

The Middle East, North Africa and the 'Arab Spring'

Towards revolutionary change or authoritarian adaptation?

Events surrounding the 'Arab Spring' have been subject to interpretive debates, particularly about their revolutionary potential. However, there are deeply embedded structural and behavioural characteristics in Arab states and societies which could obstruct any momentum that would result in fundamental and enduring change. Of particular interest is how these events can be informed by the state of the literature on transitions and impediments to democracy. As such, this article provides an empirical, conceptual and theoretical prism through which the changing landscape of the Middle East and North Africa can be viewed and understood. It considers those factors that militate against revolutionary change and this, in turn, invites a reflection on the relevant conceptual and theoretical concerns that underpin democratic transitions and the challenges that arise from these, especially the practice of patrimonialism. The empirical core of the article focuses on the resilience of authoritarianism and highlights problematic themes which persist in defining the reproduction and upgrading of authoritarian tendencies across the Arab world.

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Introduction

This paper intends to explore and assess the conditions which animate the changes underway in the Middle East and North Africa (hereafter MENA) and the extent to which these can be said to be 'revolutionary'. This is a critical analytical challenge since the 'Arab Spring' is taking place under historical circumstances as well as forms of institutional politics and matrices of power that have not registered any real formal transitions to democracy. However, there is currently much debate and discussion about what the upheavals that have accompanied the Arab Spring portend for democratisation, institutional renewal and new forms of governance. A sobering editorial in the *Washington Post* comments as follows:

Two years ago to the day since protestors toppled Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ali, triggering revolts across the Arab world, euphoria has clearly turned to disappointment. Building Arab democracies with open economies is proving much harder than was, perhaps naively, anticipated ... Yet the Arab Spring has not failed. Democracy in the Middle East need not lead to the spread of

failed states and radical Islam, and it is not too late to respond.¹

The political project of crafting appropriate responses certainly remains a major challenge in view of the fact that in the broader Arab region, the waves of protests and social upheavals that drew their impulse and were emboldened by the North African experience were driven by similar structural factors. Most crucial among these were changing demographic dynamics and realities, the failure of authoritarian paternalist regimes, and popular demands for greater political participation and representation.² Perhaps Perry Anderson's elaboration makes the point even more poignantly by asserting that

... beneath the commotion now shaking the Arab world have been volcanic social pressures: polarization of incomes, rising food prices, lack of dwellings, massive unemployment of educated – and uneducated – youth, amid a demographic pyramid without parallel in the world. In few other regions of the world is the underlying crisis of society so acute, nor the lack of any credible model of development, capable of integrating new generations, so plain.³

Nevertheless, the revolutionary promise and transformation potential of the protests and upheavals that shook the Arab world largely failed to provide the pan-regional gravitational pull for large scale and durable regime changes that would be democratic in letter and spirit.

While the Arab Spring certainly offered a revolutionary moment in the wider politics of the MENA region, its long-term impact as a catalyst for durable and sustainable change remains unclear if not unpredictable, subject to a range of domestic vagaries and external ambiguities as is increasingly becoming evident under the new regimes of Egypt, Tunisia and

Libya. If we use Samuel Huntington's criteria of revolutionary change, then the MENA region has not experienced a 'rapid and violent destruction of existing political institutions, the mobilization of new groups into politics, and the creation of new political institutions'.⁴ In other words whilst the youth cohort has certainly swelled the ranks of the newly mobilised groups, the region has not witnessed the creation and institutionalisation of new political and social orders beyond change of regimes.

Structure of the Overview

This article will first offer four preliminary considerations which flow from the introduction and which are germane to understanding the challenges to democratisation and political transition that emerge from the convulsive changes across the Arab world. This is followed by a brief focus on the theoretical and conceptual framing of transitions to democracy and the challenges to democratic consolidation as a prelude to highlighting some related themes that are applicable to the MENA region. This framing then informs the core of the analysis which constitutes a diagnostic assessment that intends to highlight four key thematic areas. These could act as independent causal variables but quite crucially and given the complexity of the MENA terrain, they also intersect dialectically and in a mutually inclusive manner so as to challenge the pace, shape and substance of transitions.

The areas to be examined are obviously not exhaustive or exceptional, but can be said to be more indicative of those underlying and deeply entrenched structural characteristics and archetypical features of Arab states and societies which have been deeply scarred by calcified ruling regimes and anachronistic

forms of authoritarianism. With this caveat in mind, these thematic areas are: a) the role of resource rents from oil and gas; b) the types of regime found across the region; c) the intersubjective tensions between religion and politics; and finally, d) the impact of external forces and actors.

The conclusion attempts to tease out the implications of transitions and democratic struggles for the MENA region in general.

Four Preliminary Considerations

This section identifies those critical analytical contours that take into account the extent to which the ostensible revolutionary changes underway will result in significant political, economic and social ferment. Conversely, these very same contours stand to shape whether regimes and societies subject to these changes will end up, borrowing Fareed Zakaria's term, being stuck in a 'dysfunctional equilibrium' of continuing autocratic rule.⁵

Firstly, as has been so often observed, we have to concede that very rarely do social movements and popular protests lead to successful revolutions.⁶ Across the MENA region, there are only four countries, namely, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, that could be said to be experiencing recognisable levels of post-revolutionary transition but these remain ambiguous and uncertain, and are highly polarising. They are thus unlikely to deliver the utopian vision that inspired Tahrir Square as we are currently witnessing under President Mohamed Morsi. And in the twelve other countries, although ruling regimes have faced sustained pressures and systematic challenges from above and below, they have been able to either suppress or contain these by adjusting to changing vicissitudes in their domestic, regional and

international environments; for how long this situation can be sustained remains to be seen. In other words, since the onset of the Arab Spring, the essence of authoritarian rule has been undergoing redefinition, as ruling regimes seek new ways of simultaneously dealing with the inexorable change that this implies as well as trying to protect an increasingly precarious status quo. For instance, as Heydemann has trenchantly observed, '[a]fter twenty years, Arab regimes have become proficient at containing and disarming democracy promotion – if not exploiting it for their own purposes'.⁷

A significant aspect of what Heydemann and others have termed authoritarian 'upgrading' has been the ability of ruling regimes to contain any push to broaden the frontiers of political liberalisation, civil society activism and citizen mobilisation. Even elections have become ceremonial formalities in legitimising the ruling clique and have typically been highly choreographed affairs. What this has amounted to is the de-politicisation of citizens and society, which, as Juan Linz has observed, is a major characteristic of authoritarian regimes.⁸ Put differently,

[t]he scope of reforms in the Arab world has changed many of the aspects of traditional authoritarianism and permitted a greater space for society without, however, modifying the nature of decision-making at the highest level of government. This has produced a society where 'change' is quite visible and where the exterior signs of modernity are present, but where meaningful accountability is absent.⁹

The *second* consideration concerns the comparatively modest demands that initially emanated from the cauldron of protest and social upheaval. This probably has much to do with the post-Cold War temperament (with globalisation as

the chief catalyst) which has seen the decline of popular influences of Marxism and state-driven agendas for revolutions from above.¹⁰ In the contemporary postcolonial era, it would seem that there has been a shift away from Jacobin-style mass political mobilisation designed to engender large-scale social transformation that would otherwise be synonymous with far-reaching revolutionary change. At first, the MENA uprisings have rather been 'self-limiting' in the sense that they focused mainly on calls for individual liberal political emancipation and democratic change rather than pressing for extensive collective economic redistribution, greater political accountability and social transformation. Thus, demands for full citizenship, democratisation and electoral reform, and for the recognition of individual rights have been powerful unifying themes across countries affected by the Arab Spring.¹¹

However, with the collapse of four autocracies providing the impulse, the critical questions that now arise are as much economic as they are political. Thus, as new ruling elites emerge, how do they go about reorganising the harsh economic and cold political realities in order to meet the unfulfilled needs and aspirations of their burgeoning populations, especially among women and youth? In this regard, Anderson's normative injunction is equally instructive, namely, that 'liberty needs to be re-connected to equality. Without their coalescence, the uprisings could all too easily peter out into a parliamentarized version of the old order, no more able to respond to explosive social tensions than the decadent oligarchies of the inter-war period.'¹²

The persistence of 'stubborn authoritarianism' that historically has drawn its lineage from these oligarchies has been ascribed to both institutional and conjunctural factors. This persistence owes much to the muscular intelligence

systems, as well as police and military coercive machineries which have permeated the apparatus of the state.¹³ During the 1980s and 1990s, it was argued that regime survival across North Africa and the Middle East depended on authoritarian 'upgrading' as a key strategy of regime survival. In Heydemann's view, '[i]f upgrading has produced frameworks of authoritarian governance in the Arab world that are more flexible, open, and adept in confronting the demands of globalization, democratization, and market-based economic reforms, coercion nonetheless remains an important part of the mix ... [T]hey continue ruthlessly to police the boundaries of acceptable political practice.'¹⁴ In the process, costly developmental and welfare promises that were once keys to regime legitimation were abandoned in favour of creating a pliant indigenous bourgeoisie and a system of crony capitalism as critical dimensions of this authoritarian 'upgrading'.

Quite crucially, authoritarian upgrading also served an instrumental purpose of transforming the barriers between the public and private realms, as well as between the state and the economy, giving rise to the semi-privatisation of powerful fractions of the ruling elite and thus defining the logic of Arab-style crony capitalism.¹⁵ The legacy of this political schizophrenia and the commercial interests it has embedded and promoted in society are highly problematic for political transitions since the majority of the population have a heightened sense of grievance, alienation and dissatisfaction. This is especially the case among the young shock troops of the uprisings who have been motivated in large part by their own economic marginality and sense of political disenfranchisement.

The *third* consideration has to do with the absence of contemporary revolutionary ideologies and beliefs that bring the uprisings

together by providing a vision or gestalt of an alternate order. Anderson describes a critical disjuncture in the Arab revolt as 'an effect of the ideological limbo in which society has been left ..., with the discrediting of Arab nationalism and socialism, and the neutering of radical confessionism, leaving only a washed-out Islam as a *passé-partout*.¹⁶ A big part of the Arab Spring iconography had to do with mostly a new-media savvy, socially networked youth, and university-educated middle classes. However, it is debatable whether Facebook and other new technologies can be said to generate ideological frameworks or the kinds of coherent beliefs, values and myths that are capable of sustaining revolutionary change. Satellite television, especially *Al-Jazeera* and other Arab stations, certainly helped to create the demonstration effect and, indeed, opened media spaces that played a part in shaping, informing and broadening the region-wide public sphere; however, these media outlets did not define a new ideological compass for collective action and citizen empowerment. Thus, the movements of the Arab Spring were hardly united by a concrete or programmatic agenda for post-regime transformation and change.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the Egyptian elections, we saw that Tahrir Square was not Egypt but then neither was Cairo.

And *finally*, we have to take account of the coherence of the *ancien regime*, old ruling elites, and their ability to either suppress or co-opt rising opposition forces in the face of mounting social pressure for genuine reform.¹⁸ Hegemonic regime stability has, in a paradoxical twist, been greatly enhanced and buttressed by 'growing levels of political competition, increased attention from regimes to issues of electoral reform, and a widespread sense of progress in the liberalization, if not democratization, of electoral arenas'.¹⁹ While

these evolutionary changes and political developments served the logic of authoritarian 'upgrading', they also subtly helped to change the behaviour and attitudes of ruling elites. In two of the four regime changes, the removals of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt were greatly facilitated by the fracturing of the ruling elite. Very similar to Hussein Tantawi in Cairo, the Tunisian Army Chief of Staff, Rachid Ammar, refused to open fire on the demonstrators. The armed forces in both countries were, therefore, left intact and were strategically placed to influence the form and shape of the respective transitions. In Libya, by contrast, the country's armed forces came up against the heavy and extended support of NATO, which led to rifts in the state's security apparatus and this again was mirrored in the highly fragmented nature of the militias who were attempting to remove Muammar Qaddafi. Then, in Yemen, while Ali Abdullah Saleh – the key symbol and figurehead of the ruling regime – was removed after a 33-year despotic tenure, there is ongoing and intense political contestation for power among compromised old elites that have dominated the transition phase.

Hence, without key defections and behavioural changes within the higher echelons of the political or military elite or extended external military support, the youthful revolutionaries who have provided the stimulus for change have not been able to shake the social foundations of oligarchic rule and have increasingly become frustrated, disenchanting and confused. They have failed to provide what Anderson refers to as a 'new concatenation of political upheaval' that inspired revolutions elsewhere.²⁰

These considerations provide a useful matrix for examining some of the relevant points of reference which have emerged in a vast and fecund theoretical and empirical literature on political transitions that has evolved over

nearly three decades. This literature has come to define the 'transition paradigm' in studies of democratisation, as well as generating critical scholarly interest in the multiple dimensions of democracy in societies undergoing dramatic political change.

Assessing Transitions and Democratisation Processes

The mainstream literature of the 1960s and 1970s, greatly inspired by the writings of Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter,²¹ was based on a modernisation approach to democratisation. Its main thesis was that democracy was more likely to emerge in countries with high levels of socio-economic development. The American scholar, Seymour Martin Lipset, emerged as the leading and highly influential exponent of this thesis. As early as 1959 he wrote: 'Perhaps the most widespread generalization linking political systems to other aspects of society has been that democracy is related to the state of economic development. Concretely, this means that the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy.' The converse was that '[a] society divided between a large impoverished mass and a small favoured elite would result either in oligarchy (dictatorial rule of the small upper stratum) or in tyranny (popularly based dictatorship)',²²

Lipset's paradigmatic weight endured until the advent of studies on the 'third wave of democratisation' starting in the 1990s, which were led by Samuel Huntington²³ and provided the incubation for a generation of 'transitologists'. They challenged the modernisation thesis and instead went on to demonstrate both theoretically and empirically that transitions to democracy were occurring in countries with low levels of economic development that fell in

the bottom third of the Human Development Index.²⁴ Also, 'third wave' transitions defied cultural arguments which posited that democracy was incompatible with certain faiths and religious values.²⁵

At the time and even in the present context, it has often been asserted that the Arab world was the only region that remained beyond the remit of this wave of democratisation and certain arguments were advanced to explain this but often in a manner that was both highly tendentious and contentious.²⁶ An important contribution of the new literature on democratic transitions was the emphasis on agency and processes of democratisation. Thus, analytical frameworks and research methodologies focused not only on the importance of decisions, ideologies and public policies but importantly on the interaction among strategic political actors as harbingers of inaugurating transitions in unlikely places. There was a further normative emphasis on uncertainty and contingency surrounding transitions and, in particular, an intellectual consensus emerged that economic development in and of itself was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for successful or sustainable democratic transitions.²⁷

As the third wave literature matured in the new century, attention shifted to the impediments and obstacles to democratic consolidation and problems confronting incomplete transitions to democracy. It was argued that regardless of the manner in which regime change may occur, democracy was neither an ineluctable outcome nor would a new political order automatically follow such regime changes.²⁸ This came together in explanatory frameworks and comparative studies about the growing incidence of 'hybrid regimes', which were neither autocracies nor consolidated democracies and which were thus stuck in a 'political grey zone'.²⁹ This led to more sobering appraisals of

the non-linearity and often unmitigated complexity of transitions to democracy and the growing potential of reversals to authoritarian types of rule. Indeed, many countries in transition, but especially those in Africa, had come to occupy a precarious middle ground between outright authoritarianism and full-fledged democracy and have variously been described as 'illiberal', 'delegative', or more generally 'hybrid regimes'.³⁰ In other words, while the conduct of elections certainly promoted forms of procedural democracy, the practice and substance of politics remained inherently authoritarian. In many instances, elections served to legitimise single-party rule and the further personalisation of power, often aided and abetted by pathologies of neo-patrimonialism.

The Challenges of Neo-patrimonialism

In the African context, and this is certainly applicable to the MENA region, it has been argued that very few political systems were able to develop into institutionalised and consolidated democracies. They were typically stuck in this grey zone of 'hybrid regimes' because of the very peculiar postcolonial institutional hallmark of *neo-patrimonialism*.³¹ In neo-patrimonial regimes, executive authority is maintained through personal patronage and the right to rule is ascribed to a person rather than an office. The hallmarks of patrimonialism were very well captured by Max Weber's historical types of rule:

The patrimonial office lacks above all bureaucratic separation of the 'private' and the 'official' sphere. For the political administration, too, is treated as a purely personal affair of the ruler, and political power is considered part

of his personal property ... The office and the exercise of public authority serve the ruler and the official on which the office was bestowed; they do not serve impersonal purposes.³²

Other features include the formal administrative and political system which essentially derives its *raison d'être* from relationships of loyalty and dependence and, moreover, there is a close association between bureaucratic office and the acquisition of personal wealth and status. Corruption tends to be pervasive since the essence of neo-patrimonialism is the doling out of personal favours by public officials, both within the state (for example, providing access to public sector employment) and society (for example, issuing licences, contracts and procurement opportunities).³³

Transitions from neo-patrimonialism are complicated by the fact that they are mainly characteristic of personal authoritarian regimes and plebiscitary one-party systems, both of which are underpinned by the centralisation of power and political authority and their often arbitrary and capricious exercise.³⁴ These patterns exercise a profound effect on social advancement and development since class formation tends to be determined more by relationships to political power and the ruling elite than differentiated access to economic resources and opportunities.

Personalist regimes typically rule by decree, do not allow even a semblance of competition and rely on weak or fragile political institutions. Transition dynamics in such regimes are most likely to be driven by forces outside the state, and personal rulers will resist any liberalisation from above or give up power without a struggle; since politics resembles a zero-sum game, they have to be forced out of office. While plebiscitary one-party systems are more inclusive, they depend on popular support

through highly ritualised and controlled electoral outcomes where the president or head of state usually enjoys voter turnouts and returns that exceed 90 per cent. Grounded in an undemocratic and, indeed, an anti-democratic ethos that precludes real competition, the party machinery is the main conveyor belt for distributing patronage, which in turn helps to reproduce and entrench the plebiscitary culture. However, as far as transitions are concerned, there is just enough space for the emergence of political opposition, which usually tends to concentrate on changing the rules of the political game by insisting on constitutionalism and the rule of law as key ingredients of political change. Exceeding the boundaries permitted is usually met with a repressive response.

However, these conceptual and theoretical factors can be further disaggregated because of the profound impact they could potentially have on the course of transitions and, equally importantly, the extent to which they help to explain the resilience of authoritarianism in the MENA region. We now focus on the anatomy of four problematic thematic areas

The Problem of 'Resource Rents'

Many of the region's paternalistic and authoritarian regimes have been bolstered by natural resource rents from oil and gas. There are several studies which find a positive relationship between resource dependence and the persistence of authoritarianism.⁵⁵ Arab countries account for 61 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves and for 40 per cent of international trade in crude. Although only 10 of the region's 16 countries are significant oil exporters, the political and economic effects of oil are felt by their oil-importing neighbours through migration opportunities and the remittances which

flow from these. (In several countries, these remittances constitute a sizeable portion of GDP: 22,4 per cent in Lebanon; 15,5 per cent in Jordan; 6,6 per cent in Morocco; 5,3 per cent in Tunisia; 5,2 per cent in Yemen; and 4,0 per cent in Egypt.)⁵⁶ The prevalence of these 'rentier state' dynamics helps to establish a key source of regime legitimacy and stability other than through military, tribal or religious authority.⁵⁷

An implicit social compact has ensured that citizens enjoy public goods and services without taxation and this depends on large government expenditures on public sector jobs and generous subsidies, especially for basic consumer goods. Larbi Sadiki calls this the 'democracy of bread' which is closely associated with a 'democratic bargain' with its own moral economy. As he explains, '[e]ssentially, its chief premise is that post-independence Arab rulers have been paid political deference by their peoples in return for the provision of publicly subsidized services – education, health care, and a state commitment to secure employment'.⁵⁸ The political culture spawned by the 'democracy of bread' is thus 'largely deferential and non-participatory, conditional on the state's providential capacity'.⁵⁹

The breakdown of this social compact and the attendant erosion of the moral basis of the state–society nexus help to explain why the lack of jobs has been the main grievance of the region's youth since the private sectors have failed to grow sufficiently or have been paralysed because of the large and bloated public sector and weak business climate. However, rentier regimes have not only provided the fiscal base for large food and fuel subsidies, expansive public sector employment, and housing and cash transfers, but have also guaranteed and created conditions for political stability and quiescent and depoliticised citizens. Thus, civil society development has been constrained

since business, labour and religious associations are all subject to government control and regulation, if not outright suppression.⁴⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that MENA countries, but particularly oil producers, underperform on standard voice and accountability indicators and that, as early as 2008, public opinion surveys showed strong popular support for more democratic governance as a response authoritarian sclerosis.⁴¹

Other than certain prominent conflicts, such as between Israel–Palestine and Iran–Iraq, and until the onset of the Arab Spring at least, most countries have escaped significant violence. Stability has thus coexisted with limited liberalisation, with resource rents helping to buttress prevailing state–society interactions. Further, paradoxically there has been enduring stability in the face of a near absence of economic dynamism which has severely constrained entrepreneurship and private sector development.⁴² While still subject to controversy, it has been argued that rentier states with greater petroleum wealth and hydrocarbon assets are less likely to make successful transitions to democracy. This is because oil-funded autocracies have proven themselves to be particularly durable.⁴³

Since resource rents typically accrue to the central government, an executive which controls how rents are used and for what purpose will establish substantial political influence that can be used to further entrench personalist and autocratic one-party regimes.⁴⁴ Significant oil wealth provides the types of fiscal revenue stream that obviate the need to impose taxes on the population. Rather, oil wealth is redistributed through rents and subsidies such that and in line with Sadiki's logic of the 'democracy of bread' and the 'democratic bargain', 'the state 'buys off' the population through redistribution and eliminates the potential

for a 'taxation without representation' conflict, yielding an autonomous state alongside a contented population that (assumedly) does not aspire to challenge its rule'.⁴⁵ This does not mean that democracy activists and revolutionaries for change in the oil rich countries of North Africa and the Persian Gulf will fail; but only to suggest that they will face inordinately more difficult transition challenges than their counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia.

The Problem of Regime Types

The next theme has to do with the types of regime which are found in the MENA region. As of 2011 and even in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Freedom House has designated only four Arab countries (22%) as partly free and the majority of 13 (72%) as not free. By its controversial standards and criteria of political rights and civil liberties, only Israel is free (6%).⁴⁶ There are a few hybrid regimes such as Lebanon, Kuwait and Iraq, which have some institutions associated with democracy but yet fall way short of full political pluralism, popular rule and accountability. Beyond these hybrid regimes, which have constitutional systems that incorporate nominal democratic features, there are a variety of what we have described as personalist and single-party plebiscitary regimes which are essentially authoritarian and follow a neo-patrimonial logic. Of these there are seven monarchies – namely, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Morocco, Jordan and Oman. And, prior to the Arab Spring, there were six republics led by long-standing autocrats and strongmen, as in Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. The monarchies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar have been described as 'dynastic', meaning that they are ruled by a

family rather than an individual; and power is distributed among family members. Except in Bahrain where the position of emir belongs to the first-born child through primogeniture, succession is decided by family consensus and a leader can be removed if he loses the allegiance of his family. In the non-dynastic Arab monarchies of Jordan, Oman and Morocco, the monarch enjoys absolute power and selects his own successor. Across these monarchies, there are no mechanisms for holding rulers accountable to citizens. For example, in Saudi Arabia citizen participation is limited to elite consultation (*shura*) and elected local councils.⁴⁷

The republican governments are a complex amalgam of personalist, single-party and military-dominated regimes. Most republics owe their lineages to coups or anti-colonial struggles. The initial postcolonial period was characterised by what Huntington calls 'radical praetorianism'⁴⁸ and military intervention in politics, but over time (except in Libya) there was greater recourse to single-party dominated systems that varied greatly, particularly with regard to how the dynamics between civilian and military authority were defined. In Algeria and Syria, civilian governments are highly dependent on military support; in Egypt the military is embedded in the nerves of government; while in Tunisia and Libya, the armed forces were substantially weakened to prevent the possibilities of coups. What the republics have in common is their increasing use of the security infrastructure of repression, fear and intimidation to deal with political dissent, especially once the gloss of nationalism had started to fade. Institutions were then used as bases for disbursing patronage to loyal regime supporters as power became increasingly vested and concentrated in the hands of individual leaders as the supreme political and secular authorities.⁴⁹

The Problem of Religion and Politics

There is a need to consider the highly contested interface between religion, culture and politics as an explanatory variable in the Arab world's lack of democracy. Diamond has rejected this linkage by arguing that 'neither culture nor religion offers a convincing explanation for the Arab democracy deficit'.⁵⁰ However, there is an established school of thought which holds that democracy can only flourish if societies adhere to certain cultural values, its leading exponents being the US scholars Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba.⁵¹ This culturalist school considers values such as individual responsibility, civic participation, inclusion and tolerance as prerequisites for democracy, while others aver that democracy can only prosper if elites and masses believe it to be the most legitimate form of government. In trying to explain the democracy deficit in the Middle East, adherents of this culturalist persuasion argue that there are elements of Muslim and Arab traditions that are anathema to the values required for democracy. To the contrary, these traditions facilitate authoritarian rule and practice.

In one such view, namely, that of Elie Kedourie, participatory government and individual rights are 'alien to the Muslim political tradition' because Islam vests authority in Allah and society must be guided by the laws of Allah.⁵² Kedourie has argued further that there is 'nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world – which are the political traditions of Islam – which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing idea of constitutional and representative government'.⁵³ Consequently, there is no legitimate basis for the sovereignty of man, for civil codes, or representative government.

Another culturalist strand argues that the region's democratic deficit can be explained

by the unquestioning acceptance of authority in Islam.⁵⁴ The patrimonial tribal origins of modern Arab societies are said to have fostered submission to authority and reduced any impulses toward democratisation. Beginning in the ninth century, Muslim views of political authority took a 'quietist' approach. There was a fear of civil war and foreign conquest and Muslim scholars argued that believers should support a leader provided he was a Muslim and could protect society against civil disorder (*fitna*).⁵⁵ While proponents of this Islam-centric explanation do concede that the history of Islam is filled with groups who have justified their struggle against tyranny on religious grounds, they insist that the 'quietist' narrative has remained dominant since it continues to be preached by modern Muslim clerics (*ulama*). As the argument goes, this helps to account for the de-politicisation of citizens and entrenched patterns of autocratic rule.

This culturalist disposition, however, suffers under the weight of evidence in the contemporary setting. While Islam will always be a major force in Arab politics and while elections show strong public support for political Islam, recent opinion surveys suggest that Arabs strongly support democracy.⁵⁶ Indeed, with the onset of the Arab Spring, Islamist parties have begun to make the case that they are the only credible democratic alternatives to authoritarian power-holders. Furthermore, the logic of the current Islamist momentum does not dictate that religious precepts will necessarily dominate the Arab discourse as we continue to see in Egypt and Tunisia. Tensions between secularists and Islamists will persist in the struggle to establish the ascendance of their respective democratic credentials in society and this has become the crucible in shaping the normative bases of popular legitimacy and citizens' demands. Constitutions and new frameworks

for governance will have to carefully navigate this tension between liberal freedoms and the imperatives of a civic culture *and* conservative rules and the Islamisation of social life.⁵⁷ This is a major challenge as Mohamed Morsi has discovered.

Obviously, different Arab countries display different levels and degrees of religiosity and this certainly will exercise a determining influence on the role which dominant Islam and indeed, other religions could play in Arab transitions and how these might be accommodated, especially among Christian and Jewish minorities. The extent to which the Sunni and Shia divide has now been instrumentalised in Arab politics, increasingly in violent expressions as witnessed in Syria, will also have to be taken into account. However, it must be emphasised that a strong role for religion and religious life is not necessarily an impediment to the consolidation of a democratic order. In short, cultural and religious determinism must be rejected as a myth since no religion or belief system is more favourable than another when it comes to a peaceful transition to democracy; and nor does genuine democratisation imply the triumph of secularism.⁵⁸

The Problem of External Actors

And finally, there is the external dimension and the absolute importance of the Arab world's oil production in the global political economy. As Diamond has observed, '[e]xternal support for Arab regimes, historically coming in part from the Soviet Union but now mainly from Europe and the United States, confers on Arab autocracies crucial economic resources, security assistance, and political legitimacy'.⁵⁹ Non-oil economies such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have come to increasingly depend of foreign

assistance which 'is like oil: another source of rents that regimes use for survival. Like oil, aid flows into the central coffers of the state and helps to give it the means *both* to co-opt and repress'.⁶⁰ That said, the protection of oil pipelines and shipping lanes that are a critical part of the production infrastructure is a strategic priority for the world's major economic powers, especially the United States. The external dimension is further complicated by America's strategic support of Israel. The post-war history of developed countries' engagement has therefore shown no overt condoning or explicit condemnation of the repressive actions of the region's autocrats. While there has been some nominal foreign assistance in support of democracy and governance to largely ineffective NGOs,⁶¹ overall the foreign policies of the main external players, particularly the United States, the EU and Russia, have bolstered the stability of existing regimes.

This kind of support, regardless of regime excesses, has been referred to 'strategic rents' because of the skewed distribution of aid to strategically important countries.⁶² The purpose of Western foreign policy has turned more on building constructive alliances with such countries and their regimes so as to ensure that they stay in power, mostly by way of military assistance. This includes equipment acquisition, training and access to sophisticated weaponry and surveillance technologies, all of which have been instrumental in establishing large intelligence and security infrastructures which are keys to sustaining regime loyalty and legitimacy. Given these dynamics and the history of external interaction with the region, initially the major external actors like the US and the EU were totally surprised by the 'Arab Spring'. The conventional foreign policy wisdom of major powers has now been challenged on all fronts, especially with regard to the

sustainability of 'strategic rents' and the efficacy of current security doctrines and support for Israel. The future role of foreign powers in the Arab Spring is thus highly uncertain since there are distinct limits to external influences on the transition processes underway; the desultory external interventions in Syria are eloquent testimony to this. Indeed, the history of foreign engagement in the region shows no discernible impact on democratisation.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, what are the implications of these reflections for the general transition dynamics and democratisation challenges in the MENA region? Democratisation can be expected to follow a very different trajectory in the Arab world because of its distinctive paternalistic and authoritarian regimes, the role of Islam in politics, the importance of oil in some of the region's economies, strategic reassessments by major external actors and an 'over-determined' security apparatus that is often at the centre of the state.⁶³ Quite crucially, there are several structural conditions and policy choices that will shape the contest of democratic struggle and how transitions will unfold. These include

- the mode of regime change and the manner in which the calculus of power has changed
- the MENA countries' past experience with paternalism and authoritarianism and how nascent political pluralism and political opening could play itself out across state and society
- the critical policy choices which domestic actors will have to make in the course of transition, especially with regard to subordinating the military and security establishments to civilian oversight, the nature and conduct of elections, constitution-making

and reform, and transitional justice (holding former regime members accountable for abuses)

- promoting social cohesion and cultural pluralism, especially dealing with growing religious sectarianism and intolerance, widening social and communal cleavages, and highly problematic insurgencies
- addressing the pathologies of the 'rentier state' particularly in ensuring equitable welfare, more employment opportunities for women and youth, and economic diversification through private sector development
- managing the role of external actors and their policy choices, quite critically when

it comes to their possible role in efforts to either foster democratisation or support authoritarianism.

As a parting message, the spirit of Karl Marx can be invoked for what he famously wrote in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, since it has profound relevance as well as great normative implications for the Middle East and North Africa. Thus Marx wrote: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.'

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