



Dec-2012

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Recommended Citation

Frantz, Erica (2012). How and Why do Dictatorships Survive? Lessons for the Middle East. *Bridgewater Review*, 31(2), 16-18.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol31/iss2/7

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How and Why do Dictatorships Survive? Lessons for the Middle East

Erica Frantz

Political events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have dominated news headlines for the past two years. Since the revolution in Tunisia in December 2010, one dictatorship after the next has appeared on the verge of collapse, as citizens gather en masse to voice their demands for democratic governance. In some countries, such as Tunisia, democratization seems all but assured following one of the most successful democratic elections in the Arab world. In countries such as Libya and Egypt, though relatively successful democratic elections were held following the collapse of long-standing dictatorships, it is uncertain whether the new political system being installed will be democratic or autocratic. And in other countries, such as Syria, autocratic government and pro-democratic forces are locked in a bloody armed confrontation, the outcome of which is

undecided. Elsewhere in MENA, popular protests demanding democratic changes fizzled very quickly, and the region's dictatorships remain as strong as ever.

The recent sequence of events in MENA (commonly referred to as the Arab Spring) has renewed our awareness that authoritarian regimes dominate the region. Figure 1 illustrates

this. The figure classifies countries in the developing world according to whether they are “free” (i.e. fully democratic), “partly free” (i.e. semi-democracy) or “not free” (i.e. not fully democratic), using the Freedom House (www.freedomhouse.org) classifications of political rights and civil liberties released in 2011, and groups them by region (the Middle East, East and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa). More than 90% of the countries in the Middle East are either “partly free” or “not free.” In other words, democracy in the Middle East is rare. This reality has prompted many observers to ask: why is the region so inhospitable to democracy?

Though the dominance of authoritarian governments in the Middle East seems anomalous at first glance, when we expand our lens to include the rest of the developing world, we see that the experience of the Middle East is quite common. As Figure 1 shows, outside of Western Europe and North America, countries that are “partly free” or “not free” are the norm. In other words, democracy is rare not just in the Middle East; it is rare across the developing world.

What is peculiar is not that the Middle East is ruled by dictatorships, but that it is ruled by such stable ones. Though

Figure 1 – The Regional Distribution of Freedom House Ratings of Countries as Free, Partly Free, and Not Free

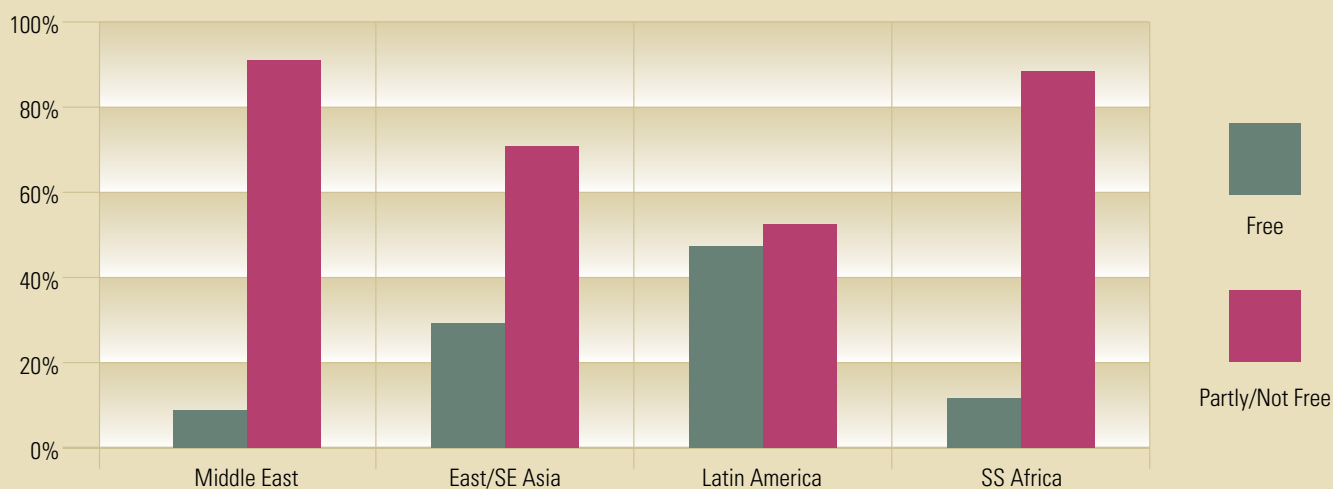
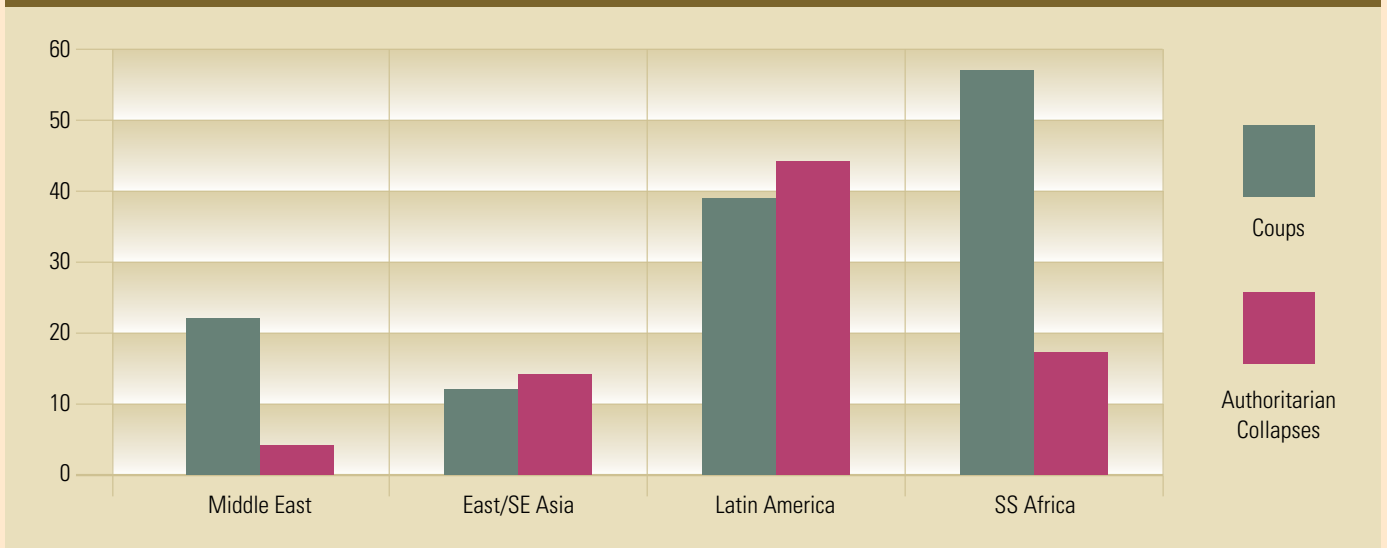


Figure 2 – The Regional Distribution of Coups and Authoritarian Collapse



political stability seems to many the last way the Middle East should be described these days, aside from the episodes of mass protest that swept across the region during the Arab Spring, the trend has largely been one of political stability.

A comparison with the rest of the developing world helps illustrate this pattern. Figure 2 shows the number of coups (such as the ouster of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 in Iran) and authoritarian collapses (such as the fall of the Iranian monarchy in 1979) from 1946 to 2009, grouped by region. Compared to other regions, the occurrence of these sorts of political events is low in the Middle East (with the exception of East and Southeast Asia, where fewer coups have happened). Turbulent events such as coups and authoritarian collapse occur far less frequently in the Middle East than elsewhere.

We see a similar story when we look at the longevity of the dictatorships in the Middle East and beyond. Between 1946 and 2009, middle eastern dictatorships lasted in power for an average of 41 years. This statistic drops to 27 years for East and Southeast Asia, 17 years for Sub-Saharan Africa, and 11 years for Latin America. Middle eastern dictatorships managed to stay in power more than a decade longer compared to their

counterparts outside of the region. This is a sizable difference and prompts the question: why are middle eastern dictatorships so stable? The answer is plain. The political stability of the region's dictatorships rests in their capacity to ensure that leadership transitions occur via expected, established guidelines.

Leadership transitions occur often within authoritarian regimes. Though we sometimes view the leader and the regime as one and the same, the

persisted since. In fact, in roughly half the instances when leaders fall from power, regimes survive the transition.

The reverse side of this statistic is also telling: the other half of the time when leaders depart office, regimes collapse. Leadership transitions are key moments of vulnerability for dictatorships. When leaders fall from power – whether due to natural death, coups, elections, resignations or elite consensus – the most coveted political position is suddenly

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leader is but a single person, whereas the regime is a network of elites who have something at stake in the regime's continuation. Leaders come and go often in dictatorships while a regime remains intact. In Iran, for example, when Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini died in 1989, the Islamic Republic did not collapse with him; instead, Khomeini was succeeded by Ali Khamenei and the regime has

up for grabs. This political opening can stoke tensions among elite factions vying for their preferred candidates, which can in turn create deep fissures within the regime that can trigger its downfall. At the same time, such frenzied political activity can also signal to members of the opposition movement (and foreign observers) that the regime is unstable and that the moment is ripe to stage a protest or revolt. Leadership

transitions therefore expose dictatorships to the very real risk that the regime will be toppled, either internally (through elite divisions that escalate), or externally (through mass uprisings or foreign intervention). As such, regimes only have a 50/50 shot of surviving these pivotal moments.

Thus, leadership transitions, do not always have to be destabilizing. One of the critical choices that regimes can make is to establish guidelines for how leadership turnovers will occur. In other words, dictatorships can regulate the succession process to ensure that there are clear rules in place for determining the conditions under which leaders can be replaced and the protocols for selecting their successors. In democracies,

fell into this category. In other dictatorships, such as Saudi Arabia, there are very clear guidelines for determining leadership transfers; the process is fully regulated. About 18% of the world's dictatorships fell into this category during the same period (see www.systemicpeace.org). Most dictatorships fall somewhere in the middle, having some protocols in place for deciding who can replace the leader and under what conditions, but lacking institutionalization and transparency. The murkiness means that the process usually entails substantial discussions among elites that occur behind closed doors.

Where dictatorships have established succession rules to guide the transfer of power from one leader to the next,

the next leader, and leaders are chosen from among members of the royal family. Though such an autocratic process bars citizens from playing a role in executive selection, it does ensure that leadership succession occurs in a regulated fashion.

As evidence of this, about 36% of leadership transitions in the Middle East from 1946 to 2009 occurred in a regulated environment. When we focus solely on the transitions that have occurred in the monarchies there, this number is an impressive 100%. By comparison, in East and Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, only 17% and 14% of leadership transitions, respectively, are regulated, and only about 7% in Latin America. The evidence suggests that the establishment of rules for succession in the Middle East, particularly in the region's monarchies, helps to explain the political stability there.

When looking to the future of the region beyond the Arab Spring, one thing seems clear: the Middle East's monarchies do not appear to be going away any time soon, for all of the reasons discussed in this essay. The durability of these dictatorships is seen as a negative by those within and outside the region who hope for democratization in the Arab world. However, there are positives to political stability that warrant attention: by reducing the incidences of politically chaotic events such as coups and other autocratic seizures of power, these regimes shield their citizens from the often disastrous economic consequences and violence that accompany them.

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leaders are typically replaced via free and fair elections, the rules of which are usually stipulated in a constitution. In dictatorships, though free and fair elections for the leadership post are largely absent, regimes can establish constitutional guidelines for this process.

Though we often think of dictatorships as political systems where rules have no meaning, this is far from the reality in most of them. The extent to which regimes institutionalize the political process varies widely from one regime to the next. In some dictatorships, such as Spain under Francisco Franco (1936-75), there are no rules in place for leadership succession; the process is unregulated. From 1946 to 2009, about 13% of the world's dictatorships

leadership changes are far less destabilizing. Regulated dictatorships survive leadership transitions about 60% of the time; unregulated dictatorships, by contrast, survive them only 45% of the time. Setting in place guidelines to manage the process of succession makes a substantial difference in protecting dictatorships during episodes of leadership transition.

For the Middle East, one key factor in explaining the political stability of the dictatorships is the pervasiveness of succession rules. The majority of the region's dictatorships are monarchies (which currently include Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain). In monarchies, heredity determines who will be