

### Democratization in the Arab world: challenges and setbacks

Radu, Aitana

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Radu, A. (2009). Democratization in the Arab world: challenges and setbacks. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 9(3), 515-531. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-445369>

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

**Terms of use:**

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

# Democratization in the Arab World

## Challenges and Setbacks

AITANA RADU

In the last decades a large number of political scientists worldwide have dedicated their work to the study of democratization in the Arab world. Nevertheless, in spite of their best efforts little progress has been made on the path of better understanding the Middle East's unique resilience towards democracy. Although a large number of theories on Arab democratization have been developed through the years, an overview of which will be later on provided, none succeeded in creating a comprehensive and unique framework of analysis that could be applied to all case studies.

One of the main drawbacks of all these studies resides in the versatile nature of the concept of democracy itself. Throughout time, the concept of democracy has been applied to a wide variety of regimes and even today scholars fail to agree on a common definition. Moreover, according to Richard McKeon, since the late 1940s for the first time in world history no doctrine has been promoted as being undemocratic. Therefore, democracy has become a symbol rather than a reality, a shield used to protect and support even those regimes whose connections to a democratic political system are feeble at best<sup>1</sup>.

As it would be both useless and impossible to include here a detailed overview of all definitions and classifications of democracy, I will mention only a few that I consider to be relevant for this paper. One of the most reductionist definitions of democracy, which nevertheless has been widely applied in the study of the Middle East, is that provided by the UN General Assembly who equated democracy with the existence of periodic elections. In this case the ballot is seen as an objective indicator of the legitimacy of a particular regime<sup>2</sup>. However, such a reductionist approach leaves way for much ambiguity, as many Arab regimes have been classified as electoral democracies without really measuring up to real democratic standards.

A more complex approach is provided by Sartori who states that "democracy is a system in which no one can choose himself, no one can invest himself with the power to rule and therefore, no one can abrogate to himself unconditional and unlimited power"<sup>3</sup>. Although Sartori takes here into consideration several characteristics of a democratic system, his definition lacks functionality.

The best suited definitions for the present analysis are the ones provided by Lipset and Robert Dahl. According to Lipset "democracy is not a quality of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard MCKEON (ed.), *Democracy in a World of Tensions: A Symposium Prepared by UNESCO*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951, p. 522.

<sup>2</sup> Russel Lawrence BARSH, "Democratization and Development", *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 14, 1992, pp. 120-134/p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni SARTORI, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, Chatham House Publishers, New Jersey, 1987, p. 206.

social system which either does or does not exist, but rather a complex of characteristics which may be ranked in different ways<sup>1</sup>".

Following this line of reasoning when coining his concept of "polyarchy", Dahl establishes some core elements that define democratic systems: effective participation and inclusion, vote equality, freedom of speech and agenda control. He also mentions six democratic political institutions that are vital for the well-functioning of any democracy: officials elected through a secret ballot, periodic and free elections, freedom of expression, the existence of alternative sources of information, freedom of association, inclusive citizenship<sup>2</sup>.

It is clear that no state can fulfill all these requirements simultaneously, for they are the characteristics of an ideal democracy. However, depending on the place a state occupies in the path of achieving these standards we can determine its degree of democraticness.

The study of democracy and democratization reached its peak in the 1970s when what scholars called "the third wave of democratization" swept through South America and Central and Eastern Europe. It is in this optimistic context that the first serious studies on Arab democratization appeared. It soon became clear for scholars and policy analysts alike that the Middle East region displayed a singular resistance to democratization, remaining almost unaffected by the Third Wave<sup>3</sup>.

Since 1974 the absolute number of democracies in the world has nearly tripled. According to the 2008 Freedom House report in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union the number of democracies has gone from none before the fall of communism to 21 or 75% of the total 28 states. In the Americas and the Caribbean, 34 of the 35 states are democracies. In Asia and the Pacific Islands the number of democracies has increased from 5 in 1974 to 31 in 2008. Even in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of democracies has increased from 3 to 33 during the same time span<sup>4</sup>.

The Middle East and North Africa remain the only regions where democracy has failed to expand. Out of the 18 countries in the region, only Israel is considered a democracy and even its democratic status faces serious contestation because Israel is considered responsible for the not free status of the areas under its control. Six other countries are considered semi-democracies (Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, Yemen), while the others are labeled as not-free<sup>5</sup>.

Consequently, nowhere in the world does the relevance of the democratization theory appear more questionable than in the Middle East. Moreover, the region's "exceptionalism" evolved from a mere scientific curiosity in the 1990s to a major policy dilemma after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. At this point comparative political scientists who worked on democracy and democratization

<sup>1</sup> Seymour Martin LIPSET, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 53. no. 1, March 1959, pp. 69-105/p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. DAHL, *Despre democrație*, Romanian transl. by Ramona Lupașcu, Alina-Maria Turcu, Mihaela Bordea, Adriana Bargan-Straub, Institutul European, Iași, 2003, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa ANDERSON, "Searching Where the Light Shines: Studying Democratization in the Middle East", *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 9, February 2006, pp. 189-214/p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> *Freedom in the World 2009: Global Data* at [www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/FIW09\\_Tables&GraphsForWeb.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/FIW09_Tables&GraphsForWeb.pdf) (accessed on 02.04.2009).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

globally found that little of the general comparative politics literature provided hypotheses directly testable in the region<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, it soon became clear for researchers that it is very difficult to generalize about political change in the Arab world, as several distinct patterns have emerged, reflecting the differences existent in the institutional settings and in the strategies of local elites<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, in exploring the factors that have led to the Middle East's "exceptionalism" I will start with a review and critique of the various theoretical approaches that have sought to explain the conditions that obstruct or facilitate democratization in the region. Although none of these theories has succeeded in providing a comprehensive explanation, it is my belief that by integrating them in a whole one may create a much better theoretical framework that would cover a wider variety of case studies. The analysis begins with the earliest debates and brings the discussion forward to present times.

One of the first and most influential theories to be applied to Arab democratization is the early modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s that examined the requisites of democratization in developing countries. According to its promoters, beyond certain thresholds of economic development, societies become too complex and socially mobilized to be governed by authoritarian means<sup>3</sup>.

As Lipset originally proposed in 1959 there are two interrelated intervening variables that explain the positive effect of economic development on the likelihood for a country to become a democracy: political culture and social structure. His theory was later on adopted by Dahl who in 1989 argued that economic development along with the syndrome of factors associated with development produce a modern pluralist society especially favorable to democracy. Furthermore, in 1991, Samuel Huntington included economic development in the essential set of factors affecting the expansion of democracy<sup>4</sup>.

However, the main problem of this theory resides in identifying the thresholds of modernization required for democracy. While the case of India appears to prove that democratic regimes are possible at relatively low levels of modernization, European fascist and communist regimes appear to suggest that authoritarianism can remain viable at high levels of income and social mobilization. Therefore, modernization levels are not determinate and merely facilitate different types of regimes, deterring democracy only at the very lowest level and authoritarianism only at the very highest<sup>5</sup>.

When reverting to the case of the Middle East several important considerations must be mentioned. First, all of the high-income Middle East states are oil states. In these countries the huge returns from external oil rent have contributed primarily to an aggrandizement of the state and its political oligarchy, while the

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisa ANDERSON, "Searching Where the Light Shines...cit.", p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> Carrie ROSEFSKI WICKHAM, "Beyond Democratization: Political Change in the Arab World", *Political Science and Politics*, vol. 27, no. 3, September 1994, pp. 507-509/p. 507.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique", in Frederic VOLPI, Francesco CAVATORTA (eds.), *Democratization in the Muslim World: Changing Patterns of Power and Authority*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Edward N. MULLER, "Economic Determinants of Democracy", *American Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. 6, December 1995, pp. 966-982/p. 980.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", p. 13.

large part of the working population has been turned into de facto state clients whose livelihoods depend on the public purse<sup>1</sup>. As such, in this case a high-income is not an indicator of a high level of economic development at national level and therefore cannot facilitate democracy but quite the contrary it increases the stability of authoritarian regimes.

Secondly, governments in the Middle East have found it difficult to manage the relationship between political and economic reform. Although in the initial phases of modernization in the 1980s many regimes initiated experiments in political liberalization to secure popular support for their market-oriented economic reforms, the consequences produced were far from desirable. The political arena was opened to a wide variety of opposition movements that had been previously been barred from political life. By the mid-1990s governments in the Middle East started to believe that pursuing economic and political reforms simultaneously was threatening to the existent political order. As a result, top-down management of economic reform by decree replaced the earlier approach. This method does not increase public participation and social mobilization but quite the contrary, it sustains interventionist and paternalistic patterns of state-society relations as transparency and accountability are not taken into consideration<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite these specific conditions it still remains clear that democratization did not happen in the Middle East at the income levels that produced some democratization elsewhere. Consequently, researchers have attempted to identify other factors that might have short-circuited the "natural" relation between increased economic development and increased democratization. The most important of these arguments is the cultural one that takes into consideration two features of Arab political culture: the influence of Islam and the pervasiveness of "traditional" small group loyalties. As later on in this paper the relationship between Islam and democracy will be addressed extensively, I will concentrate here only on the second part of the cultural argument. This inheritance of the tribalism of nomadic tribes had two significant consequences of Arab political culture. Firstly, it makes it almost impossible to construct a broad-based civil society or strong political parties. Secondly, this exclusionary group solidarity is manipulated by authoritarian leaders in order to construct strong elite cores for their states. The development of a kinship culture allows authoritarian elites to use clientelism as the basis for their political linkage with the masses<sup>3</sup>.

The failure of the early modernization theory in explaining democratization in the less developed countries led to a revision of this theory, reflected in the works of Huntington and Karl Deutsch. According to the first, social mobilization in less developed countries might not lead to democratization but to "praetorianism" as mobilization exceeded the slower rate of economic development and political institution-building needed to accommodate it. The result was an increase in inequality during the development process. In the Middle East, modernization was indeed associated with new inequalities. Consequently, even in the states that

---

<sup>1</sup> Larbi SADIKI, "Popular Uprising and Arab Democratization", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, February 2000, p. 71-95/p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Tarik M. YOUSEF, "Development, Growth and Policy Reform in the Middle East and North Africa since 1950", *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 18, no. 3, Summer 2004, pp. 91-115/pp. 110-111.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", p. 14.

had some democratic experience, such as Turkey and Lebanon, the process of democratization collapsed because of the inability of semi-democratic institutions to incorporate newly mobilized social forces<sup>1</sup>.

Another factor taken into consideration by the later modernization theory are the circumstances that have led to state-building in the Middle East. According to Hinnebusch a second obstacle to democratization is the mismatch typical in the less developed states between state and identity. This mismatch resulted from the artificial manner in which Middle Eastern states have been created during the period of Western colonialism. As a result these states lack the underlying consensus on political community, they lack a national identity. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab world was divided into a multitude of small weak states, a situation that encouraged the persistence of sub- and supra- state identities. Throughout time, local elites have given little importance to democratization, focusing instead on overcoming these numerous cleavages. Hence, the main popular political movements in the region, pan Arabism and political Islam focus more on identity, unity and authenticity than on democratization<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, in order to properly apply the modernization theory to Middle East democratization, researchers should focus not only on the level of economic development but should also take into consideration cultural and historical arguments.

Another set of theories dealing with democratization in the Arab world take into consideration social structures, mainly the state-society relationship. These theories originated in the tradition of historical sociology reflected in the works of Barrington Moore. In brief, social structural analysis argues that democracy requires a balance between the state/ruler and independent classes. Here, the state is neither wholly autonomous of dominant classes nor captured by them, allowing a space in which civil society can develop. The development of democracy requires thus, the presence of a coalition between the bourgeoisie, the middle classes and the working class<sup>3</sup>.

However, studies on the Middle East, such as that conducted by Tim Niblock seem to indicate that in this case social groupings are in a weak and dependent position in relation to the state and are not capable of introducing their demands on the official agenda. The bourgeoisie, which has often been regarded as the main promoter of democracy, developed into a position of dependency towards the state, its interests being closely interlinked with the interests of key elements from the state apparatus<sup>4</sup>. Although modernization has stimulated the creation of an educated middle class, this class was also a product of and dependent on the state. Finally, the industrial working class is controlled by a combination of social welfare and oppression, characteristic to Middle East regimes. Hence, instead of democracy two types of political regimes appear. In the tribal regions, oil rentierism gives birth to right-wing authoritarianism, while in the more advanced settled regions, the coalition formed between the large landed classes, the salaried middle class and peasantry supported the establishment of populist authoritarianism of the left<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Tim NIBLOCK, "Democratization: A Theoretical and Practical Debate", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, November 1998, pp. 221-233/p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", pp. 17-18.



Compared to modernization theory the structural approach has two important advantages. First, it uses variables that can be applied to a wide variety of case studies, providing thus a basis for comparability with democratization experiments elsewhere. Secondly, it allows researchers to distinguish and classify the differences between the various Middle Eastern states, as the factors do not act in the same manner in all cases. The main limitation of this theory lies in reconciling it with the experience of Eastern Europe. In those countries, the state was even more dominant over society than in the Middle East and democratization still occurred<sup>1</sup>.

A third theoretical approach used to address Middle East democratization is promoted by the school of "new institutionalism", which argues that the institutional configuration of regimes makes a crucial difference for outcomes. The main advantage of this approach is the fact that it distinguishes between different types of authoritarian regimes according to their level of institutionalization, which in turn is determined by the social forces they include and exclude<sup>2</sup>.

The first and most primitive forms of authoritarianism are personalistic dictatorships and military juntas which lack institutions able to include supportive social forces and implement policy. A second category is formed by more "institutionalized" authoritarian regimes with single party/corporatist systems and bureaucratic/technocratic institutions that are more include and developmentally capable. Within this second category we must distinguish between two major types of regimes: populist authoritarian (PA) and bureaucratic authoritarian (BA)<sup>3</sup>.

The dominant institutional type in the Middle East is populist authoritarianism. Hinnebusch argues that this type of regimes are a brand of successful authoritarianism, as it managed to find a formula for durability and stability. Firstly, PA regimes appeared from revolutionary coups conducted by a coalition of middle classes and peasantry against the cosmopolitan oligarchy under Western tutelage. The socio-economic reforms conducted under PA regimes simultaneously destroyed the power of the oligarchy and the bourgeoisie, while strengthening the position of the workers and peasants<sup>4</sup>.

Second, PA regimes were reactions against Western colonialism and the conflict with Israel. This allowed them to develop a nationalist legitimacy that would replace traditional or democratic legitimacy. Third, PA regimes were consolidated structurally. The single-party system was consolidated allowing these regimes to penetrate society at all levels. Fourth, popular authoritarianism managed to successfully combine tradition and modernity in order to strengthen its position<sup>5</sup>. Fifth, these regimes made frequent use of reliable instruments of repression (intelligence or security services), becoming very efficient in preventing and repressing active rebellion. Sixth, the PA revolutions weakened the bourgeoisie, which as mentioned above is traditionally the promoter of economic liberalization and political pluralism. Instead it strengthened the position of the classes that are the most threatened by democratic transitions: the peasants, workers and civil servants<sup>6</sup>.

Additional research on this topic seems to indicate that PA regimes are indeed very durable as they combine all the individual features, which individually are

<sup>1</sup>Tim NIBLOCK, "Democratization...cit.", p. 224.

<sup>2</sup>Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 20.

the most resistant to democracy, such as personalist leadership, single party rule and a politicized army with stake in the regime<sup>1</sup>.

The other major type of authoritarian regime in the Middle East is the rentier monarchy, a combination of oil and tribalism, modernity and tradition. All social classes in these countries are dependent economically on the rentier state, thus having a stake in preserving the *status quo*<sup>2</sup>.

Overall, the institutionalist approach has offered researchers sufficient evidence so as to conclude that when attempting to understand Middle East "exceptionalist" cultural and historical explanations are not enough, as the unique social structural configurations characteristic to the region should also be taken into consideration.

A later extension of the institutionalist approach attempted to analyze Middle East democratization by looking at the evolution of populist authoritarianism in combination with economic theory. According to this school of thought, economic crises force PA regimes to evolve into post-populist authoritarianism involving economic liberalization. As mature capitalism and democracy are believed to be interconnected, it might be expected that economic liberalization will be accompanied by political liberalization<sup>3</sup>.

However, most researchers have concluded that this is not the case, at least not in the short run. Quite the contrary the economic reforms that took place in the Middle East led to the development of crony capitalism. Crony capitalism is an economic system dependant on privileged non-transparent clientelist connections between investors and state elites that could not be preserved in a democratic society<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, the successful implementation of economic reforms presupposes the implementation of a set of policies that would weaken the legitimacy of local elites, such as the encouragement of Western investors, payment of foreign debts, increased taxation, limiting social welfare. Hence, the elites attempt to compensate for this loss by increasing their hold on society and the economy. In addition, economic liberalization gives the authoritarian state access to new revenue sources and allows it to include previously hostile social groups into its coalition, thus increasing its ability to marginalize potential opposition<sup>5</sup>.

The fourth important approach used to explain the failure of Arab democratization is elite theory. Beside the level of modernization, political culture, historical context and institutional framework, elites or political leadership play a key role in introducing and supporting democracy. In the Middle East, most of the Arab states could be labeled as one-man regimes<sup>6</sup>. The leaders, both presidents and monarchs enjoy enormous power, without being subject to the control exercised in other parts of the world by parliaments and the judiciary<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Gawdat BAHGAT, "Democracy in the Arab World: An Elitist Approach", *International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1994, pp. 49-60/p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> Marina OTTAWAY, "Democracy and Constituencies in the Arab World", *Carnegie Papers*, no. 48, July 2004, pp. 1-15/p. 3.



According to Larry Diamond "the only real precondition for democracy is that a politically powerful set of elites becomes committed to it"<sup>1</sup>. If we presume that the political elites are rational actors, then it is reasonable to state that Arab elites will only embark on the path of democratization if they think their vital interests will survive or even be enhanced by the transition from authoritarianism<sup>2</sup>.

However, this is not the case in the Middle East where elites fail to negotiate a successful "pact" that would ease their exit from the legacy of autocratic rule. One of the main causes for this situation is the fact that many Arab rulers have obtained their position by violently eliminating their rivals and/or predecessors. In such circumstances it is difficult for those elites to envision a safe surrender of their position to forces outside their control. Although, the possession of a strong security apparatus has enabled these leaders to preserve the power for long periods of time it has simultaneously increased the cost of relinquishing power<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, instead of entering a pact with the opposition that would negotiate their exit from power, Arab authoritarian elites have concentrated their effort in preserving the original "ruling bargain" by which the state provides jobs, subsidies and social order in return for political quiescence. The control exercised by the state over economic resources, especially in the oil-monarchies, has made the existence of this autocratic social pact possible<sup>4</sup>. Even in those countries where certain reforms were implemented from above, elites focused solely on modernization. As I have mentioned before in this paper, reforms aimed at increasing economic development were not accompanied by political liberalization<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, the democratic elites in the Arab world proved themselves incapable of building broad-based constituencies, remaining isolated from the majority of the society. Most of the pro-democracy intellectuals have concentrated their efforts on reaching across national borders to like-minded people in the Arab states, instead of attempting to reach down into their own countries. This has occurred both because of the strong control exercised by authoritarian regimes over society and because of the deep divide existent in the Arab world between the educated elites and the majority of the people<sup>6</sup>.

There are two key elements that transition theory mentions as being central to the process of elite-led democratization. One, as I have mentioned above, is the existence of a negotiated pact between the ruling elite and the opposition and the second is the existence of elite divisions inside an authoritarian regime. The Middle East has experienced very little elite fragmentation, as the separation between moderates and hard-liners is not clearly expressed. However, researchers believe that several factors might lead to a change in the present situations. For example, according to Hinnebusch the succession of a new regime leader might cause the necessary split in the regime and open the path for creating a pact as intra-elite competition leads members of the elite to reach out for public support. Still, despite the

---

<sup>1</sup> Larry DIAMOND (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 1993, p. 430.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Larry DIAMOND, Mark F. PLATTNER, Daniel BRUMBERG (eds.), *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, The Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, Baltimore, 2003, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xii.

<sup>5</sup> Marina OTTAWAY, "Democracy and Constituencies...cit.", p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

generational change in leadership that has started in the Middle East, this phenomenon has not yet occurred<sup>1</sup>. An illustration of this situation can be found in the power vacuum that appeared within the Palestinian elites after the demise of Yasser Arafat. During his time as the president of the Palestinian Authority, Arafat managed to exercise a strong control over all levels of the Palestinian society, including the various Islamist groups opposing his policies. That is why his death did not give the Palestinian territories a push toward democracy, but quite the contrary it led to the outbreak of new tensions and conflicts between the various factions fighting to gain supremacy.

The second factor that should be taken into consideration is the impact of external pressure on achieving a split between reformists and hard-liners. Nevertheless, researchers believe this is an unlikely option for the Middle East, as outsiders have little leverage on the most important Arab countries. Hence, the only viable solution would be for the authoritarian elites to experience pressure from inside, and this cannot be achieved unless the pro-democratic elites manage to form a coherent opposition movement with strong popular support<sup>2</sup>.

However, interest in the role played by foreign powers in the dynamics of Middle East democratization did not end here as several comparative political scientists working on this topic turned their attention on international relations. One of the most important Arab scholars, Mohammed Ayooob complained in 2005 that

"it is regrettable that the majority of the literature on democratization produced in the past two decades has concentrated almost exclusively on internal dynamics, and the causes for the reversal of the democratization process have also been sought in the domestic sphere, to the near exclusion of external influences"<sup>3</sup>.

Generally democracy is seen as the outcome of a domestic political process that is not influenced by outside actors, albeit recent literature in comparative politics has questioned this assumption. Many researchers now argue that the presence of external security threats to states can inhibit and erode moves towards democracy. During periods of security crises the leaders will generally attempt to consolidate their power in order to mobilize resources that allow them to confront the external threat<sup>4</sup>. That is why some researchers place the Arab-Israeli conflict among the factors conducive to Middle East exceptionalism. The Arab rejection of the newly-created Israeli state combined with their defeat in the subsequent wars has encouraged the development of military regimes and security-focused states that are difficult to liberalize<sup>5</sup>.

In the case of the Palestinian territories, foreign intervention plays a major role in its path towards democratization. Firstly because, the Palestinian Authority, the

<sup>1</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Marina OTTAWAY, "Democracy and Constituencies...cit.", pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammed AYOOB, "The Muslim World's Poor Record on Modernization and Democratization: The Interplay of External and Internal Factors", in Shireen T. HUNTER, Huma MALIK (eds.), *Modernization Democracy and Islam*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> Jon C. PEVEHOUSE, "Democracy From the Outside-In? International Organizations and Democratization", *International Organizations*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 2002, pp. 515-549/p. 518.

<sup>5</sup> Graham E. FULLER, "Islamists in the Arab World: The Dance Around Democracy", *Carnegie Papers*, no. 49, September 2004, pp. 1-15/p. 6.

main executive body has been the result of a compromise achieved between different international political actors, including Israel and the United States. Moreover, both the structure and field of activity of the PA are clearly states in a number of international documents, namely the Declaration of Principles of September 1993, the Cairo Agreement of May 1994 and the interim Taba Accords of September 1995. Secondly, it is clear that the neighboring state of Israel exerts direct influence over the Palestinian territories, not only in security affairs but also in civil legislation and legal administration<sup>1</sup>. This type of interference corroborated with the Israeli occupation over significant parts of the Palestinian territories clearly hinders the democratization process taking place in the region.

Another factor to be taken into consideration here is membership in international organizations. Firstly, pressures (both diplomatic and economic) generated from these organizations can, in combination with internal forces, force authoritarian regimes to liberalize. Secondly, membership in international organizations can become an incentive for different elite groups to accept liberalization, as it may lower the risks that these groups must face in the transition period<sup>2</sup>. There are two mechanisms by which this acquiescence to liberalization is achieved. On the one hand, membership in international organizations can help calm the fears of elites by serving as an external guarantor of their rights and preferences, and on the other hand it can help alter their preferences through a socialization process<sup>3</sup>.

When addressing the impact of external factors we should also assess the importance of direct Western intervention in the process of Middle East democratization. After 9/11, with the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration embarked on an intensive campaign of promoting liberal democracy in the Arab world. However, most researchers agree on the fact that this forced top-down democratization project proved to be a complete failure, mainly because of a reductionist approach towards democracy as simply an issue of institutional building and electoral mechanisms. Among key factors that were overlooked were the resentment of US regional control and the lack of political legitimacy of the newly elected leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq. Additionally, the American democratization policy had an unwanted political effect as it opened the political arena for new political forces, mainly Islamist movements<sup>4</sup>.

An extension of international relations theories on Middle Eastern democratization is the recently developed globalization theory. According to globalization enthusiasts, the outward spread to the periphery of economic liberalization stimulates transnational bourgeoisies more independent of the state, encourages political pluralism and the rule of law, and finally leads to the triumph of liberal ideology. Nevertheless, there is little evidence for such a phenomenon to occur in the Arab world<sup>5</sup>.

An opposite position is adopted by globalization critics who argue that this phenomenon is causing the transfer of power away from the states and the

<sup>1</sup> Hilel FRISCH, Menachem HOFNUNG, "Power or Justice? Rule and Law in the Palestinian Authority", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2007, pp. 331-348/p. 335.

<sup>2</sup> Jon C. PEVEHOUSE, "Democracy From the Outside-In?...cit.", p. 519.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 525.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier ROY, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, p. 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond HINNEBUSCH, "Authoritarian Persistence...cit.", p. 27.

empowerment of transnational corporations and international regimes that seek to impose neo-liberal prescriptions on the Middle East. Thus in the less developed weaker states of the region, globalization deters or dilutes democratization that would make governments responsive to domestic rather than international demands<sup>1</sup>.

Beside these major theories, researchers have also identified a set of additional factors that more or less act as obstacles in the face of Arab democratization. The first is the absence of a civil society acting as a champion for democracy. The labor unions are very weak organizations, the businessmen's associations lack credibility, while NGO's fail to establish indigenous grounding<sup>2</sup>. However, in some cases this situation appears to be changing. For example, as a result of the peace process the Palestinian territories experienced a revival of the civil society. Starting with the 1980s there has been greater freedom of the press, a multiplication of NGO's and of political mobilization<sup>3</sup>.

A second factor is the low literacy level in the Arab world. Although there are some significant Arab scholars working on Middle East democratization, their ideas have little impact on the general population as a consequence of the huge gap existent between the two groups<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, scholars like Walid Kazziha argue that the prevalent educational system in the Middle East is itself responsible for the lack of a democratic political consciousness in the region, by encouraging submissiveness, narrowness and dogmatism<sup>5</sup>.

Thirdly, countries in the Middle East are regionally remote from the epicenter of democratization. Studies of Turkey, a Muslim country directly bordering models of successful democratization appear to indicate that geographical proximity is an element to be taken into consideration<sup>6</sup>.

Although the Arab world appears to have failed the test of democratization, in the last decades researchers have observed a significant trend towards political liberalization. Despite the fact that "democratization" and "liberalization" are used interchangeably by Arab elites they refer to two distinct, yet related processes. Democracy denotes a mode of governance where decision-making is shared by "the people" rather than being concentrated in the hand of an oligarchy. In its modern usage the term refers almost exclusively to representative democracy in which "the people" yield power to a political elite, checked by periodic elections<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand, "liberal" in the classical sense refers to limitations on the power of a state – democratic or otherwise – to intervene in the individual and collective lives of people. In the Arab case the push towards liberalization is generated by the regimes' attempt to cope with economic and social crises. Political reform has reached the agenda of key Arab states because of the profound crisis of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Eva BELLIN, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2, January 2004, pp. 139-157/p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Khalil SHIKAKI, "The Peace Process, National Reconstruction and the Transition to Democracy in Palestine", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, Winter 1996, pp. 5-20/p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Eva BELLIN, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism...cit.", p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Gerd NONNEMAN, "Rentiers and Autocrats, Monarchs and Democrats, State and Society: The Middle East between Globalization, Human 'Agency', and Europe", *International Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 1, January 2001, pp. 141-162/p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Eva BELLIN, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism...cit.", p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> MIDDLE EAST REPORT, *The Democracy Agenda in the Arab World*, no. 174, January-February 1992, pp. 3-5+47/p. 3.

political legitimation that has in the past years swept through the region. Regimes have responded to popular discontent by adopting reforms designed to entice key elites to share responsibility for devising and implementing austere measures aimed at economic restructuring<sup>1</sup>.

While there is a consensus within the region that political reform is necessary there is no corresponding agreement as to the shape these reforms should take. Instead reform has been used as a cover word shielding very different approaches<sup>2</sup>.

The first such perspective is the liberal democratic outlook, according to which political reform is a process needed to establish secular, Western-style democratic republics or genuine constitutional monarchies. The supporters of this approach have constantly called on Arab rulers to submit to constitutional restrictions on their power, to the will of the people in free, fair and regular elections and to term limits. Among their other demands are the abrogation of emergency laws and security courts, the expansion of human rights, the end of state censorship over the media, the elimination of restrictions on political parties and civil organizations, and respect for the rule of law. The advocates of the liberal agenda mostly, include Western-educated intellectuals, journalists, human rights and democracy activists, members of secular opposition parties and a small number of businessmen and progressive-minded government officials. However, the impact of this movement on official decision-making is very limited<sup>3</sup>.

The second approach is the one proposed by moderate Islamists, who support some of the liberals' core reforms such as free elections, term limits and empowered elected institutions. But they believe that political reform must be in accordance with Islamic law and tradition. This belief has several important consequences at the level of political reforms. On one hand they give less importance to the issue of human rights and the principle of rotation of power. On the other hand, the state they envision is an Islamic one governed by religious laws and not a Western-style democracy ruled by secular laws<sup>4</sup>.

A third perspective is the modernization approach advocated by many Arab regimes, which features good governance reforms such as upgrading the judiciary, streamlining bureaucratic procedures and fighting corruption. It also supports increased political participation, especially for women, the strengthening of civil society, the expansion of human rights education and the elimination of media censorship. Steps toward achieving this type of reforms have been taken in several countries of the Arab world, including Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. The advocates of this perspective emphasize the need for gradual change carried out in accordance with the circumstances and culture of each country<sup>5</sup>.

In spite of the lively debates surrounding the issue of political reform in the Arab world, only very little changes have been actually introduced in the last years, all falling into the category of "modernization". Moreover, reforms have generally, been introduced from the top, by governments acting on their own initiative rather than in response to specific pressures and demands coming from the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>2</sup> Amy HAWTHORNE, "Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment?", *Carnegie Papers*, no. 52, October 2004, pp. 1-15/p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.



citizens. Since 2001, only two countries in the region, Bahrain and Qatar have implemented reforms that seek to change the overall structure of the political system. In other countries, reforms have been more narrowly focused and cautious, mostly been targeted at elections and human rights. For example, Algeria, Jordan, Morocco and Yemen have revised their electoral laws and upgraded their electoral administration to make voter registration, balloting, vote counting and the announcement of results more efficient and transparent. Additionally, in Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan and Oman steps have been taken toward the enhancement of women's rights and the expansion of their presence in government<sup>1</sup>.

These states that have embarked on the path of reformation are reunited by researchers under the title of "liberalized autocracies" – states that not only tolerate but actually depend on a limited, state-managed pluralism of ideas and organization as a strategy for legitimation. Hence the essence of liberalized autocracies is liberalization without popular sovereignty or political accountability. The dilemma that still puzzles political scientists is whether these hybrid regimes have a negative or positive impact on the overall process of democratization. Are liberalized autocracies opening a possible path toward democracy or as a self-contained system they hinder the transition from liberalization to democratization? Unfortunately, no consensus has been reached in the academic field on this crucial question. For example, political scientists like Daniel Brumberg adopt a critical approach about both the costs and the benefits of liberalized autocracy. On one hand he argues that this type of regime encourages the reduction of ethno-religious and ideological cleavages by providing secular, Islamist and ethnic groups space in civil society, parliaments and governments. On the other hand, he argues that liberalized autocracies eventually strengthens the influence of Islamists, thus setting the stage for a zero-sum game between regime and opposition that would raise the cost of further political reform<sup>2</sup>. Here the case of the Palestinian Authority is a suitable example. After acquiring power, the Palestinian Authority adopted undemocratic policies which were supposedly aimed at protecting the peace process and the process of national reconstruction. Consequently starting with 1995 it focused on the establishment of military security courts that were designed to deter Islamist organizations like Hamas or the Islamic Jihad from attacking Israeli targets<sup>3</sup>.

Other researches, such as Jillian Scheduler, Russell Luca, Jason Brownlee and Bedlam Maharani are not as optimistic as Brumberg, focusing more on what they perceive as the negative consequence of liberalized autocracy – the political inclusion of Islamist groups. According to them the great electoral gains that Islamists invariably achieve within these regimes force the authoritarian leaders to adopt some strong anti-reform measures in order to preserve their power<sup>4</sup>.

There are different types of responses that Arab authoritarian leaders have adopted in order to cope with the reformation movement. Usually Arab regimes attempted to neutralize the democratic challenge by a multilayered response that included repression, redefinition and co-optation. Hence, the most active and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Larry DIAMOND, Mark F. PLATTNER, Daniel BRUMBERG (eds.), *Islam and Democracy...cit.*, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>3</sup> Khalil SHIKAKI, "The Peace Process...cit.", p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Larry DIAMOND, Mark F. PLATTNER, Daniel BRUMBERG (eds.), *Islam and Democracy...cit.*, p. xv.



consistent measure among regimes was to reinforce and revitalize the existent Arab nationalist ideology. This approach argues that given the imperialist and Zionist threat, democracy is an integral part of the Western conspiracy against Arabs. The West is perceived to be attacking the Arab world and Islam itself through subversive means, that include the promotion of certain cultural products and political ideas<sup>1</sup>.

A second tactic employed is the delegitimation of the democratic opposition, which consists of branding reformers as traitors and subversives. Usually the regime attempts to convince the general public that the reformers are enemies, while the state is a friend. An example of such behavior occurred in 2000 in Egypt with the condemnation of a renowned pro-democratic intellectual Saad Edin Ibrahim<sup>2</sup>.

A third response, closely correlated with the first is the repression and co-optation of reformers. In certain situations the use of intimidation against the democratic opposition, as it was the case in Egypt, forced these groups to shift sides and become allies of the regime. Instead of demanding domestic political reforms, they focused their attention on external issues, such as the Palestinian *intifada* and the war in Iraq. Usually in these cases, the repression tactics used are varied, varying from one end of the violence spectrum to the others (from public criticism to prison and murder)<sup>3</sup>.

In trying to cope with the reformation movement, many authoritarian regimes found themselves in the position of supporting Islamist movements, as a challenge to the liberal opposition. This happened because in many cases, the Islamists produced parallel ideas that reinforce the government's position and also their increasing strengthened frightened the people into supporting the regime. Although the Islamists support the electoral reform, as it would grant them access to more political power, they overall promote a more conservative outlook, effectively blocking other attempts at reformation<sup>4</sup>.

The last tactics employed by authoritarian regimes are to give the appearance of reformation, or better yet to adopt several minor reforms in order to shift the focus from the critical issues. Generally, Arab rulers and their supporters stress the fact that their countries are well governed and democratic<sup>5</sup>. According to the Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi: "Our political path is the correct one as it grants freedom to the whole people, sovereignty, power and wealth to the whole people"<sup>6</sup>.

Many Arab regimes have appropriated the symbols of democratization, such as elections without the principles that govern them. Researchers such as Laurence Whitehead strongly criticize such procedures as in his opinion these contenders for political power will have

"non-democratic antecedents, and so risk the suspicion that their new-found espousal of democracy is merely instrumental and insincere. Provisional

---

<sup>1</sup> Barry RUBIN, "Pushback or Progress? Arab Regimes Respond to Democracy's Challenge", *Policy Focus* 75, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2007, pp. 1-16/p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Muammar al-QADDAFI, "Libya's Gaddafi Urges Backers to 'Kill' Enemies", *The Epoch Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006, at <http://en.epochtimes.com/news/6-8-31/45530.html> (accessed on 18.04.2009).

democratic credentials have to be fairly readily available, if broad-based democratization is to proceed, although final judgments can only be made post-mortem<sup>1</sup>.

These regimes, of which Jordan is the best illustration, that have adopted democracy only as a façade, are generically called "façade democracies". In his 1970 book *Comparative Government*, the British researcher S.E. Finer defined façade democracies as "a system where liberal-democratic institutions, processes and safeguards are established by law but are in practice so manipulated or violated by a historic oligarchy as to stay in office"<sup>2</sup>. Other concepts used to designate these types of regimes are "quasi-democracy" or "partial democracy", both conveying a special meaning regarding the relationship between ruler and the ruled<sup>3</sup>.

Due to space and time limitations of this paper as well as to constraints regarding the topic I will approach here only one of the key features of liberalized autocracies and façade democracies, mainly the issue of elections. For the researchers dealing with the process of democratization in the Middle East, the issue of elections has become very important, as it is one of the democratic mechanism most widely adopted by the Arab regimes. In fact many countries in the region can be considered as Alfred Stepan argued "electorally competitive regimes". By this he means that these countries have at least a minimal level of electoral democracy, although the socioeconomic prerequisites for democracy are not fulfilled<sup>4</sup>.

Although in the Middle East the process of openly contested competitive elections within a democratic pluralistic political system remains unfulfilled, still, researchers have been amazed by the high degree of regularity and frequency of Arab elections since the 1990s. From 1989 up to 1999 a total of over 80 elections have taken place in the Middle East, including elections for trade union bodies, chambers of commerce, for mayors and other types of public offices. Furthermore, voter turnout has been astonishingly high in most elections during the same period, indicating wide popular support for this process. It is important to note here that election activity takes place not only horizontally (across the region) but also vertically (different types of elections taking place in the same country)<sup>5</sup>. For example in the 1996 legislative elections in Palestine, the voter turnout level was very high, reaching around 70 percent in the West Bank and 88 percent in the Gaza Strip<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, after the Oslo peace process elections within the Palestinian territory occurred on a regular basis, with little criticism regarding their organization and results coming from Western observers.

On the other hand the level of competitiveness of those elections is quite low. Only three Middle Eastern countries have benefited in 2000-2001 from competitive

<sup>1</sup> Laurence WHITEHEAD, "The Alternatives to 'Liberal Democracy': A Latin American Perspective", *Political Studies: Prospects for Democracy*, vol. 40, Special Issue, 1992, pp. 146-159/p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Edward FINER, *Comparative Government*, Pelican, London, 1970, p. 441, in Beverley MILTON-EDWARDS, "Façade Democracy and Jordan", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 191-203/p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI, "Is the Middle East Democratizing?", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, November 1999, pp. 199-217/p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Larry DIAMOND, Mark F. PLATTNER, Daniel BRUMBERG (eds.), *Islam and Democracy...cit.*, p. x.

<sup>5</sup> Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI, "Is the Middle East Democratizing?", *cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>6</sup> Khalil SHIKAKI, "The Palestinian Elections: An Assessment", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, Spring 1996, pp. 17-22/p. 18.

elections, these being Lebanon, Turkey and Israel. Four countries, including Iran, Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen have had semi-competitive elections, while Iraq and Syria fall into the category of non-competitive. Finally, five other countries, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have held no direct elections to national institutions whatsoever<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, several important topics must be discussed related to the importance of the electoral process for the understanding of Arab democratization. Firstly, in many cases the authoritarian elites have managed to manipulate electoral systems, hence managing to control electoral outcomes and partisan politics. Most Arab countries use the winner-takes-all system, whose consequence is the distortion of the actual vote given to large parties. This was the case in the 1996 Palestinian legislative elections when Fatah candidates managed to gain only 30 percent of the votes but wound up with 58 percent of the 88 seats. Conversely, independents who had managed to gain around 80 percent of the votes, in the end received only 40 percent of the seats<sup>2</sup>.

Secondly, in some countries the electoral law has been fashioned in such a way as to make open contestation and meaningful political change an impossibility. Moreover, in some cases such as Lebanon the electoral law is designed as a means of excluding certain groups (Lebanese citizens abroad) from the political life of the country. In this situation the electoral process becomes a means of blocking instead of facilitating the circulation of power amongst competing political forces<sup>3</sup>.

In other cases, the necessary conditions for a successful electoral process are not fulfilled, such as political transparency, the rule of law, constitutional government, freedom to express different opinions, the right to organize, mobilize, publicize and congregate, unhindered access to information and ultimately confidence in the voting process<sup>4</sup>. For example, in the period leading to the 1996 Palestinian legislative elections Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority were strongly criticized for tolerating abuses of the security agencies and interfering with the freedom of the press. Furthermore, in their final statement on the day of the elections, the European Union Electoral Unit noted "certain measures which have inhibited the rights and freedoms normally associated with elections campaigning"<sup>5</sup>.

The last important feature of Middle Eastern elections, which plays a major role in the path towards democratization is the presence of the Islamist opposition. In tandem with the growth of the electoral process in the Middle East has come the challenge of Islamist groups. Furthermore, many researchers, such as Niblock consider that recent electoral achievements of Islamists are among the reasons that authoritarian leaders often invoke in order to justify their resistance to liberalization and democratization. Apparently, the paradox of Arab democratization is that it opens the political arena to groups that are staunch enemies of democracy<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Dieter NOHLEN, Florian GROTZ, Christof HARTMANN (eds.), *Elections in Asia and the Pacific*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Marsha PRIPSTEIN POSUSNEY, "Behind the Ballot Box: Electoral Engineering in the Arab World", *Middle East Report*, no. 209, Winter 1998, pp. 12-15+42/p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI, "Is the Middle East Democratizing?", cit., p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> Lamis ANDONI, "The Palestinian Elections: Moving toward Democracy or One-Party Rule?", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, Spring 1996, pp. 5-16/p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Tim NIBLOCK, "Democratization...cit.", p. 225.

To conclude, despite the global resurgence of democracy in recent decades, authoritarianism has proved to be remarkably resilient in the Middle East. Although several theories have been elaborated in the attempt to understand the "exceptionalism" of the region, none proved to be self-sufficient. Furthermore, due to the variety and uniqueness of the Arab regimes an overall generalization becomes very difficult if not impossible. Therefore, the easiest solution is to combine all these theories and bring together all the factors enumerated in order to create a broader framework of analysis that would give some significant insight into the failure of democracy in the Arab world. Nevertheless, no final solution to the problem can be found, most researchers remaining very circumspect in their conclusions. An authoritarian retrenchment being as much a possibility as is more meaningful democratic progress<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mehran KAMRAVA, *The Modern Middle East. A Political History since the First World War*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles, London, 2005, p. 358.