

Introduction and Summary

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In a previous work, based on both cross-country research and case studies of individual Arab countries (Elbadawi and Makdisi 2011), the editors of this volume explored various economic, political, social and historic factors that may explain the persistence of a general democracy deficit in the Arab region. Taking it as a framework for analysing long-term cross-country differences in the standards of democracy, rather than as a theory of political transition the modernisation hypothesis was deployed as a benchmark model for analysing the Arab democracy deficit relative to the counterfactual consistent with its level of development, as well as for testing hypotheses that might explain the persistence of this deficit.

Very briefly summarised, the evidence from the cross-country model (for details refer to Elbadawi and Makdisi 2011) showed that for the Arab region as a whole, while the extended ‘modernity’ variables (e.g. income, education, neighbour polity, female participation in the labour force) are important determinants of democracy in the long run, they fail to explain why the Arab democracy deficit persisted relative to other regions. Other possible explanatory factors included past colonial rule, ethnic fractionalisation and religion. Colonial rule has certainly had a negative impact (a preponderance of Arab countries became authoritarian immediately after independence), but does not furnish evidence for the entrenchment of Arab autocracy. Ethnic fractionalisation increases regime instability, whether autocratic or democratic. However, the results imply that ethnic fractionalisation does not seem to have influenced to any substantial degree the democratisation process in the Arab region. It is noteworthy that religion did not emerge as a factor promoting autocracy in the Arab world.

What in large measure seemed to explain the entrenchment of Arab authoritarianism, as a region-wide phenomenon, was the twin emergence of abundant oil wealth in a region that is not yet democratic (the oil curse effect) and a highly conflictual environment (frequent home and regional wars as well as the persisting Arab–Israeli conflict) with all their attendant disruptive foreign imperial interventions. At the level of

individual countries, the effects of these two variables were dependent on further supplementary factors that helped to explain the durability of particular autocratic regimes. To illustrate, the extent to which oil wealth might facilitate the trade-off between economic welfare and political freedom is contingent on the specific socio-political history of the country concerned. Similarly, the Arab–Israeli conflict has had a much stronger impact on domestic political developments in countries nearer to the theatre of the conflict. In recent years, foreign military interventions (e.g. Iraq) and the rise of Islamist fundamentalism (encouraged by such interventions) have also acted, in one way or another, to bolster authoritarianism in the region.

The case studies revealed that, whatever the specific explanation for the lagging democratisation in each one of them, they shared common explanatory factors (e.g. historical legacies, co-option of business elites and so on). And as El-Affendi (2011) put it succinctly: ‘What stands out is that the post-independence Arab rulers continued to arrogate to themselves the same privileges and powers that the colonial state had enjoyed, thus alienating themselves from their societies as much as the colonial powers had done before them.’

In December 2010, this alienation was finally manifested in the successful Tunisian uprising that toppled the prevailing autocratic order. The knocking of history at the bolted door of autocracy in the Arab region was loud, albeit delayed, but it was soon followed during 2011 by uprisings in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Whatever the immediate triggers for the Tunisian and other uprisings, a gamut of interacting factors, economic, political and others underlying them, have been building over the years towards a push for democracy in the region.

However, the ray of hope for democracy to which the initial uprisings gave rise soon faded away. More than five years after the initial uprisings, the door of autocracy is only very slightly ajar. Of the five countries where uprisings have taken place, only Tunisia appears to be forging its way successfully through a democratic transition which, however, facing important socio-economic challenges and occasional acts of terrorism, is yet to be firmly established (Boughzala and Ben Romdhane, Chapter 3). Egypt’s progress along a path of social justice, liberties and freedoms has not so far taken hold (El Mikawy, Mohieddin and El Ashmaouy, Chapter 4), while the other three countries have been suffering from vicious civil conflicts intertwined with foreign intervention. The case of Syria, where the conflict has drawn in external armed interventions, both regional and international, in support of opposing sides in the conflict, has been especially tragic (Safadi and Neaime, Chapter 5).

Of the other Arab countries, since independence, Lebanon (Makdisi and El Khalil, Chapter 7), with its consociational democracy, has throughout constituted an exception to the general trend of autocracy in the region, though it has not been spared the pains of civil war. Iraq progressed politically after the fall of Saddam Hussein (with its Polity score rising to 3 in 2010–14), but political rights and civil liberties have remained restricted (with Freedom House scores ranging between 5 and 6 for this period), while the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) democracy index placed Iraq in 2014 at the bottom of the so-called hybrid regime category.¹ The political process has been plagued by sectarian politics, which reduced the democratic opening to a ‘winner take all’ electoral system controlled by the governing majority; and, since mid-2014, when vast areas were lost to Daesh militarily, the country has been witnessing an ongoing war between Daesh and government forces. Sudan (Elbattahani, Chapter 8) and the Gulf countries remain highly autocratic, except for Kuwait whose political system allows for a measure of political participation via parliamentary elections (Elbadawi and Kubursi, Chapter 6). In 2003, Algeria introduced some reforms to the executive authority which helped raise its polity score from –3 for that same year to 2 subsequently. However, its freedom scores for political rights and civil liberties continue to reflect significant restrictions (6 and 5 respectively for 2014), and the EIU index for 2014 classified it as an autocracy. Similarly in the wake of the uprisings of 2011, reforms in the executive branch of Morocco improved its polity score for that year a little, from –6 to –4. Again its political rights and civil liberties scores continue to demonstrate restrictions (5 and

¹ Various measurements of democracy have been constructed, the Polity and Freedom House indices being among the longest standing and most widely used in empirical work. According to the authors of Polity, its scores reflect a spectrum of governing authority that spans from fully institutionalised autocracies through mixed, or incoherent, authority regimes (termed ‘anocracies’) to fully institutionalised democracies. The Polity score captures this regime authority spectrum on a twenty-one-point scale that ranges from –10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy). The Polity scores can also be converted into regime categories in a suggested three-part categorization of ‘autocracies’ (–10 to –6), ‘anocracies’ (–5 to +5), and ‘democracies’ (+6 to +10). Freedom House carries out annual comparative assessments of political rights and civil liberties in the world. Each country is assigned two numerical ratings – from 1 to 7 – for political rights and civil liberties respectively, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free. The more recent EIU index of democracy is based on four categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture. It classifies countries into five categories: authoritarian (score of 0–3.9); hybrid regime (4–5.9); flawed democracy (6–7.9) and full democracy (8.1). It should be added, of course, that all these indices have their inherent limitations (e.g. see Munck and Verkuilen 2002, and Paxton 2000). A full appreciation of the attributes of the political system of any country can be achieved only through an in-depth study of the country concerned.

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4 respectively for 2014), though to a lesser degree than Algeria. In turn the EIU index for 2014 classified it at the top of the autocracy category.

Thus, as of mid-2016, with a few exceptions – among them Lebanon and Tunisia – autocracy continues to reign in the Arab region, though in varying forms and to different degrees from one country to another. Only slightly ajar, the doors of autocracy have taken some battering; when they will open wide only time will tell.

A primary objective of this volume is to shed light on the dynamics of transition in the Arab world and the conditions for its success, as revealed by select Arab case studies, but not on the particular form of democracy that might arise. In the concluding chapter, we touch on the emerging resistance to transition.² Again we combine cross-country work and country case transitions. The cross-country work, divided into two chapters, sets the framework of analysis: the first is based on an elaborate econometric analysis that focuses on the region-wide and global factors that underlie democratic transitions, while the second is a conceptual polemical analysis elucidating the requirements for stabilising the democratic transition or at least for transforming autocratic regimes in democratic directions. With this framework as a background, six case studies identify specific economic, political and social conditions influencing the transition in each of them, as well as the requisite conditions for consolidating democracy once the process is initiated. They reflect varying Arab experiences that not only highlight specific factors associated with each country's transition trajectory, but also reflect common explanatory factors that tally with major findings of the cross-country work. Given the emergence of strong resistance to democratic change in the aftermath of the initial uprising, this volume concludes with remarks on the underlying reasons for this resistance and the prospects for democratic transition that lie ahead.

² In a recent study by Mukand and Rodrik (2015) on the political economy of liberal democracy, the authors distinguish between three political groups (elite, majority and minority) and three kinds of rights: property (elite interest), political (majority interest) and civil (minority interest). They point out that a liberal democracy requires all three rights, whereas an electoral democracy generates only the first two. They then explain why in the West liberal democracies came to be established while in the developing world most democracies that emerged are electoral democracies that provide property and political rights but not civil rights. Earlier, Schmitter (2010) noted that in countries that had democratized since 1974 their evolving regimes came to be regarded as poor-quality regimes, i.e. defective, partial or only electoral democracies.

The Thematic and Cross-Country Analysis: Main Results and Issues

Elbadawi and Makdisi (Chapter 1) employ an empirical multi-year index of ‘sustainable’ democratic transition, based on a widely used global indicator of the standard of democracy (Polity). Using this index they analyse an extended ‘rentier’ model emphasising the role of resource rents and conflicts, while accounting for modernisation and other traditional controls analysed in the received literature. They find that rents from oil and other minerals are a hindrance to democracy when managed by less than fully democratic regimes and that their corrosive influence is subject to threshold effects. Their results also suggest that home wars, including civil wars and the Arab–Israeli conflict, have impeded democratic transition throughout the Arab world. Testing for two causative mechanisms that might explain how resource rents might constitute a drag on democratisation, they show that resource rents are an effective deterrent when they are deployed to create jobs. On the other hand, compared to resource transfers, political repression does not seem to be the first, best option, especially for highly resource-endowed countries.

Finally, they find negative neighbourhood externalities exist for democratic transitions when a resource-endowed country is located in a non-democratic or conflictive region. Based on their evidence concerning the adverse regional externalities affecting the region, together with the prevailing regionalisation and even internationalisation of the conflicts in the Arab world, and the looming re-entrenchment of regional autocracy, they conclude that the prospects for democratic transition appear highly uncertain.

In Chapter 2, El-Affendi analyses the challenges of stabilising democracies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In this context he reviews the arduous trajectory of the struggle for democracy, starting with the rise and failure of early post-colonial democratic experiments in several Arab countries, which gave way to the rise and eventual entrenchment of authoritarianism in the Arab world. In line with the empirical analysis of Elbadawi and Makdisi, El-Affendi’s conceptual analytic narrative also emphasises the role of oil and conflicts in facilitating the ascendancy of authoritarian rule and the capacity of autocratic regimes to maintain their grip on power. However, he draws attention to the point that the role of oil and conflicts in shaping the evolution of the political landscape in the region is rather complex, in view of the feedback effects between oil and conflicts on one hand and between autocracy and conflicts on the other.

According to El-Affendi, the arrival of the Arab Spring was made possible when the accumulated economic and political failures of the

Arab political order led to a convergence of visions on the part of the Islamist and secular elements in society, notably in Tunisia and Egypt. However, despite the apparent success of moving towards democracy in Tunisia, as uncertain as it may be, the failure to maintain consensus on a common platform of a viable social contract between these forces and the flaring up of sectarian and sub-national anxieties in the societies of the Arab Spring have all paved the way for an authoritarian counter-revolution. He argues that the most potent weapon the counter-revolution has used has been ‘induced violence’, unfortunately with remarkable success, to restore social cleavages along lines of ideology and identity and thus to undermine the case for democracy. The ongoing authoritarian counter-revolution, contends El-Affendi, threatens to force a post-Arab Spring relapse into the ‘democratic deficit’ phase, where ‘stabilising democracies’ becomes an endeavour the success of which is difficult to visualise, and much less ‘consolidating democracies’.

The Case Studies: Main Results and Issues

The case studies taken up in this volume may be classified as of three categories. The first category includes three autocracies where uprisings have broken out, namely Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. The second comprises two countries which traditionally have had partial democracies, albeit partial to varying degrees: Lebanon with its long-standing consociational democracy, and Kuwait where the political system allows for a measure of participatory governance; both countries have so far failed to establish fully fledged democracies. The third category includes one country, Sudan; with the exception of short-lived democratic experiences in the 1950s, 1960s and 1980s, it has throughout been subject to autocratic rule and is yet to re-initiate any moves towards democracy. These case studies reflect variations in the political experiences of the Arab world but, as already noted, autocracy continues to prevail generally.

While the respective politico-economic trajectories that led to the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria differ, the case studies amply demonstrate that they do share common elements. In the economic domain, these include rising unemployment, over the years, reaching very high levels especially for the young, and the persistence of economic inequality as well as significant disparities between urban centres and rural regions. Concretely, the benefits of growth went in large measure to the ruling elites and favoured groups in society. In the political domain, highly exclusive governing bodies alongside a popular desire for greater freedom bred increasing resentment, with civil society organisations

pressing ever harder for political reform, a state of affairs that eventually turned into full-blown civil uprisings.

Boughzala and Ben Romdhane (Chapter 3) draw attention to the relatively rapid economic growth and rising per capita income as well as improved levels of education that Tunisia experienced prior to 2011. They argue that, as the country developed economically and socially, its social structure became more complex, with a highly educated salaried workforce becoming the main social category and civil society, as a whole, developing rapidly. These developments carried with them the seeds of change in line with the modernisation hypothesis. Economic openness also gradually took hold, becoming increasingly incompatible with restrictive political institutions. This growing incompatibility eventually helped to bring about the overthrow of the regime. But while democratic institutions have been taking root since the uprising, their consolidation will require not only effective leadership and more political cohesion but above all a new, participative and inclusive economic strategy focusing on society's expectations and the aspirations of the youth whose economic and political frustrations played a major role in triggering the uprising.

In the case of Egypt, as El Mikawy, Mohieddin and El Ashmaouy point out (Chapter 4), the factors underlying transition were multifaceted. They included structural drivers of economic and social exclusion (e.g. unemployment and informalisation, impoverishment of the middle class, pronounced poverty); institutional drivers, that is, political exclusion that, among other things, meant a captured state – as they put it, the marriage between capital and politics; exclusion of minorities and women from effective political participation – and finally the declining regional role of Egypt, awareness of which exacerbated popular resentment of the regime. The authors caution that, unlike Tunisia, Egypt is undergoing a protracted transition process. While progress at the constitutional level has been achieved (a more liberal constitution was adopted in 2014), the consolidation of democracy remains a goal to aspire to, requiring guarantees of freedoms, the accountability of governmental institutions and social justice. Equally imperative will be to put in place an inclusive and progressive social justice agenda. The authors also bring to mind the importance of elite choices, especially with respect to how they define the role and the accountability of the institutions of religion and security.

The Syria uprising may be traced, as Safadi and Neaime (Chapter 5) explain, to gross economic mismanagement and a harsh authoritarian and clientalist political system which have combined to thwart any move towards freedom and equality in the country. The uprising turned civil war (now five years old) has pitted an amalgamation of opposition groups, with fundamentalist parties effectively in the lead and attempting to

expand their control of the country, against regime forces that are trying to re-establish governmental authority. The conflict has invited international and regional interventions in support of one side or the other. The final outcome remains uncertain. The authors believe any future settlement will, and indeed should, bring in its wake profound political change leading to a pluralistic, democratic Syria. They emphasise the point that as democracy is restored, a new socio-economic model of development, based on inclusive socio-economic policies and the promotion of good governance, should emerge. Genuinely democratic and accountable governance in Syria will be able to implement such a model.

The Kuwait case, taken up by Elbadawi and Kubursi (Chapter 6), exhibits features of partial democracy, a state of affairs unique among the monarchies of the Gulf. Kuwait has an elected parliament, regular elections and a constitution that guarantees basic human rights and the powers of the parliament. In contrast to the countries that have witnessed uprisings, the main challenge facing Kuwait, as the authors point out, is how to sustain the march towards more advanced forms of democratic governance. The authors explain that Kuwait's early democratic experience had much to do with its geographic location, positioned apart from the trade route to India controlled by the British. This led to an inclusive and equitable relationship between the Emir and the Kuwaiti trading families who, in the past, used to finance the ruling family and also enjoyed access to footloose sources of income. However, this pioneering democratic experiment has been partially derailed by the advent of oil, which altered the initial political equilibrium in Kuwaiti society. Therefore they argue that, among other factors, economic diversification and the expansion of the non-oil economy are likely to have positive implications for democracy in the country, since they would weaken the oil-driven authoritarian bargain. However, the authors also recognise that Kuwait's autocratic neighbourhood and the region-wide sectarian conflicts constitute a serious threat to its social cohesion and democratic consolidation.

The Lebanese case is unique in the Arab region. Lebanon's political system has been based on a consociational democracy model: an arrangement for power-sharing between its multiple religious communities that was intended to guarantee freedom of expression and stability. Furthermore, the national economy has throughout been open and dominated by the private sector. However, as Makdisi and El Khalil point out (Chapter 7), in practice the intended objectives of this political model have only been partially realised. It allowed for plural political activity and parliamentary elections, but also encouraged the emergence of weak political institutions that fostered corruption and nepotism and did not

ensure political stability or equal political and civil rights. And despite robust economic growth, the political system could not prevent the outbreak of a civil war. The authors argue that only a transition to a fully fledged secular and democratic system with accountable political institutions will guarantee stability and allow for the promotion of a more equitable structure at both the economic and social levels.

Analysing the Sudan case, El Battahani outlines the elements that have allowed autocratic rule to prevail following the overthrow of a democratically elected, multi-party government in 1989. The leaders of the ruling party have utilised their monopoly of the instruments of power to control soft and hard rent sources. Over time, various repressive measures were implemented with a view to undermining opposition groups, while violent conflicts in marginal regions have rendered traditional political parties increasingly less effective at leading any confrontation with the ruling autocracy. There was a brief and limited opening up to democracy (2005–11), but with South Sudan going its own way in 2011, autocracy in Sudan re-asserted itself under the leadership of al-Bashir, seizing more power via constitutional amendments. The author argues that prospects for transition in Sudan are uncertain. New politicised groups, among the youth for instance, have emerged as potential agents of change. Yet despite harsh economic conditions and a fiscal crisis, the autocracy of Sudan has managed to survive, thanks to favourable regional and international circumstances, by concluding authoritarian bargains with rival elites and running a strong authoritarian state underpinned by durable coercive institutions.

Outline

Accordingly, this volume is divided into four parts: first the introduction and summary, then Part I, on the dynamics of transition, sets the framework of analysis. It comprises two chapters: Chapter 1 explains the dynamics of democratic transitions in the Arab world, and Chapter 2 considers existing obstacles to democratisation, the means by which they may be overcome and the stabilisation of the democratic process. Part II comprises six case studies (Chapters 3–8), which reflect the variations in the experiences of the Arab countries under study. These case studies include three countries where uprisings have taken place: Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, which respectively have been experiencing a successful, protracted and painful transition; two countries with halted democracies, Kuwait and Lebanon; and one country, Sudan, where since 2011 an autocratic regime has been trying, under extremely uncertain conditions, to prevail against the winds of change. Part III (Chapter 9) concludes with remarks on the resistance to and prospects for democratic change and consolidation in the region.