Introduction

Five years after the uprisings that swept through the Arab republics in 2011, it is hard to argue that the people in these countries are faring any better than before, except in the case of Tunisia. All eight republics – Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen – have long been characterized as authoritarian regimes. This book seeks to deepen our understanding of the authoritarianism and coercive systems that prevailed in these countries, and such knowledge is also critical to making a successful transition to a more open and free society.

The failure and collapse of countries such as Libya or Yemen, and Syria's protracted civil war, suggest that the demise of authoritarianism in the region is perhaps remote. Western observers' misunderstanding of the uprisings was partly due to their lack of awareness of how authoritarian regimes operated. Many were propelled by a wave of enthusiasm that engulfed not only local people but also scholars and commentators. A salutary lesson can be drawn from the continuing research into Latin American and Eastern European regimes where authoritarianism has been perpetuated in spite of their apparent transition to democracy. This underlines the importance of detailed and accurate analysis of the inner workings of these powerful and pervasive systems.

When researching my previous book (*Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime*), which was based on the archives of the Ba'th Party regime in Iraq (which ruled from 1968 to 2003), I kept asking whether the other Arab republics were similar or not to Iraq and to each other. To answer that question, I would ideally have to examine the archives of other authoritarian Arab regimes. Unfortunately, they are inaccessible to any researcher. Consequently, I turned to memoirs written by those who were embedded in the system: political leaders, ministers, generals, security agency chiefs, party members, and businessmen close to the center of power. I also examined memoirs of people who were on the outside: political opponents of these regimes

and political prisoners. I hoped that a combination of the two groups – insiders and outsiders – would help in the endeavor to learn about the coercive tyrannies of the Arab world in spite of being unable to tap into their closed archives. Secrecy was, of course, the norm in these regimes and dissent was severely punished, so reliable information is not readily available. As Lisa Anderson explains, one of the dimensions of autocracy is that "neither rulers nor their subjects have reliable access" to information that would allow proper decision making.[1] Memoirs, however, can partially bridge the gap by revealing the inner functioning of organizations such as the military or the security forces. Even more importantly, we gain insights into the thinking of the leaders of these countries and their relations with their associates.

This book addresses a myriad of questions. How did the different regimes operate? What was the role of the ruling party in countries with a multi-party system, like Tunisia and Egypt? To what extent were repression and violence used, and how did the security services control opposition and co-opt other influential groups such as labor and student unions? How was the executive branch structured, and how were decisions made? Was Saddam Hussein's personality cult similar to or different from that of Hafiz al-Asad in Syria or Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia? How did economic planning differ? And how did these regimes tackle their economic problems?

The book is thematic, rather than allocating a chapter to each republic. It does not intend to be a historical review of events, but zooms in on certain episodes and trends through the prism of memoirs. It begins in 1952 with the Egyptian Revolution and ends with the Arab uprisings of 2011, with a final chapter devoted to the difficult process of transition from authoritarianism that began after 2011.

The monarchies of the Arab world, like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, and other Gulf countries, are excluded for several reasons. First, it would have been too ambitious to include them all in one book. Second, in some monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, political parties do not exist, and it is very problematic to compare their government structure to the republics. Finally, while numerous political

[1] Lisa Anderson, "Authoritarian Legacies and Regime Change: Towards Understanding Political Transition in the Arab World," in Fawaz A. Gerges (ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 48.

memoirs have been written in Morocco and Jordan, few have emerged from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

Among the Arab republics, Lebanon was not covered because of its particular political structure, and it lacks many of the elements of authoritarian Arab regimes. Palestine was also not included, since most of the country still toils under occupation, and while aspects of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) are similar to other republics, it is nevertheless an anomaly. Iran, an obviously authoritarian republic, is excluded because it is not an Arab state, and its political system is somewhat unique compared to those of its regional neighbors.

Certain disciplines, such as anthropology and literature, have drawn widely on memoirs from the region, yet memoirs are less commonly used as a primary source in modern history and politics, especially in studies of the Arab world. Historians of other regions have been quicker to recognize the value of memoirs as a primary source. Given the lack of archival sources in the Arab world, however, memoirs could become an essential tool in our study of these countries. Significantly, the governments that came to power in Tunisia after the fall of Ben 'Ali in 2011 refused to open the national archives, fearing that this could lead to upheavals in the country. One report indicated that files were burnt in several Tunisian ministries. In Libya, the archives are still supposedly intact; it is not clear which side controls them.[2] Even in those authoritarian countries around the world that have opened their archives, as in Russia, scholars regularly complement their work by poring over memoirs to examine the undercurrents in society and how those who were on the inside (or outside) perceived the regime.

Because excellent work has already been published about the Arab world and authoritarianism, to a certain extent this allows us the "luxury" of studying memoirs to complete the picture of political history. The present book draws on more than 120 memoirs from the eight republics, as well as recently published testimonies from Tunisia. These testimonies, which began to be collected after the uprising there, give remarkable insights into the hidden world of prisons and torture endured by the many opponents of the previous regime, regardless of their political or

[2] 'Abd al-Jalil al-Tamimi (ed.), *Dawr al-qasr al-ri'asi fi al-nizam al-Nufimbiri* [The role of the presidential palace in the November regime] (Tunis: Tamimi Foundation for Scientific Research and Information, April 2014), no. 41, pp. 15–16. The November regime refers to November 1987 when Ben 'Ali took over the presidency in a bloodless coup.

religious beliefs. No doubt there are memoirs that I have either missed or could not access, but among those that I read, the all-important questions I addressed are who wrote them, when and where they were published, and who their primary audience was. For instance, questions about the reason why so many Egyptian generals wrote their memoirs will be addressed in a number of chapters to underline the actual significance of publishing their memoirs. In addition, a large assortment of scholarly studies in Arabic, English, and French have supplemented this study.

There is no doubt that memoirs have significant drawbacks, and these are detailed in Chapter 1. Many were written after their well-placed authors had left their positions, and sometimes their country. What authors of memoirs remember, and why, changes over time, and all these aspects are shaped by the politics of memory. Regrettably, the memoirs studied here are not divided equally among the eight countries. From Sudan we have very few, while from Egypt there is an abundance from a parade of political actors. Needless to say, the book to some extent reflects this, but I have attempted to compensate by taking a thematic approach.

I have chosen to focus primarily on how authoritarian systems operated internally within each of the eight republics. Many memoirs are centered on major events such as wars or peace negotiations, and relations with the United States or the Soviet Union. Interesting as these topics are, they shed little light on internal dynamics. Also, these memoirs do not explore the role of the superpowers in the region in strengthening the durability of the regimes internally.

Other limitations of this collection of memoirs have affected the content of this book. For example, very few women in politics wrote memoirs or were written about. This is due, in large part, to their exclusion from key positions of power. In contrast, many biographies of "famous women" were published in the twentieth century celebrating their achievements, but unfortunately they do not fit the scope of this book.[3] Second, almost no memoirs of labor movement members or student union leaders were found that focus on authoritarianism and its implications for these movements. As a result, I could not examine issues of gender, education, or labor in great depth, and these are

[3] For a comprehensive study of these biographies, see Marilyn Booth, *May her Likes be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

mentioned only when referred to by authors. Regrettably, a project such as this cannot encompass every major aspect of authoritarian systems or how all segments of society were profoundly affected.

The history of authoritarianism in these eight republics stretches back before 1952.[4] As provinces of the Ottoman Empire they suffered from tyranny, and then, as colonies of the British, French, and Italians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all were governed by authoritarian systems. When they became independent republics, they inherited remnants of despotism as well as limited institutional capacity. Many scholars have analyzed the problems of authoritarianism in the region in eloquent terms. Prominent among them was ʻAbd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1848–1902), a Syrian official and journalist who vehemently opposed Sultan ʻAbd al-Hamid, one of the most tyrannical rulers of the Ottoman Empire. In a short but succinct treatise titled *The Characteristics of Despotism and the Death of Enslavement*, al-Kawakibi discusses the various implications of despotism. He details the intertwining of tyranny on the one hand, and wealth and corruption on the other, and does not mince his words:

> If tyranny were a man who wanted to talk about himself, he would say: "I am evil, my father is injustice, my mother is offense, my brother is treachery, my sister is misery, my father's brother is harm, my mother's brother is humiliation, my son is poverty, my daughter is unemployment, my homeland is ruin, and my clan is ignorance, my country is destruction. As for my religion, honor and life they are money, money, money!"[5]

Al-Kawakibi addresses his essay to the youth, so they could learn about the far-reaching impact of tyranny before it is too late, "before despotism annihilates the last remnants of vitality in them." Fearing reprisal, he says that his booklet is not about a particular ruler but is a discussion of a general phenomenon. (This theme recurs in many of the memoirs studied here, even those published long after the rulers have died or been ousted.) Written more than a century ago, al-Kawakibi's emphasis on the

[4] For a survey of authoritarianism in the Arab world, see Zuhair Farid Mubarak, *Usul al-istibdad al-ʻArabi* [The origins of Arab despotism] (Beirut: al-Intishar, 2010).

[5] ʻAbd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, *Taba'iʻ al-istibdad wa masariʻ al-istiʻbad* [The nature of tyranny and struggle against enslavement] (Cairo: Iqra' Foundation, 2013), p. 64. Translation of the quote is from Sami A. Hanna and George H. Gardner, *Arab Socialism: A Documentary Survey* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1969), p. 218.

importance of good governance and the destructive effects of despotism apply equally today to many of the eight republics. He discusses the connection of despotism with religion, science, glory, wealth, morality, education, and progress. Each chapter of his book details those interactions; for instance, he argues that "political despotism is inseparably tied to religious despotism," and that "despots, assisted by the clergy, take on for the common people the powers, attributes, and the very names of God."[6] Defining despotism, he asserts that it is dehumanizing and demoralizes a whole society, and adds: "It is unaccountable, unlimited, arbitrary, self-serving, and exclusive rule. It is served by the coercive military power of the ruler and the incapacitating ignorance of the ruled."[7] In fact, al-Kawakibi's treatise is an excellent introduction to authoritarianism in the Arab world. He manages to cover all the main features of tyrannical rule and its devastating effects on both the individual and society.

Authoritarianism is not solely a product of the Arab region or entrenched in its culture. Many revolutionaries around the world, from Mao in China to Kenyatta in Kenya, never fulfilled their promises of equality or democracy, and after coming to power they were mostly interested in staying there. Many of the characteristics and policies of authoritarian Arab regimes were learned or copied from other regimes, beginning with the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and continuing with the military dictatorships of Latin America and Asia.

Time and again, the role of the leadership and the centrality of decision making by the presidents are emphasized here. But as two scholars put it: "The declaration of absolutism, however, is never true. No leader, no matter how august or revered, no matter how cruel or vindictive, ever stands alone."[8] Hence, apart from focusing on leadership, the book looks at the other main components of authoritarianism: party, military, security services, and an economic cronyism that is dependent on the leadership.

Needless to say, there is a wide variety in history, politics, and economics among these countries, but the book strives, first of all, to find

[6] Al-Kawakibi, *Taba'i' al-istibdad*, pp. 24–40. Translation was taken from Khaldun S. al-Husry, *Three Reformers: A Study in Modern Arab Political Thought* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966), p. 63. For an interesting discussion of al-Kawakibi's book and views, see pp. 55–112.

[7] See Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 37.

[8] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 2.

common features or dissimilarities. Second, I examine the role of coercive organizations such as the military and security services, and whether that role changed over time. Third, I explore what kinds of institutions were established and what their legacies are going forward. Obviously, this is very pertinent to the chances of a successful transition from despotism. Fourth, I raise the more hypothetical question of whether authoritarian rule might return to these republics. Will institutions like the oppressive security services continue to act as before, and will the new leaders reinstate a cult of personality to serve their needs and ambitions? By investigating an extensive collection of memoirs and testimonies from across these countries, the book will answer those questions judging from how those on the inside (and to some extent from the outside) perceived these systems and described their functionality.

The book will argue that the eight republics have far more in common than was previously envisaged. Variation in degrees of repression or denial of freedoms is an important distinction among them, but does not alter the final picture. Attitudes toward violence differed; some countries engaged in public hangings or assassination of political opponents, while others abstained from such activities. However, all the republics used systematic torture in their prisons, and the structure of their coercive apparatuses did not differ much. The systems of repression they created or "strengthened" after coming to power were quite comparable; all penetrated their societies by planting informants at every level, including in the high echelons of power to ensure the loyalty of the elites. Leadership was characterized by its centrality, and the decision-making process was in the hands of the leader with a small cohort of advisers. But it would be a mistake to imagine that these regimes could sustain power for such a long period without the critical assistance, to varying degrees, of ruling parties, security services, and the military. Economic management varied widely among those countries, but all leaders ensured that their economic cronies and networks of support would continue to support the regimes in return for financial benefits.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 discusses political memoirs as a source of information for studying the Arab world. It looks at memory and interrelated issues, and appraises the positives and negatives of studying these relatively neglected memoirs for political analysis of the region. In a general manner, the different genres of memoirs are categorized. The lack of personal diaries in the region was striking, and is

surely due to the state of fear that prevailed. Understanding the reasons for writing memoirs, the expectations of their authors in publishing them, and what they included or omitted are all important in understanding the personalities of these political actors.

Chapter 2 deals with the ruling party and governance from the perspective of these memoirists. Some of these republics, such as Iraq and Syria, had a one-party system, while others, like Egypt and Tunisia, had multi-party systems. But there were also countries like Libya, whose leadership annulled political parties and parliament and created its own unique system. Through the memoirs of party members, parliamentary opponents, and ministers, the chapter analyzes the substantial role of ruling parties in perpetuating the regimes. While the triangular relationship between the leadership, the party, and the bureaucracy differed from one republic to another, the overall structure of governance did not vary widely, except in the case of Libya.

Chapter 3 focuses on one of the core organizations in authoritarian regimes: the military, which had been a vital factor in the histories of these nations since they gained their independence from the colonial powers Britain, France, and Italy. Most of the leaders had a military background, to which they remained connected. Military conflicts and civil wars had immense political ramifications for these republics, except in Tunisia, whose leadership managed to keep the army out of politics. Armed conflicts allowed the authoritarian regimes to stay in power longer by rallying the population around them and subjugating their opposition. Yet in spite of the prominence of the military, this chapter will convey how, once the military leaders became presidents, their relationship with the military was not always harmonious. An insight is gained by looking at the lives and careers of military officers through the memoirs they authored, which mostly indicated the cohesiveness of these institutions.

Chapter 4 dwells on the role of the security services, which were a cornerstone in establishing these regimes and ensuring their durability. Heads of security services in almost all the republics wrote memoirs, mostly to justify their actions. Once again we find many common characteristics. Among them was the fact that all the regimes, without exception, used imprisonment, torture, and trials as a means of coercing the opposition in all its shapes and forms. Furthermore, all these regimes feared the influence of religion and felt threatened by religious movements. Memoirs of political prisoners portray the extreme suffering of anyone who opposed or was suspected of opposing the regime, and document the

extent of violence meted out to opponents and their extended families. The chapter also reveals how these societies were deeply penetrated by informants, whose numbers swelled dramatically in most republics. While the mass of information they gathered was colossal, this did not guarantee that it was properly analysed or efficiently used; a case in point was the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat, where the information was available but the follow-up was flawed.

Chapter 5 discusses economy and finance. It is clear from memoirs that economic issues were not high on the leaders' agenda unless facing a crisis. The majority of leaders focused on staying in power, and decisions related to military and foreign affairs were far more important in their eyes. Hence, most memoirs only delved slightly into economic issues, but they still convey information about decision making and the role of certain prominent businessmen. One feature was that leaders in most of these republics were not interested in stemming corruption. Corruption began to gather momentum in the late 1970s, and became embedded in the political and bureaucratic systems of these countries, which in turn benefited the economic elites and strengthened their alliance with the political leadership.

Chapter 6 analyzes leadership and the cult of personality. Leaders of the Arab republics shared many personality traits, particularly those who held power for a long time. Each had a deep belief in himself and in his elevated role toward his country and people. Many believed they were carrying a divine *risala* (message) to their people. As they were surrounded mostly by yes-men and sycophants, this conviction intensified over time. Escaping assassination attempts and overcoming internal resistance strengthened their determination and self-belief. Memoirs clearly highlight another common characteristic: the lack of trust in anyone or anything. While the leaders demanded utter loyalty from those close to them, and cherished it, they were not always loyal to their friends or to those who helped them early in their careers. For instance, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi, and Saddam Hussein removed most of the men who were alongside them when they assumed power.

Biographies and autobiographies of leaders underline that they changed with time. Events such as wars impacted them; assassination attempts and betrayals by those close to them changed their views and attitudes. Several became old and sick, which altered their behavior and decision making. Many observers overlook the contribution of the cult of personality to leadership, or accord it little weight, but the

evidence is that this was, and remains, an important tool in the political armory of authoritarianism and was skillfully used by some leaders. It placed them above recrimination or reproach and made it extremely hard to resist their ideas or decisions.

The final chapter addresses the burning issues that continue to confront these republics on their troubled path of transitioning from authoritarianism post-2011. Because only a few memoirs discuss this, the chapter engages in comparisons with other parts of the world to understand this process. For Tunisia, the only country that is truly undergoing a transition, I interviewed senior people from the previous regime, as well as current politicians, academics, and businesspeople to gain an insight into current issues and challenges. The chapter examines three facets of transition: governance and state–religion relations; economic problems and corruption; and confronting the past. The chapter also asks if Iraq after 2003 could become a case study of post-authoritarianism among these republics. I argue that in spite of the vast differences between Iraq and the other republics that witnessed uprisings, lessons can still be learned from Iraq post-Saddam Hussein. Comparative studies show that when political change is not accompanied by substantial economic change, there is a risk of reversion on the political front, as old vested interests can regain control over the political process.

As for dealing with the history of these regimes, it is argued here that genuine transition cannot take place unless there is reconciliation with the past. The coercive security apparatus that existed in the Arab region, not dissimilar from other parts of the world, has to be analyzed and understood. The testimonies of political prisoners recently collected and published in Tunisia augur well for its future in that regard. It has become clear that the scars of the past that remain after decades of tyranny and terror cannot be obliterated or ameliorated until we more fully comprehend the complexities of these despotic and damaging regimes.

Finally, it is hoped that this book will encourage other researchers to make greater use of memoirs in understanding the anatomy of authoritarianism in the Arab states, at least until their archives are made available.