Middle East Dialogue 2020
Common Path and Divergent Patterns: Welfare Regimes in the Post-2011 Arab World

Anis Ben Brik, PhD
Associate Professor
College of Public Policy
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
Email: abrik@hbku.edu.qa

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of the welfare reform trajectories in the post 2011 Arab world. It is questioned in the paper whether countries in the Arab world have undergone a converging reform trajectory and whether their distinct ways of doing social policy have come to an end. Have welfare regimes converged in the post 2011 Arab world? If so, in which direction? Are there “convergence clubs” and in which ways do welfare regimes constrain possible convergent developments? Several theoretical perspectives engage with these questions, offering several causes of convergence. This paper seeks to analyze welfare regimes convergence from a macro-comparative perspective. It tracks the development of welfare regimes in the post 2011 Arab world by looking at several trends. The analysis focuses on social protection benefits; employment based social security, and social safety nets and in-kind assistance. It builds on data on standardized institutional variables which facilitates analyzing different welfare programs in the region. Drawing on different measures of convergence for assessing welfare policy dynamics, the paper prepares the ground for more analyses on causes and consequences of welfare state development in the post 2011 Arab region.

Countries in the post 2011 Arab world have followed a similar path in their social policy reform direction, the forms and patterns they have taken to follow have been distinct, largely aligned with the existing structure of social protection in each. Distinctive strategies of welfare adopted by each country have led to a divergent pattern in their way of doing social policy; many countries introduced social policies with economic objectives
(reducing poverty, promoting economic growth, etc.), social objectives (reducing inequality, promoting social inclusion) and political objectives (reducing civil unrest, promoting state legitimacy). These instruments include price subsidies, school feeding, public works and nutrition programs. Two overarching tendencies, both of which fall short of universal coverage or adequate benefit levels: (1) employment based social security, which means that formally employed private- and public sector workers are the most likely to receive protection, primarily in terms of end-of-service indemnity pay, health and education, but with some countries not having old-age pension schemes; and (2) social safety nets and in-kind assistance, often provided by community or family based social networks, to vulnerable groups such as orphans or elderly people. This has been the system in practice since the 1940s, and it shows no sign of significant reform. With some minor exceptions of countries with long socialist or trade union traditions—such as Egypt and Tunisia—most countries adopted a strong neoliberal stance, whereby the private sector is the main engine of social and economic prosperity, though often the political establishment is the main owner of capital—such as in telecommunications and industry. The current donor-sponsored reform of food and fuel subsidies that is taking place in the region is part of this trend. In addition, many countries had phased out subsidies and redirecting social investment into direct, in most cases, targeted cash transfers. Some added cash transfers to their social protection systems, as well as new or reformulated old-age pensions and disability grants. Governments in the region used targeted cash transfer programs, following in the footsteps of Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, “serving ‘old wine in new bottles’” without really touching the status quo—the ‘autocratic social contract’, based on the provision of free health and education, government jobs for all graduates and low prices for basic necessities, but limited political and civil liberties. This social contract mainly targeted the urban middle classes. The persistence of social welfare systems that are skewed towards the interests of political and urban elites, even in the post 2011 events, means that political systems in the Arab world have been unable to provide quality services in the context of accelerated population growth, increasing poverty and an overall changing global context of free capital, international labour flows and private-sector dominance. Furthermore, the presence of oil in the region has fostered a rentier model of distribution, whereby “political elites sought to sustain their political dominance by avoiding nationwide taxation and constituting complex rent-distribution mechanisms designed to allocate rents derived from oil production, foreign aid or similar channels isolated from productive economic activities”.


Overall, the concept of social welfare regime is mainly understood in a narrow sense of social safety nets of cash transfers. While it is too early to draw conclusions about the dynamics of welfare policy arrangements in the post 2011 Arab region in general given that we are still lacking data on further important fields of social security (sickness insurance, standard pensions and parental leave) and for more diversified household types, at this stage our preliminary results suggest that the diversity of welfare policy patterns in the post 2011 Arab world and in the temporal development of welfare policy is still evident.

Bio

Dr. Anis Ben Brik is an Associate Professor at HBKU College of Public Policy. Prior to joining HBKU, he served as Director of Family Policy Department at the Doha International Family Institute. He has previously held senior advisory positions focused on advancing the use of evidence in decision-making and social policy at the UAE Government, and has been advisor to several ministries and member of national and regional Scientific Committee for Development Strategies. Dr. Ben Brik is interested in the empirical analysis of issues related to welfare systems, family policy, child welfare, social security, policy evaluation and sustainable development in the Gulf and the MENA region. He has published empirical research in a wide range of international peer-reviewed journals, including Children and Youth Services Review, Early Child Development and Care, Child Indicators Research, Journal of Business Ethics, and Decision Sciences. His most recent publication includes Family Changes in the Context of Social Changes in the Gulf Region (Routledge). Dr. Ben Brik has extensive experience in applying experimental and non-experimental methods to evaluate policies and has worked with government departments on a range of projects, including on issues related to family and child welfare, child protection, social security, labor economics and public economics. Dr. Ben Brik is a strong advocate for strengthening civil society engagement and collaborative partnerships at the United Nations. He served as the Middle East Regional Partner at the United Nations NGO Major Group and has spoken at numerous UN high-level meetings such as the UN High Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the United Nations Commission for Social Development.