

## **Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes**

*Oliver Schlumberger, ed.*

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The Middle East has long contended with the title of the region most lacking in democratic state structures, and while several countries endeavor to enforce a form of democracy, yet others preserve the frameworks that efficiently sustain their monarchies, revenue, and power status in the area. The twin questions of how and why democracy has proved elusive in the Middle East forms the crux of the collection of essays comprised within Schlumberger's tome: *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*.

Spanning Morocco to Oman, via Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, the authoritarian mode of governance is surveyed through an assessment of the durability of regimes, the role of Islamist political parties, intra-regime dynamics, and the economic aspects of political reform. Divided into four sections, the book's structure incorporates key elements of Arab authoritarianism: "State-Society Relations and Political Opposition," "The Regimes," "The Economy and the Polity," and "The International Arena." That the sections retain a subtle reluctance to address the link between the repressive capacities of Arab states and their longevity, as well as the concept that Islam is incompatible with democracy, is conspicuous, yet prudent. Far from rereading worn theories, the contributors provide fresh conceptual and comparative analyses of individual countries and the region on a wider level, in addition to prospects for the respective regimes.

Commencing with the socio-political aspect of authoritarianism, part 1 opens with Steven Heydemann's "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East." From the outset, Heydemann grapples with the complex issue of the endurance of authoritarianism in the region and whether the populist social pacts that currently characterize mass politics could be conducive to a participatory, democratic form of rule. From the factors that sustain authoritarianism to the enforcement that protects it, Ellen Lust-Okar's "The Management of Opposition: Formal Structures of Contestation and Informal Political Manipulation in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco" provides an excellent demonstration of artful manipulation by governments and opposition groups. The individual cases of Egypt and Morocco are subject to further empirical analysis in "Authoritarian Opposition and the

Politics of Challenge in Egypt” and “Islamist Inclusion and Regime Persistence: The Moroccan Win-Win Situation,” by Holger Albrecht and Eva Wegner, respectively. Albrecht, who focuses on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kifaya Movement in Egypt, presents a strong and cogent study that demonstrates both the reality and the mirage of political opposition parties as street politics and Islamist groups vie against each other and the Egyptian government.

Centering on the extent to which opposition groups are granted equal opportunities to engage in the formal political arena, Lust-Okar’s study affords a thorough analysis of the implications of the incumbents’ choices of institutions over participation on the dynamics of contestation, and the informal mechanisms utilized to strengthen or weaken opposition groups. By examining each country in turn, the case studies support and demonstrate the thrust of her argument, and it is the author’s candid approach toward contentious issues, as in the case of Jordan, that is particularly noteworthy:

Several cleavages in Jordanian society were kept just below the surface of politics, to be exacerbated and emphasized whenever increasing societal tensions served to reduce political pressures. The most notable was the division between Jordanians of East Bank and Palestinian origin. (p. 56)

This division was further exacerbated by the “Jordanian Likud” (*al-Likud al-Urdunni*), a Transjordanian right-wing nationalist movement whose active opposition to a permanent and equal role for Jordanians of Palestinian origin ensures that the political progress of Palestinian-Jordanians is rarely free from obstructions. Moreover, “[a] second division remained between Transjordanians of northern and southern origin. The king emphasized this division by implementing an obvious and consistent balancing act between the two regions” (p. 56). For Lust-Okar then, the regimes of Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco endure through either the fragmentation of opposition groups or the controlled promotion of peripheral radical opposition groups.

Part 2 holds four equally strong contributions by Peter Sluglett (“The Ozymandias Syndrome: Questioning the Stability of Middle Eastern Regimes”), Fred Lawson (“Intra-regime Dynamics, Uncertainty, and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Contemporary Arab World”), Daniela Pioppi (“Privatization of Social Services as a Regime Strategy: The Revival of Islamic Endowments [*Awqaf*] in Egypt”), and Marc Valeri, “State Building, Liberalization from Above, and Political Legitimacy in the Sultanate of

Oman”). While Sluglett questions the cases of authoritarianism in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya, he also casts a critical eye over the influence of external forces on the states’ various status quo predicaments. Yet it is Sluglett’s lucid analysis that lends a tone of urgency to the conclusions:

Egypt has been under martial law for nearly forty years; Libya may or may not be able to turn itself around after Qaddhafi’s decision to end his nuclear program; the instability of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, and its embryonic efforts to arrive at a post-Syrian national consensus were brought to a halt (if not derailed) by Israel’s war against Hizbullah less than a year later. Finally, for all the optimism expressed by commentators in the 1990s, the democratic initiatives undertaken by the rulers of the Gulf states do not look particularly impressive at the beginning of 2007. (p. 105)

Equally strong, the section’s concluding chapter analyzes how Oman’s Sultan Qaboos established legitimacy by initiating a process of nation-building. Having redefined cultural, political, and historical references, he has virtually rewritten history through a careful selection of events and periods relevant only to the new national heritage (*al-turath al-watani*). Accordingly, the history books in schools cover Omani history with a degree of negligence: “Twentieth century Oman is only skimmed over, leaving a black hole between the imperial nineteenth century under the al-Busa’idi dynasty and the nahda” (p. 145). While Valeri speculates on several motivations behind the initiative, the sultan’s desire to legitimize his paternalistic authority presents the most plausible argument. With a dash of anecdotes, the paper is singularly riveting owing to the compelling narrative and insight into an oft-neglected aspect of Middle Eastern society.

Part 3 boasts contributions spanning the economic and political sector, from Giacomo Luciani’s appraisal of the middle class (“Linking Economic and Politics Reform in the Middle East: The Role of the Bourgeoisie”) to Philippe Droz-Vincent’s survey of the military dimension (“From Politics to Economic Actors: The Changing Role of Middle Eastern Armies”). Part 4 comprises Mustapha K. Sayyid’s lament on the G8’s failure to promote democracy in the region: “International Dimensions of Middle Eastern Authoritarianism: The G8 and External Efforts at Political Reform.” The book ends with Paul Aarts’ satisfyingly informative study of “The Longevity of the House of Saud: Looking Outside the Box.”

While these essays address a plethora of aspects of Arab authoritarianism, the variety nevertheless reveals a dichotomy in terms of quality. While

certain papers are outstanding, others raise questions as to the validity of their argument. One such instance arises during a discussion of the measures taken by incumbent regimes to incorporate political reform (p. 3). While much space is given to the issue, in reality very little action has been taken in countries such as Syria and Jordan toward breaking down party hegemony and government corruption. Moreover, the assertion that political protest and pressure for political reform – both from domestic and external players – has been “long absent from the Middle Eastern scene” (p. 2) and reappeared as recently as 2005, thereby constituting a “signal that strong winds of change are blowing” (p. 2), smacks of implausibility. Mercifully, such episodes of weakness are outweighed by the feats of insight replete in the publication, rendering *Debating Arab Authoritarianism* a valuable and timely contribution to the study of regimes and regional politics.

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