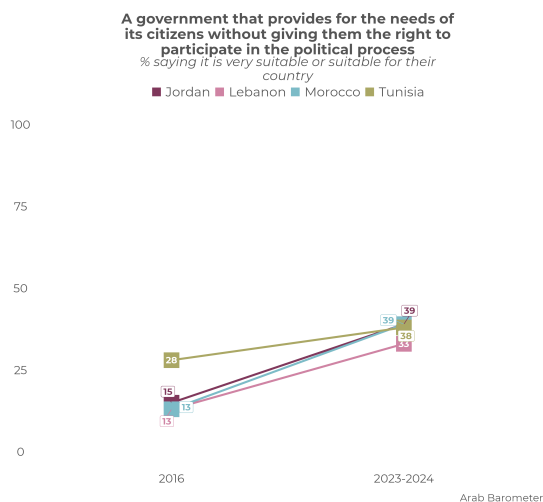
Roughly a decade later, support for this system had increased substantially in most countries. In Iraq, there was a 38 point rise followed by Tunisia (27 points), Morocco (14 points), and Lebanon (12 points). Only in Jordan was there not a dramatic change with an increase of just five points over this period. This evidence strongly suggests that not only did many citizens in the region lose confidence in liberal democratic systems, but their views shifted to support non-democratic systems in the years after the Arab uprisings.

A parliamentary system in which nationalist, left wing, right wing, and Islamist parties compete in parliamentary elections.
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

■ Iraq ■ Jordan ■ Lebanon ■ Morocco ■ Tunisia

Arab Barometer

A political system governed by a strong authority which makes decisions without considering electoral results or the opinions of the opposition.
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

■ Iraq ■ Jordan ■ Lebanon ■ Morocco ■ Tunisia
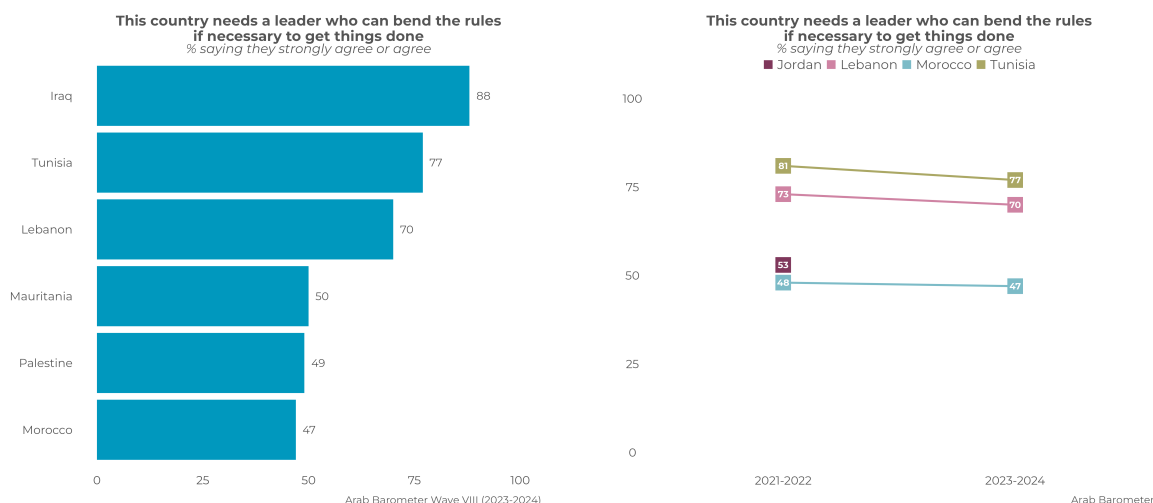

Arab Barometer

By other measures, support for non-democratic forms of government are also rising. In addition to strongman rule, the idea of a "benevolent dictatorship" is also increasing. This question first appeared on Arab Barometer in 2016, with relatively small percentages saying they would be willing to trade their political rights for a system that provides for them economically. At most 15 percent favored such a system in Jordan (15 percent), Lebanon (13 percent), and Morocco (13 percent). However, in Tunisia, 28 percent favored the same system. By 2023-2024, support was significantly higher across these countries with at least a third in favor of such a system. Overall, the increase was greatest in Morocco (26 points) followed by Jordan (24 points), Lebanon (20 points), and Tunisia (10 points).

A government that provides for the needs of its citizens without giving them the right to participate in the political process
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

■ Jordan ■ Lebanon ■ Morocco ■ Tunisia

Arab Barometer

Despite an apparent contradiction between continued support for "democracy" and rising support for non-democratic systems, the fundamental logic comes down to the definition of democracy for citizens. Democracy is less about inputs than outputs. To many ordinary citizens, elected parliaments appear to be inefficient means of making meaningful improvements in their lives. In cases like post-revolution Egypt and Tunisia, significant debates were over the role of religion in the state instead of the issues that would improve the lives of ordinary citizens. In places like Iraq and Jordan, parliaments focused more on distributing rents than making meaningful changes.
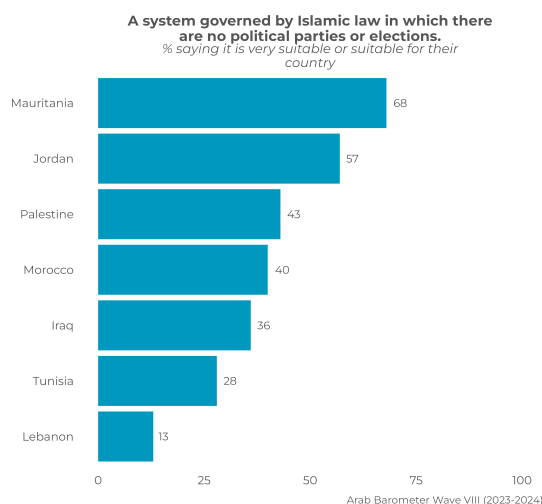
This frustration is also demonstrated by a question asking about preference for results over process. Arab Barometer includes a question about the extent to which respondents agree that a country needs a leader who can bend the rules if necessary to get things done. In three countries where elections have been more meaningful in the past decade—Iraq, Tunisia, and Lebanon —at least seven-in-ten citizens agree or strongly agree with this approach, including 88 percent in Iraq. In the remaining cases, roughly half agree with this sentiment including 50 percent in Mauritania, 49 percent in Palestine, and 47 percent in Morocco. This attitude underscores the widespread demand for forward progress in countries across MENA, even if it comes at the expense of the legal norms often associated with a democratic system.

This country needs a leader who can bend the rules if necessary to get things done
% saying they strongly agree or agree

Country	Value
Iraq	88
Tunisia	77
Lebanon	70
Mauritania	50
Palestine	49
Morocco	47

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

This country needs a leader who can bend the rules if necessary to get things done
% saying they strongly agree or agree
■ Jordan ■ Lebanon ■ Morocco ■ Tunisia

	2021-2022	2023-2024
Tunisia	81	77
Lebanon	73	70
Jordan	53	
Morocco	48	47

Arab Barometer

Support for rule under Islamic law, or the *shari'a*, suggests another nuance in these findings. In two countries, Mauritania and Jordan, a majority of citizens say they would favor such a system even if did not include political parties or

elections. Elsewhere, support for this system is lower, ranging from about three-in-ten to roughly four-in-ten in most countries. The clear exception is Lebanon where only 13 percent favor a system under the *shari'a*. Notably, half also support a parliamentary system in both countries while fewer than half in both countries support the other two non-democratic political systems. It appears that in both, there is widespread support for a system that is both democratic and one that incorporates aspects of traditional Islamic law into the system of governance.

A system governed by Islamic law in which there are no political parties or elections.
% saying it is very suitable or suitable for their country

Country	Value
Mauritania	68
Jordan	57
Palestine	43
Morocco	40
Iraq	36
Tunisia	28
Lebanon	13

Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2023-2024)

Takeaways

As citizens across MENA seek to translate their support for 'democracy' into a system of governance, there is not a unified vision about what type of system this would be. In most countries, support for a liberal parliamentary democracy is the highest but support is not overwhelming. Moreover, support has fallen in most countries over the last decade. Instead, many citizens are becoming more open to non-democratic alternatives including a variety of systems that do not provide them direct say into the political process. Support for a strong authority that doesn't consider the opposition or electoral results has grown dramatically in the last five years as has support for a system that provides for the needs of citizens without giving them say over the political process. However, neither system has reached the levels of support for liberal democracy.

These conflicting results suggest that MENA publics are unlikely to advocate for a single system to bring about personal dignity. Frustration with authoritarian systems that failed to provide for the people played a large part in bringing

about the protests of the Arab uprisings of 2011. Yet, the democratic experi-
ments in Tunisia and Egypt did not achieve the desired results. The results have
been a major drop in support for liberal democracy in Tunisia accompanied by
significantly higher support for an authoritarian system. Those living in other
MENA countries may have taken similar lessons from this transition process.
The end result is that citizens prefer a democratic system of governance, but
are not unified behind this institutional arrangement. Without a clear vision for
the future, it is likely that existing systems will continue to govern while citizens'
ongoing search for 'democracy', or really dignity, will continue.

About Arab Barometer

The Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insights into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

We have been conducting rigorous and nationally representative public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006. The margin of error is ±2 percent.

The Arab Barometer is the largest repository of publicly available data on the views of men and women in the MENA region. Our findings give a voice to the needs and concerns of Arab publics.

Through 2024, the Arab Barometer has conducted nearly 100 national surveys over eight waves including more than 135,000 interviews in 16 Arab countries.