The Dilemma of Middle Eastern Democracy

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Searching the academic literature for a universally accepted definition of democracy, if any, is far from simple or straightforward. It seems, nevertheless, that there is a consensus that democracy primarily is 'a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions' (Schmitter and Karl, 1991: 114) and that a society can choose and replace those rulers through 'open, free, and fair' elections (Huntington, 1991: 9). Democracy is not ideal (Touraine, 1997: 28), yet it remains the most valued and efficient forms of government in the world.

However, this system of rule still failed to find a foothold in the Middle East, a region that has historically been a democracy-free zone. This paper seeks to highlight the obstacles that render the Middle East an infertile soil for democracy. Therefore, it will be argued that the Middle East lacks many of the democratization prerequisites, such as the adequate political culture and socio-economic grounds. Yet, this could not serve as the main reason why the Middle East is resistant to democratization, as many other countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia succeeded to initiate democratic change even though these prerequisites were absent. The true singularity of the Middle East, this paper argues, lies in 'The will and capacity of the [Arab] state's coercive apparatus to suppress democratic initiative[s]' (Bellin, 2004: 143).

This essay, thus, is structured into two main sections. Firstly, the role of the coercive apparatus as a *democratization inhibitor* will be analysed. Secondly, some *democratization obstacles* that thwart the consolidation of democracy will be discussed.

Democratization Inhibitor

The coercive apparatus, including but not limited to the military and security forces, of the authoritarian regime is the most tenacious obstacle in the way of democratization in the Middle East. This apparatus is the instrument whereby the state pursues its monopoly of physical violence within its sovereign territory. This essay suggests that this repressive apparatus has to be at least neutralised first before a democratic transition can start. That is because the security apparatus' terror and compulsion are the primary tools of subjugating its people (Linz, 2000) and crushing democratic initiatives.

Indeed, it acts as the dictator's shield. Without the loyalty and support of this stronghold it would be 'virtually impossible' for an authoritarian regime to survive (Kassem, 2004: 7). Ensuring this apparatus loyalty 'entails the constant flow of state patronage' as well as social and economic incentives (Ibid). Thus, it is not surprising that the Middle Eastern states' expenditure on security is among the highest in the world (Bellin, 2004: 147). For instance in 2000, the average spending of Middle Eastern countries on security expenditure was 6.7 percent of their GNP, compared to an international average of 3.8 percent in the same year (Ibid).

In Egypt, for example, since the 1970s, with President Sadat's political changes in the country, the army's subordinate role in politics was acceptable in exchange of safeguarding the institution and its leaders' interests (Harb, 2003). The Egyptian military enjoys increasing economic investing in almost everything. From companies of production of pasta, mineral water, butane gas cylinders, military-gear and gas station services to housing, farming and tourism enterprises (Abul-Magd, 2011; Barany, 2011: 32). 'The revenue from these enterprises goes straight to the military's coffers and is disbursed without state oversight' (Ibid).

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Furthermore, it is often difficult to identify the distinction between the despotic regime and the coercive apparatus. As in most cases, the 'civilian' ruler, like in Egypt, Algeria or Sudan, is a former military officer. This conflation, along with patrimonial, symbiotic or ethnic linkages between them, makes the coercive apparatus' elites very hostile towards any gesture of regime change, as they believe that they will be 'ruined by reform' (Bermeo, 1997). An unequivocal example is Syria, in which the Alawites, the religious sect of Bashar al-Assad, 'hold key military positions' (Pipes, 1989: 429). The army atrociously fights the anti-Assad movement because of the belief that 'Political opening and popular accountability would deprive the Alawi officer in Syria of his special perquisites, if not his life' (Bellin, 2004: 149)

During the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Arab armies have fiercely quelled the democratic movements in Bahrain, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Barany (2011: 30) contends that in Tunisia and Egypt, the soldiers 'backed' the revolution. However, for various reasons it was only in the Tunisian case that the military did not oppose the democratic change.First, in the heydays of the Egyptian uprising, the military's top brass did everything in their power to save their supreme commander-in-chief, Hosni Mubarak. They endorsed Mubarak's plan to transfer some powers to Vice President Omar Suleiman and urged 'the return of normal life' (*The Huffington Post*, 2011), whereas their troops on the ground 'were actually detaining and abusing protesters' (Barany, 2011: 31-32). Second, permitting the pro-Mubarak and security elements to attack the peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square, in 2 February, put the military institutional integrity and its domestic legitimacy in jeopardy. Therefore, it was crucial for them to behave as if they were neutral. Third, the army's abandonment of Mubarak was merely a 'good strategy to secure the long-term interest of [the] military elite' (Franzén, 2012).

Finally, on 3 July 2013, because the coercive apparatus remained 'intact and opposed to political reform', the military was able to extinguish the hope of political change (Bellin, 2004: 143). Not only has the military ousted Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, in essence 'It has ousted democracy' as well (Gerges, 2013a).

Democratization Obstacles

Apart from the coercive apparatus' role in inhibition of democracy, some Middle East analysts usually forget the complicated evolution of democracy in Europe. It has passed many reformations in the past, and it is unsurprisingly expected to undergo further changes in the future (Maghsoudi and Khorshidi, 2011: 16). Democratization is a complex process, in which no single variable will prove imperative or enough to it (Diamond et al., 1999). Therefore, this section will review some aspects of the cultural, economic, societal and international factors, which are believed to hinder the consolidation of democracy in the Middle East.

Religious Factors

For some historians and political theorists, Islam is perceived to be incompatible with democracy (Huntington: 1991: 298-307; Vatikiotis, 1987). For instance, Bernard Lewis (1958) contends that Islam is inclined to authoritarianism, also Eli Kedourie (1992: 1) views that 'the idea of democracy is alien to the mindset of Islam'.

Conversely, it is a fallacy, for different reasons, to attribute the lack of democracy in the Middle East to Islam. First, majority-Muslim nations like Indonesia, Turkey and Bangladesh have functioning democratic systems (Chaney in Zakaria, 2012). Second, given the opportunity to play by democratic rules, people in the region enthusiastically participate in the democratic process (BBC, 2011). Third, 'Catholicism and Confucianism have […] been accused of incompatibility with democracy, yet these cultural endowments have not prevented countries in Latin America, southern Europe, and East Asia from democratizing.' (Bellin, 2004: 141).

On the other hand, some analysts contend that it is an 'Arab' rather than 'Muslim' democracy gap (Stepan and Robertson, 2003). Albeit, the 2011 Arab uprisings and the fact that 'for decades people in the region have been resisting and protesting against unrepresentative and oppressive regimes' (Franzén, 2012), disprove this claim.

Yet, all religions, including Islam, 'require *interpretation* to give them meaning in specific contexts' (Bromley, 1997: 333). Thus, the problem is that 'some interpretations–such as those favored by […] radical Islamists–conflict with

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democratic ideals' (Otterman, 2003). Some of them are hostile to democracy because they believe that only God's laws, *al-Shari'a*, must be implemented (Ibid). Another problem, given the weight of Islamist opposition movements in the Arab world, is the fear that 'Islamists would only participate in elections to win power and put an end to democracy immediately' (Ottaway and Carothers, 2004). Some could argue that, this is what Egypt's deposed president, Morsi, has done shortly after his first few months in office, when he granted himself sweeping powers and 'immunity from legal oversight' (Beaumont, 2012). On the other hand, as considerable portions of the region's peoples support the Islamist movements, it seems that without their inclusion, democracy is impossible in the Middle East (Ottaway and Carothers, 2004).

Nevertheless, with respect to Islam, and in order to help democracy settle in the Middle East, there are some efforts need to be done. For instance, the Islamic scholars should resume the endeavors of 'Islamic modernism and revivalism' that were nurtured by ideas of prominent religious leaders like that of the Islamic jurist Mohammed 'Abdu (Dawn, 1991: 8). They should scrutinize the Islamic heritage, history and literature in order to provide the people with clear answers to questions about the relation between Islam and democracy.

In addition, for the Islamist parties, they need to revamp their views, and offer real guarantees to the public and non-Islamists parties to emphasize their adherence to the rules of the democratic game. However it is still early to gauge the Islamists' experiment in post-revolutionary Tunisia, it could be useful to contrast their success in supporting the democratic transition and cooperating with other factions in Tunisia, the trajectory of the Muslim Brothers in post-Mubarak Egypt.

Cultural, Societal and Historical Factors

Democracy, to Ayubi (2001: 397), is not merely a system of governance, 'it is also a cultural and intellectual tradition'. Therefore, it could be argued that, in the Middle East, the high levels of illiteracy and widespread autocratic, patriarchal and masculine traditions in both family and society impose a serious problem to acknowledging the democratic values (Crystal, 2001).

Not only the poor illiterate portions of the community that make the road of democratization bumpy, but also the circle of the business, religious, academic, public servants and military elites who choose to ally with the authoritarian government, in exchange for incentives, benefits and the state's patronage. In the region, 'Missing until now are elites committed to serious rather than cosmetic reform' in the economic and social structures in their states (Norton, 2009: 146).

Norton (2009: 130) asserts that 'the region's governments are not simply undemocratic but anti-democratic'. This disdain for democracy date back to the founding of the Arab republics, in the 1950s and 1960s, when openly military dictatorships replaced the partial democracies of the colonial period in Egypt, Iraq and Syria (Bromley, 1997: 327). In that era, democracy was portrayed as 'nationally divisive' and a Western tool (Ibid). President Nasser viewed the partial parliamentary democracy in Egypt, during the period 1923 to 1952, as nothing more than 'an easy tool for the benefits of the feudal system' (*BBC* in Owen, 2004: 133).

In consistency with the anti-democracy legacy of the Arab systems, there was no 'fairly strong institutional separation […] of the realm of politics from the overall system […] in society' (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992: 41-58). Moreover, absent were the checks and balances within the state system, which is overwhelmingly controlled by the authoritarian leader. Furthermore, the civil society that could have played *'an intermediary'* role between the individual and the state, as well as '*a constitutive* role by redefining […] the political game along democratic lines' (White, 2004: 14-15), has been undermined and fizzled out as a result of the regimes' containment and repressive policies (Kassem, 2004: 126-7).

Socio-economic and Development Factors

If we follow the international financial institutions' doctrine that the path to democracy starts from liberalised economy (Norton, 2009: 137), it might be argued that the Middle Eastern countries have a democracy problem, in part,

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because of the lack of the adequate economic preconditions. Generally, there are some common socio-economic features in the region. For instance, the public sector remains the major employer in the state. In addition, in most cases, the state is *rentier*, which means that the state depends mainly on the rents rather than taxation. According to Beblawi (1987: 383), the rent is generally 'a reward for ownership of all natural sources', like the oil wealth in Gulf countries. To put it another way, it is 'the income derived from the gift of the nature' (Marshall, 1920).

While Huntington (1991: 65) argues that 'broad-based economic development involving significant industrialization may contribute to democratization', he suggests that oil-based economies do not. In Huntington's opinion, the oil revenues accrue to the state, and this helps to fortify the state bureaucracy and, lessen the need for taxation. Consequently, the absence of taxation disengages the citizens and separates the state from the society. Just as if the state pays in exchange for silence and obedience of its citizens. Luciani (1994: 132) asserts that 'The roots of democratic institutions are in the state's need to tax in order to support its activities'.

In 2011, in the awake of the Arab uprisings, the Saudi King's plan to save his throne was spending 'an unprecedented amount of money, more than £60bn ($100bn) and counting' on raising salaries, helping people to buy houses, and benefits for the unemployed citizens (Buchanan, 2011). Therefore, in a sense, oil could be a curse, when it becomes 'a factor perpetuating authoritarian government' (Luciani, 1994: 131). In keeping with this view, Ross (2011) suggests that citizens of the Arab countries with little or no oil generally had more freedom than those of lots of it.

Similarly, foreign aid is one of the sources of the rents. For instance, the United States provides Egypt with $1.55 billion as annual aid package. This aid, in part, does help the government reduce its dependence on the conventional taxation (Norton, 2009: 136). Egypt, the second largest recipient of US aid (Sharp, 2010), and some other Middle East countries are among the most dependent and vulnerable countries in the world (Ayubi, 2001: 401). This vulnerability and dependence is closely linked to the discussion of international obstacles in the following part.

International Interferences

The international patronage, occasionally, plays a key role in sustaining and stabilizing the authoritarian regime and its coercive apparatus. This notion was proven in Latin America and Europe by the end of the Cold War, as the withdrawal of American patronage of the Latin American dictatorships and the cease of *Brezhnev doctrine* to support Eastern European communist systems quicken the pace of the fall of these regimes (Janos, 2000). Contrarily, in the Middle East, the patronage continued as the authoritarian regimes secured the Western interests in the region, which revolve around the security of Israel, the access to oil, and containing the Islamist threat (Bellin, 2004).

Despite the American rhetoric of supporting democracy and human rights in the region, the truth is that the USA has long been – and remains – a key ally of tyrannical Arab regimes. In the time was President Clinton, in the 1990s, talking about promoting democracy all over the world, his prominent aid, Martin Indyk (2002), viewed democracy in the Middle East as a chaos-inducer, and detrimental to Israel. Indyk's perspective reflects the long-standing tradition of the US foreign policy in the region; upholding the status quo, as working with the dictators is better than dealing with what might democracy produce. The fact that 'American policy in the Middle East [has never] been historically pro-democratic' (Ayubi, 2001: 402) was emphasized in the words of Madeleine Albright (2003), the former Secretary of State; 'we did not make [democracy] a priority. Arab public opinion, after all, can be rather scary'.

Even in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when the Bush administration decided to break the conventional American foreign policy and adopt a unilateral, interventionist agenda in the Middle East where the US enjoyed an intimate relationship with despots, promoting democracy was merely rhetorical. In July 2003, with the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated before the US Congress, 'We promised Iraq democratic government. We will deliver it' (*CNN*, 2003). In August 2003, Condoleezza Rice declared 'a generational commitment to helping the people of the Middle East transform their region' into a democratic zone (Milbank, 2004). Furthermore, in November 2003, President Bush reiterated the commitment of the USA to the goal of promoting liberal democracy and market-driven economy throughout the entire Middle East (Bush, 2003).

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On the contrary, there was a mismatch between this pro-democracy discourse and actions in reality. The Bush administration turned a blind eye to human rights violations and authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere in the Muslim world (Abootalebi, 2007: 427). Freedman suggests that 'emancipation was not the reason why the Bush administration went to [Iraq] war […] For Rumsfeld and Cheney, the war was about solving the Saddam problem rather than the Iraq problem, about bringing security rather than justice' (2006: 134).

Distancing itself from Bush's interventionist and tarnished legacy, the Obama administration returned to the traditional realist line of Middle Eastern policy. During the Arab uprisings, Obama stayed reluctant to side with the democratic uprising of Egypt until it became obvious that Mubarak could not continue (Gerges, 2013b). Also, his administration was 'reticent to support the [Bahraini uprising] because the Bahraini monarchy best serves U.S. regional interests' (Hughes, 2011). Likewise, during the Tunisian uprising, France supported Ben Ali 'right up to the moment he fled' (Chrisafis, 2011).

Not only was America pro-tyrants, but occasionally it moved against democratically elected regimes. For instance, in Iran, in 1953, the CIA was involved in a clandestine operation, codenamed *Operation Ajax*, to overthrow the elected prime minister of Iran and return the pro-America shah to his throne (Bill, 1988: 86-94). Also, when the Islamic Resistance Movement *Hamas* won the Palestinian elections in 2006, the 'US plotted to overthrow Hamas' government (Goldenberg, 2008).

A fair assessment of the Western role in Middle East might bring us back to Thomas Jefferson's observation on the world of his days: 'We believe no more in Bonaparte's fighting merely for the liberties of the seas than in Great Britain's fighting for the liberties of mankind. The object is the same, to draw to themselves the power, the wealth and the resources of other nations' (Chomsky, 2003).

Conclusion

Explaining the paradigm of democratisation in the Middle East is 'a complex business' (Bromley, 1997: 340). Throughout this essay, the main accounts for the region's democracy deficit have been classified into two main categories. Firstly, the Arab state's coercive apparatus which acts as a democratisation inhibitor. The existence of this apparatus intact and opposed to political change means that a democratic transition cannot be initiated at all, and herein lies the singularity, if any, of the Middle East. Secondly, this paper has refuted some fallacies regarding the incompatibility of Islamic or Arabic culture with democracy. In addition, it was argued that democratisation obstacles such as an inadequate literacy rate and socio-economic arrangements, the weakness of civil society and the Western support for the region's dictatorships rendered the region an infertile soil for democracy. Finally, despite the Arab uprisings' disappointing outcomes, and the democratisation problems in the region, there is still hope. This hope is incarnated in the revolutionary Tunisian march for a better future, in which Tunisia is stepping forward 'on its path to democracy, shattering stereotypes and setting an example for others to follow.' (Abdessalem, 2014).

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