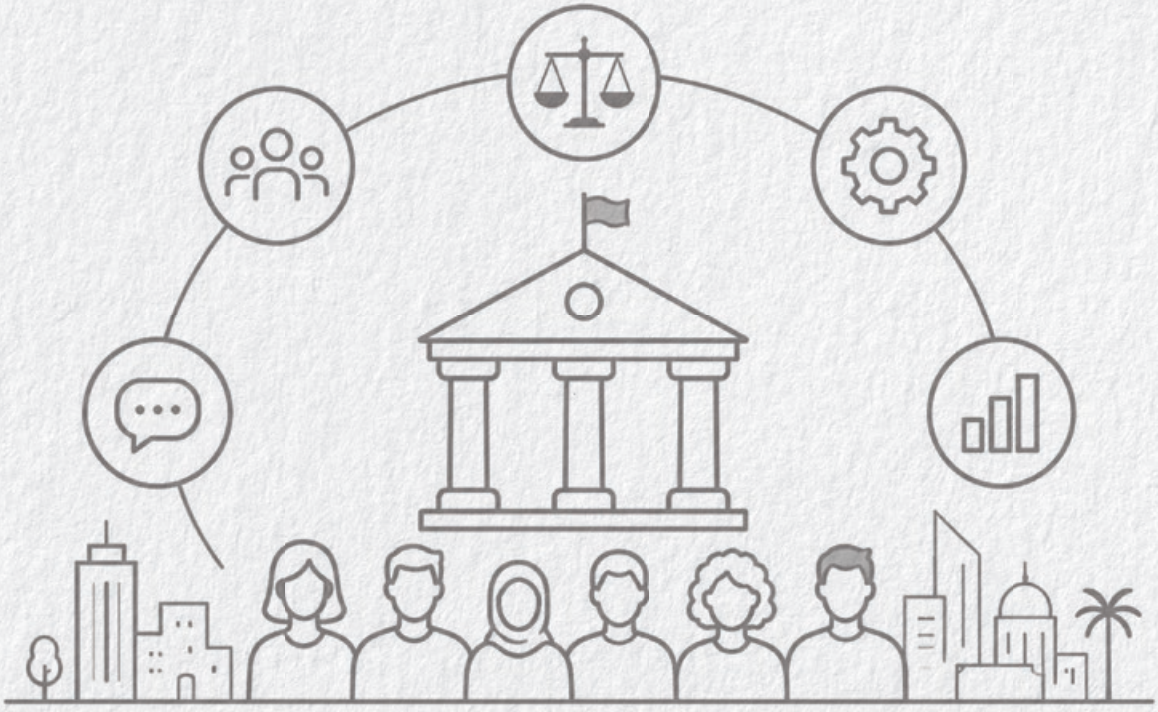
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ENGINEERING GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS FOR INCLUSIVE CITIZEN-CENTRIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARAB REGION

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world characterized by increased mobility, transnational migration, global religious dynamics, and revolutionary communication technologies, individuals and nations are more interconnected than ever within a wider global system. The growing interdependence among societies holds immense promise for collaboration and collective advancement. However, it also intensifies the risks of inequality, cultural friction, and socio-political tension. Without deliberate efforts to cultivate mutual respect, inclusion, and genuine dialogue among diverse communities, these connections may exacerbate divisions rather than bridge them. To harness interconnectedness as a catalyst for cohesion rather than conflict, it is essential to ensure equitable representation of all groups within socio-economic and political systems.

The Arab region, encompassing 22 countries and home to over 400 million people, is marked by remarkable diversity across its vast geography (Bishai and Rostoum, 2019). This diversity is reflected in a complex mosaic of ethnicities, languages, religious traditions, cultural practices, and historical influences that vary across countries. The region's pluralism is further enriched by global migration and the influence of widespread Arab diasporas, whose interactions with other cultures continue to reshape identities in their countries of origin. These transnational connections simultaneously preserve cultural heritage while introducing new social and political dynamics. This intricate tapestry forms a core component of the Arab collective identity, contributing to its vibrant sociopolitical landscape. The complexity of the social fabric presents both challenges and opportunities for governance and inclusive nation-building. Although diversity is celebrated as a source of enrichment, bringing dynamism and innovation through the engagement of varied constituencies, the lived reality across the region often falls short of this ideal. The promotion of a unified national identity may foster solidarity; however, in the absence of inclusive and participatory citizenship, it risks exacerbating divisions. In many cases, Arab governments have manipulated identity politics to marginalize minority groups and reinforce exclusionary governance; leading to social fragmentation and resentment. These dynamics have contributed to two significant outcomes; the rise of Islamism as a form of political opposition, and the proliferation of violent extremist groups that advocate narrow interpretations of Arab identity (Bishai and Rostoum, 2019). Such developments highlight the need for Arab governments to adopt inclusive governance frameworks that embrace the region's pluralism, rather than suppress it. Acknowledging and valuing diversity is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for advancing equitable development and achieving peace.

In recent years, the region has grappled with a series of profound crises that have generated far-reaching socio-political and economic implications. The Arab Spring (2010–2011) marked a transformative shift, as widespread protests erupted in many countries, challenging deep-rooted authoritarian regimes and exposing systemic governance failures. The ensuing unrest underscored the fragility of state institutions and the urgency for reform. A renewed wave of uprisings in 2019- most notably in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon- further highlighted public discontent with ineffective governance, institutionalized corruption, and policies that perpetuated social

inequality. These movements were driven by demands for accountability, transparency, and inclusive political participation. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges; triggering economic collapse marked by a massive drop in oil prices, rampant unemployment, and heightened social vulnerability. These compounded pressures have amplified demands for transformative governance systems that reinforce inclusive citizen-centric development.

The health emergency hit the region amid a period of acute political instability, worsening inequalities and public frustration over corruption, minimal political rights and restricted civil liberties. Alongside preceding crises, the pandemic exposed the weaknesses of public institutions and their insufficient preparedness to confront both persistent and emerging challenges. It also highlighted the growing erosion of public trust and the escalating disconnect in state-society relations, underscoring the urgent need for institutional reform and inclusive governance (ESCWA, 2022). The Russo-Ukraine war, which erupted in February 2022, has had profound geopolitical and economic repercussions in the region. One of its most immediate impacts was the disruption of global grain supplies, triggering sharp increases in food prices and exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Lately,

the ongoing wars in Gaza and Lebanon have further undermined regional stability, compounding the effects of fragile political systems, persistent economic challenges, and protracted refugee crises. In addition to these geopolitical shocks, the region continues to grapple with deep-rooted sectarian tensions and religious divides, especially between Sunni and Shia communities, that have fueled conflicts and political instability in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Environmental degradation poses another critical threat, with water scarcity, desertification, and the accelerating impacts of climate change threatening livelihoods. Compounding these challenges is the rise of extremist groups -including ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and others- whose activities have intensified violence and insecurity, not only within national borders but across the region and beyond.

> *"It has become very clear that the freedom that donors give you is quite conditional. This adds more challenges to feminists who are continuously fighting to prove that we are an integral part of society, and our concerns are the concerns of our communities".*
>
> ***- Feminist activist***

People of the Arab region are increasingly challenging the prevailing state-citizen relationship, which has long been shaped by corruption, weak institutions, and elite control over public resources. These governance failures have exacerbated systemic inequalities. Over the past decade, citizens have become increasingly vocal in asserting their rights and responsibilities, demanding a redefinition of the social contract grounded in inclusive public service delivery, fair political representation, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. These demands reflect a broader call for justice, the rule of law, socio-economic security, and institutional accountability. Ghanem (2014) underscores this point, stating that "the old autocratic social contract (bread vs. freedom) has been broken". The Arab Spring protests and the subsequent waves of unrest embody a collective demand for a new, sustainable state–citizen relationship rooted in inclusive citizenship and good governance; an aspiration that many Arab governments have yet to fully embrace.

2. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Traditional state-centric governance models in the Arab region have historically emphasized allegiance to the state rather than prioritizing the needs of its citizens. The Arab Uprisings and ongoing civil unrest have exposed the limitations of these models, underscoring the urgent need for paradigm shifts toward inclusive, citizen-focused governance that reflects the region's rich diversity. This study critically examines the limitations of conventional governance frameworks and advocates for reforms rooted in transparency, equity, and civic engagement. It explores how governance structures are evolving across the region, shaped by geopolitical shifts and a growing momentum toward inclusive governance as a strategic policy compass. Despite persistent challenges, the region is undergoing significant socio-political changes that offer opportunities to transcend entrenched cultural, legal, social and religious obstacles.

The study identifies key barriers to inclusive governance and assesses the transformative role of digital platforms, media, and e-Government in enhancing citizen participation and driving institutional reform. Organized thematically, it discusses how good governance promotes development and how inclusive citizenship upholds equality, justice and respect for diversity. Through a comprehensive analysis, it proposes a model of inclusive governance that actively involves citizens in reform efforts and leverages the strengths of diverse communities. While implementing such a model in the region is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, it remains a critical prerequisite for building cohesive, peaceful, and prosperous societies. Addressing cultural, constitutional, social, and religious challenges requires a holistic approach that balances diversity with the principles of equality and justice The study underscores the imperative for context-sensitive reforms tailored to the region's evolving social contracts in the post-Arab Spring era. By embracing inclusive governance, the region can lay the foundation for sustainable development and empowered citizenship.

In today's digital age marked by rapid technological advancement, the integration of E-Governance and E-Democracy marks a transformative shift toward transparent, citizen-centric governance. The study explores how digital tools empower citizens, foster civic engagement, and facilitate participatory decision-making. It also addresses the complexities and risks of digital transformation; including privacy concerns, surveillance, misinformation, and unequal access to technology. Navigating these risks demands strong policy frameworks, ethical technology design principles, and inclusive digital literacy initiatives to ensure technology reinforces democratic resilience rather than exacerbates exclusion or control.

While progress has been made in many Arab countries toward adopting good governance and inclusive citizenship, continued efforts are needed to ensure equal participation for all. The study concludes with a forward-looking vision for digital-era governance that prioritizes the security of information spaces as a key component of the broader human security framework. As digital platforms become central to civic life and public services, safeguarding them is crucial to individual well-being and societal stability. Ultimately, the study calls for a transformative path that institutionalizes governance based on individuals' rights and collective welfare. This model promotes social peace and economic prosperity while dismantling authoritarian, theocratic, and patronage-based systems. It addresses the structural drivers of extremism and corruption through civic empowerment and institutional reform. Achieving this vision requires sustained collaboration among governments, civil society, and international partners to build transparent, equitable, and participatory governance frameworks.

3. GOOD GOVERNANCE:
A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

There is broad consensus among scholars and policymakers that good governance is essential for achieving sustainable development. Governance refers to the systems and processes through which authority is exercised in society. It ensures that decisions are made efficiently, laws and policies are properly formulated and enforced, and those in power are held accountable. Fundamentally, governance involves the institutions and mechanisms that confer legitimacy, including how governments are selected, monitored, and replaced; how effectively the state designs and implements policies; and the degree of trust between citizens and institutions that regulate social and economic interactions. Key governance principles; such as transparency, accountability, and inclusivity; are critical to promoting equitable and sustainable development outcomes. In this context, good governance is a cornerstone of political stability, institutional integrity, and long-term development.

The following sections outline the core principles and defining characteristics of 'good' governance, highlighting its pivotal role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Special attention is given to the strategic significance of SDG16 in governance. The final section presents approaches for assessing governance performance in the Arab region, with the goal of identifying priority areas for reform and strengthening institutional capacity in line with the 2030 Agenda.

3.1. What makes governance 'good'?

The concept of governance is not new; yet it has gained increasing prominence in development discussions and across various domains; ranging from corporate and international to national and local contexts. Despite the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition, this study adopts an understanding of governance as the process by which authority is delegated to rulers, the mechanisms by which rules are formulated, and the means by which those rules are enforced. The analysis of governance involves both formal and informal actors involved in decision-making as well as the official and unofficial structures that facilitate implementation. Although government

plays a central role, it is not the sole actor. Other actors influence governance processes, depending on the level at which decisions are made; be it rural, urban, or national. These actors may include influential landlords, affluent families, cooperatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research institutes, religious leaders, financial institutions, political parties, the military, media outlets, lobby groups, international donors and multinational corporations. Collectively, non-governmental and non-military actors are often referred to as 'civil society'. Formal government institutions represent one channel through which decisions are made and enforced. However, informal structures, such as unofficial advisory groups or 'kitchen cabinets', patronage networks, or even organized crime syndicates like the 'land mafia' can exert significant influence in decision-making. These informal mechanisms often emerge from or contribute to corruption, undermining transparency and accountability in governance (ESCAP, 2009). To address these challenges, inclusive governance must integrate the voices of minority groups and vulnerable populations. Good governance should be responsive to both present and future societal needs, ensuring that decision-making is inclusive, transparent, and rooted in justice.

The term 'good governance' is widely used in policy discourse, yet remains challenging to define and operationalize in practice (ESCWA, 2021). Broadly, it encompasses principles such as accountability, impartiality, transparency, and efficiency (Johnston, 2006). According to ESCAP (2009), good governance is characterized by eight key attributes; it is participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and grounded in the rule of law. Additional perspectives emphasize the importance of legitimacy, competence, and respect for legal frameworks (ESCWA, 2021). Kanbar and El Sayegh (2016) underscore two core values: inclusiveness, which ensures equal treatment under the law and enables broad civic participation; and accountability, which depends on transparency and public access to government information. Good governance is indispensable for reform and development

(Kanbar, 2024); ultimately aiming to promote human dignity, security, and societal advancement. Also, good governance contributes to effective aid utilization, sustainable resource management, and improved productivity. It fosters political inclusiveness and strengthens public trust in institutions, thereby enhancing state stability and its capacity to pursue long-term development (ESCWA, 2015a *in* Sumpf *et. al*., 2016).

3.2. Why SDG16 is strategically central to governance?

In pursuit of eradicating poverty and hunger, reducing inequalities, and protecting human rights, UN member States have pledged through the 2030 Agenda to building peaceful, just and inclusive societies free from fear and violence. Central to this vision lies SDG16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which seeks to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". As one of the foundational pillars of the United Nations SDGs, SDG16 is instrumental in fostering the conditions necessary for sustainable development by strengthening access to justice, curbing violence and organized crime, combating corruption, and building institutions that are effective, accountable, and inclusive. SDG16 is foundational to the success of all other SDGs, as it creates a groundwork for peace and good governance. It places a strong emphasis on state-society relations and highlights key governance principles essential to promote peaceful and inclusive societies. These include: strengthening the rule of law at both national and international levels; ensuring equal access to justice; significantly reducing corruption and bribery; building accountable and transparent institutions; promoting responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making; guaranteeing public access to information and safeguarding fundamental freedoms; enhancing national institutions through international cooperation, especially in developing countries; preventing violence and combating terrorism and crime; and enforcing non-discriminatory laws and policies that support sustainable development (ESCWA , 2022).

3.3. Governance in the Arab region: Deficits and barriers to the 2030 Agenda

There is no specific universally recognized 'Arab Governance Index' for cross-country comparison within the region. Rather, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has proposed comprehensive approaches to measure governance in Arab countries. In particular, ESCWA (2021) introduced a multidimensional Arab governance index aimed at evaluating government quality and institutional performance. This index focuses on three core pillars; namely rule of law and access to justice, institutional accountability and effectiveness, and citizen participation. Complementing these efforts, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) database offers a global benchmark by measuring six dimensions: Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption (World Bank, 2023). Together, these tools offer valuable insights into governance performance and help identify areas for reform.

In the Arab region, persistent governance deficits constitute a major impediment for achieving the 2030 Agenda. These challenges hinder public institutions from effectively responding to both longstanding and emerging crises, limiting citizens' ability to fulfill their developmental and political aspirations. While some progress has been made in basic services like health and education, governance weaknesses remain a recurring theme in regional assessments. These deficits are reflected in consistently low scores on governance indicators (ESCWA, 2022). Despite varying socioeconomic conditions, many Arab countries share structural features that contribute to weak governance. These include concentrated power among elites; reliance on external revenues such as oil, foreign aid, or remittances; patronage-based access to economic opportunities, centralized public sectors, coercive security systems, and demographic pressures from growing youth populations (Sumpf *et. al.,* 2016).

Political and economic instability, popular uprisings, and ongoing conflicts have further eroded trust between states and societies. This strained relationship is evident in poor performance on indicators like Voice and Accountability and Political Stability, which point to limited public participation and a lack of transparency and accountability (ESCWA, 2022). According to Sumpf *et.al.* (2016), the region consistently shows declining trends on several WGIs, particularly in Political Stability, Rule of Law, Voice and Accountability and Control of Corruption. High levels of corruption, lack of transparency, weak accountability, and limited citizens' participation have created a fragile environment marked by declining public confidence in governance systems.

The foundational elements of SDG16 are increasingly pertinent, echoing the demands voiced during the 2011 Arab Spring and shaping subsequent reform efforts. SDG16 is particularly critical in countries classified as fragile by the OECD (2022), which include Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, representing 41% of Arab League member states (Milton and Alhamawi, 2024). Although Lebanon is not officially designated as fragile, Milton and Alhamawi (2024) indicate that SDG16 is also markedly relevant due to the long-standing issues of conflict, injustice, and institutional weakness. Lebanon is also experiencing a severe economic crisis, ranked "in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century" amidst "deliberate inaction" (World Bank, 2021). Its sectarian political system, lacking effective accountability mechanisms, fosters clientelism between corrupt leaders and their constituencies (Kanbar, 2024), exacerbating inequality and institutional paralysis. In terms of peace, Lebanon was ranked the 29th least peaceful country globally in 2023 (IEP, 2023 in Milton and Alhamawi, 2024), and the 28th in the most recent report by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2025). These indications reflect the erosion of the SDG16 core pillars and underscore the goal's broader relevance marked by weak governance.

Across the region, the analysis of the advancement towards SDG16 measured by 12 targets and 24 indicators highlight serious shortcomings in governance systems. ESCWA's (2025a) report shows that reliable data are available for only 7 out of the 24 indicators, underscoring major limitations in monitoring capacity. The region is also identified as one of the most conflict-prone globally, undermining peace and security. Furthermore, only about 32% of Arab countries have independent national human rights institutions that meet the Paris Principles (ESCWA, 2025a). Milton and Alhamawi (2024) outline five major barriers to achieving SDG16; namely ongoing conflict, state fragmentation, rising authoritarianism, insufficient data, and the broader global 'polycrisis' threatening regional sustainability. The recent Israeli war on Gaza, which began in October 2023, has intensified regional violence and tensions, causing a major regression in the progress toward the first target of SDG16, the reduction of all forms of violence and related deaths (Milton and Alhamawi, 2024).

4. INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP AS A GOVERNANCE IMPERATIVE: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The concept of citizenship carries varied meanings in the Arab region, where differences in religion, ethnicity, and ideology shape its interpretation across different national contexts. This lack of unified understanding presents significant challenges. Amidst competing political and cultural influences, clear definitions of the rights and obligations associated with citizenship are becoming increasingly crucial. Establishing a shared vision of citizenship also requires refining related principles such as human rights, democracy, equality, freedom, inclusion and exclusion.

Citizenship is defined based on the provision of rights (civil and political, social and economic, cultural and collective, and recently environmental) intertwined with citizens' fulfilment of their duties such as tax payment, legal compliance, and, in some cases, military service (Marshall, 2009 *in* UNDP, 2019a). It is not merely a legal status but a dynamic and contested process shaped by formal and informal social relationships. While legal frameworks, political institutions, economic systems, and technological developments influence this process, citizenship is also modeled by social interactions, power dynamics, and historical struggles. For marginalized and excluded communities, legal equality may not translate into lived equality. Inclusive citizenship therefore requires active participation, responsive policymaking, and recognition of individuals' diverse identities and affiliations (Pfister, 2012 *in* UNDP, 2019a). Although Arab constitutions confirm equality before the law, the practical implementation of citizenship varies widely due to differing policies, political contexts, and societal structures. This results in "differentiated citizenship," where individuals experience unequal treatment based on religion, gender, ethnicity, or other identity markers. These disparities manifest both in state-citizen relations and among citizens themselves. Gender, in particular, remains a significant axis of structural inequality and discrimination throughout the region (UNDP, 2019a).

In recent decades, political and social shifts have prompted a reevaluation of citizenship and its role. The region is undergoing remarkable changes aimed at expanding democratic space to fulfill citizens' aspirations and address development challenges. Traditional methods of maintaining social peace, through coercion or financial incentives, are proving ineffective. Sustainable peace now requires a transformative mindset and recognition that comprehensive reform is more cost-effective than piecemeal solutions. The key challenge lies in how current regional dynamics can redefine citizenship to foster inclusive political environments that embrace pluralism and diversity. Reformulating the social contract through inclusive citizenship is essential for driving institutional reform and advancing prosperity and stability in line with the SDGs. Inclusive citizenship emphasizes that all individuals; regardless of identity or background; should have equal opportunities to participate in civic life. Its core components include access to rights, representation in decision-making, and empowerment. It is an active form of citizenship that draws strength from the diversity of ideas, beliefs, and expressions to shape collective political action for the common good (Adyan Foundation, 2019).

The concept of citizenship in the Arab region is both intricate and multi-layered, shaped by diverse historical experiences and evolving socio-political dynamics. These complexities pose substantial challenges to implementing inclusivity. Addressing these challenges is crucial for advancing justice, representation, and empowerment. The analysis that follows delves into the challenges to inclusive citizenship across four key dimensions; namely cultural, constitutional, social, and religious. It also identifies emerging opportunities for cultural transformation, constitutional reform, social justice, and constructive religious engagement. Together, these pathways offer strategic directions for building a more inclusive civic landscape in the region.

4.1. Cultural issues and transformations to neutralize exclusion

In the Arab region, citizenship extends beyond a mere legal status of a member of a society to encompass a broad spectrum of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights and responsibilities that shape the social contract (UNDP, 2019a). Discrimination arises when individuals are denied identity-based rights, particularly civil and cultural rights. The slogans of the 2011 Arab uprisings not only called for economic prosperity, social justice and political inclusion but also revealed deep-rooted cultural grievances. Arab societies comprise a mosaic of identities that, while enriching, present intricate challenges to inclusive citizenship. These include resistance to change by minority groups who feel marginalized or excluded, difficulties in forging a unified national identity in multicultural societies, as well as tensions between universal human rights and culturally specific practices.

Cultural factors, embedded in longstanding historical and societal traditions, create multiple interdependent and mutually reinforcing challenges to inclusion. The region's cultural diversity often gives rise to tensions between preserving traditional values and embracing contemporary ideals. Initiatives to promote progressive principles; such as gender equality or minority rights; frequently encounter resistance from groups committed to maintaining cultural continuity. Conservative factions, in particular, may perceive such changes as threats to their cultural identity. As Livingstone *et. al.* (2024) note, concerns for cultural aspects of identity shape and constrain resistance, particularly among minorities. This resistance often manifests in efforts to reinforce in-group cohesion and cultural homogeneity in response to perceived external threats. Such mobilization may take the form of cultural expression or protest, reinforcing solidarity within the group while potentially fostering exclusionary attitudes toward out-groups deemed responsible for the threat. In societies where inclusive social contracts are weak, the desire to preserve cultural autonomy can lead to ethnic revitalization movements that seek formal recognition and protection of group-specific rights. Such forms of identity-driven mobilization reflect deeper aspirations for inclusion, representation, and affirmation of cultural identity within governance structures.

Creating a cohesive national identity is particularly difficult in Arab societies marked by ethno-religious and cultural pluralism. Deep-rooted group affiliations often result in competing loyalties that challenge national unity. Dominant cultural narratives frequently marginalize minority groups, perpetuating exclusion through systemic biases in media and education. In several Arab countries, media content and educational curricula tend to highlight the perspectives and contributions of majority groups, while overlooking or minimizing those of minorities. Such exclusionary narratives are not incidental; they are shaped by underlying political and economic structures that steer public discourse and determine priorities. Consequently, national identity is often portrayed through a narrow lens that reinforces existing hierarchies and diminishes the visibility and recognition of the region's cultural diversity.

To overcome these cultural challenges, Arab countries must revise their national frameworks to embrace cultural diversity as a source of strength. Achieving inclusive citizenship requires two-way reciprocal adaptation; whereby majority groups must support more accommodating and inclusive practices, while minority communities should abandon discriminatory traditions that conflict with broader societal norms. Embedding pluralism and diversity into education and media is essential for fostering mutual understanding and respect. Empowering communities, cultivating belonging, challenging stereotypes and encouraging intercultural dialogue are key strategies for dismantling exclusionary narratives and advancing inclusive citizenship.

It is widely acknowledged that education plays a critical role in combating marginalization and fostering peace. Educational institutions serve as vital spaces for dialogue between youth and the state, helping to build social cohesion and a sense of identity. Ensuring equitable access to education and employment is essential for reintegrating marginalized youth and preventing their

social and economic exclusion. The League of Arab States (2023) underscores the importance of gender-sensitive reintegration policies to support inclusive citizenship. Facilitating dialogue that bridges cultural, religious and political divides can empower young people to lead community initiatives that promote social harmony. Educational reforms should incorporate human rights and peace education, alongside media literacy and critical thinking, to prepare future generations to champion democracy, justice, equity and inclusion. Teaching conflict resolution, encouraging collective action, and sharing diverse experiences in educational settings can also help foster inclusive attitudes. Cultural and educational institutions must be supported in their role as agents of reconciliation and inclusion.

In the era of global digital transformation, Arab educational systems have a strategic opportunity to leverage Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as instruments for advancing digital literacy and empowering youth from culturally diverse backgrounds. Integrating ICTs into curricula can ensure equitable access to essential digital skills, enhancing academic achievement and preparing students for the integration into the labor market and active participation in the emerging knowledge-based economy. For marginalized cultural groups, digital literacy can serve as a gateway to broader social and economic inclusion. Digital proficiency is increasingly vital for civic engagement, as online platforms enable underrepresented communities to amplify their voices and challenge dominant narratives. The Arab uprisings demonstrated the transformative power of social media, where real-time communication dismantled traditional barriers to participation and united individuals across cultural divides around shared demands for reform. These platforms became powerful tools for mobilizing against systemic injustices and fostering collective action. While traditional governance structures in the region have often limited the participation of certain cultural groups, digital activism has emerged as a dynamic force to promote inclusion and participation. It offers new avenues for representation, dialogue, and accountability, reshaping the relationship between citizens and the state in pluralistic societies.

4.2. Constitutional challenges and pathways to reforms

Most Arab countries encompass diverse communities that were incorporated as minorities during the post-colonial era. The formation of Arab states often overlooked the varied cultural, linguistic, and religious identities within the administrative units that later became sovereign nations. International reports indicate that only few countries experienced a smooth transition toward inclusive governance following independence. Instead, the dominant model of statehood emphasized centralized control, with nationalist movements aiming to suppress diversity and enforce uniformity through rigid command structures (UNDP, 2019a). As a result, many countries failed to establish democratic governance that guarantees representation and inclusion for their culturally diverse populations (UNDP, 2009). Although most constitutions affirm equality and non-discrimination, their practical implementation is frequently undermined by ambiguous legal frameworks and selective enforcement. In practice, constitutional guarantees are often undermined by clauses that prioritize specific religious, ethnic, or ideological identities, creating systemic obstacles to inclusive citizenship. Three key constitutional challenges in the Arab region are explored below; namely inconsistencies in legal frameworks, weak rule of law, and differentiated citizenship.

A prominent feature of many Arab constitutions is the recognition of Sharia as either “a source” or “the source” of law. Within Islamic jurisprudence, Sharia offers a comprehensive set of principles governing civic, social, and economic life; and it is often regarded by many Muslims as divinely inspired and superior to secular law. Bernard-Maugiron (2021) highlights that Islam holds a privileged status in most constitutions, with religious principles deeply embedded in legal texts. For some, laws derived from Sharia should supersede those enacted by legislators, as Sharia is viewed as a foundation for justice, accountability, rule of law and rights (IDEA, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, for example, constitutional articles explicitly state that judges are bound solely by Islamic law. Provisions that

declare Islamic law as the chief source of legislation impose constitutional obligations for all state laws to align with Islamic principles, creating barriers to the rule of law. Many constitutions drafted or amended in post-Arab Spring are likely to include Sharia-as-Source-of-Legislation (SSL) clauses, reflecting evolving public interpretations of the Sharia role in governance. Most scholars and policymakers acknowledge that the impact of SSL provisions is closely tied to its specific phrasing (Lombardi, 2013). The constitutional or legal declaration of Sharia as a source (or the source) of law significantly influences its degree of authority. Vague or broadly worded provisions grant courts and lawmakers considerable discretion in interpreting and applying Sharia principles, which can shape legal decisions, ideological orientations, and broader socio-political dynamics. Bernard-Maugiron (2021) observes that in contemporary legal systems, Sharia is primarily applied in personal status and penal law, while other areas have been secularized after Western systems. This selective application reflects a hybrid legal landscape in which religious and civil codes coexist, shaping the boundaries of state authority and individual rights. While Islam represents the identity of the majority, inconsistencies in legal frameworks often marginalize religious minorities. Laws governing personal status -such as marriage, inheritance, and child custody- remain frequently based on religious codes, resulting in unequal treatment based on faith or gender.

The weak rule of law presents a major constitutional challenge to inclusive citizenship in the region. In many countries, the absence of independent judicial systems enables corruption and political interference, eroding public trust and weakening justice. A lack of judicial autonomy compromises the principle of equal treatment under the law and perpetuates exclusion. Lebanon serves as a clear example, where limited separation of powers and politicized institutions hinder the enforcement of constitutional rights. Although the Lebanese Constitution guarantees equality among citizens, current laws fall short of enforcing non-discrimination. The country's confessional power-sharing system, coupled with weak governance and inconsistent application of constitutional provisions, highlights how judicial shortcomings can obstruct accountability and transparency (UN Lebanon, 2023).

The concept of "differentiated" citizenship adds another layer of complexity to inclusion efforts. According to UNDP (2019), citizens often experience unequal rights and treatment based on religion, gender, ethnicity, or other identity markers, affecting both state-citizen and citizen-citizen relations. Women, in particular, face legal discrimination, including restrictions on citizenship transmission, mobility, and political participation. These disparities stem from legal frameworks and societal norms that prioritize collective identities, such as the family or religious community, over individual rights. Social structures that reinforce gender, religious, or ethnic hierarchies institutionalize systemic discrimination and exclusion, relegating marginalized groups to second-class citizens. This undermines inclusive governance and equitable citizenship, posing significant challenges to human-centered development in the region.

To overcome these constitutional challenges, broad reforms are essential. Key pathways include clarifying rights and duties, strengthening judicial independence, and eliminating legal discrimination. Strategies to foster inclusive citizenship are outlined below.

Efforts to achieve constitutional reform are constrained by entrenched governance models that prioritize centralized control and narrowly defined national identities. As Bishai and Rostoum (2019) note, "the exclusive top-down imposition of a narrow Arab identity has only served to sharpen the sense of 'otherness' and deepen feelings of alienation and marginalization". To move forward, it is crucial to adopt governance models that embrace diversity and pluralism. This requires adopting a rights-based approach that acknowledges the heterogeneity of Arab societies. Pluralistic citizenship thrives in environments that uphold human dignity, individual rights, transparency and accountability. Inclusive governance not only promotes tolerance and acceptance of 'the other' but also safeguards freedoms. Governance frameworks must strike a balance between collective identity and individual liberties, ensuring that constitutions enshrine inclusive and equitable rights and responsibilities. Such frameworks are vital for countering extremism and ensuring that all citizens, regardless of background, can engage in political life. Following the 2011 uprisings, several Arab countries made

constitutional advances in women's rights and gender equality. Laws addressing domestic violence were introduced in Algeria and Bahrain (2017), Lebanon (2016), and Saudi Arabia (2015). Tunisia's 2014 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights, including freedom of belief and conscience for all religions, and the right to peaceful protest and expression. Jordan's 2011 amendments established a Constitutional Court and an Independent Elections Commission to supervise the electoral process (UNDP, 2019a).

According to the Arab Sustainable Development Report (ESCWA, 2024a), judicial independence is a cornerstone for achieving SDG 10, which targets the reduction of inequality. Reforms enhancing access to justice and equitable treatment are essential for addressing grievances when rights are inadequately fulfilled. In line with SDG16, the report underscores the imperative of upholding the rule of law, ensuring equal rights, and maintaining a clear separation of powers to ensure the autonomy of judicial and legislative bodies. Realizing this vision requires robust parliamentary oversight, transparent and accountable governance, and effective anti-corruption strategies. Strengthening institutional capacity and building independent judicial systems are key to protecting citizens' rights and restoring public trust and justice for all.

Constitutional reforms are instrumental in ensuring equal protection for all citizens, irrespective of identity. These reforms aim to align national legal systems with international human rights standards, promoting social justice across the region. Revising discriminatory constitutional provisions is crucial for cultivating inclusive citizenship. In diverse societies, constitutions must reflect equality while carefully balancing group rights, individual freedoms, and national unity. Reform efforts recognizing and protecting minority rights are essential for equity, though it may sometimes be perceived as a challenge to national unity. A key area of reform in the region involves incorporating gender equality into constitutional frameworks. As of 2023, twenty Arab countries have ratified or joined the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (League of Arab States, 2023). The UNDP (2019b) report provides an overview of the compliance of national laws with international human rights standards and the CEDAW. Post-uprising momentum has driven increased attention on constitutional reforms that address human rights and gender equality. Most constitutions now affirm gender equality as a core legal principle, with several explicitly banning gender-based discrimination. Countries such as Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Libya (2011 Constitutional Declaration), Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine (Basic Law), Qatar, Somalia, Sudan (2019 Constitutional Declaration), and Tunisia have enshrined these protections. In the cases of Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, although all citizens are constitutionally assured equal treatment, the application to gender equality remains unclear due to religious courts overseeing personal status issues, which may conflict with constitutional provisions.

As for the reform of national laws, gender-based disparities were addressed in Algeria (2005), Egypt (2004), Iraq (2006), Morocco (2007), Tunisia (2010), and Yemen (2010) after improving women's ability to pass citizenship to their children. However, several countries continue to enforce gender-based nationality laws and maintain reservations to CEDAW's Article 9, contributing to statelessness and limiting access to education and healthcare. Many constitutions now include safeguards against violence, torture, and degrading treatment. Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, and Morocco provide general protections, while Egypt specifically bans violence against women and Iraq addresses domestic abuse. Somalia's constitution prohibits violence against women and sexual abuse in the workplace. Tunisia takes a more progressive stance by guaranteeing human dignity and physical integrity, banning both mental and physical torture, and committing to comprehensive measures to eliminate violence against women (UNDP, 2019b). With respect to criminal laws, recent reforms have eliminated several discriminatory provisions, marking significant progress toward justice and gender equality (UNDP, 2019b). These include stronger anti-trafficking laws, the repeal of statutes allowing rapists to evade punishment by marrying their victims, and the abolition of clauses that permitted mitigated sentences for so-called 'honor' crimes and child marriage. While these constitutional amendments are promising, their true impact depends on sustained advocacy, robust enforcement, and vigilant oversight to ensure effective implementation.

4.3. Social problems and strategies towards equality-driven justice

The Arab region remains off track in its pursuit of eradicating poverty by 2030, as long-standing political instability and recurring economic downturns have exacerbated poverty and widened social and economic inequalities. Since 2019, an estimated 29 million additional individuals have fallen below the international poverty threshold of $2.15/day, raising the poverty rate to 10.2% by 2022. This marks a steep increase from 5.9% in 2015 and is double the 2005 rate of 5.1%; highlighting the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions (ESCWA, 2025a). Additionally, the rising trend of social inequalities is largely driven by the repercussions of prolonged conflicts. Since 2010, the region has experienced escalating levels of displacement and forced migration, resulting in a significant increase in the number of refugees per 100,000 people, accounting for over 40% of the global refugee population (ESCWA, 2025a). Alongside uneven levels of poverty and inequality, this displacement crisis has compounded social challenges. These include low labor force participation, particularly among women, youth, and persons with disabilities; widespread social exclusion; weak governance; and persistent deficits in human rights.

Social justice, grounded in the principles of equality, equity, participation and human rights, remains a cornerstone for achieving the SDGs. However, contemporary Arab societies have evolved around a state model that has not fostered social cohesion (UNDP, 2019a). The region's complex social dynamics further hinder progress toward inclusive citizenship. Deeply-rooted societal norms often perpetuate exclusion and inequality, obstructing the realization of equal rights and opportunities. The section below highlights three social problems undermining inclusive citizenship in the region; namely gender inequality, marginalization of minorities, and youth disengagement.

Gender inequality remains one of the most entrenched social challenges linked to structural inequality and discrimination across the Arab region. Traditional patriarchal norms function as systems of power that grant men authority across legal, cultural, and societal domains. These norms contribute to persistent limitations on women's rights in education, employment, and political participation. The unemployment rate among young women stands at 38.2%, significantly higher than the 22.5% rate for young men (ESCWA, 2022). While contemporary legal reforms and evolving generational attitudes are gradually shifting the landscape, patriarchal structures continue to be reinforced by religious interpretations and state policies. Despite constitutional commitments to gender equality in several countries, women still face systemic barriers that restrict their full participation in civic and public life.

The marginalization of minorities represents a significant social impediment to achieving inclusive citizenship. Although existing laws and policies may not explicitly aim to discriminate or oppress minorities, they often fall short of guaranteeing meaningful inclusion, equity, and respect for cultural diversity (UNDP, 2019). Ethnic and religious minorities; such as Kurds, Amazigh and Copts frequently encounter systemic exclusion and discrimination. These communities often lack access to resources, political representation, and cultural recognition; placing them at heightened risk of marginalization and social alienation.

Equally pressing is the issue of youth disengagement, which poses a significant challenge to inclusive citizenship. With nearly 35% of the population under the age of 18; significantly higher than the global average of 25% and second only to sub-Saharan Africa; the Arab region has one of the youngest populations worldwide. This demographic presents both a powerful opportunity and a pressing challenge, contingent on the effectiveness of socioeconomic policies and political leadership (ESCWA, 2022). Harnessing the potential of the rising generations requires inclusive strategies that promote education, employment, and civic engagement; ensuring that youth are not excluded from governance processes.

Despite improvements in educational attainment, the Arab region continues to record the highest youth unemployment rate globally, estimated at 26.1%, compared to the global average of 12.8%.

In 2017, around 27% of Arab youth aged 15–24 were unemployed, more than double the world average of 13% (ESCWA, 2022). This alarming disparity highlights youth unemployment as a pressing issue for policymakers, especially given the substantial number of individuals expected to enter the workforce over the next decade. Research consistently associate high youth unemployment- often perceived as exclusion from economic participation- with increased risks of social unrest, violence, and possibly radicalization (ESCWA, 2015b; 2022). Beyond economic exclusion, young people face limited access to political decision-making, contributing to widespread feelings of disappointment and alienation. The Arab Spring marked a pivotal moment, as youth expressed deep frustration over governmental inaction on critical issues such as safety, education, unemployment, and exclusion from governance. The uprisings revealed the youth awareness of the significance of political participation; not just for them, but also for their communities and future prospects. Since 2011, the youth-led protests have amplified demands for justice, freedom, and systemic reforms to address socio-economic and political marginalization (ESCWA, 2022). In response, governments have increasingly recognized the need to include diverse groups- especially youth, women, and minorities- in shaping public policy. Faced with bleak prospects, many young people have mobilized to demand a dignified life, ultimately rejecting entrenched political systems. A notable example occurred in March 2019, when peaceful demonstrations in Algeria led President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to withdraw his bid for a fifth term and subsequently resign from office (UNDP, 2019a). These movements signaled, to some extent, the emergence of a new era of civic engagement, political participation and institutional accountability.

To effectively address persistent economic challenges and reduce social inequalities, Arab governments must reaffirm the State's role as a guarantor of economic and social rights (ESCWA, 2025a). Achieving the targets outlined in the 2030 Agenda requires inclusive policy measures that promote social justice and cohesion. Key measures include fostering pro-poor growth, expanding social protection systems, creating decent employment opportunities, and improving wages and income levels. Empowering marginalized groups- particularly women, youth, individuals with special needs, migrants, refugees, and displaced populations- is essential to cultivating active citizenship and ensuring inclusive participation in community life. Efforts must also focus on engaging vulnerable minorities, especially those in rural areas, through improved access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Furthermore, community-level initiatives that foster dialogue and collaboration among diverse social groups can build mutual trust and contribute to peace and social security.

To support effective participation, enhance trust, and foster inclusive co-leadership between diverse citizens and policymakers, many Arab countries have introduced national laws, development strategies, policies and action plans aimed at deepening collaboration between governments and civil society. In line with these efforts, the League of Arab States has emphasized the pivotal role of youth in advancing peace and development. In collaboration with regional and international partners, it launched the '*Regional Arab Strategy for Youth, Peace and Security*' (League of Arab States, 2023), highlighting the importance of joint Arab action to support regional stability. The strategy positions youth as central agents in building peaceful, sustainable, and prosperous societies. It calls for their active participation in governance through enhanced roles in decision-making, civic engagement, economic empowerment, digital inclusion, gender equality, and climate advocacy. At the national level, several countries- including Jordan, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, Qatar, Lebanon, Libya, and Egypt - have developed youth-focused laws and policies aligned with the regional framework. These initiatives prioritize education and technology, employment and entrepreneurship, citizenship skills, volunteerism, leadership, as well as health and recreational activities. Collectively, they aim to promote tolerance, and a culture of non-violence (League of Arab States, 2023).

4.4. Navigating religious concerns in interfaith dialogue

Religion plays a central role in shaping social and political life across the Arab region. It has emerged as a key marker of citizenship and a deeply divisive issue that dominates political dynamics (UNDP, 2019a). Religious beliefs shape personal values, societal norms, identity formation, and ideological orientation. While religion can serve as a source of unity and moral guidance, it also has the potential to generate conflict, exclusion, and fragmentation. This section explores three key challenges that religion poses to inclusive citizenship; namely religious pluralism and sectarianism, interpretations of religious texts, and state–religion relations.

Among the factors that contribute to fragmented citizenship, religious pluralism and sectarianism remain particularly significant. The region's religious diversity often fuels sectarian tensions both between and within communities; such as Sunni, Shia, Christian, Druze, and others. As noted in the Arab Human Development Report, "No political power can ignore the fact that religion, and especially Islam, is a crucial element in the cultural and spiritual make-up of the Arab people" (UNDP, 2005). With the rise of the modern state, religion 'became instrumentalized, and in some instances weaponized. It has been integrated into how states conceive of governance and ensure continued legitimacy" (UNDP, 2019a). In Lebanon, for example, confessional and sectarian narratives frequently overshadow national discourse, legitimizing exclusionary practices and acts of violence against those who challenge rigid ideological frameworks.

Political systems that institutionalize religious representation often exacerbate societal divisions rather than foster inclusivity. In many Arab countries, ethnic, religious and sectarian differences are frequently linked to ongoing conflicts, particularly in pluralistic societies. In countries like Somalia, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq, communal loyalties- whether ethnic, religious, or tribal- have become central to political mobilization. These groups frequently advocate for either greater inclusion within the state or for autonomy, contributing to fragmentation and instability. Such dynamics have contributed to destabilizing conditions and destructive conflicts, resulting in significant human casualties (UNDP, 2009). Importantly, religious identity is not inherently the root cause of intergroup conflict. Rather, such tensions typically arise from unequal access to political power and the absence of inclusive governance. These conflicts are often fueled by corrupt political actors who exploit communal loyalties among marginalized populations for ideological or personal gain, deepening feelings of exclusion and discrimination (UNDP, 2009).

Narrow interpretations of religious texts represent a significant barrier to inclusive citizenship. Conservative readings of religious doctrine and Sharia law often reinforce gender-based discrimination, imposing restrictions on women's autonomy and freedom of expression, and limiting their ability to participate in political life as equal citizens. Happer (2025) examines the complex relationship between Sharia and women's rights, highlighting how religious interpretations influence legal systems, social norms, and gender dynamics. Since the inception of Islam, Sharia has served as a foundational source of law in many countries. In more conservative Islamic societies, limitations on women's rights are frequently justified through religious discourse (Idris, 2022). With the growing influence of Western traditions, many countries have initiated processes of legal secularization, leading to diverse interpretations of Sharia depending on cultural, historical, and political contexts. Following the Arab Spring, Tunisia's Constitution declared the country a civil state governed by civilian politicians rather than religious or military authorities. While Tunisia acknowledges Islam and allows space for Islamic law, it does not operate as an Islamic republic. In practice, the impact of legal clauses referencing religious sources depends largely on how they are interpreted and applied (IDEA, 2014). Provisions of Sharia related to women's rights; particularly in areas such as marriage, inheritance, education, employment, divorce, and custody; are deeply influenced by interpretations, cultural norms and local legislations. Happer (2025) notes that several countries have adapted aspects of Sharia to align with international human rights standards, resulting in varied experiences for women across the region. Efforts to challenge restrictive interpretations on women's rights have given rise to movements advocating for modern, feminist readings of Islamic

sources. These approaches have yielded tangible outcomes, such as granting women in Egypt the right to initiate divorce and promoting liberal and tolerant Islam through state-certified female scholars (Murshidat) in Morocco (Idris, 2022).

State-religion relations play a critical role in shaping inclusive citizenship. These relations are typically governed by constitutional frameworks, which vary significantly from one country to another. In secular states, constitutions uphold religious neutrality and promote equality. Conversely, in countries where religion is deeply embedded in communal and national identity, constitutions often incorporate religious elements. While this may be intended to protect cultural and religious diversity, it can result in preferential treatment for specific religious groups, exacerbating social divisions and undermining the rights of religious minorities. This dynamic can intensify tensions between dominant and marginalized communities, making religion a source of societal fragmentation and a barrier to inclusive citizenship. As such, the role of religion in governance and state–religion relations must be carefully considered during constitutional design, particularly in Muslim-majority countries, religiously diverse societies, and contexts marked by historical tensions between religious and secular actors (IDEA, 2014).

Traditionally, many Arab legal systems are rooted in religious foundations, with religious and political authorities often playing closely intertwined roles. In pluralistic societies, accommodating minority groups is essential to fostering inclusive citizenship. Egypt's 2014 Constitution, for example, formally acknowledges Islam as the state religion but also explicitly recognizes the rights of Christians. Such recognition can help minorities feel included and protected. However, by identifying specific groups, others may be inadvertently excluded; as seen in Egypt's lack of constitutional recognition for the Baha'i minority. A similar concern arose in Sudan when President Omar Bashir threatened to amend the constitution and declare Islam the sole religion if the South splits, raising concerns among non-Muslims who remained in the North following the independence of South Sudan (IDEA, 2014). Overall, the intertwining of state and religion often leads to the privileging of one religious group over others, eroding the principle of equal citizenship. This can result in the exclusion and marginalization of non-conformist groups, contributing to discrimination and social conflict. Upholding freedom of religious belief is therefore essential, not only to defend minority rights and prevent exclusion, but also to promote inclusive citizenship.

It is important to note that Arab laws and constitutions generally do not explicitly endorse discrimination based on religion; unlike the more evident legal discrimination against women in some national frameworks (UNDP, 2009). Nevertheless, religion has been deeply integrated into governance structures as a source of legitimacy. It is frequently utilized by political actors as a tool for mass mobilization to advance their agendas. Across the region, constitutions, legal and educational systems, civil rights, and even cultural expressions are largely framed through a religious lens. Ultimately, religion plays a central role in defining citizenship and functions as a powerful political, social, and cultural means of control by both state and non-state actors (UNDP, 2019a). The relationship between state and religion is both complex and dynamic, capable of fostering either stability or conflict depending on the prevailing social and cultural contexts. While religion can help reduce interfaith tensions and promote unity, it also has the potential to generate politicized religiously-inspired cultural norms that undermine security, particularly when religious identity is intertwined with national identity in pluralistic societies.

Bridging divides between communities shaped by religious dynamics requires a comprehensive strategy. This includes promoting inclusive education that nurtures tolerance, encouraging interfaith dialogue that fosters mutual respect, and supporting reinterpretations of religious texts that align with principles of equality and inclusivity. For governments seeking to maintain social stability, understanding the religious dimensions of citizenship is strategically essential. The recurrence of religion-based conflicts and mass mobilizations driven by religious rhetoric highlights the need for policies that harness religious values to support reconciliation and interfaith cooperation. Across the region, numerous organizations advocate for initiatives aimed at mitigating tensions arising from religious differences and fostering peaceful coexistence. These efforts often emphasize

interfaith education, the cultivation of empathy and understanding of 'the other,' and progressive interpretations of religious texts through an inclusive lens. Setiawan *et. al.* (2025) observe that while religious organizations can create meaningful spaces for dialogue, challenges persist particularly when political interests are involved and religious beliefs are politicized. In pluralistic societies, amplifying the voices of marginalized religious groups and encouraging their political participation can serve as a powerful catalyst for social transformation.

5. TRANSFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK OF GOOD GOVERNANCE AND INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP

Good governance and inclusive citizenship are mutually reinforcing foundations for building just, resilient, and equitable societies. Their synergy represents not only a cornerstone of democratic ideals but also a strategic imperative for addressing deep-rooted social, political, and economic challenges. When people are empowered to actively participate in decision-making, governance becomes more responsive to the diverse needs of the society. Inclusive citizenship enriches policy development by incorporating a range of perspectives, thereby enhancing institutional legitimacy and governance quality. This dynamic fosters a culture of participation, dialogue, and trust between citizens and the state. However, governance systems in the Arab region have often been criticized for their limited capacity to engage citizens, protect public freedoms, and uphold accountability; resulting in a disconnect between institutions and the communities they serve. In response, there is a growing movement to redesign governance structures that prioritize diversity and inclusion. A transformative framework that embeds inclusive citizenship into practical governance mechanisms has emerged as a prominent theme in regional discussions. Such a framework must embrace diversity, ensure equitable representation, and encourage active civic participation. To realize this vision, several foundational elements must be put in place. Chief among them is the institutionalization of participatory mechanisms that balance the roles of public, private, and civil society actors. Advancing education, fostering knowledge-based economies, and embracing innovation in digital information systems are also essential to cultivating democratic values and expanding civic engagement. Moreover, leveraging digital platforms, media, and e-government tools can improve efficiency and broaden opportunities for citizen involvement. Collectively, these components form a strategic blueprint for inclusive governance. The sections that follow outline the key elements of this evolving framework.

5.1. Balancing the roles of the public, private, and civil society sectors

In this transformative model that closely links good governance with inclusive citizenship, it becomes crucial to establish collaborative frameworks that distribute responsibilities among government institutions, businesses, and civil society. The public sector is evolving beyond its conventional role as a service provider to assume a more strategic function as a regulatory authority responsible for setting policy direction and ensuring accountability. In parallel, the private sector is becoming a key engine of growth driven by innovation, investment, and a commitment to ethical standards and quality. Civil society, meanwhile, remains a cornerstone of the governance ecosystem, fostering participatory involvement and serving as a bridge between citizens and institutions. Empowering individuals to engage as true partners in governance enhances the quality of public discourse. To ensure that citizen input meaningfully influences policy, participation must be embedded within consultative democratic processes that promote structured and inclusive dialogue. Beyond its role in raising awareness and advocating for inclusive policies, civil society plays a critical role in safeguarding democracy by monitoring policy implementation, exposing corruption, and challenging practices that marginalize vulnerable groups. Achieving this vision also requires strengthening grassroots mechanisms, particularly within local governance structures, where citizen involvement can be most immediate and impactful. In recent years, the region has witnessed a notable surge in NGOs focused on human rights, gender equality, and minority inclusion. These organizations actively promote inclusive policy agendas and foster civic responsibility. Simultaneously, grassroots movements have gained momentum, mobilizing communities and advocating for inclusive governance. This growing engagement is linked to the expanding climate of public freedoms, especially in the aftermath of the uprisings, which ignited widespread calls for reforms.

Despite enduring challenges, the region holds promising opportunities for transformation that harmonizes cultural and religious traditions with modern governance principles. Leading these shifts are the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which have launched reform agendas emphasizing cross-sector coordination and alignment with global standards. Similarly, Maghreb nations have promoted partnerships between religious authorities and academic institutions, advancing governance models that respect traditional values while embracing pluralism and inclusivity. These efforts reinforce the nation-state as a unifying framework that brings together diverse communities under a shared civic identity. They also preserve religious legal foundations by anchoring them in ethical principles that uphold moral integrity and public welfare. In this evolving landscape, citizens assume a pivotal role; not only through civic participation but also by fostering public-private partnerships that enhance transparency, drive productivity, and ensure compliance with international monetary and financial regulations.

In contemporary governance discourse, civil society organizations are increasingly asserting themselves as integral and influential actors, shifting from peripheral roles to central positions within institutional development. Their trajectory reflects a transition from participation to collaboration, positioning them as policy-shaping stakeholders and strategic partners in the design and evolution of governance. These organizations demonstrate the potential to transcend the role of 'active participants' and emerge as 'structural co-designers', capable of engineering governance systems rooted in equity and justice. Their work emphasizes inclusive citizen-centric development across the region. This evolution reflects a broader paradigmatic shift toward democratic frameworks that prioritize engagement and inclusivity, positioning civil society not merely as an advisory entity but as a co-creator in policy and institutional design. Through sustained advocacy and deliberate engagement, civil society groups are spearheading systemic reforms, strengthening accountability, and contributing to the development of governance architectures that are both socially equitable and institutionally robust.

5.2. Advancing education, knowledge-based economies and digital information systems

Efforts to balance the roles of the public, private, and civil society sectors in the region are increasingly accompanied by major advancements in the education sector, the rise of knowledge-based economies, and the expansion of digital information systems. Education is now widely recognized as a cornerstone of good governance and inclusive citizenship, playing a pivotal role in shaping national trajectories of long-term development. In this context, the academic sector has assumed a more prominent and strategic role. Arab countries have embarked on educational reforms aimed at cultivating critical thinking and active citizenship through updated curricula. Human rights education and democratic citizenship are now considered essential for addressing socio-political instability and for building inclusive societies grounded in respect for human rights. Beyond curricular reform, the region is also advancing in collaborative cutting-edge scientific research, paving the way for transformative breakthroughs across political, economic, social, cultural, legal, and medical fields. These initiatives are driven by a commitment to empowering individuals to innovate and contribute to societal advancement. Such empowerment enhances the involvement of intellectual and scientific communities, positioning them as active contributors to shaping governance for a better future in the region.

In the 21st century, knowledge has emerged as a driving force behind productivity and growth, catalyzing a global shift from resource-dependent models to knowledge-based economies. In the Arab region, this transition is being realized through strategic investments in education, ICT infrastructure, and Research and Development (R&D). National development plans increasingly prioritize the generation, dissemination, and application of knowledge across diverse sectors, aligning with broader goals of human development. For instance, the United Arab Emirates Vision 2021 includes the "*United in Knowledge*" pillar, highlighting the importance of innovation, research,

science, and technology in building a competitive knowledge economy (ESCWA, 2018). Similarly, Egypt introduced the National ICT Strategy (2012–2017) '*Towards a Digital Society and Knowledge-Based Society*', emphasizing the importance of knowledge, innovation, and scientific research in building a competitive economy (ESCWA, 2018). Egypt's Vision 2030 articulates strategic goals such as improving quality of life, establishing a sustainable environmental system, and fostering a competitive knowledge-based economy (ESCWA, 2025b).

Despite remarkable progress, particularly in GCC countries, challenges remain. These include talent gaps, underdeveloped innovation ecosystems, and ongoing regional geopolitical instability. Recognizing these obstacles, Arab governments are increasingly investing in human capital focusing on educational reform to cultivate diversified skills tailored to future labor market demands, especially for youth and women. To drive economic diversification, efforts are underway to upgrade digital infrastructure, adopt innovative technologies, and establish robust R&D frameworks. The strategic determination to build knowledge economies marks a pivotal shift away from oil-dependent models toward knowledge-intensive sectors, leveraging human capital as a central driver of transformation. Success in this endeavor hinges on the formulation of national strategies that reduce reliance on oil revenues, implement sustainable economic models, and promote environmental awareness. Continued investment in education reforms and knowledge-based initiatives remains essential to achieving inclusive development.

In addition, the development of a well-informed digital economy represents a key enabler of good governance and inclusive citizenship. According to ESCWA (2018) report, the digital economy is defined as the "pervasive use of ICTs in social and economic endeavors, leading to expanded opportunities, economic growth and improved public service delivery". The report emphasizes that "the digital economy revolution is having a monumental impact, in a similar vein to that of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century when steam power, the combustion engine and electricity transformed society", underscoring that the region cannot afford to remain on the sidelines. Beyond mitigating associated risks, Arab countries must harness the digital economy's potential to drive comprehensive social and economic change. The digital economy is foundational to building 'smart' societies, where governments, businesses, and citizens- particularly youth and women- actively leverage ICT tools and services to make informed decisions. Beyond its technological impact, the digital transformation plays a crucial role in reducing inequality and promoting inclusive development models across the region.

At least 15 Arab countries have articulated long-term national visions that integrate digital transformation with the 2030 Agenda, creating strategic opportunities to align Artificial Intelligence (AI) with defined goals and objectives shared by both leadership and the broader population (ESCWA, 2025b). Among the most ambitious is Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, structured around three pillars; namely a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. The Kingdom is investing extensively in high-speed internet and 5G infrastructure, while also establishing regulatory frameworks to accelerate digital innovation. Its strategy includes developing a skilled and diversified workforce, increasing R&D investment, promoting public-private partnerships to build a globally competitive and inclusive economy. Beyond strengthening AI-specific competences, increasing attention is being directed toward training in business and innovation management within a broader digital ecosystem. Emerging technologies such as the Metaverse and blockchain are being explored as new engines of growth, offering entrepreneurs innovative pathways for economic transformation (ESCWA, 2025b).

5.3. Enhancing participation through digital platforms, media, and e-government

Enhancing participation lies at the heart of the transformative framework of good governance and inclusive citizenship. Digital platforms are progressively viewed as powerful tools for improving citizen participation, revealing the strong governance-citizenship interconnection. Through consultative democracy, facilitated by digital governments and media, citizens are evolving from passive recipients of information to active participants in public life. Across the region, digital platforms, media outlets, and e-government systems have significantly influenced citizen participation. These platforms are essential for facilitating dialogue, enhancing transparency, and reinforcing citizen contributions in policymaking and oversight. By revolutionizing communication, they have created open spaces for public discourse, raised awareness of social and political issues, and mobilized communities. Social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram have become instrumental in promoting civic awareness and engagement. They serve as engines of equality by expanding opportunities across diverse groups, fostering collaboration and enabling previously excluded individuals to participate in decision-making processes. Also, they empower marginalized communities (including women, youth, and minorities) by providing tools to advocate for their rights and participate in decision-making processes. In many countries, structural barriers continue to hinder the inclusion of these communities. Digital platforms help dismantle these obstacles by offering new avenues for expression and advocacy. This is especially critical in contexts where traditional governance often fails to meet citizens' needs and frequently exclude marginalized populations. Notable examples include Saudi Arabia's online campaigns advocating for women's rights, which gained international attention and contributed to landmark reforms such as the lifting of the driving ban for women. Similarly, youth-led initiatives in Lebanon and Tunisia have harnessed social media to address unemployment, education, and corruption.

Media and cultural exchange also play a transformative role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy. Social media, in particular, has become a dynamic space for sharing information, raising awareness, and mobilizing collective action - including protests, as witnessed during the Arab uprisings. These platforms have enabled movements that challenge traditional power structures, with grassroots initiatives increasingly relying on digital tools to build solidarity, share experiences, and coordinate efforts. Online networks connect local activists to global support systems, allowing them to learn from international examples and access resources that strengthen

their advocacy. Environmental and human rights groups in the Arab region have benefited from such collaborations, leveraging digital platforms to amplify their messages and mobilize global action. Digital media also plays a critical role in keeping citizens informed about political developments, government activities, and civic rights. Independent online media outlets offer alternative perspectives that challenge state-controlled narratives, advancing critical discussions and contributing to a more diverse and participatory public sphere.

E-government systems are integral components of digital governance, offering tools that make government data and processes more accessible. These systems empower citizens to hold authorities accountable and ensure that policies respond to public needs. By integrating feedback mechanisms and digital reporting tools, e-government platforms enable individuals to report issues like bribery, corruption and inefficiency directly to authorities. This digital engagement can generate pressure for reform and prompt government responsiveness. Countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have made significant investments in e-government to improve transparency and trust. The UAE's creation of the Dubai Digital Authority in 2021 marked a strategic step toward managing digital transformation and cybersecurity. The country has implemented several e-governance initiatives through its digital ID system, Emirates ID, which facilitates secure access to public services (Ali, 2023). Saudi Arabia's 'Balady' portal integrates municipal services with digital consultation and decision-making tools, promoting local engagement and improving service delivery (UN, 2022). As powerful enablers of good governance and inclusive citizenship, digital platforms, media, and

e-government systems are instrumental in advancing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. When effectively managed through inclusive technology applications and supported by strategic partnerships, digital transformation can ensure that no one is left behind or disconnected in the digital age (UN, 2022).

Although digital systems offer transformative potential, they continue to face substantial obstacles-especially in rural areas, economically disadvantaged communities, and post-conflict zones. Unequal access to technology, underdeveloped infrastructure, and limited digital resources restrict public engagement and hinder access to essential services. These challenges disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, exacerbating existing social inequalities. Persistent issues such as poor connectivity and lack of digital literacy further impede the effectiveness of public institutions. Addressing these gaps requires strategic investments in digital education, robust cybersecurity frameworks, and inclusive citizen-centric strategies (Atiq ***et. al***., 2023). In the Arab region, where traditional media is often dominated by state control, social media has emerged as a contested space for competing narratives. The rapid diffusion of information on these platforms makes them susceptible to misinformation and propaganda, which can undermine public trust and hinder informed civic participation. Cybersecurity and privacy concerns add another layer of complexity, weakening confidence in digital tools and discouraging online engagement. To translate digital momentum into sustainable policy change, governments must prioritize the development of secure information ecosystems and advanced IT infrastructure that protect citizens' data and foster trust in digital governance (Ali, 2023).

6. INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE:
FROM REFORM TO RESILIENCE

As digital technologies and AI increasingly shape today's world, it becomes essential to rethink the principles of inclusive governance in light of its impact on the social contract and the evolving nature of democracy. E-government has become a key priority for many nations seeking structural reforms to modernize public administration within liberal democratic frameworks (Ali, 2023). To ensure inclusivity, governance restructuring must go beyond surface-level adjustments; demanding deep commitments to addressing systemic inequalities. When governments adopt a deliberate approach to inclusion, they enhance democratic outcomes and reinforce governance stability (Quick and Feldman, 2011). It is broadly recognized that the investment in comprehensive governance reform is minimal compared to the long-term costs of exclusion, marginalization, and conflict. The social, economic, and political consequences of instability far outweigh the investment cost required to build inclusive institutions. Governments are thus compelled to design and implement policies that reflect the diverse needs of their populations; ensuring representation, encouraging participation, and building public trust. In an era marked by fragmentation, economic uncertainty, and growing demands for transparency and accountability, inclusive governance is not merely an ethical obligation; it is a strategic necessity. Countries that prioritize inclusion are better positioned to reduce instability and foster long-term resilience. The benefits of inclusion extend beyond moral considerations; they underpin legitimacy, institutional strength, and sustainable development.

Sánchez-Soriano *et. al.* (2024) highlight the growing importance of inclusive governance as a strategic response to global challenges. This model has evolved into a core framework for improving governance by encouraging active participation of diverse groups and ensuring that policies are fair and representative. Inclusive governance is framed as a transformative model that empowers marginalized groups, fostering equality and social justice. Importantly, it extends beyond conventional institutions by integrating activists, civil society organizations, and social movements into the governance landscape. By cultivating empowered and resilient communities, inclusive governance emerges as a vital pathway for achieving sustainable governance outcomes. In this context, the following sections explore key paradigm shifts focused on redefining the social contract in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and examining the rise of e-governance and e-democracy.

6.1. Redefining social contracts in Post-Arab Spring

The Arab Spring marked a pivotal rupture in longstanding state-society relations, signaling a widespread rejection of the prevailing social contracts across the region. It exposed long-standing structural tensions, fueled by pervasive public discontent and a sustained erosion of trust in state institutions. In its wake, efforts to redefine these social contracts remain laden with enduring challenges. While some countries initiated reform efforts, progress has been consistently hindered by entrenched political and institutional obstacles.

Although demands for dignity, justice, and participation were at the heart of the uprisings, many regimes responded with superficial reforms or reverted to authoritarian practices, thereby stalling meaningful transformation. Despite the protests' transformative potential, most countries have not succeeded to establish stable and inclusive social contracts in the aftermath of the uprisings

(Zintl, 2024). Consequently, the post-revolutionary period has largely failed to deliver the inclusive and accountable governance that citizens had envisioned. The region continues to grapple with high youth unemployment, inadequate public service delivery, and limited political participation (ESCWA, 2022). The absence of institutionalized mechanisms for civic engagement and government accountability has perpetuated a legitimacy crisis, particularly among youth who remain excluded from decision-making processes. This ongoing marginalization not only undermines public confidence but also poses a serious threat to long-term stability. The disconnect between citizen expectations and state performance remains wide, highlighting the urgent need for context-sensitive structural reforms and renewed efforts to redefine social contracts that foster trust between governments and citizens. The following sections will examine how social contracts have evolved across the region since the Arab Spring, and explore potential reform pathways that reflect the changing dynamics of inclusive governance in the digital age.

6.1.1. DIVERGING TRAJECTORIES IN EGYPT, MOROCCO, AND TUNISIA

The social contract serves as the base of state-society relations, representing a mutual agreement in which citizens concede the state's authority to govern in exchange for the fulfillment of specific obligations. This arrangement is dynamic rather than static; it continuously evolves in response to shifting societal dynamics and emergence of new actors. Examining the evolution of this contract and the changing patterns of engagement between the state and diverse social groups reveals the underlying forces that have disrupted long-standing political equilibria and paved the way for new governance models (El Haddad, 2020). In its classical formulation, as theorized by Hobbes, the social contract emphasized the state's role in ensuring security and maintaining the rule of law. In modern contexts, however, it has expanded to include a wider range of responsibilities, such as safeguarding economic and social rights. Today's social contract is a complex blend of formal and informal, explicit and implicit agreements that define the reciprocal expectations between governments and their citizens. These agreements delineate the mutual rights and responsibilities that shape the evolving state-society relationships in modern governance.

El Haddad (2020) explores how social contracts have fragmented and been reconfigured in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia; tracing how state obligations evolved from a narrow focus on law and order in the 1950s and 1960s to a broader commitment to social welfare. In the post-independence period, state-led development; particularly through industrial policy; became central to governance. Prior to 2011, many Arab states operated under authoritarian stability, offering basic services like healthcare, education, subsidies, and public employment in exchange for political silence. This arrangement fostered a sense of inclusion and legitimacy. However, as economic conditions worsened and fiscal pressures mounted, the state's ability to deliver public goods declined. These strains led to the collapse of the prevailing model and fueled public discontent, culminating in the uprisings. The protests exposed the inherent fragility of authoritarian social contracts built on centralized control and limited political freedoms.

Following the collapse of the post-independence, a more exclusionary framework took shape. Economic liberalization often replaced inclusive development with crony capitalism, as governments increasingly aligned with elite business interests. Trade and industrial policies were repurposed to benefit narrow groups, sidelining broader societal needs. This shift produced what scholars call 'unsocial' social contracts; arrangements that prioritized regime survival through elite patronage rather than inclusive governance. The result was growing inequality, weakened public services, and a widening gap between citizens and ruling elites, ultimately eroding state legitimacy and setting the stage for the Arab Spring mass mobilizations. Since the uprisings, the trajectory of social contracts across the region has diverged significantly. El Haddad (2020) notes that while Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia initially moved toward broader commitments to social rights, these efforts were disrupted by economic decline and liberalization policies favoring elite networks. In Egypt, the "unsocial" model has become further entrenched, with the military becoming a dominant economic actor. Its extensive role in commerce blurs the boundaries between governance and profit-making, reinforcing an exclusionary and elite-driven social contract. Morocco's monarchy, though still central, has shown some responsiveness to public demands by cautiously adopting more inclusive industrial policies; potentially laying the foundation for a more equitable social contract. Tunisia has pursued a more inclusive model; but its trajectory remains precarious due to political fragmentation and threats of extremism. Promoting inclusive governance requires acknowledging the divergent trajectories shaping each country's political landscape. Tailoring reform strategies to these unique contexts is essential for designing context-sensitive strategies that promote equity, legitimacy, and long-term stability.

6.1.2. MARKET-BASED WELFARE AND INCLUSION IN THE GCC

A compelling illustration of how market-oriented welfare model reforms have weakened the symbolic foundations of the social contract can be observed in the GCC countries. These states historically relied on a distinctive welfare model shaped by the oil boom of the 1970s, offering generous benefits to citizens- including public-sector jobs, energy subsidies, non-means-tested benefits, and free education and healthcare services. This model was not merely economic; rather it served as a political instrument to reinforce the legitimacy of ruling elites and demonstrate the state's commitment to its citizens. However, the broad and undifferentiated distribution of welfare benefits, regardless of individual need, limited the model's capacity to address underlying social inequalities. Over time, fiscal constraints driven by volatile oil revenues, demographic pressures, rising public expectations, and labor market inefficiencies have exposed the fragility of a system built on resource abundance and distributive generosity. As GCC governments face the need to diversify their economies and modernize governance structures, the traditional welfare model has become increasingly unsustainable.

The transition toward market-oriented reforms - such as subsidy rationalization, labor market liberalization, and the introduction of taxation- has begun to erode the symbolic foundations of state-citizen relations. This shift has deepened the disconnect between governing elites and the broader citizenry, raising questions about the legitimacy of the existing social contract. In response, GCC governments are attempting to redesign their welfare systems by integrating fiscal restructuring, welfare modernization, and labor policy reforms. Crucially, the emerging social contract must be dynamic, merit-based, and responsive to the unique political, economic, and social contexts of each GCC country (PWC, 2024).

6.1.3. CHRISTIANS: FROM MINORITIES SEEKING PROTECTION TO ACTIVE CITIZENS

The Arab region has long been shaped by a complex and often volatile interplay between religion and politics. Within this context, Christian communities- deeply rooted in the region's cultural and historical fabric- face existential challenges that jeopardize their continued presence and influence in public life. In response to these pressures, a diverse ecumenical group of theologians and scholars released the 2021 document '*We Choose Abundant Life'*, presenting a visionary framework for Christian engagement rooted in citizenship, equality, and justice (We Choose Abundant Life, 2021). This section outlines the main messages expressed in this document.

Amid ongoing geopolitical instability, the Christian population has steadily declined, raising serious concerns about their future as equal citizens. This demographic shift is largely driven by conflict, economic hardship, and systemic injustice, leading to widespread emigration and displacement. The rise of extremism, authoritarianism, and democratic deficits has reinforced the perception of Christians as vulnerable minorities in need of protection. Their marginalization is not only demographic; it is also political and cultural, as they are increasingly excluded from decision-making processes. The document acknowledges the crucial role of religion in political life but cautions against its politicization for authoritarian purposes. It advocates for a new social contract that guarantees equal rights for all citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation, challenging sectarian models and promoting civil states governed by constitutional law. The proposed social contract includes tangible reforms, such as enacting civil personal status laws and encouraging proactive participation of Churches in legislative processes to affirm neutrality of the state on religious matters. These reforms aim to integrate Christians into civic life, not as minorities seeking protection but as equal citizens shaping inclusive and democratic societies.

The Arab region's rich diversity is both a strength and a potential source of conflict. The document emphasizes the importance of managing this diversity through values of acceptance and intercommunal dialogue. While Christian-Muslim relations have often been grounded in coexistence

and cooperation, they remain strained by historical tensions, sectarianism, and power imbalances. Reimagining these relationships through mutual respect and shared responsibility is essential. Churches are called to reclaim their prophetic voice by advocating for freedom and human rights. While Churches are integral to societies, they often face challenges in navigating their relationship with political authority. '*We Choose Abundant Life*' affirms the rootedness of Christians in the region and urges Churches to remain committed to their cause. This commitment reinforces their sense of belonging and empower them to embrace civic responsibility and work collectively toward the common good.

Churches are required to reject fear, engage openly with the different 'other', embrace justice, and contribute to the revival of an Arabism enlightened by freedom. They are encouraged to develop strategic initiatives that support Christians to remain in their homelands and participate in public life. Central to this vision is the pursuit of a civil state built on constitutional governance, institutional integrity, and equal citizenship. Supporting civil personal status laws based on equality reinforces the state's neutrality toward religion and its commitment to justice. By actively engaging in legislative processes, Christians can reaffirm their role as advocates for freedom, human rights, and democratic governance. The document also calls for confronting injustice and double standards. It supports the Palestinian right to establish an independent state with Al-Quds as its capital, and advocates for the return of refugees in accordance with international resolutions. It urges Christians to speak out against the suffering of Syrians, Lebanese, and Iraqis, and to resist efforts to erase their historical identities. It calls for the establishment of states built on law and citizenship that reflect the aspirations of their peoples and protect the values of the social contract that brings them into 'living together'.

Reflecting on the Arab Renaissance; which emphasized education, social development, and the reconciliation of religion and reason; the document acknowledges its failure to deliver lasting democratic outcomes. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, the region has seen a resurgence of traditionalism and extremism, fueled by identity fragmentation linked to globalization and the reassertion of authoritarian regimes. The continued marginalization of women and youth from political life, alongside rising corruption and weakened accountability, threatens inclusive governance. To counter these trends, '*We Choose Abundant Life*' calls for interfaith dialogue and a clear separation between religion and politics. It warns against the instrumentalization of religion for political gain or authoritarian control. More than a theological reflection, the document is a political and social call to action, urging Christians to take an active role in building inclusive societies. By advocating for a new social contract based on equality and citizenship, it offers a transformative path forward; not only for Christians but for the entire region.

6.1.4. MAPPING SOCIAL CONTRACTS: TOOLS FOR MEASUREMENT

In an attempt to lay the groundwork for a more dynamic understanding of social contracts, Loewe *et. al.* (2024) introduce the "three Ps" framework, which outlines three indices, each representing a fundamental dimension of governmental responsibility; namely Protection, Provision, and Participation. This model identifies the three "Ps" that governments are expected to deliver; including safeguarding citizens from internal and external threats (Protection), supplying essential social and economic services (Provision) and facilitating political engagement and representation (Participation). Each index comprises multiple indicators that reflect the government's intent to fulfill these roles, focusing on input variables rather than outcomes, which are shaped by broader political dynamics. Applying this framework to 154 countries around the year 2019, Loewe *et. al.* (2024) conducted a cross-national comparison of social contract structures and governance commitments. Their findings reveal distinct regional trends, with Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries scoring low across all indices, particularly in political participation. The indices align closely with established metrics such as per capita income, the Human Development Index (HDI), and the Global Peace Index, implying that governments performing well across the three Ps are likely to exhibit higher levels of development, prosperity, and stability. This convergent validity reinforces the framework's value for comparative policy analysis.

Looking ahead, future research should incorporate longitudinal data to track changes over time and explore causal links between governance inputs and developmental outcomes. Such analysis would offer deeper insights into the evolution of social contracts, especially in response to crises, reforms, and shifting public expectations; ultimately guiding more responsive and inclusive

governance strategies (Loewe *et. al.*, 2024). As state-society relations continue to evolve, governance reforms must be context-sensitive and tailored to each country's specific political economy, institutional capacity, and civil society context. Uniform models of democratic development have repeatedly failed to deliver sustainable outcomes in the region, underscoring the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches. Effective reform must therefore be politically sensitive, institutionally grounded, and socially embedded; reflecting domestic realities rather than external standardized templates. Without this contextual awareness, reform efforts risk undermining legitimacy and deepening citizen dissatisfaction. Instead, governments should pursue adaptive, inclusive frameworks that reinforce the foundations of the social contract.

6.2. AI-Driven Transformation: The Rise of E-Governance and E-Democracy

The world is experiencing a profound transformation driven by the rapid advancement of digital technologies and their growing role in shaping governance systems. Artificial intelligence, now a core component of digital governance, offers significant potential to improve policy development and decision-making processes (OECD, 2025). Innovations such as AI-driven automation and machine learning are revolutionizing governance by streamlining public sector functions, enhancing the delivery and accessibility of public services, and strengthening institutional efficiency and responsiveness. The following sections explore how digitalization is transforming governance and democratic practices worldwide, with particular emphasis on its evolving impact across the Arab region.

6.2.1. DIGITALIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Digitalization has become a powerful force reshaping the foundations of social contracts, with far-reaching implications for establishing inclusive state–society relations (Zintl and Houdret, 2024). Central to this digital transformation is the evolving interplay between E-Governance and E-Democracy- two pillars that are redefining how governments engage with citizens, promote civic participation, and strengthen democratic institutions (Ali, 2023). E-Governance represents more than the digitization of administrative processes; it marks a fundamental shift in the nature of governance itself. By emphasizing efficiency, transparency, and citizen-centric approaches, E-Governance reconfigures the relationship between governments and the public. It plays a central role in enabling data-driven policymaking and fostering international cooperation (Atiq, 2023). Through the strategic use of ICTs, governments can streamline operations, improve service delivery, enhance inter-agency collaboration, and optimize institutional performance. Enabling the process of E-participation through inclusive digital frameworks strengthens citizen engagement and enhances E-Governance, laying the groundwork for more responsive public services. By harnessing large datasets and advanced analytics, E-governance enables governments to excerpt strategic insights into citizen behavior and societal trends. This data-driven approach allows for more precise policy design, better resource allocation, and evidence-based decision-making; ultimately contributing to more effective governance.

Concurrently, E-Democracy introduces a transformative shift in how democratic participation is conceptualized and practiced. It involves using digital tools; such as e-voting systems, online consultation tools, and social media; to expand engagement opportunities. As digital technologies and AI continue to evolve, E-Democracy has emerged as a key mechanism for empowering citizens and fostering inclusive participation. The core aim of E-Democracy is to make democratic processes

more accessible, transparent, and representative. It redefines the role of citizens from passive recipients of information to active contributors in shaping policy. Digital tools enable individuals to express their views, influence decision-making, and engage directly with government institutions. By overcoming geographical barriers and bridging divides across culture, ethnicity, gender, age and religion; E-Democracy revitalizes civic engagement and widens the democratic space to include all citizens. Ultimately, E-democracy revolutionizes the democratic process and offers new horizons and innovative solutions for governments to promote inclusive citizenship and reimagine democratic governance in the digital age.

6.2.2. DOUBLE-EDGED ROLE OF DIGITAL PARTICIPATION: EMPOWERMENT OR CONTROL?

The Arab region is at the forefront of the global digital revolution, which is rapidly reshaping economic and social landscapes. Digitalization is evolving as a key driver of productivity growth and improved welfare, with the potential to transform governance and redefine state–society relations. During the Arab uprisings, digital platforms played a crucial role in mobilizing public opinion, demonstrating their power to influence political dynamics. The impact of digitalization extends beyond technological innovation; it fundamentally alters how governments function and how citizens interact with public institutions. By changing the channels of communication, it redistributes power among stakeholders, expands civic engagement, and challenges traditional governance models- paving the way for more inclusive, responsive, and adaptive social contracts.

Zintl and Houdret (2024) conceptualize digitalization as a driver of change in state–society relations across the region. They explore how digitalization reshapes the state's core responsibilities - Protection, Provision, and Participation- in exchange for legitimacy. Proposing a conceptual framework that redefines the nature of citizen–state interactions, the identity and relative power position of the contracting parties, they acknowledge that digitalization brings about three key transformations in the architecture of social contracts. First, it redefines mutual responsibilities of both parties. Governments are now expected to deliver robust digital infrastructure, ensure data protection, and uphold cybersecurity standards. In return, citizens are responsible for engaging with digital platforms responsibly, safeguarding their digital identities, and actively participating in emerging forms of online civic engagement. These evolving responsibilities reflect a redefinition of the rights and obligations embedded in contemporary social contracts. The second major change brought by digitalization is the reconfiguration of interaction spaces for state–society interaction. Traditional venues for civic engagement- like town halls, voting booths, and public hearings- are complemented or replaced by digital platforms, including social media, e-governance portals, and online forums. While these tools broaden access to political participation, they also raise pressing concerns about digital accessibility, surveillance, and the quality of public deliberation. The third transformation involves the changing composition of the contracting parties. In the digital age, governance involves more than just state actors and citizens. Technology firms, data intermediaries, and global platforms now play influential roles in shaping policy and public opinion. This expansion of stakeholders can fragment the social contract into localized or transnational layers, especially when digital access and governance experiences vary across different communities. These transformations highlight the urgency of redefining social contracts as flexible and evolving frameworks capable of adapting to the rapid technological, societal, and political changes.

Despite its promising potential, digitalization has yielded mixed outcomes in the Arab region. Authoritarian regimes have leveraged digital tools for surveillance and repression, reinforcing coercive governance. They have used these platforms to monitor, intimidate, and suppress opposition. At the same time, digital media have expanded spaces for political expression and civic participation, though these gains rarely translate into sustained offline mobilization or institutional reform. These cases reveal a fundamental contradiction; while digitalization holds the potential to foster more participatory and inclusive governance, its current trajectory seems to reinforce exclusionary social contracts shaped by dominant actors in the region (Zintl and Houdret, 2024).

Rather than democratizing governance and empowering citizens, digital tools can just as easily be harnessed to entrench authoritarian control, marginalize dissent, and selectively improve public service delivery for digitally connected populations, thus deepening existing inequalities. This dynamic underscores how digitalization is shaped by the political economy and governance structures in which it operates. The challenge for modern governance is to balance innovation with oversight, ensuring that digital platforms advance freedom and participation rather than institutionalize state surveillance and autocratic control. Addressing these issues requires rethinking power dynamics in digital spaces and confronting intrusive surveillance practices and encroachment on personal freedom; challenges that demand collective action and visionary policy responses (Zermatten, 2025).

7. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOKS

The Arab region stands at a pivotal juncture in its history, where governance is increasingly shaped by tensions between entrenched traditional power structures and rising demands for reform, inclusion, and accountability. Recent geopolitical shifts, vibrant social movements, and shifting economic dynamics have revealed the complexity of reform; yet they also signal that meaningful transformation is underway. This study comes at a critical time to examine the evolving governance dynamics, with a particular focus on the political and legal challenges surrounding civic participation and the adoption of inclusive citizenship as a guiding policy compass. Central to this transformation is the recognition that governance and citizenship are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. By emphasizing their interplay, the study positions these principles as foundational to advancing the 2030 Agenda. Sustainable development cannot be realized without a firm commitment to social justice, democratic principles, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental human rights. Fragmented and piecemeal reform efforts have consistently fallen short in addressing the region's deep-rooted challenges. What is urgently required is a comprehensive reform agenda that redefines governance through the lens of inclusive citizenship. By embedding inclusivity into the core of governance structures, Arab societies acknowledge the complex identities that shape their social fabric, embrace diversity and lay the foundation for resilient institutions and empowered communities.

For decades, the region has grappled with persistent governance deficits and social fragmentation. It remains one of the most severely affected areas globally by conflict, displacement, institutional weakness, and economic vulnerability. Citizens continue to face systemic barriers to accessing justice, basic services, and legal protections; conditions that erode public trust and undermine institutional legitimacy. Multi-faceted challenges to inclusive citizenship include constitutional constraints, social and cultural divisions, and religious dynamics. These obstacles are compounded by entrenched structural inequalities, widespread human rights violations, and systemic injustices that marginalize large segments of the population.

Within this complex landscape, the integration of good governance and inclusive citizenship offers a transformative framework for reimagining state–society relations. Arab governments must adopt inclusive governance systems that address institutional, social, and cultural dimensions. Key priorities include restoring balance among constituencies, advancing education and knowledge-based economies, and enhancing meaningful citizen participation through digital technologies. The region's long-term stability depends on its ability to foster an environment that embraces diversity and encourages pluralism. Such efforts must be grounded in an unwavering commitment to equality, ensuring that governance structures serve the diverse needs of all citizens. By reimagining models of identity and civic engagement, the region's rich social fabric can be harnessed to democratize governance and advance inclusive citizenship.

7.1. Navigating reform: Challenges and opportunities

Despite ongoing structural reforms toward inclusive governance in the Arab region, significant challenges continue to hinder progress. Entrenched authoritarian and sectarian regimes pose persistent obstacles to civic participation, often resisting decentralization and power-sharing initiatives that are essential for institutionalizing inclusive governance. While some progress toward embracing inclusivity has been made, the region still grapples with systemic issues such as widespread corruption, limited judicial independence, and inadequate access to basic public services. These systemic deficiencies perpetuate inequality and social exclusion. Addressing them requires a coordinated and multi-sectoral approach that not only strengthens institutions but also empowers civil society, promotes civic education, advances gender equality, and engages youth as active contributors to change.

Regional collaboration is equally vital, enabling the exchange of best practices and fostering a shared commitment to reform. International actors can play a key role by offering technical assistance, capacity-building, and financial support. However, their involvement must be grounded

in mutual respect and non-interference. Past interventions driven by geopolitical agendas have often undermined trust, leading to skepticism and resistance. To ensure meaningful collaboration, international partners must prioritize local ownership, align with country-specific priorities, and respect national sovereignty. When guided by these principles, external actors can become true allies in the region's journey toward inclusive governance.

Today, the region is witnessing a profound transformation in its governance landscape driven by the rapid advancement of digital technology, media, and AI. The digital era is reshaping how governments are managed, how citizens engage, and how data drives decision-making. In the wake of the Arab Spring, renegotiating the state-society relations has become increasingly urgent. Also, AI is emerging as a powerful force in this process; offering both tools for empowerment and mechanisms of control. Governments are leveraging AI to streamline public services, enhance administrative efficiency, and foster digital engagement. E-governance is transforming service delivery, while E-democracy tools are expanding the scope of civic participation and public discourse. However, AI technologies present a double-edged sword for governance. The same tools that promise transparency, empowerment, and inclusion may also be used for surveillance, control, and exclusion. In a region marked by institutional fragility and social fragmentation, the ethical governance of AI is not just a technical issue; it is a political and developmental imperative. To ensure that AI serves the public good, ruling elites must embrace a deeper sense of social responsibility. This entails deepening their understanding of governance systems, valuing the perspectives of diverse communities, and empowering citizens to actively participate in policy-making. Achieving this vision requires a fundamental shift from top-down control to participatory governance models that prioritize citizen welfare. Such transformation demands strategic investment in digital literacy, the expansion of equitable access to digital infrastructure, and the reinforcement of legal protections to prevent technological innovation from exacerbating existing inequalities. The digital era calls for a reimagining of governance; one that is citizen-centric, technologically informed, and anchored in justice. By aligning digital transformation with the principles of equity and inclusion, Arab countries can lay the groundwork for sustainable governance models that are both comprehensive and forward-looking, capable of advancing long-term stability and development.

In the wake of the Arab Spring and amid ongoing structural challenges, restoring public trust and strengthening institutional capacities have become urgent priorities. These efforts are essential to achieving sustained institutional transformation. To unlock the transformative potential of governance reform, the study outlines a comprehensive set of policy measures. These include strengthening national institutions, enhancing access to legal protections, investing in civic education, and fostering regional and international cooperation to support peacebuilding and institutional reform. The strategic integration of digital technologies and AI can accelerate these efforts, offering innovative solutions for service delivery, civic engagement, and institutional transparency.

7.2. A vision for inclusive governance in the digital age

Despite the considerable challenges to achieving inclusive governance in the region, the potential for transformative progress remains promising. By prioritizing democracy, Arab countries can reimagine governance through the integration of human security principles into their digital modernization strategies (ESCWA, 2022). This transformation demands more than policy reform; it requires visionary leadership and commitment, recognizing that change is inherently complex and non-linear. Through collective action and a shared dedication to justice and human rights, the region can overcome historical barriers and move toward a governance model rooted in ethical integrity and inclusiveness. At the heart of this vision lies a human security framework that centers on protecting and empowering individuals. This marks a shift from traditional state-centric models to citizen-centric development that places individuals' rights and needs at the core of policymaking.

Such a paradigm lays the foundation for renewed state-citizen relationships built on democratic values. Promoting well-being in this context requires an enabling environment grounded in equality, inclusion, and social justice; pillars essential for cultivating resilient societies capable of adapting to evolving regional transformations. This vision offers a compelling path to strengthen institutions and empower citizens to face the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century.

In an era defined by rapid digital evolution and shifting socio-political dynamics, Arab countries face both urgent challenges and unprecedented opportunities to reshape governance. Engineering inclusive governance systems and fostering active citizenship are essential for advancing citizen-centric development that promotes a 'people-first' approach to decision-making and institutional reform. To achieve this, the notion of 'human security' must expand to encompass 'information space security', a vital dimension of modern governance. As digital platforms become increasingly integral to data management, civic engagement, and public service delivery, safeguarding these spaces becomes central to both individual well-being and societal resilience. Positioning information space security as a core pillar ensures that digital transformation is not only technologically progressive but also ethically grounded; upholding privacy, defending rights, and fostering public trust in governance systems.

This vision advocates for the strategic integration of digital innovation, participatory governance, and ethical leadership to promote transparency, accountability, and civic empowerment. Embedding information space security within governance structures offers Arab countries a transformative pathway toward building resilient institutions and inclusive societies capable of navigating the complexities of the digital age. Realizing this transformation requires targeted investments in digital infrastructure, human capital, and regional cooperation- anchored by a renewed social contract that engages citizens as co-designers of their collective future. As AI continues to evolve rapidly, the region is uniquely positioned to redesign governance architectures suited for knowledge-based economies. By grounding these efforts in both information space security and the broader human security framework, Arab countries can safeguard technological advancements from cyber threats while ensuring they remain aligned with the core values of individual empowerment and human dignity.

Looking forward, the Arab region holds vast potential to invest in capacity development, strengthen regional and global partnerships, and harness the transformative power of digital governance. Leveraging innovations in AI, digital media, and e-government will be instrumental in accelerating progress toward the SDGs. However, to ensure that digital innovation benefits all segments of society equitably, this transformation must be guided by ethical governance, inclusive design principles, and robust legal safeguards. The study outlines strategic recommendations to address persistent issues such as inequality, marginalization, exclusion, and disempowerment. It underscores the critical role of citizen-centric governance models that embed information space security and human security as foundational pillars; guiding future reforms toward sustainable development.

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