Authoritarianism in the Middle East

Here to stay

Expectations were high that authoritarian regimes would not survive the expansion of capitalism. However, in the Middle East there are strong currents that underpin authoritarianism. Trying to impose democracy from the outside will not help. Only changes in economic structures will show results in the long term.

How long can authoritarian regimes survive in a capitalist world? At the end of the Cold War expectations were high. With the expansion of capitalism to Russia and China, these countries would soon become democracies as well. But in China, the communists have remained in power despite the buoyant capitalist economy, and in Russia under Vladimir Putin the regime has become increasingly autocratic. These two countries have given rise to speculations about an 'autocratic revival'. Some observers see successful autocracies as not only compatible with capitalism, but even as a rival form of capitalism, while others maintain that 'ultimately, autocracies will move toward liberalism'. ☞

The discussion has so far focused on the 'great powers' Russia and China, but is also relevant for autocratic regimes elsewhere, especially the Middle East. Autocratic regimes have coexisted there with a capitalist economy for half a century or more. And there are some structural factors that help maintain autocratic regimes in the Middle East. Without a good understanding of these factors, any steps to support democratization may be taken in the wrong direction.

In *Authoritarianism in the Middle East*, Marsha Posusney and Michelle Angrist take the reader on 'a sobering but instructive tour of regime dynamics in the Middle East'. They and other authors have provided much information about the sometimes ingenious regulations that favour incumbents in elections, rigged elections, and the selective co-optation of opponents. Such descriptions of 'domestic means of authoritarian regime maintenance' may be relevant, but they do not adequately highlight the structural aspects that ensure the continuation of authoritarian rule.

This article discusses six interrelated factors that serve to underpin authoritarianism in the Middle East. It is an

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Summary

- Autocratic regimes in the Middle East will continue to coexist with capitalism.
- Six structural factors strengthen authoritarianism: oil rents, protectionism in a globalized economy, the threat of ethnic and other cleavages, external threats, patrimonial networks, and cultural traditions.
- Outside interventions to impose democracy will not succeed; at the same time Western support for non-democratic regimes undermines Western credibility.
- Only slow and careful cooperation with existing (secular and religious) groups might contribute to democracy in the long term.

uncomfortable fact that authoritarianism in the region seems over-determined – in other words, even if one of these factors is removed, authoritarianism will still prevail.

Income from oil

What is true for Iran is probably also true for many other regimes in the region. The reason why they have proved so successful, according to Roger Howard, is that 'they have the spare cash to do so, and nearly all of this comes from the proceeds of the sale of just one commodity – oil'. This income made it possible to buy off rivals, 'to alleviate painful economic pressures' by large-scale subsidies, 'to compensate for a lack of social freedom', and to expand 'security services to crush any dissent well before it becomes a threat'.

Taking a much broader regional and historical perspective, Isam Al-Khafaji has described how oil rents have led to a form of state interventionism that has stifled industrial development. Oil prices have fallen as a result of the financial crisis, but they are likely to rise again in the future. High oil prices obviously increase the power of those regimes that receive such incomes, but they also generate high expectations, which could result in crises if those expectations are not met. The sudden oil price hike in

Here to stay: Saudi King Abdullah and a young member of the royal family attending the Janadriya Heritage and Culture Festival, Riyadh, March 2009.

2007–2008 was too short-lived to create patterns of expenditure that had to be maintained.

The reliance on oil income – and the ability to finance imports – creates other problems. In particular, oil production for export generates few jobs. Youth unemployment rates in Arab countries are among the highest in the world, averaging about 25%, according to the Arab Labour Organization. As the numbers of youth continue to grow, this could represent a ticking time bomb for the future.

Arab regimes have created all kinds of welfare organizations to soften such problems, but they often differentiate between national citizens and foreigners. In some countries, nationals enjoy some security even if they do not work, while much of the work is done by less privileged foreign migrant workers. The internal tensions arising from the presence of migrants, and their lack of civic rights, is another potential time bomb, and again legitimizes to some extent autocratic rule to keep these tensions under control.

But what would happen if the present economic crisis sparked efforts to 'green' the global economy and reduce the demand for fossil fuel? Would that mean the end of autocratic regimes in the Middle East? Or would the structures created with the oil income in the recent past ensure continuing support for such regimes?

International competition
The later a country industrializes, the more state intervention is necessary to make this possible in the face of stiff international competition. 👆 The fact that in the past oil money has contributed to the build-up of industries that probably could not survive in a free international market,

makes state intervention necessary, even if the regime changes. But at the same time, state subsidies do not usually make enterprises more competitive in the long run, and so the need for state subsidies tends to continue.

Even if a new regime were democratic, it would still have to protect the national economy. Democracy and free trade on the one hand, and autocracy and protectionism on the other, do not necessarily go together. Providing continuous protection of the national economy in a liberal world order requires a degree of control that would hardly be compatible with a fully democratic system. An autocratic regime leads to an economy run by cronies who will not make it more competitive, and an uncompetitive economy needs protection by a regime that controls the flows of goods, people, money and ideas.

Structural heterogeneity
Autocratic governments are not only a reflection of international inequality, which creates demand for protection against more competitive economies abroad. The forces of internal inequality and diversity also give rise to authoritarianism. Within countries in the Middle East there are several different modes of production. Some people live in traditional ways that have remained unchanged for centuries, while others live in a hyper-modern world. The different mental frameworks that go with these different forms of production can make it difficult to find mutually acceptable compromises. Much was written in the 1960s and 1970s about 'structural heterogeneity', especially in Latin America, and some of that thinking could still be relevant for a region like the Middle East. According to the liberal narrative, diversity leads to democracy. As noted by

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Bedouin tribal leader kisses the forehead of Jordan's King Abdullah during Eid-al-Fitr celebrations in Amman, 30 September 2008.

The recent experiences in Lebanon and Iraq demonstrate to neighbouring countries the violence that can ensue if competition among different groups is not controlled. Many people may not like their government, but they still prefer it to the chaos and violence that would probably occur in countries like Syria or Saudi Arabia if their regimes were to fall. The relative certainty and physical security that an autocratic government offers may, despite the suppression, be preferred to uncertain freedom and the danger of violence (and physical destruction). In such a situation many people behave as if they support the regime. 👆

Outside threats

In the official rhetoric, threats are presented as coming from the outside rather than inside. External threats are used to fuel nationalism, which is then used to enforce internal allegiance. Opposition groups are discredited as foreign agents. Faced with external threats, real or perceived, societies have always entrusted more responsibility to their leaders. Outside threats can be real or fabricated. In the Middle East, with the existence of Israel, the massive US intervention in the region, and the general perception of an adversarial West, the threat from the outside is easily invoked. With the demand for oil still rising, outside interest in the region will continue, and so will outside interference. The possibility of such interference justifies high military expenditures, and the armed forces usually form patrimonial networks that support autocratic rule, although not necessarily a specific autocratic ruler.

Patrimonial networks

The income from oil has financed old and new patrimonial structures that determine people's life chances to a large degree. Most of the networks that depend in some way on the regime would not benefit from regime change. Religious foundations in Iran, for example, are estimated to account for 35% of total GNP, and control about 40% of the non-oil sector of the economy. Thus, it is also necessary to examine state expenditures on patronage and material co-optation. These apply not only to the army, but also to the large middle-class employed by the state, as well as the intellectuals and the entrepreneurs who benefit from the expenditures of these groups.

Patrimonial networks are an important aspect of culture. They are typical not only of state-financed structures and private enterprises, but also of civil society organizations. Leadership is highly personalized and largely unquestioned. In a society in which all kinds of organizations form autocratic structures, it is unrealistic to expect that politics would be organized otherwise.

Cultural traditions

A directly related aspect of culture can be seen in patriarchal family structures, which frame expectations with regard to leadership from early childhood on. Fred Lawson warns against cultural explanations of authoritarianism, since concepts like 'patriarchy' are quite vague. Family structures

Deudney and Ikenberry, however, 'modern industrial societies are marked by an explosion of complexity and the emergence of specialized activities and occupations, thus producing a plural polity rather than a mass polity. The increasing diversity of socioeconomic interests leads to demands for competitive elections between multiple parties'. But the complexity of society can be so great that there are few common denominators. As a result, the losers of competitive elections would not peacefully accept the outcome, but contest it through armed struggle.

In the Middle East, not only do traditional and modern ways of life coexist, but there are numerous other cleavages – between Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims, Shiite and Sunni, religious and secular movements, pan-Arab groups and nationalists, conservatives and liberals, as well as between regions. They may have lived together peacefully in the past, but in a situation in which such groups (such as Shiite and Sunni Muslims) collide on a global or regional scale, dormant identities are redefined, acquire new importance, and are used to mobilize groups in violent conflicts. Authoritarian regimes then use the possibility that conflict could happen to legitimize their control over such mobilization.

are changing quickly in the Middle East and are becoming similar to those in the West. But there is one indirect impact of culture and its perception that is still relevant.

Patriarchal family structures survive in (usually faith-based) societies where there are large families, relatively large numbers of children, and where there is usually a male heir. Recently, family size in the Middle East has declined quickly, to the extent that family structures in Iran are no longer so very different from those in France. Smaller families may lead to more equal rights for men and women. While some expect that this would undermine autocratic rule, this may not necessarily be the case (although Muslim women tend to be more supportive of democracy than men).

An often-heard argument is that Islam would not be compatible with democracy. However, a recent analysis of Muslim attitudes to democracy in 32 countries has shown that 'personal experience and perceived benefits of democratization play an important role in shaping' these attitudes, and that 'Islam is [only] one of many environmental factors shaping attitudes about democracy'. ☞ 'Islam is widely known to be more pluralistic than many other religions.' Many texts from the Quran mean different things to different people. '[I]n most cases the balance of political power in a society determines the outcome of any religious debate'. The causality may thus run in the opposite direction – Islam does not preclude democracy; it is the political regime that determines whether or not a specific (democracy-averse) interpretation of Islam prevails.

The causality between cultural tradition and the maintenance of autocratic governments is probably much more indirect than is often thought. Many opposition Islamist groups in Middle Eastern countries are also the most fervent supporters of democracy. The fact that these are Islamic groups, however, reduces Western enthusiasm to press for more democracy in the region, because it might bring more explicitly Islamic parties and movements to power – as is feared in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Palestine.

The continued Western support for non-democratic governments makes Western calls for democracy in the region less credible. Outside interventions that have been legitimized as contributing to 'democratizing the Middle East' have also given 'Western-style democracy' a bad image. 'Western democracy' is not so much understood as power held by the people, but as power held by traditional classes maintained in power (against the people) by foreign countries. 'Liberal democracy' does not have the same connotation as it does in Western countries. Inconsistencies in the Western approach to democratization thus lend some legitimacy to autocratic rulers.

Consequences for democratization

What, then, are the implications of these factors for policies to support democracy in the Middle East?

It would probably be helpful to start with some reflection on why past efforts have been largely unsuccessful – and may have had negative consequences in the form of a shady image of the notion of 'democracy' itself. A second step

would be to open up to Islamic organizations, instead of assuming that their enthusiasm for democratic rule will vanish as soon as they are in power. A third step would be to strive for peace in the region. Any success in bringing more peaceful relations would also strengthen the chances of democratic development (but not necessarily vice versa).

The structural economic basis of autocratic regimes would have to be addressed. That would imply support for policies of diversification to make economies (and governments) less dependent on the income from oil, and more on local production.

As well as addressing international imbalances, the policies should aim to reduce horizontal inequalities within countries by improving opportunities for development in neglected regions that often provide the power base of autocratic rulers. Another aspect might be support to the development to social security systems, which might help to free people from their dependence on patrimonial networks.

Determining roles

What could be the role of civil society, and of external civil society support? The more structural the factors that maintain an autocratic regime, the more limited the role of civil society is likely to be. One important role that remains, of course, is fighting extreme forms of power abuse and suppression. While the creation of independent civil society networks will probably be difficult, more cooperation with existing (often religious) organizations may be possible. Direct outside support may be seen as outside interference. But genuine cooperation that addresses common problems may be mutually rewarding. Any contribution to improving understanding between different population groups may initially be welcomed by the rulers (as long as it does not challenge their 'divide and rule' approach), and may help to reduce the fear that the only alternative to autocratic rule is total chaos.

Policies that take these structural factors into account have to focus on the long term. Those who hope for rapid change – after an election or as a result of an economic crisis – are likely to be disappointed. ∎

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This article is based on the results of the Hivos project on state–society relations in western Asia.

☞ A longer version, with notes and references, can be found at **www.thebrokeronline.eu**