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# LGBTQ activism in repressive contexts: the struggle for (in) visibility in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on social movements and gender studies, the article aims at exploring repertoires of action articulated by LGBTQ communities in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey during and after the 2011 and 2013 protests. The aim is to disentangle how LGBTQ individuals mobilized in the MENA region and which role civil society organizations and digital technologies played in the development of such mobilizations. State repression of mobilizing structures, the relevance of digital networks in mobilization strategies, involving LGBTQ activists and individuals in the three countries, will be discussed. The empirical analysis draws on 44 semi-structured interviews carried out in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey between 2011 and 2020 focusing on repressive contexts, civil society activism, and digital networks. By doing so, the analysis aims also to shed light on the roles played by both meso-level organizations and digital technologies in triggering a range of diverse repertoires of action. If in the three countries LGBTQ communities have been disproportionately targeted by state and non-state repressive campaigns, in Egypt LGBTQ activists challenged repression thanks to the use of social networks as alternative venues for socialization, while in Tunisia and Turkey, LGBTQ activists, drawing upon more established meso-level mobilizing structures, built-up new strategies with the aim to increase their cooperation with other political challengers.

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## Introduction

LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> activism in contexts where homosexual, bisexual, and transgender subjectivities are repressed and persecuted has increasingly gained academic attention. Studies indicate that LGBTQ individuals living in hostile environments face both ‘state repression’ (Davenport, 2007; Tschantret, 2020) and ‘soft repression’ (Ferree, 2004). The former occurs through the (actual or threatened) use of physical sanctions (Davenport, 2007, p. 2), for instance, criminalization of same-sex relationships, police raids, and death penalty. The latter concerns actions undertaken by non-state actors with the aim of ridiculing and silencing marginalized communities (Ferree, 2004, p. 88), such as media misrepresentation and public delegitimization of their rights. Scholars have also

examined how LGBTQ activism may develop under repressive conditions, why actors may participate in public mobilizations, and how their repertoires of action may evolve. However, these studies have mainly focused on the historical roots of Western LGBTQ mobilizations since the Stonewall riots (Bernstein, 1997; D'Emilio, 1983) or on post-communist countries and Eastern Europe (Ayoub, 2016; Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2019; O'Dwyer, 2018). Except for a few investigations (such as Birdal, 2020 and Fortier, 2019<sup>2</sup>), research has not paid attention to how LGBTQ activism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has developed since the so-called 'Arab Spring' and the Gezi Park movement, a period of comprehensive change for civil society in the region.

Drawing on social movement and gender studies scholarship, especially on the MENA region, this article aims to contribute to deeper understanding of LGBTQ mobilizations under repressive conditions, shedding light on the roles played by civil society organizations and digital technologies in the articulation of diverse repertoires of actions. In particular, it explores how the repertoires of action (Tilly, 1986) articulated by LGBTQ communities in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey have changed since the outburst of the 2011 and 2013 uprisings. It addresses the following research questions: how have LGBTQ individuals based in the MENA region mobilized since the 2011 and 2013 protests? What role has the repression against LGBTQ communities played in the development of such repertoires of action? How have LGBTQ civil society organizations (CSOs) and information and communication technologies (ICTs) contributed to the development of LGBTQ mobilization strategies in different repressive contexts? In order to tackle these questions, the empirical analysis draws on 44 semi-structured interviews conducted by the first (Acconia, 2018) and third authors in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey between 2011 and 2020.<sup>3</sup>

The article is structured as follows: section 2 discusses theoretical and empirical investigations on repertoires of action in repressive contexts, focusing on LGBTQ activism in the MENA region; section 3 illustrates the case selection, the methodology, and the data collection processes; section 4 presents the results of the analysis of the interviews, examining both the repertoires of action articulated by LGBTQ activists in the three case studies, and the roles played by repressive conditions, mobilizing structures, and digital media in the innovation of such strategies. The final section summarises results and interpretations and suggests future research paths.

## **LGBTQ repertoires of contention in repressive contexts: the struggle for (in) visibility**

Social movement scholars have long examined the nexus between repressive contexts and challengers' repertoires of contention, defined as the sets of means developed by challengers to make political claims (Tilly, 2008, p. 14, 1986, p. 2). To explain how and why activists may articulate different repertoires of contention, scholars have considered both macro-level conditions, such as the specific features of the repressive contexts, and meso-level factors, such as the presence of civil society organizations and their use of digital media, which may strengthen challengers' capacity to innovate such repertoires. The role

played by repressive conditions on activists' repertoires of contention has been analysed through the contrasting hypotheses of radicalization and moderation of the repertoires of contention<sup>4</sup> (Davenport, 2005; Earl, 2003; Pilati, 2016).

However, scholars have also found that CSOs play a crucial role in the innovation of activists' repertoires of action in repressive contexts (Pilati, 2016) because they provide venues for political socialization (Dorsey, 2012; Tétreault, 2000).

CSOs includes both formal organizations and informal groups (Edwards, 2004). Regardless of their level of formalization, both are civil society actors 'promoting collective action on public issues, whether on a service delivery or a protest-oriented basis' (Diani, 2015, p. 35). They may indeed either ally with the central government (Jamal, 2007), renovate their repertoires of contention through the two main mechanisms of radicalization (Beinin & Vairel, 2011) and moderation (Duboc, 2011), or even opt for a depoliticization of their agendas (Bayat, 2002; Clark, 2004; Dorsey, 2012). Furthermore, scholars have found that ICTs also contribute to the innovation of challengers' repertoires of contention<sup>5</sup> (Rasler, 2016). They may enhance the radicalization of the repertoires of contention by reducing the costs of information exchange, recruitment, and coordination (Hamanaka, 2020; Howard & Hussain, 2013), by reinforcing people's expectations for success, thus encouraging individuals to take political actions (Howard & Hussain, 2011), and by helping activists mobilize public rage (Hassenpour, (2014); Van de Bildt, (2015)). New technologies may also support the development of moderate and apolitical actions through the development of informal networks across different individuals and social groups (Rasler, 2016). In contrast with scholars emphasizing the benefits brought by ICTs to collective efforts, some researchers have shown that social media have also been exploited by State authorities to identify and monitor activists in repressive contexts (Michaelsen, 2017; Xu, 2021). Social media may also be deployed by non-State agents to both circulate LGBTQ-phobic content (Wijaya, 2022) and target LGBTQ individuals, such as by using dating apps to 'out' – and thus endanger – gay people as happened in Morocco (Steinfeld, 2020).

Studies on LGBTQ activism in repressive contexts suggest that sexual minorities' repertoires of contention stem from a complex tension between the need for public recognition and the risks of 'coming out' and being visible (Ayoub, 2016; Birdal, 2020; Fortier, 2015, 2019; Wilkinson, 2020). On the one hand, LGBTQ activists may seek public visibility with the aim of making their claims more resonant in the public sphere<sup>6</sup> (Currier, 2012; Zivi, 2012). Within this perspective, 'coming out' is considered a political strategy aimed at moving sexual rights from the margin to the centre of political debates and achieving their full recognition (Ayoub, 2016). The rationale of this tactic is that, by claiming public space, non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities will gradually be conceived as 'normal', instead of 'deviant', and will therefore be granted the same rights enjoyed by the rest of the population (Waalldijk, 1994; Wilkinson, 2020). On the other hand, in repressive contexts higher visibility has often been followed by increased vulnerability and violence (Edenborg, 2017, 2020; Wilkinson, 2017). This situation, known as 'hypervisibility' (Wilkinson, 2020), occurs when public authorities ally with anti-LGBTQ actors to raise concerns over non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities and practices, for instance, by portraying homosexuality as a threat to the survival of the nation (Wilkinson, 2014).

Revolutionary uprisings against authoritarian governments are crucial to the articulation of tactical repertoires (Almeida, 2003; Davenport, 2005; Goldstone & Tilly, 2001). However, while such uprisings may empower some sectors of the population, they usually endanger sexual minorities (Tschantret, 2020). Transitional governments are indeed found to disproportionately target LGBTQ communities for both strategic and ideological reasons. Political elites instrumentally repress less visible groups to show their ability to contrast national instability, and sexual minorities may be perceived as being influenced by Western-centric and liberal principles that may threaten the project of a new national state (Tschantret, 2020). Evidence of this phenomenon can also be found in the MENA region. Indeed, LGBTQ individuals took an active part in recent uprisings in the MENA region in the hope of gaining civil rights and social justice for sexual minorities in their country (El Amrani, 2019; Birdal, 2020). However, as soon as transitional governments were formed, LGBTQ individuals were subject to repressive acts, such as police raids, illegal imprisonments, and public shaming (El Amrani, 2019; Fortier, 2015, 2019; Needham, 2013). Despite gaining public visibility during the Arab Spring and Gezi Park movements, they found themselves forced to invisibility once the protests terminated.

### **Diversifying strategies to be (in)visible: organizational structures and digital networks**

In order to deal with the struggle for (in)visibility in the post-revolts phase, LGBTQ activists in the MENA region have articulated different political strategies. Many have aimed at increasing their visibility in the public sphere. Their tactics have ranged from creating stronger communities with the aim of triggering cultural change to building broad coalitions with the aim of campaigning for legal reforms and publicly addressing homophobia (El Amrani, 2019). Such repertoires of action comprised the participation in public demonstrations, the use of recognizable symbols such as the rainbow flag, as well as the creation of coalitions with human rights organizations and networks (Fortier, 2015). At the same time, due to increased violence against LGBTQ communities by post-revolutionary governments, LGBTQ challengers have also utilized strategies aimed at achieving higher discretion (Fortier, 2015, 2019). Their repertoires have encompassed the organization of informal meetings in cafés and universities (Fortier, 2015), and the use of dating apps (Alqaisiya, 2020). Building on the insights discussed above, we argue that LGBTQ activists in the MENA region may adopt different strategies not only to make their claims more or less visible in the public sphere depending on the repressive conditions following the 2011 uprisings, but also according to the presence of civil society organizations and their use of social media.

Unlike Egypt, where LGBTQ organizations were neither present before nor founded after the uprisings, LGBTQ groups were active in some countries in the MENA region even before the Arab Spring (Birdal, 2020). For instance, the first Turkish and Lebanese LGBTQ organizations were officially registered between the 1990s and 2000s. Other countries, such as Tunisia and Morocco, took advantage of the 2011 uprisings to establish their first organizations (El Amrani, 2019; Birdal, 2020; Fortier, 2015, 2019). These organizations and groups have articulated different

repertoires of action: on the one hand, they have increased the public visibility of LGBTQ claims and advocate for LGBTQ recognition and rights (Fortier, 2015, 2019); on the other, they have acted as venues to support each other and create a safe community (El Amrani, 2019).

In a different fashion, already some years before the outburst of the uprisings, Egyptian LGBTQ activists had been found to articulate an ‘activism from the closet’ strategy (El Menyawi, 2006). Instead of primarily advocating for LGBTQ rights in a society that did not perceive such claims as legitimate, they framed LGBTQ rights as part of a broader range of issues that concerned every citizen, for instance, human rights and freedom (Birdal, 2020; Magued, 2021; Needham, 2013). By not directly addressing LGBTQ issues, this strategy was aimed at protecting activists’ safety (Birdal, 2020). Within this framework, individuals did not need to disclose their LGBTQ identities in the public sphere to engage in activism. On the contrary, the ‘closet’ was perceived as ‘a safe locus for collective strategizing’ (El Menyawi, 2006, p. 51).

The few studies on LGBTQ mobilizations in the MENA region show that activists have highly relied on online platforms in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (El Amrani, 2019; Birdal, 2020; Needham, 2013). Consistently with the struggle for (in)visibility discussed above, LGBTQ organizations have deployed digital platforms in different ways. On the one hand, the Internet has been used as a tool to ‘come out of the digital closet’ (Gorkemli, 2012). In other words, social media have served to both give information about the aims and activities of the organizations, and to publicly defy homo-transphobic statements, promote petitions, advocate for LGBTQ rights, and denounce human rights violations (Fortier, 2015, 2019). On the other hand, with the increase of public repression of LGBTQ activists, Tunisian organizations have gradually shifted from the visibility strategy to the ‘activism from the closet’ approach (Fortier, 2015). In a similar vein, Turkish LGBTQ activists and organizations deployed the Internet as a ‘digital closet’ during the 1990s (Gorkemli, 2012). The web indeed provided otherwise isolated individuals with the possibility to gather without ‘coming out’ in public. Moreover, during the early 2000s, Turkish LGBTQ organizations started using the internet to organize widespread campaigns to make LGBTQ individuals and claims more visible (Gorkemli, 2012). Hence, Turkish LGBTQ activists deployed digital platforms in a twofold way: to exchange information and create a community in which everyone could feel safe by not being exposed, but also to defy mainstream negative representations of LGBTQ individuals by promoting coming out strategies.

Within this framework, LGBTQ organizations and groups in the MENA region may be considered as platforms to negotiate the struggle for (in)visibility articulated by activists (Sherif, 2020). In other words, we expect that, depending on the configuration of repression against LGBTQ minorities in Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt, LGBTQ organizations and groups may both constitute structures for visible advocacy, and venues for invisible and safer community-building. LGBTQ constituencies may thus negotiate their struggle for (in)visibility by existing as networking venues for LGBTQ individuals living in hostile contexts and also for resisting repressive conditions through advocacy and mobilization. Furthermore, they may deploy new technologies to negotiate the tension between the will to be visible and advocate for their rights in the public sphere, and the need to create an invisible community to protect their safety. Against this backdrop,

digital media may be used both as venues to exist as LGBTQ individuals, by providing means to communicate and exchange information with peers, as well as means to resist under repressive circumstances, by endowing challengers with platforms to connect and mobilize.

## **The empirical study**

### ***Case studies***

To investigate the repertoires of action of LGBTQ communities in the MENA region, we focused on Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey as cases of rather hostile contexts. Although Turkey has been sometimes excluded by some MENA studies' authors, it has a growing and leading role in the region.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the three countries are characterized by Sunni Muslim majorities and have witnessed historical tolerance towards local LGBTQ communities (Massad, 2002), compared to neighbouring countries, and experienced repression after major episodes of mobilizations, which took place in Egypt before and after the 2011 uprisings, in Tunisia before and in the aftermath of the 2010–2011 uprisings, and in Turkey before and in the aftermath of the Gezi Park movement (2013).

### ***Data sources***

The fieldwork research comprised 44 semi-structured interviews undertaken by the first author (Acconcia, 2018) and third author. The interviews were conducted with male and female Egyptian, Tunisian, and Turkish LGBTQ activists involved in grassroots mobilizations and advocacy campaigns, as well as ordinary citizens in Cairo, Alexandria, Tunis, Sousse, and Istanbul between 2011 and 2020 in Egypt, and 2019–2020 in Tunisia and Turkey. Some of the interviews were conducted through several collective discussions. The testimonies offered insights and perspectives on the pre-, during, and post-2011 uprisings in urban and peripheral Egyptian and Tunisian neighbourhoods, and on mobilizations in University Campuses before and after the Gezi Park movement (2013) in Turkey.

Concerning the Egyptian interviewees (28), after a first meeting with Revolutionary Socialist activists, a Left-wing oriented political group advocating for social rights, located in Cairo, a snowball sampling was utilized to involve other participants. Thus, the selection of the interviewees started with contacts from initial members active in Tahrir Square demonstrations and included additional participants via chain referral to select both activists and ordinary citizens. In addition, gatekeepers working as NGO activists were interviewed in Cairo and Alexandria and they took part in the process of developing and organizing of the interviews.

Concerning the Tunisian interviewees (10), after a first meeting with Shams Association activists, a think tank campaigning for the depenalization of homosexuality in Tunisia, and individual supporters of the LGBTQ movements in the country, a snowball method was utilized to involve other participants. Thus, the selection of the



interviewees encompassed contacts from initial members active in 2010–2011 Tunis and Sousse anti-regime protests and other participants including both activists and ordinary citizens.

The interviews in Turkey (6) involved supporters of the major local LGBTQ associations, Legato, Kaos-Gl, Lambda, active in Istanbul, Ankara, and within University Campuses. Thus, the selection of the interviewees was based on contacts from LGBTQ individuals active in student associations, the Gezi Park movement (2013), and the 2015 Gay Pride as to include both activists and ordinary citizens.

The interviews were organized with the specific aim of understanding a range of topics: the involvement of Egyptian, Tunisian, and Turkish LGBTQ communities in grassroots mobilizations, their repertoires of action, police and military repression, media stigmatization, cooperation with other oppositional groups, mobilizations within campuses,<sup>8</sup> narratives of the 2011 uprisings, the Gezi Park movement (2013) and their aftermath, relations with state agencies, political parties and Islamist groups. The interviewees appeared to be supportive of the Tahrir Square, Habib Bourguiba 2010–2011 demonstrations' demands, and Gezi Park movement (2013), participating in public protests in Egypt between January 2011 and June 2011, in mobilizations in Tunisia between December 2010 and January 2011, and in protests in Turkey before and after 2013. The interviewed LGBTQ supporters had been part of several waves of protests before the 2011 uprisings. However, this participation in many cases had not been formalized and remained at the individual level.

Access to the field was very problematic, especially as a consequence of the increasingly repressive measures taken after the 2013 military coup in Egypt, under Article 230 of the Penal Code criminalizing homosexuality in Tunisia, and the increasing repression after the 2016 failed coup in Turkey. The interviewees expressed security concerns with reference to their participation in the interviews. Consequently, all interviewees have been anonymized and each interviewee was assigned an identification number.

## Findings

### *LGBTQ mobilizations in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey: (in)visible advocacy*

In both Tunisia and Egypt, subalterns were paramount in the formation of popular mobilizations calling for human and social rights, minimum wages, and social justice (Pilati et al., 2019). Key actors in the 2010–2011 uprisings in Tunisia were, on the one hand, workers engaged in major trade unions, such as Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), that were central during the local protests that occurred long before 2011 (Beinin & Vairel, 2011); and, on the other hand, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD). Not only did the ATFD play an important role in the opposition to the regime throughout the nineties and the new millennium, but it also focused on gender rights against Ben Ali's state feminism, Islamism, and rising conservatism (Debuysere, 2018). Similarly the protests that erupted in Egypt in January 2011 were the product of large cross-class networks in which young people and students joined middle-class professionals, government employees, workers, housewives, and the unemployed. These mass riots were paramount to the formation of new means of popular mobilizations that aimed at enhancing a diverse range of unmet needs and motivating



ordinary citizens to participate in socio-political activities, such as advocating for human and social rights, calling for minimum wages and workers' rights, as well as participating in the political arena (Pilati et al., 2019). The diverse activists protesting against police methods and calling for the end of the Hosni Mubarak regime included individual LGBTQ supporters (Acconcia, 2018). In the aftermath of the uprisings and until early 2013, in both Egypt and Tunisia free elections were held, assemblies were charged with drafting a new constitution, and Islamist parties won elections and assumed office (Hassan et al., 2020).

Concerning LGBTQ mobilization strategies, the interviews show that LGBTQ individuals participated in protests taking place in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey with the aim of both supporting transformative claims and advancing LGBTQ rights in the public sphere. However, these repertoires developed in different ways both during and after the riots: while Egyptian activists tended to mobilize through informal gatherings and social media, Tunisian and Turkish activists also founded structured organizations to enhance advocacy strategies.

In Egypt, groups of young homosexuals used to gather in downtown Cairo long before the 2011 uprisings. 'We used to meet there during the anti-Mubarak demonstrations (2006) and later on the occasion of the anti-Morsi protests (2013), or even on ordinary working days' (interview 20), an Egyptian LGBTQ activist stated. According to our interviewees, LGBTQ supporters were among the various marginalized groups that gathered in Tahrir Square in 2011 hoping to see their rights recognized in the near future. 'At the crossing between Tahrir Square and Talaat Harb Street, at the corner with the metro station Anwar al-Sadat, and on the metro gates in front of the KFC restaurant in Tahrir Square, another silent revolution was taking place' (interview 7), an Egyptian LGBTQ activist taking part in protests in Tahrir Square explained. However, precisely because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, their participation in the riots made them, together with female activists (El Ashmawy, 2017; Chafai, 2020), specific targets of state repression. 'In parallel with the repression of women participating in the 2011 protests we faced the same kind of attacks, arrests, harassments and anal tests' (interview 2), another Egyptian LGBTQ activist outlined. After the 2011 uprisings, meetings organized by LGBTQ activists continued taking place in different places in downtown Cairo for months but without reaching their targets. 'In 2011 and 2012, we were planning to stage a "Cairo Gay Pride" in Tahrir Square many times, but only a few people joined us' (interview 1), another LGBTQ activist recalled. In this phase, social media and new technologies were crucial to LGBTQ mobilizations. As an LGBTQ activist who took part in Tahrir Square protests emphasized, 'Thanks to the use of social networks it was easier to bypass state control and organize protests for dissent' (interview 14). Due to state repression, Egyptian LGBTQ mobilizations in the aftermath of the revolution were hence still characterized by the presence of informal groups organizing meetings and gatherings through digital communication platforms.

While women were central to the success of the Tunisian 2010–2011 protests, there was an extensive participation of LGBTQ activists as well. 'Many LGBTQ activists took part in the 2010–2011 protests at the individual level' (interview 28), an LGBTQ activist who took part in Tunis demonstrations highlighted. Differently from Egypt, Tunisian activists affirmed that there had been a political opening following the riots. As an activist who took part in protests in Tunis explained: 'In the aftermath of the uprisings, a wider

space for LGBTQ activism was evident' (interview 30). A positive consequence of such an opening may be seen in the establishment of Shams (Sun), Maghudin (We exist) and Chouf, the first three Tunisian LGBTQ organizations founded between 2012 and 2016. Shams was legally registered on 18 May 2015. However, these organizations were opposed by the central government, which presented a lawsuit against Shams to suspend its activities for a month starting from 4 January 2016. Thus, Tunisian LGBTQ activists took advantage of a slight opening in the political opportunity structure to create more structured organizations from which to articulate public advocacy strategies. As an LGBTQ activist explained, this mobilization process has been slow, but consistent throughout the years: 'There is not a structured organization or a political party advocating for LGBTQ rights but a tradition of activism growing little by little since 2007. There is a new generation of activists, like Saif Ayadi, both LGBTQ and feminist militants and engaged in social struggles as well. This introduced a very interesting new dimension in the way in which political demands are formulated in Tunisia' (interview 36).

A similar mobilization process has been taking place in Turkey after the rise to power of current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) after 2003 (Yeşilada, 2015). Feminists, LGBTQ activists, human rights groups, academics, nationalists, liberals, environmentalists, students, Kurds, anti-capitalist Muslims protested against the Turkish authorities in 2013, during the Gezi Park movement.<sup>9</sup> 'This was a chance for the LGBTQ movement to ask for a better inclusion of sexual minorities into society, while the repressive government repeatedly and arbitrarily denied their rights to peaceful assembly' (interview 42), an LGBTQ activist explained.

Due to limitations on public gatherings, between 2013 and 2020, LGBTQ associations based in University Campuses in Turkey have gained increased visibility. Legato (Lesbian and Gay Inter-University Organization) is a solidarity network among university students aimed at connecting LGBTQ people on campuses. Despite facing some problems with the university internal authorities, the network members began to reorganize, getting in touch with other universities in Istanbul and in other cities. Pembe Hayat (Pink Life LGBTQ Solidarity Association) was the first association based at the University of Ankara and aimed at protecting the rights of transgender individuals carrying out projects focused on discrimination, hate speech, violence, and social exclusion both at national and international level. 'Apart from these organizations, LGBTQ activists can still have a role in University Campuses regarding the creation of student associations, organizing demonstrations with their school-mates and colleagues in the university. Whether they belong to the LGBTQ community or not, they can share their experiences more closely without the fear of being judged and targeted by the regime' (interview 41), an LGBTQ activist said. Starting in 2006 several 'Campus Meetings against Homophobia and Transphobia' have been held within the three biggest universities in Ankara, then extended to other universities. 'These were important occasions to raise awareness of LGBTQ people rights' struggles, facing for example, the issue of the medicalization of sexuality and of the conservative policies which justify the institutionalization of discrimination and inequality under the guise of terms like "family values", "obscenity" and "public morals"' (interview 42), an LGBTQ activist explained. The topics debated in these meetings included a wide range of issues. 'We discussed every kind of topic from the right to housing to gendered public space; from the right to work to the union movements to

Social Service Areas for LGBTQ; from the discrimination of sexual orientation and identity in education to the right to public health and the trajectories of homosexuality and the LGBTQ Movement Against Inequality' (interview 44), an LGBTQ activist outlined. After the Gezi protests, Turkish LGBTQ activists have increasingly relied on university campuses to organize and mobilize. Mobilization processes have been characterized by the presence of both structured organizations that have undertaken advocacy work for years and of grassroots groups in which LGBT individuals have found space to participate and contribute to awareness raising strategies.

### ***2011-2013 protests and LGBTQ activism in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey***

After 2013, Egypt and Tunisia showed divergent profiles. In Tunisia, a democratic transition culminated in the adoption of a new Constitution on 14 January 2014 (Pilati et al., 2021). Tunisian women's witnessed the approval of several laws increasing women's political and legal rights, including Law 58 criminalizing violence against women in 2017 (Pilati et al., 2021). However, since 2013 the Tunisian LGBTQ community has had to cope with wide repressive campaigns and legislations. Article 230 of the Tunisian Penal Code, approved in 1913, provides up to three years for private acts of 'sodomy' between consenting adults. After the 2010–2011 uprisings, the Tunisian Supreme Court stopped an attempt to cancel Article 230 of the Penal Code criminalizing homosexuality. 'Both the Islamists of Ennahda and the 2019 elected president, Kais Saied, strongly opposed the reform' (interview 31),<sup>10</sup> an LGBTQ activist explained. 'During major demonstrations, we always face threats and attacks by police officers. I personally witnessed several episodes of arbitrary arrests, harassment, and criminalization, perpetrated by Tunisian policemen towards LGBTQ activists' (interview 36),<sup>11</sup> an LGBTQ activist who took part in protests in Tunis added. Despite this harsh situation, the last few years have witnessed some mild openings in the Tunisian political and discursive opportunity structures (Antonakis, 2019), such as the demand for the banning of forced anal tests as a violation of human rights in 2017<sup>12</sup> and the presence of the first openly homosexual presidential candidate, Shams president, Munir Baatur, running for the 2019 elections.<sup>13</sup> In April 2020, Baatur announced an alleged first gay marriage in the country. However, these openings are not without contradictions, since Baatur is strongly criticized by many Tunisian activists. 'He used LGBTQ campaigns as a tool to increase his personal visibility, he is not a leader for the whole community' (interview 34), an LGBTQ activist highlighted. Furthermore, the Minister of Local Affairs, Lotfi Zitoun, publicly denied that Tunisian authorities legally recognized same-sex unions.

In Egypt, state homo-transphobia had targeted LGBTQ individuals already before the 2011 protests (Ammar, 2011; Habib, 2019). One of the best known repressive round-up took place on 11 May 2001 when police and state security officers raided the Queen Boat, anchored on the Nile, and arrested over fifty people with the charge of 'male prostitution'. According to human rights' activists, the detainees were physically and psychologically humiliated. 'In those years, the Muslim Brotherhood was accusing the Mubarak regime of incompetence against anti-Islamic tendencies within the society. Thus, the LGBTQ community has been the first target of the authorities to silence the Muslim Brotherhood' accusations' (interview 6), an interviewee added. 'LGBTQ rights were not tackled during

the Morsi presidency [first elected Muslim Brotherhood president] between 2012 and 2013. I personally didn't take part in the electoral process, but I supported the Revolutionary Socialists' (interview 3), another LGBTQ activist highlighted. After the 2013 military coup and with the control over state institutions by incumbent president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (Pilati et al., 2021), the regime has strongly repressed political activists, human rights advocates and the Egyptian LGBTQ community. 'Egyptian authorities are trying to demonstrate their opposition to any kind of anti-Islamic behaviours present in the country in order to lever on this and keep repressing Islamist movements' (interview 15), an Egyptian LGBTQ activist explained. Among the places mentioned for gatherings, there are few ancient hammams still located in downtown Cairo, from the surroundings of the market of the Bab el-Louk neighbourhood to the old Bab Shareya Turkish bath and the cinemas in the poor neighbourhood of Boulaq Abul-Ela. In 2014 Egyptian police raided the Turkish bath 'Sea Door' in the Ramsis neighbourhood in Cairo. Thirty-three people were accused of 'immorality' and detained. Their arrest was highly covered by the Egyptian State television. According to our interviewees, after the military coup hundreds of LGBTQ activists were imprisoned, chased away from home or lost their jobs due to their sexual orientation.<sup>14</sup> In November 2014, eight men were condemned to three years of detention with the charge of 'debauchery'. 'They arrested them because they appeared in a video that, according to authorities, represented a homosexual marriage on a boat on the Nile but there was no evidence that the video was about a wedding' (interview 27), an Egyptian LGBTQ activist outlined. According to our interviewees, the men in this case were also subjected to anal tests. In summer 2014, police raided a house where a group of transgender individuals lived. In 2017, 16 LGBTQ activists were arrested in Egypt for waving a rainbow flag during a concert of the Lebanese band Masrou Leila, in Cairo. The arrested activists were charged for 'inciting debauchery' and 'abnormal sexual relations', and were tortured in prison. The LGBTQ Egyptian activist Sarah Hegazy, who was among them, committed suicide in Canada three years later, where she had moved after being released. Her death strongly affected the Egyptian LGBTQ community, as an activist's words emphasize: 'I have been hiding all my life. When I heard about her death, I thought there was no reason to continue fighting' (interview 5).

Unlike LGBTQ mobilizations in Egypt and Tunisia, the Turkish LGBTQ movement dates back to the 1980s, paving the way for the flourishing of LGBTQ-based protests in the 1990s and 2000s (Ceylan, 2015). In the last two decades, and especially before and after the Gezy Park movement, such mobilizations have become increasingly visible. Some associations and national NGOs have begun to work on the issue of discrimination and exclusion of sexual minorities from society, despite the obstacles advanced by the Ministry of Interior for their legal recognition. Although it is clear that the situation has worsened in recent years for those who support equality in Turkey (Göçmen & Yilmaz, 2017), numerous organizations still focus on the protection and the enhancement of sexual minorities' rights. One of them is Kaos-Gl, founded in Ankara in 1994 and registered in 2005. Another important Turkish LGBTQ association is Lambda, founded in 1993 in Istanbul. Lambda is among the organizers of the 2003 Pride, the first LGBTQ march in Turkey. In 2008, a Court decision banned the organization, assuming that its activities were 'against laws and morality', but the Supreme Court overruled the decision. The LGBTQ activists we interviewed mentioned several episodes of repression and violence against the LGBTQ community (interviews 41–42). An example of violence in

this instance is the case of Ahmet Yildiz, student at the University of Marmara, killed in 2008 by his family because of his homosexuality. As a result of the Gezi protests, ‘the government made gatherings and having public assemblies for the LGBTQ community in Turkey even harder’ (interview 40). For instance, in 2015 Turkish authorities assigned police to contain the protests using tear gases and water cannons to disperse the Istanbul Gay Pride march by claiming that it had been organized during a day of Ramadan.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the three countries show that, despite differences in the socio-political and cultural contexts in which LGBTQ activists are embedded, the rise to power of repressive and conservative regimes not only challenge sexual minorities’ mobilizations and visibility in the public sphere, but also threaten their very existence and survival.

### ***LGBTQ activism in repressive contexts: strategies to resist and exist***

Participation in the 2011 and 2013 protests has only slightly improved LGBTQ activists’ possibility to make their claims heard in the public sphere. They have often been targeted by public authorities as a threat to traditional values pushing LGBTQ communities not only to mobilize, but also to articulate innovative strategies to resist and exist under hostile conditions.

In Egypt, both state repression and stigmatization are still very aggressive in public and private local media. For example, Patrick Zaki, a student of Gender Studies at the University of Bologna who was arrested at his arrival in Cairo on 7 February 2020 with charges of acting against national interests through cyber-activism, has been stigmatized by media commentators because he went abroad ‘with the aim to study homosexuality’. ‘The Egyptian authorities still portray LGBTQ activism as a “foreign form of activism”, exported to Egypt’, an interviewed LGBTQ activist highlighted (interview 24).<sup>16</sup> In the last few years, the Egyptian police have expelled several homosexual foreigners, tourists, and resident individuals, preventing them from coming back to the country. However, queer life in Cairo and Alexandria is not impossible, especially thanks to dedicated smartphone applications (Alqaisiya, 2020). ‘Despite repression and control over cyber-activism, I can still do my queer life in Cairo, meeting people and building relationships, thanks to Grindr [a gay chat] and other Apps’ (interview 23), an Egyptian LGBTQ activist explained. Hence, new technologies have played a role in the repertoires of action articulated by LGBTQ Egyptian activists: on the one hand, communication platforms were and still are deployed to organize and coordinate informal gatherings; on the other hand, social media and apps, despite an increasing digital targeting and surveillance,<sup>17</sup> provide individuals with the possibility to meet other LGBTQ people, thus strengthening processes of community building.

As in Egypt, Tunisian LGBTQ activists have had to cope with increased state homophobia after the protests. ‘This recently achieved visibility for LGBTQ activists and the cooperation of these social movements triggered the anger of the police. LGBTQ activists are now a target of constant police intimidation, their pictures are often published on social networks together with insults and death threats. An example in this instance is the LGBTQ activist, Rania Amdouni, harshly intimidated by the police syndicates’ (interview 32), an LGBTQ activist highlighted. However, Tunisian LGBTQ individuals still meet at gay bars, cafés, and dancing halls, which are among the most

fashionable places for leisure in Tunis. ‘Wax, Yuka and Habibi are among the best LGBTQ friendly bars and disco, in the Gamra neighbourhood in Tunis, opened in recent years. These new bars are places for gatherings for Tunisian gays and lesbians, but they are spaces of freedom for the whole Tunisian youth’ (interview 29), an LGBTQ activist who took part in protests in Tunis explained. As the Tunisian case shows, under repressive regimes not only social media, but also places such as cafés, restaurants, and bars may represent spaces where marginalized communities have the possibility to share their experiences and create a community that provides the base to mobilize for their rights through more structured advocacy organizations.

In Turkey, since the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt, president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Turkish authorities have been waging a war against alleged challengers (e.g., policemen, judges, journalists, civil servants, etc.) stigmatizing LGBTQ activists as ‘deviants’.<sup>18</sup> ‘Their political discourse uses Islam in order to claim that things are “not Islamic enough”, and universities, as possible “spaces for opposition”, are among the first to be censored’ (interview 41), an LGBTQ activist explained. ‘LGBTQ witness employment refusals or are even fired on the basis of their sexual orientation. Discriminatory laws make it impossible for them to practice their professions or even look for fair trials after that’ (interview 40),<sup>19</sup> an LGBTQ activist highlighted. ‘Although in the last two decades the LGBTQ movements in Turkey have moved forward in terms of organization and visibility in society, they continue to be disrupted by the authoritarianism of the regime’ (interview 39), an LGBTQ activist explained. Against this backdrop, in recent years campuses have functioned as ‘safer’ spaces<sup>20</sup> for LGBTQ people persecuted by the regime. ‘Recently things have been severely deteriorating; the reality of LGBTQ individuals is of constant deprivation of fundamental human rights, and this is happening very fast’ (interview 43), an LGBTQ activist explained. ‘Authorities in Ankara are imposing a ban on all LGBTQ cultural events, citing threats to public order and fear of “provoking reactions within certain segments of society”’ (interview 42), an LGBTQ activist outlined. Moved by a ‘Great desire to make LGBTQ solidarity visible’ (interview 39), as an LGBTQ activist highlighted, university campuses and organizations have hence been providing spaces both to make LGBTQ claims visible through public meetings and discussions, as well as to create a strong and resilient LGBTQ community.

## Conclusions

The article examined the evolution of the repertoires of action articulated by LGBTQ activists based in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey since the 2011 and 2013 protests (El Amrani, 2019; Ayoub, 2016; Magued, 2021; Wilkinson, 2020). Empirically, the study drew on a qualitative analysis, using data collected through semi-structured interviews undertaken between 2011 and 2020 in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey. All the three countries have indeed witnessed a constant presence of LGBTQ activists during recent anti-regime demonstrations that broke out in Egypt before and after 2011, in Tunisia before and in the aftermath of the 2010–2011 uprisings, and in Turkey before and in the aftermath of the Gezi Park movement in 2013.



Our findings showed that LGBTQ communities have been constantly and disproportionately targeted by state and non-state repressive campaigns (e.g., police, army, Islamists) in the three countries. However, they have articulated different repertoires of action. In Egypt, LGBTQ activists are using social networks as alternative venues for socialization due to the lack of organized LGBTQ groups through cyber-activism and cyber-advocacy campaigns based on common feelings of injustice witnessed by the community due to its sexual identity or on police abuses on human rights. On the contrary, the presence of stronger meso-level mobilizing structures (e.g., student organizations within University Campuses, post-uprising legalized LGBTQ associations), have helped Tunisian and Turkish activists to take advantage of their new visibility to increase cooperation with other political challengers within the framework of new waves of protests. Furthermore, we found that civil society organizations use social media as means to navigate their struggle for (in)visibility. On the one hand, they served to inform about the aims of LGBTQ organizations, as well as to publicly defy homophobic behaviours committed by state and non-state actors. On the other hand, ICTs also constitute private networks for LGBTQ individuals to build-up local communities. Social media were and still are hence deployed for both moderate actions, such as visible advocacy, and for more depoliticized actions, for instance, as venues for safer encounters to resist to increasing repression.

Future research may strengthen the comparative dimension of the results examining both the evolution of LGBTQ activism in the three examined countries and LGBTQ individuals' participation in protests, repertoires of action, alternative use of social networks, and meso-level organizations in other neighbouring countries (e.g., Algeria), addressing the relevance of the findings in terms of concerns and restrictions suffered by activists campaigning for gender rights and LGBTQ mobilization strategies under repressive contexts.

## Notes

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, and other (LGBTQIA\*) issues and identities have been addressed by scholars in diverse ways. To the purpose of this article, we use the umbrella term 'LGBTQ' to refer to people marginalized because of sexual orientations and/or gender identities that are deviant from cis-heteronormative frameworks.
2. The few investigations on LGBTQ activism in MENA during and after the 2011 uprisings may be complemented by studies on how mobilizations against gender-based violence and sexual harassment have evolved in the region since the so-called Arab Spring (El Ashmawy, 2017; Chafai, 2020; Rizzo et al., 2012).
3. Interviews 1–4 and 7–27, LGBTQ activists and supporters, Cairo, 2011–2014; Interviews 5–6, LGBTQ activists and supporters, Alexandria, 2014–2020; Interviews 28, 30–32 and 34–36, LGBTQ activists and supporters, Tunis, 2019–2020; Interview 29, LGBTQ activist, Sousse, 2019; Interview 33, LGBTQ activist, Sfax, 2019; Interviews 37–44, LGBTQ activists and supporters, Istanbul, 2019.
4. A third hypothesis concerns the diffusion of protests beyond national borders (Tarrow, 1996). This hypothesis will nonetheless not be considered in our paper, since our research focus concerns the innovation of LGBTQ repertoires of action within the national context.



5. More on digital surveillance in the MENA region at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34672>; <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34672> [Last accessed 03.02.2022].
6. Drawing on Habermas (1989), the concept of public sphere is here to be understood as a discursive arena where different publics engage in discussions and contestations.
7. More information available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/879/turkeys-forays-into-the-middle-east> [Last accessed 24.05.2021].
8. In Egypt and Tunisia, university campuses have been used as venues for youth movements. For example, supporters of the Revolutionary Socialists, including individual LGBTQ activists, formed the National Alliance for Change and Unions within universities in 2005 (Acconcia & Pilati, 2021).
9. The Gezi Park movement started as a protest against the government plans to rebuild Ottoman barracks and a shopping mall on the edge of Taksim Square. This decision entailed a dramatic escalation of events including the stigmatization of protesters as terrorists, arrests and exiles.
10. According to the Tunisian incumbent president the LGBTQ community is ‘receiving funds from abroad to corrupt the Islamic nation.’
11. See also <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/23/tunisia-police-arrest-use-violence-against-lgbti-activists>. [Last accessed 21.09.2021].
12. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/03/consent-or-no-anal-testing-tunisia-must-go>.
13. The electoral committee rejected his candidacy without providing details.
14. See also: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/01/egypt-security-forces-abuse-torture-lgbt-people>. [Last accessed 21.09.2021.]
15. Information available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-rights-pride-idUSKCN0P80OQ20150628> [Last accessed 03.05.2021].
16. See also: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/20/egypts-denial-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity> [Last accessed 21.09.2021].
17. See also <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/04/clean-streets-faggots> [Last time accessed 26.01.2022].
18. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55901951>.
19. See also: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/24/turkey-erdogans-onslaught-rights-and-democracy>. [Last accessed 21.09.2021].
20. The concept of safe space emerged in both feminist and LGBTQ groups of the 1960s-70s (Kenney, 2001), and since then has been developed by both activists and scholars (The Roestone Collective, 2014). Safe spaces can be understood as venues – either physical, digital, or symbolic – where marginalized individuals can feel free from violence and harassment (The Roestone Collective, 2014). The concept has nonetheless been highly debated. Black and intersectional feminists have pointed out how so-called ‘safe spaces’ have often reproduced unequal power relations that particularly affect individuals that are marginalized along various inequality lines, such as black women or LGBTQ migrants. Activists have hence started to use the expression ‘safer spaces’ to acknowledge that such venues are not vary of power relations. See also <https://splinternews.com/what-s-a-safe-space-a-look-at-the-phrases-50-year-hi-1793852786> [Last accessed 09.10.2021].

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