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Authoritarian Persistence in West Asia and North Africa

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Abstract

The robustness of coercive apparatus in West Asia and North Africa has been a result of a culmination of factors over the years. The paper looks at three such arguments - those based on cultural and religious exceptionalism which look at Islam's inhospitality towards democratization. Here, the author contends that such arguments overlook the fact that Islam is not monolithic, and varies too widely by context and time to remain a static, uniformed religious obstacle to democratic transition. Second, the paper looks at the framework of the rentier theory where the argument has been supported by looking at three primary features of the framework - first, the lack of taxation and the subsequent absence of democratic obligation; second, presence of heavy security apparatus; and lastly, the lack of any credible political opposition. Finally, the paper looks at the institutional and political systems in the region where the presence of strong patron-client networks and the loyalty of the elite groups towards the regime present a considerable obstacle to the realization of democratic reforms.

Authoritarian Persistence in West Asia and North Africa

Introduction

The robustness of coercive apparatus in West Asia and North Africa has been a result of restrictive political participation and the lack of representative institutions. Two primary features that have come to characterize the authoritarian regimes of the region are the nature of states' rent economy and the rampant patrimonialism and the associated patron-client networks.

Over the years, single-party regimes in the region have been seen as more capable of containing elite fragmentation and surviving challenges caused by the economic crisis and political difficulties. Patronage-based economic liberalization in various countries, including Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia have further provided the resources necessary for authoritarian incumbents to create new bases for support. The states have witnessed the emergence of electoral and political party laws, particularly designed to undermine democracy, accompanied by limited press freedom and widespread electoral fraud. In Egypt and Iraq, democratic instincts were thwarted in the post-colonial period by the refusal of the states' elite class to address the societies' social needs, leading to declining standards of living and the subsequent violent protests.

This paper looks at three arguments explaining the persistence of authoritarianism, and the democracy deficit in the region. First, while looking into the arguments made on the basis of cultural and religious exceptionalism, the paper argues that these arguments fall under the school of orientalism and do not take into account the numerous political movements that have existed in Islamic societies. Second, the paper looks at the rentier state theory and finds evidence in support of the argument by looking at countries like Libya and Algeria, where autocratic regimes have persisted due to funds coming in from its external resources. Under the rentier state approach, the focus has been placed upon the various clientele networks that predominate in numerous countries of the region, with evidence being provided to support the claim that these networks have ensured regime stability. Lastly, the paper looks at the political systems in the region and argues that the dominance of single-party politics after independence provided the stimulation for authoritarianism.

Cultural and Religious Exceptionalism

Islam's inhospitality towards democratization has been the core argument of the scholars of religious exceptionalism, who seek to explain the durability of authoritarianism in the region. The argument relies upon the assumption that Islamic societies have not been able to escape from their historicity since the time of the Prophet, which has eventually resulted in the misperception of what is temporal, and what may be spiritual (Lewis, 1990). Scholars (Kedourie, 1994; Lewis, 1990 & 1993) have argued how due to the concept of the Caliph and the region's history with absolutism, the states incorporated into their religion and culture, the belief of submission and obedience.

The argument rose to prominence, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century. Writing in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, which was seen as an attempt to capture political power and impose Islamic law, Huntington (1984), in his famous article titled, 'Will more countries become democratic?', claimed that the revival of Islam had reduced the likelihood of the democratic progress in the region, and that the doctrinal aspects of Islam were less favorable to democracy. Stating that since democracy was particularly identified with the West, Islamic revival, and particularly the rise of Shi'ite fundamentalism would unabashedly oppose any development of democratic institutions. He talks about the "inhospitable nature of the Islamic culture and society to Western liberal concepts" (Huntington, 1996).

Similarly, Elie Kedourie (1992), a British historian, argued about the incompatibility of Islam with democracy, concluding that authoritarianism was inseparable from the region and that the idea of democracy was alien to the mindset of Islam. In doing so, he claimed that there existed nothing in the political mores of West Asia which might slightly be familiar to the Western organizational ideas of constitutional and representative government. Another Western historian, Bernard Lewis (1993), argued that the Islamic state was a theocracy, and a devout Muslim would believe that credible authority comes from God alone. Because the Caliph derived its power from God, the societies were believed to submit to authority without question.

Hashim Sharabi (1998) credits the neo-patriarchal culture in West Asia as one of the primary causes behind the lack of development and sustenance of authoritarianism in the region, citing failed transition to capitalist modernity. Historical patterns of patronage and patriarchy permeated the new political institutions, perpetuating authoritarianism.

The argument holds that whatever the modern forms of the neo patriarchal state, their internal institutions remain entrenched in the patriarchal customs and relations of kinship, clans, and

ethnic groups (Moghadam, 1991). The primary characteristic of the system is the foundation and the dynamics of the authority in the region, resulting in the unquestioned dominance by a male figure, both within the household and at the level of the state. In a poorly integrated society like Saudi Arabia, the patriarchal clan's grip on power has been known to ensure cohesion and stability of the ruling group.

Limitations and failure of the cultural and religious approach to explaining authoritarianism in the region

The invocation of Islam as an explanatory variable for authoritarian persistence in West Asia and North Africa overlooks the fact that Islam is not monolithic, and varies too widely by context and time to remain a static, uniformed religious obstacle to democratic transition. It varies in practice, legal and theological orientation, its attitude toward women, and its role in government and society. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran claim to be Islamic states where Islam may serve as the basis for government. Turkey, on the other hand, is constitutionally secular. The arguments made under the religious and cultural approach now fall into the early school of thought, one that now is discredited as Orientalism. The school ascribed the persistence of authoritarianism in the region to culture and Islam, where Islam was viewed as an essential explanatory factor, and 'Oriental despotism', patriarchalism, and mass passivity and tolerance were all said to make the region of West Asia and North Africa democracy unfriendly.

The orientalist argument also overlooks the political and cultural history of the region, and the contentions and resistant movements that have persisted in the region despite heavy state repression. The development and the overthrow of the Shah regime in Iran, the growth of the Palestinian movement of national resistance, and protest riots in Algeria and Jordan in the 1980s are just a few of the numerous exemplars of contentious politics in the region (Gerges, 2015). In his study on opinions of democracies among Muslims, Ciftci (2010) further dismissed the religious and cultural explanations for the sustenance of authoritarianism in the region, concluding that the support for democracy was at high levels among Muslims surveyed in ten different countries.

The protests of 2011, with their rapid political mobilization, caught most of the scholars off guard, many of whom had associated authoritarianism with the Islamic culture, and the propensity of the people to tolerate and support authoritarian regimes. Angered with repeated refusals from governments to honour the democratic reform promises, the protests, starting

from Tunisia, made ways into other countries of the region, making calls for social justice, economic opportunities, political freedom, and government accountability. In Jordan, the Hirak Movement, encompassing nearly forty East Bank tribal youth activist groups, staged weekly demonstrations and rallies for over two years before the Uprising against the Hashemite monarchy, shattering constraining boundaries of legal dissent in the state (Yom, 2014).

While the 2011 protests may have come as a surprise, the region of West Asia and North Africa has experienced politics of contention throughout its history in different contexts and forms. The indigenous reform movements have existed in the region prior to the Arab Spring of 2011. The Kefaya movement in Egypt, also known as the Egyptian Movement for Change, or the Enough Movement, is one such example of an indigenous movement for political reform, which originated against the authoritarian politics of Hosni Mubarak (Oweidat et al., 2008). The movement appeared in 2004 and although it declined by 2007, it successfully mobilized wide segments of Egyptian society, transcending ideological barriers. Similarly, in Iran, two years before the Arab Spring, the country witnessed large-scale pro-democracy protests in the form of the Iranian Green Movement, against the officially declared victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009 (Dabashi, 2013). The 1979 Iranian Revolution embodied a similar movement in the country's history, where mass mobilizations called for representative government and the rule of law.

Rentier States of West Asia and North Africa

Writing about the pre-revolutionary Iran, Hossein Mahdavy (1970) laid down the concept of a rentier state, and defined it as 'a state that receives substantial rents from foreign individuals, concerns or governments.' Because the rentier state theory builds a positive relationship between democracy and taxation, the durability of the authoritarian regimes in West Asia and North Africa, has, thus, been linked to access to rents, derived from different sources, including petroleum and natural gas.

Huntington (1991), for instance, argues that the democratic trend may not reach the Middle East since many of these states depend heavily on oil revenues, enhancing the control of their state bureaucracy. Bellin (2004) has argued that this access to abundant rental income distinguishes the region, enabling it to maintain its coercive apparatus, at a time when other states catch up with democratization.

The rentier state framework points at three core features that may prevent states to undergo democratic transition – first, such states do not rely on taxation for income, consequently holding no democratic obligations; second, the states spend a substantial amount of revenue on their security apparatus and subsequent repression of its population; and third, the states may experience, what Ross (2001) has labelled as the "group formation effect", where the governments, through their ample revenues, would prevent the emergence and formation of credible opposition groups, which may demand political rights.

The line of argument suggests that the oil wealth, because it is accrued directly to the state, enables the government to redistribute the income in a manner that allows the rentier elite to remain in power. Because elite interests are linked to external markets, it allows them to avoid accountability to their populations. A large amount of rent is accrued and then distributed in the form of jobs and welfare benefits, making the citizens highly dependent on the state for their livelihoods. It is then argued that because governments derive sufficient revenues from the sale of oil, they are likely to not tax their populations (Ross, 2001). The citizens, because they are not required to pay taxes, are consequently dissuaded from mobilization to demand political representation or democratic transition.

The rentier theory framework is also adopted by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), who in their authoritarian model, conclude that the state elite controls the society by manipulating both the judicial and security apparatus, and through a combination of political repression and policies of redistribution. Hinnebusch (2006) further argues that the integration of the elite class and their dependence on the state for their business opportunities implies that the bourgeoisie class is not available to lead a democratic transition.

Wantchekon (1999) further categorizes government discretion over the manner in which oil revenues are spent as the key feature that produces and sustains authoritarianism in rentier states. Access to abundant rents has also allowed the states to subsidize most of the cost of the coercive security apparatus. While the states may not be as efficient in day-to-day administration, their police and intelligence agencies are amply funded and technologically advanced. It is pointed out that most of Iran's pre-revolution oil wealth was spent on the military, producing a 'rentier absolutist state' (Skocpol, 1982).

Empirical Evidence Supporting Rentier State Theory

While the governments of Syria and Egypt continue to earn huge amounts of strategic rent based on geography, from payments for pipeline crossings and transit fees; more than half of the state's revenues in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Libya have, at some point of time, come from the sale of their oil (Ross, 2001).

Algeria serves as a key example of a rentier state, with most of the nation's wealth being extracted from oil and gas. By the end of the 1970s, oil rents constituted approximately sixty per cent of the government's total revenue. After a brutal seven-year long war for its independence, the country fell under authoritarian rule, with the absence of any power-sharing institutions and the dominance of the National Liberation Front from 1963 to 1989 (Sandbakken, 2006). At independence, the class structure was relatively uniform, with the government providing most of the opportunities for economic advancement, conveniently creating networks of patronage in the three decades following independence. The development policies of the time concentrated increasingly on agricultural growth and heavy inward-looking industrialization, funded by rents received from the sale of oil and supplemented by other external resources (Elbadawi & Makdisi, 2011). The control of state property through nationalization and creation of hefty public sectors has been one of the common features of the small elite class throughout authoritarian regimes in the region. Therefore, as long as the oil rents were abundant, and conceived as fairly redistributed, the system directed a degree of loyalty among its population, dissuading them from political mobilization.

Libya is another example of an autocratic rentier state, where the flow of petroleum rents had become substantial by 1965, ten years after the oil exploration began in the country. In a span of twenty years, from 1950 to 1970, the oil revenues increased from zero to above 80 per cent (Sandbakken, 2006). Increase in oil wealth led to substantive government spending on housing, infrastructure, and education, and a subsequent decline in direct and indirect taxes on its population. Following the 1969 coup against the monarchy, Qaddafi embarked on large-scale public spending, eliminating any remaining taxes, with oil revenues being an indispensable part of his policy plans. With the majority of the population becoming financially dependent on the state, any plans for a democratic opposition were thwarted by the government.

Patrimonialism and Clientelism in West Asia and North Africa

The oil revenues stimulated rent-seeking activities through the establishment of patron-client networks and rampant corruption. With regards to Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Tunisia, King (2009) argued that the privatization of state assets allowed the governments to gain patronage resources to be able to form a new ruling alliance, constituting landed elites, military officers, and private sector capitalists. While exploring the relationship between authoritarianism and businessmen, scholars (Hanieh, 2011) have cited the example of Kuwait, where the ruling family of al-Sabah purchased substantial portions of urban lands at exorbitant rates, later reselling them to the richest merchants at extremely low prices.

Kienle (2001) has argued that increased economic liberalization in the region further led to the persistence of authoritarianism, allowing for the advent of various business networks, simultaneously increasing their financial and structural power. The consequence has been the incorporation of the regimes' alliances within the political system. In Saudi Arabia and Syria, entire divisions of the military, and security and intelligence forces are made up of patrimonial relations, where political reliability surpasses merit.

Similarly, in the case of Egypt, the regime was seen creating rent havens in favour of its business alliances. Harders (2003) placed focus on the local-level, complex networks of informal politics in Egypt, arguing that the state's inability to fulfil the social welfare demands led to the formation of clientelist mechanisms at the local level. In the three decades of being in power, not only did the Mubarak regime include businessmen in its political administration, but also simultaneously created several social institutions through alliances with businessmen, in exchange for loyalty to the regime (Tarouty, 2015).

Similarly, in Turkey, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), distributed state resources in alignment with its clientelist alliances, portraying how new patrons solidify their position through electoral politics. Several countries additionally allow foreign companies to sell their products only through local merchants or by partnering with local merchants, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, where the Juffali family partnered with Mercedes, and the Futtaim family of the United Arab Emirates partnered with Toyota (Tarouty, 2015). While these partnerships contributed directly to the mounting wealth of the elite class, they provided the ruling regimes with the loyalty of the business community in exchange.

Political Systems

Several scholars (Hinnebusch, 2006) have traced the origins of authoritarian rule in the region to the nature of political systems inherited at the time of independence. The countries, because they were a result of the forced fragmentation, led to the emergence of sub-identities. These supra-identities went beyond the state boundaries, weakening the consolidation with their territorial states, and sowing dissatisfaction with the geographical identity, thus delaying the stable political institutions.

These populist authoritarian regimes were consolidated through expansive military and bureaucratic incorporation, producing single-party systems that permeated both urban and rural areas, and took over the various associations which were working with peasants, union workers, and youth. Several countries, including Tunisia and Yemen, witnessed the emergence of single dominant parties at the time of independence, led by the countries' political elite. Not only did these parties render authoritarianism unavoidable, but also enabled the oligarchic elites to build autocratic regimes in the face of no credible opposition (Angrist, 2004). The successors later found the resources to produce vigorous, modernized forms of authoritarianism compatible with the contemporary environment, the most important of which was the states' capacity to uphold its monopoly over the means of coercion (Skocpol, 1982).

The election results in several countries, including Egypt and Algeria, reflect a ubiquitous trend of fraudulent electoral systems throughout the region of West Asia and North Africa. These elections, marred by low voter turnout, lack of credible opposition, and rampant political repression fail to accurately capture and represent the will of citizens. Egypt has repeatedly witnessed the reduction in the power of judicial systems, frequent arrests of political opposition figures, and increasing state control over the media houses.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at three dominant arguments which are employed in explaining the persistence of authoritarianism in West Asia and North Africa. In doing so, the paper has argued that, first, orientalist arguments based on religious and cultural exceptionalism, fail to comprehend Islam, which is too wide in spatial and temporal scope to be taken as a static monolithic religion. The arguments also fail to explain the vigorous political movements that have long existed in the region and the ubiquitous contentious politics which have led to mass

anti-regime mobilizations throughout the region in different times. The Arab Spring of 2011, is the foremost reflection of grass-roots mobilizations to attain democratic transition.

Next, the paper has looked into the framework of rentier theory. In doing so, it has looked at three core features of the framework. First, the lack of taxation and the subsequent absence of democratic obligation; second, heavy security apparatus, the presence of which is ubiquitous in the countries across the region; and lastly, the lack of any credible political opposition.

The examples of Libya and Algeria give weight to the theory, and while the rentier state theory can be applied to several states in West Asia and North Africa, and can be used to obtain an understanding of how resource rents could produce conditions that are not conducive to democracy, the framework alone cannot explain the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the region. Institutional design is also held to be a determining factor of successful democratic transition. The presence of strong patron-client networks and the loyalty of the elite groups towards the regime present a considerable obstacle to the realization of democratic reforms. By focusing on the fraudulent political institutions of the states, it is assumed that strong mechanisms of both, vertical and horizontal accountability, would increase the likelihood of democratic consolidation in the states. These would include fair electoral processes, free and independent media, and the capacity of the institutions to make public agencies accountable to the citizenry.

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