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Mahmood Monshipouri on Political Participation in the Middle East. Edited by Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008. 286pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

Political Participation in the Middle East. Edited by Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008. 286pp.

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Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni illustrate how the patronage systems help the state to maintain ultimate control over its polity, while simultaneously mapping out the mechanisms by which many Middle Eastern governments currently deal with political participation. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, "Participation under Authoritarian Rule," Holger Abrecht examines channels of political participation in the Middle East. Albrecht argues that authoritarian rulers typically assume a defensive posture toward political participation and, as a result, these countries experience political participation through the opposition and resistance of a disaffected populace.

Part One continues with an analysis of the role that political parties and civil society organizations play in mass political participation. Informal political participation relies on the primordial social bonds of kinship, family, tribe, or *shilla* (peer group). Focusing on different venues of engagement, Laila Alhamad demonstrates that the lack of sustained, large-scale organizational activity enables small groups to dominate syndicates. This permeability of formal institutions by informal actors and networks can distort the nature of these institutions, transforming them into patron-client agents and derailing them from their public service role (46).

In the second section, "Negotiating the Electoral Arena," Gunes Murat Tezcur sheds some light on elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran, arguing that they can be best conceptualized as the extension of factional conflicts. The Guardian Council defines the eligibility of candidates and effectively sets the boundaries of competition and pluralism. Although Tezcur is correct in his interpretation that elites have substantial access to state power and manipulate the system to distribute patronage, it is essential to recognize that state and elite fragmentation exist in a "divided environment" whereby only certain elites are allowed to participate in formal politics.

In the next chapter, Ellen Lust-Okar examines the issue of electoral politics under authoritarianism by investigating competitive clientelism in the Jordanian elections. Lust-Okar argues that until we understand the regional variations surrounding the politics of authoritarian elections and the institutions that govern them, we cannot distinguish elections that build momentum toward democratization from those that reinforce the existing regime (77). Elections in Jordan, Lust-Okar concludes, are likely to remain confined to "competition over patronage," where state monopolization of resources remains unchallenged (92).

In Chapter Six, Samer Shehata discusses Egyptian civil perception regarding the role and function of the parliamentary system, voting behavior, and the political implications for governance and democratization. Shehata writes that in Egypt, as elsewhere in the Arab World, the logic of voting behavior is not determined on the basis of party affiliation, electoral program, or ideology, but rather on the provision of services (*khadamat*), including personal services provided to constituents. In sum, the well-to-do and those better educated are less likely to vote because they have little to gain from participation (95). Increasingly, at the community level, citizens require a candidate—or a parliamentarian to be a *wasta* (a connection) to provide jobs and low-cost healthcare, and to help them pursue their interests through a maze of bureaucracy

(115). The question of how these social movements from below could participate in power-sharing is not answered, however.

In the final chapter of this section, Dag Tuastad examines Palestinians' power struggles and the resulting lack of political cohesion in the Gaza Strip. By examining the 2005 local elections held in the Bureij, a refugee camp located thirteen kilometers southeast of Gaza city, Tusatad argues that the Palestinian Authority has cultivated tribalism and factionalism in an effort to prevent power-sharing at the grassroots level.

In the third section, "Beyond Electoral Politics," Katja Niethammer shows that formal and informal institutions are not separate political arenas. Bahrain's society offers a complex matrix of interlinking social institutions that are mobilized to varying degrees for political ends. The most important of these institutions are clubs, *majalis* (literally "sitting rounds"), and *ma'atim* (literally "funeral houses").

In the following chapter, Nihad Gohar explores the intersections between formal and informal venues of participation and their limits in Egypt. The most important impediment to expanding political participation in Egypt has been the revival of the notorious Emergency Law no. 162 (1958) after the assassination of President Sadat, which vested the president with immense powers. Several new laws have granted security organs the power to arrest citizens, search houses, monitor correspondence, and tap phone calls without a court order. Other laws limit political parties, syndicates, and associations in Egypt. These restrictions, which have confined the activities and operations of several secular parties and associations, have all combined to put the Muslim Brotherhood in a very competitive position vis-à-vis other parties.

Driss Maghraoui's study examines the strengths and limits of civil society participation in Moroccan politics. Maghraoui notes that part of the Moroccan regime's strategy of self-renewal, adaptation, and co-optation has included an attempt to bring more non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into its political orbit. At the same time, the government has been forced to contain the rising popularity of the Islamists by formal inclusion.

Turning to the role of parliament in Morocco, Saloua Zerhouni points out that the parliament's role in the field of legislation and government oversight is very limited and that it is more a space for "doing politics" than for "producing politics." In short, the parliament is a space for "managing the field of politics," creating debates, resolving differences, and settling or curbing conflicts within the society (217).

The study of trade unions in Tunisia is the topic of investigation by Delphine Cavallo, who argues that economic liberalization has fallen short of a full-fledged movement toward political participation. That said, the General Labor Union of Tunisia (UGTT) has turned into an arena of contestation within the Tunisian political sphere, leading to conflicts over the balance of power among actors and the boundaries of the state (240).

In the final chapter, Saloua Zerhouni illustrates the ways in which both formal and informal channels of participation play significant roles in shoring up authoritarian regimes. More specifically, she views traditional modes of participation and informal networks as being

effective and still holding a strong legitimacy (260-261). Yet the question of how these changes can unfold without undermining the tenacity of authoritarianism is not directly tackled.

A discussion of the case of Kuwait, as well as the role of the press and media in mobilizing democratic movements and local populations, is sorely lacking. Regardless, the case studies in this volume offer a unique blend of cultural and political economy models—the true value of which is only beginning to be understood. Contributors to this volume have shed enormous light on the various forms, strategies, and venues through which actors attempt to influence decision-making in diverse governments in the Middle East and North Africa. This volume merits particular attention by students, activists, and policymakers who work toward improving prospects for a pragmatic, measured process of change in the Middle East.

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