

Middle East Centre public lecture

Democracy, Authoritarianism and Regime Change in the Arab World

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For decades—certainly since the fall of the Berlin wall, and for some among the older of us the wave of democratization in Latin American and southern Europe in the 1970s—those who study and care about it (not to say many of those who live there) have been puzzling over what had become known as the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab world.

The costs of the remarkable resistance to the global movement to freer, more transparent and more accountable government in the latter decades of the twentieth century were borne principally by several generations of citizens whose prospects were thwarted by government policy-making that was opaque, unresponsive, demeaning, and increasingly aimed at little more than the perpetuation of the regime.

Far less important in the larger scheme of things, but deeply irritating to those of us effected, was the isolation and marginalization of the region in conventional political science. The study of politics as we know it today in the United States and Europe reflects its origins in efforts in the late nineteenth century to understand, promote and protect democratic government. For American political science, where the study of American politics sets the standard for the science, this has been particularly marked, but even in Europe since at least the collapse of the Weimar Republic in Germany, the study of politics has been shaped by the desire to prevent the breakdown of democracy and to ensure its speedy restoration in the event that it fails. In many respects, the ideological struggle of the Cold War reinforced this democracy-centric science, since it discouraged taking seriously alternative regime types except in the search for those flaws and shortcomings in the countries behind the Iron Curtain that would permit democracy to prevail.

As a democrat, I am profoundly sympathetic to the normative biases of political science; as a scientist, however, I have been deeply frustrated by our inability—nay, unwillingness—to take authoritarianism seriously. The vast majority of human history has been organized in what we would now call authoritarian, or at least non-democratic, regimes—tribes, kingships, monarchies, empires, oligarchic city-states, slave republics. Scattered across the landscape of Egypt alone is evidence of millennia of remarkably powerful polities whose rulers were not even mere mortals, but the children of gods. Yet, these are all treated by political science as endearing (or, sometimes, grotesque) anachronisms, the realm of disciplines like history and anthropology, but not the responsibility of a science of politics.

But now that the Arab world seems to be shrugging off the shackles of anachronistic authoritarianism, does it even matter?

Yes, in some ways, for those of us who study the region, and for those of us who live there, it may be even more important than ever.

Shortly before he died several years ago, Charles Tilly published a small book called *Democracy* (2007), in which he argued that there are several reasons why we actually do need to know whether a country is democratic—and, by implication, what else it might be. Democracies behave differently, he said—they make alliances and break commitments, accept loans, offer credit and declare war in ways different from other kinds of regimes. So too the quality of life in a democracy is different, and the nature of political change is distinctive. On all these dimensions—understanding how they behave internationally, how they evolve and how they treat their own citizens—being able to characterize not just democracies but other, different kinds of regimes would be enormously valuable to scientists and policymakers alike.

And in fact, the Arab Uprising of 2011 gives us an opportunity not simply to celebrate the first genuine efforts at democratization in the Arab world—and let me be clear, I think, with some qualifications that will become clear shortly, these are developments to be welcomed, celebrated, embraced and supported—but an occasion to examine exactly why and how the varied nature of authoritarian regimes is important to understanding political change. Common causes—widespread protests—have already produced very varied effects in government responses, and we should be able to say why. What intervening variables, if you will, account for these different outcomes?

Permit me a minute or two in the technicalities of typologizing. As it is typically used in political science, a *regime* is the set of rules, cultural or social norms that regulate the operation of government and its interactions with society, including how its incumbents are selected. The *government* itself is those incumbents and the policies associated with them. In the United States we call what most Europeans call the government the administration, as in the “Obama administration.” The US and the UK are democratic regimes—slightly different versions, let it be said, as the US is a presidential system and the UK parliamentary—and the current governments are those associated with Barack Obama and David Cameron.

All of the regimes about which we are concerned are devices designed to produce and regulate the government of a modern *state*, and for that, we will borrow Max Weber's definition—a political unit is a state, “if and insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim on the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of violence in the enforcement of its order.”

Typically, these three layers of political organization are distinguishable—Morocco, for example, has been a relatively stable state for centuries, recognized, if sometimes grudgingly, by those who live there for its monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Its regime is a more or less absolutist monarchy, and its government is selected by the king, largely these days from an elected parliament. Sometimes the distinction is less clear. Saudi Arabia, for example, is a state defined—as you can tell by its name—by a family, and whether it is the family or a separable state that upholds a claim to the legitimate use of force is not altogether clear. That family provides the principal incumbents of government through the mechanism of a quasi-monarchical regime.

Most discussions of democracy as a regime type are predicated on the assumption that the state is not a matter of contention—and in North America and Europe, that is by and large a reasonable assumption. In the Arab world, however, as the Saudi instance suggests, the state as the organizing principle of politics is not uncontested—and certainly the states currently arrayed across the map do not necessarily all enjoy recognition as legitimate sources of law and order. The Syrian Ba'th Party's continuing rhetorical attachment to Arab nationalism, the ongoing ambiguity of the status of Palestine (and hence of the states in which large numbers of Palestinians live), and the refusal of the Libyan ruler to acknowledge his status as a head of state—he is, as he insists, the leader of a revolution—all illustrate in various ways the continuing dispute about the state and its representatives in the region.

In 1975, in his magisterial synthesis, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Juan J. Linz attempted to develop a typology of regimes, and it remains the standard for such efforts to this day. He began his synthetic essay with the revealing observation that

“one of the easiest ways to define a concept is to say what it is not. To do this obviously assumes that we know what something else is, so that we can say that our concept is not the same. Here we shall start from the assumption that we know what democracy is and center our attention on all the political systems that do not fit our definition of democracy...we shall deal here with nondemocratic systems.”(2000; 51)

The preoccupation with democracy as the standard and measure—the “norm” of politics—is not difficult to discern. For Linz, a totalitarian regime was like democracy in that “citizen participation in and active mobilization for political and collective social tasks are encouraged, demanded, rewarded...” but in other respects, totalitarianism was the *opposite* of democracy—it was institutionally and structurally monistic rather than pluralistic, and, far from the free-wheeling marketplace of ideas that characterized democratic competition, “there is an exclusive, autonomous... ideology...” (70) In other words, totalitarianism turned

democracy on its head, almost mocking the American commitment to what Philippe Schmitter called, in another influential typology, the “multiple, voluntary, competitive, nonhierarchically ordered and self-determined categories” of pluralist participation. (Schmitter 1974, 96)

If totalitarianism was democracy’s perverse antithesis, the two regimes shared one important feature: they were both modern. Not all contemporary regimes were and Linz felt constrained to briefly acknowledge “traditional authority and personal rulership” in his essay. These were the residue of “the small and diminishing number of Third World traditional political systems...” (145)

Having distinguished the distinctly modern from the purely traditional, and shown totalitarianism to be the modern perversion of democracy, Linz was left with everything else, all the other regimes in the world that fit into none of these categories, and these he called “authoritarian.” Authoritarianism was, in fact, a residual category, defined almost completely what was missing: “political systems with *limited, not* responsible, political pluralism, *without* elaborate and guiding ideology... *without* intensive nor extensive political mobilization except at some points in the development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally *ill-defined* limits but actually quite predictable ones.” (159).

The hope that there is something “actually quite predictable” in regimes that were “ill-defined,” “non-ideological,” “neither intensive nor extensive,” and indeed, even “occasional” led Linz to attempt to develop a typology of this subset of regimes itself. He distinguished “bureaucratic-military authoritarianism,” “organic statism,” “postdemocratic” and “postindependence mobilizational authoritarianism,” “post-totalitarian authoritarianism,” “racial and ethnic ‘democracies,’” and a variety of other “‘defective’ and ‘pretotalitarian’ political situations and regimes.” This list was less a typology than an inventory, and in some important respects it was an admission of failure.

It is certainly true that there are common elements in most non-democratic policy settings. In general, information is scarce. Hence the proliferation of rumor, innuendo, conspiracy theory—there are few ways to reliably verifying claims.

Since discussion and debate are, typically restricted, the absence of reliable information is not as noticeable it might be, but the tendency to make outrageous claims is. Political actors who know they will never be held accountable can say pretty much anything they want: the Muslim Brotherhood can claim that Islam is the solution; the Egyptian National Democratic Party can call itself democratic; the Leader of the Libyan revolution can describe himself thusly and characterize his opponents as cockroaches with little fear of contradiction.

Political action is also restricted to authorized vehicles, groups, institutions. This, combined with the lack of widely disseminated information, tends to reduce policy debate and amplify corruption, since policy decisions are shaped by proximity to those with access rather than rational deliberation.

And finally, of course, compliance is not born of acquiescence, much less understanding, but of intimidation and fear, or at least resignation. Even here, though, you see the weapons of the weak. (My favorite is the ongoing battle over garbage disposal—an uncontroversial policy domain, one might think—throughout much of the Arab world. The mutual contempt of government and citizen is rarely so eloquently conveyed as in the casual littering of the citizen and the ineffectual collection of the public authorities that produces debris-strewn landscapes across the region.)

But for all their similarities, we have made little progress in identifying the crucial features of authoritarian regimes. There is no systematic, scientific typology, no universally-accepted dimensions upon the world's regimes are arrayed—there was only democracy, its perversion, and its absence—and the recent enthusiasm for “hybrid” regimes merely carries this ambiguity into the twenty-first century (eg Levitsky and Way). Political science continues to be marked by its pre-Copernican conviction that democracy is the center of the political universe. Normative commitments have distorted scientific standards.

Perhaps, as is so often the case, we are better served by literature and by Tolstoy's famous observation that in fact, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” (*Anna Karenina*) Our authoritarian regimes—or at least the bulk of their citizens—may all be unhappy, but in very different ways and, as I hope to show, exactly how will matter a great deal for the outcome of the processes of political change we witness today in the Arab world.

Let me now look at this change in more detail.

Starting in mid-December, when the Tunisian vegetable vendor, Mohammad Bouazizi, set himself on fire in a display of helpless, hopeless frustration at government harassment, almost every country in the Arab world saw protests. Bouazizi's act was copied in Algeria, Jordan, Egypt; peaceful demonstrations, marches and rallies, starting with protests against corruption, police brutality and high food prices, escalated to calls for changes of policies in Saudi Arabia, Oman, of governments in Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and ultimately of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria—virtually no country was exempt, and no government unscathed. By mid-June, the governments of Algeria and Saudi Arabia had announced major infusions of money, including across-the-board wage increases, the cabinets in Jordan and Morocco had been sacked, the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia had fallen, Libya had slid into civil war, Yemen was in limbo after the evacuation of the president for medical treatment after he was injured in a bombing; Syria was confronting a brutal crackdown by its government.

There were certainly common themes in all of them.

Yes, the new information and communications technologies, especially the social media, were important in fueling and disseminating the protests. In obvious ways, they permitted access to information about

the way people live elsewhere in the world, and they permitted organization and communication among and across protesters within and beyond the borders of each country.

Perhaps more subtly, these technologies also empowered a generation who had become accustomed years ago to being more tech-savvy, and hence, in modest but significant ways, more knowledgeable and authoritative, than their parents. The young people of the Arab world are not only a large proportion of the population, as we know—this is, after all, the “youth bulge”—but their experience of growing up is qualitatively different from that of their parents. This generational cohort taught themselves and then their parents to use these technologies and in doing so assumed a kind of responsibility for themselves and their families that their parents had not borne at their age. Fifteen years ago there were no mobile phones in Egypt, and as any of you who ever visited the country then, the inadequacy of the telephone network was a regular staple of the fabled Egyptian humor. Ten years ago, there were a million mobile phones and today, in a country of 85 million people, there are 65 million mobile phones. It is, of course, the youth of the country who grew up with this technology, and who taught their parents how it worked. Their impatience and frustration at being unable to deploy the information they can access, the knowledge they have acquired, and the responsibility they have shouldered goes a long way to explain the millions of young people who continue to militate for more open, transparent and accountable government.

This is reflected in another common theme. Although in many places, economic grievances played an important role in the early mobilizations, by and large these were liberal, participatory, deliberative revolts... almost reminiscent of the “liberal, democratic revolutions” of nineteenth century Europe. That is, they are about demands for citizenship. The nearly universally complacent, unresponsive and often contemptuous policies and positions of the governments produced a nearly universal response: demands for effective citizenship, personal agency and government accountability. Hence the remarkable accent on dignity.

And in this many of the aspiring citizens surprised even themselves: the community watches that sprang up in the wake of the still mysterious but, as it turned out, very valuable and instructive withdrawal of the police in Egypt not only demonstrated that Egypt was not on the brink of chaos, as the government had argued, but that ordinary citizens across the country—not just the protestors in Tahrir Square, Suez and Alexandria—would be able to take responsibility for, and indeed wanted to take control of, their own neighborhood, and by extension, their own country. This desire to participate, to be useful and productive members of society, was apparent throughout the country, in the young men who staffed the overnight community watch committees and manned the spontaneous roadblocks set up to protect residents from prisoners released when the police vanished. For the first time, neighbors of all social classes came out of their politically imposed isolation and got to know each other, and the young people at the barricades enjoyed the acknowledgement, respect and gratitude of those they protected. This experience of new

networks of trust marks a qualitative and permanent change in the conception and experience of citizenship on the part of many ordinary Egyptians, and it is not unique to Egypt.

So, if there were common elements—elements, it may be apparent, which I find cause for great optimism about the outcome of these movements in many places—there have been very different trajectories and, already, very different outcomes in the “Arab Uprisings.” Why?

Here we return to my “unhappy families” of authoritarianism. Although they are all unhappy in their own way, there are patterns. Two, possibly three, characteristics seem to bode well for regime survival.

1. Governments that control large revenue streams that are independent of local labor are able to diffuse or control opposition. That is, governments in rentier states, such as the large oil and gas exporting countries of the region, may distribute resources so as to both bolster acquiescence and strengthen coercion, thereby surviving political protest. Where there is no taxation, enhanced distribution appears to divert calls for greater political representation. This was the approach for regimes as otherwise diverse as Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Oman. Obviously, however, Libya’s counter-example, suggests this cannot be the only factor.
2. Timing is important, and quick decisive responses to protestors’ demands enhanced the prospect for regime survival. One of the striking features of events in Tunisia, Egypt Yemen and Libya was how slowly and maladroitly the rulers responded to the initial protests. Had they made the concessions they eventually made even a week or so earlier, all three of these presidents would probably still be in office, and Qaddafi would not be under siege in Tripoli. The relative alacrity of the responses of the kings of Jordan, Morocco and Oman in sacking their cabinets and promising further reforms seemed to stave off, and possibly diffuse altogether, more serious calls for the downfall of the regime.
3. Monarchy may be a useful device by which rulers can distance themselves from the failings of their policies, salvaging the regime by dismissing the government. This hypothesis is widely cited to explain the ability of the kings of Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman to weather protests that seems to have capsized presidents elsewhere, although the first two factors—the availability of resources to the governments and the agility of the ruler--confound this argument to some extent, as Algeria suggests.

But what of those regimes that fell, or seem to be collapsing? We have also to account for the relative ease with which the Egyptians and Tunisians were able to slip out from under their governments to begin building new regimes, while the Libyans and Yemenis seem to be fighting long and as yet inconclusive civil wars, and the Syria’s citizens face a brutal onslaught from their own rulers.

This leads us to another set of hypotheses, which link the regime not simply to his revenues and rulers but with the state over which it presides.

4. In countries where affiliation to the state is widespread and clear cut, discarding the regime is relatively unthreatening—no Egyptian or Tunisian worries that his passport will be devalued or his right to live in his country will be challenged should the president resign and the constitution be rewritten.
5. In countries where the state is weak—where it does not enjoy a monopoly on violence or where the legitimacy of that monopoly is widely contested—regime change entails state collapse. In Libya, one of the few features of life all Libyans share is their passport, and it displays the name of a country—the Socialist Libyan Arab People's Jamahiriyyah—to which very few feel any affinity or loyalty. Thus, the breakdown of the regime has triggered a collapse of the state apparatus, which in turn provoked political opportunism and alliance-building that may or may not be sustainable. Similarly, in Yemen, where the authority of tribal leaders routinely trumps that of the putative central government, the fall of the regime removes the device by which the tribes had negotiated their relations.
6. In countries where the project of the regime *is* state-building, the identity of the regime is so closely tied to that of the state itself that efforts to dislodge the regime are interpreted as a challenge to the state itself. Here the regime and its allies are better equipped than their weak state counterparts; they have built at least some of the elements of a modern state—a strong standing army, for example, and a public bureaucracy. Unlike the regimes in strong states, however, where the militaries are loyal not to the regime but the state itself, these state-building regimes have more resources and their supporters have more to lose should the regime fall and the state building project be reversed. Hence, they are likely to be quite brutal in suppressing opposition—as we see in Syria (and, I would argue, we saw in Algeria in the 1990s).

So, the nature of the authoritarian regime *does* matter as we try to understand, explain or perhaps even predict what happens in regime change.

Authoritarian regimes, in their relatively low premium on institutions for consultation and deliberation, amplify the importance of the ruler, and remind us that the distribution of political agility and skill—on the part of rulers particularly, as they select their trusted advisors and develop a rhythm of decision-making, but also in their advisors and opponents as well—is an important component of political change.

Authoritarian regimes dispose of different kinds of revenue bases, and these can be crucial in determining their ability to respond to popular demands.

Authoritarian regimes have different legitimacy formulae, and rulers who can distance themselves from their governments—as is often the case of kings—may have opportunities to respond to popular demands for change that permit regime survival.

Authoritarian regimes may reflect, and obscure, very different kinds of states. Strong states permit regime change to take place relatively peacefully and efficiently.

Weak states collapse as their regimes fall.

Threats to regimes in states-in-information may pose existential threats to governments with relatively high levels of control over military resources, and hence provoke particularly brutal responses.

What does this all mean for the Arab Uprisings of 2011? There is ample reason for great optimism in Egypt and Tunisia. Strong states, populations with robust identities as citizens, and increasingly experienced and agile political actors bode well for a successful—if difficult—regime change and the building of sustainable institutions of more open, transparent and accountable government. The amplified importance of individual skill in circumstances of weak institutions does heighten the contingent quality of some of the specific outcomes: the skills of the members of the government, the military leadership, the protest organizers and public intellectuals will shape some of the process, including its speed and its institutional results. Nonetheless, these are transitions that have every reason to work, and they will be managed domestically.

For the countries facing state collapse, particularly Libya, the longer the stalemated civil wars go on, the more difficult reconstruction becomes, as non-state identities are forged and strengthened in battle, while civic relationships are suspended and eroded in wartime. Tribal and regional networks shift and shrink, political opportunism is reinforced as a survival strategy, and mistrust grows, not only between government supporters and opponents but among and within the general population. At the end of the war, however it ends, the rebuilding of the state apparatus, and the construction of a regime that can take responsibility for its functioning, will very likely require international assistance—and its recipients are likely to mistrust and resent offers of such assistance.

For the regimes that are constructing states—and this includes not only Syria, but also Algeria and Iraq, which both saw ample violence in the last twenty years and hence may not be in a position to be quite as draconian today—the international community will be confronted far more starkly than they have in Libya with the challenge of taking seriously their rhetorical commitment to a “responsibility to protect” populations at risk from their own governments.

So, as Charles Tilly reminded us, there are good reasons to think that the nature of the regime shapes how states operate internationally, what the quality of life in the polity is like and how political change takes place. On all these dimensions—understanding how they behave internationally, how they treat their own citizens, and how they evolve—understanding how the Arab Uprisings will evolve requires that we take authoritarianism seriously.