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RESILIENT AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
LESSONS FROM SYRIA AND IRAN
&
IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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Resilient Authoritarianism in the Middle East

Lessons from Syria and Iran
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About this paper

At the end of 2009 the authors initiated a research project entitled *Comparing Authoritarianisms: Governance and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*. This research project is part of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, a joint initiative of the University of Amsterdam and Hivos, a Dutch NGO working on advocacy issues related to strengthening civil societies and democratic reform in the Middle East and beyond.[1] A dozen social scientists from various universities world-wide discussed and compared their work on Syria and Iran, and produced high-quality, fieldwork-based research on constellations of authoritarian governance and –resilience in both countries. Their contributions will be published in an edited volume. The current paper draws on the project's main findings to list some key parameters for a rethinking of democracy and reform promotion in this part of the region.

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[1] For more details see http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia

Introduction

The political landscape of the Middle East is undergoing its most dramatic transformation in sixty years. Through the force of popular uprisings, consolidated authoritarian regimes have been overthrown in Tunisia and Egypt. Popular militias are pushing toward the overthrow of Muammar al-Qadhafi in Libya. In every other country from Morocco to Iran governments confront popular demands for democratic political change.

What will emerge from transitions in Egypt and Tunisia is unclear. Early indicators are mixed, but provide some basis for cautious optimism. Whether protest movements will force authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the region to accept meaningful political reform is also uncertain. Through belated compromises and renewed coercion, incumbents across the region are struggling to contain popular movements and preserve their hold on power. If the trajectory of the changes set in motion in December 2010 is uncertain, however, it is not too soon to conclude that the long era of authoritarian hegemony in the Middle East is over. In two dramatic months the Middle East lost its longstanding distinction as the only world region never to have experienced a transition from authoritarian rule.

While celebrating this historic turning point, however, it is also clear that authoritarianism will remain a prominent feature of Middle East politics. The spectrum of regime types in the region will expand. It may even come to include democracies. Yet as the cases of Syria and Iran demonstrate, not all regimes will experience political openings. However the region might be transformed in the years ahead, the cases of Syria and Iran remind us that the political landscape of the Middle East will retain familiar and troubling features.

Even as Western governments turn their attention to countries in transition, therefore, and consider how to support democratic outcomes in Tunisia and Egypt, it would be counterproductive to disengage from efforts to promote political change in the region's remaining authoritarian regimes. The resilience of authoritarian systems in the Middle East requires that Western governments sustain their commitment to democratic reform across the region, including the "hard cases" such as Syria and Iran.

Sustaining this commitment, however, does not mean that Western governments should adopt a business as usual approach to democracy promotion, for three reasons.

- First, there is little evidence that US and European democracy promotion efforts contributed to the fall of the Egyptian and Tunisian leaders, or to the wave of mass protests occurring in other countries. The incoherence and fragmentation among the opposition forces that forced powerful incumbents out of office is a telling indicator of how limited the impact has been of decades of efforts to develop the democratic capacity of civil societies in the Middle East.

- Second, current strategies of democracy promotion are tightly linked to ideas about how best to secure Western interests that are increasingly problematic. For almost two decades, the work of democracy promotion has been hemmed in by arguments about the need for stability, and by fear that political openings would inevitably empower militant Islamists -

concerns that Arab leaders were delighted to endorse. As a result, Western support for political reform has been marked by timidity, a disinclination to alienate pro-Western regimes, and reluctance to tackle core issues concerning the distribution of political power. Recent uprisings demonstrate just how misguided these calculations have been. Western interests are poorly served by regimes that have lost the confidence of their people. The link between Illegitimacy and instability is now explicit, and the connection provides compelling justification for more assertive Western approaches to political reform in the Arab world.

- Third, supporters of political reform have misdiagnosed how authoritarian governance operates in the Middle East. While recognizing that authoritarianism varies from one case to another, they have nonetheless underestimated its diversity. No less important, however, democracy promoters have underestimated the adaptive capacities of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. They have been slow to recognize the extent to which regimes in the region have appropriated the rhetoric and techniques of democracy promotion, modifying and "upgrading" their behaviour in response to an evolving configuration of pressures. If this strategy has now been shown to have its limits in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, it continues to hold important clues for the development of more effective approaches to democracy promotion in the region's remaining, and perhaps most resilient, authoritarian regimes: Syria and Iran.

As a result of these deficiencies, democracy promotion programs have fallen victim to diminishing returns over time. As democratic transitions advance in some Arab states, it is critical to address shortcomings in democracy promotion strategies, and work to enhance their efficacy.

Challenges of Recombinant Authoritarian Regimes

To effectively exploit opportunities created by the transformations underway in the Middle East and improve the efficacy of democracy promotion, it is necessary to revisit underlying assumptions about the nature of authoritarian governance in resilient cases such as Syria and Iran. Rather than view these two regimes simply as more repressive than their counterparts, we define them as cases of *recombinant authoritarianism*: systems of rule with the capacity to reorder and reconfigure strategies of governance in response to evolving challenges. Such regimes have a demonstrated capacity to modify their practices as circumstances change, to accommodate seemingly contradictory policies, to balance competing demands, and sustain diverse ruling coalitions.

In our view, this recombinant quality is critical for understanding regime resilience in Syria and Iran— two countries that have been least affected by the wave of political change that broke across the Middle East in early 2011. It underscores the capacity these regimes possess to amend and modify the arrangements—both formal and informal—through which they manage the distribution of power and resources, the production of legitimacy, and the maintenance of their authority. What this starting point underscores, moreover, is that recombinant authoritarian regimes like Syria and Iran defy many of the assumptions on which current democracy promotion programs are based. Two examples of this stand out: the civil society bias evident in democracy promotion programs, and the related emphasis on private sectors as agents of political reform.

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, democracy promoters have tended to view state and society as distinct and neatly bounded. States are authoritarian; civil societies are the potential carriers of democratic reform – once they have acquired the capacity to play this role. In the Syrian and Iranian cases, however, as in others, the boundary between state and society is highly porous, and these roles much more ambiguous. In both cases, regimes have worked to capture civil societies, insulate them from the effects of democracy promotion programs, and exploit them to reinforce rather than challenge authoritarian systems of rule.

In these contexts, non-state actors do not necessarily organize in spheres independent from or (only) in opposition to the state. Instead, regimes in Syria and Iran have facilitated the development of authoritarian civic sectors, in which civil society organizations often reproduce the authoritarian norms and practices of the regimes in which they are embedded. In these contexts, the civil society bias evident in current democracy promotion efforts could well be counterproductive. Programs should be adjusted to more effectively address the linkages between regimes and civic sectors.

Democracy promotion programs reflect equally problematic assumptions about private sectors. Like their civil society counterparts, business actors are seen as potential carriers of democratic norms and values. Here too, business and state tend to be seen as distinct domains, operating according to distinctive rules. Even while recognizing that authoritarian regimes cultivate ties to elements within the private sector, market-oriented reforms are believed to empower autonomous business actors to serve as counterweights to state-dominated economies, increase demands for accountability and rule of law, and thus facilitate democratic change.

Yet private sectors in Syria and Iran—or elsewhere in the region, for that matter—do not support these assumptions. In both the Syrian and the Iranian case, state and business are not discrete categories: they connect and overlap. Economic networks cut across states and private sectors, and their success is heavily contingent on their political connections. Programs of market oriented reforms that seemingly threaten entrenched elites instead provide regimes with additional instruments that regimes exploit to reward loyalists and punish critics. Nor does the introduction of market-oriented policies imply a retreat from state-led, patrimonial frameworks. As a result, economies acquire a mixed character. Policies that might appear contradictory co-exist alongside one another.

These hybrid strategies of economic governance give the Iranian and Syrian regimes significant flexibility; they contribute directly to regime resilience. Yet they explicitly undermine prevailing assumptions about the role of private sectors as potential agents of democratic change. Instead, what we see in both cases is that select groups of regime clients are enriched by their privileged access to the opportunities that economic reforms create. And for average citizens, market-oriented reforms become closely associated with crony capitalism. They are seen as aggravating inequality and increasing corruption. Thus, democracy promotion programs that assume that private sectors are potential agents of political change can end up enhancing authoritarian resilience.

Toward Recombinant Strategies of Democracy Promotion

Authoritarian resilience, and the concept of recombinant authoritarianism as a source of resilience, form the starting points for our own attempt to identify promising opportunities to reframe democracy promotion in an era of political change in the Middle East. In doing so, we are guided by several key assumptions:

1) Strategies of democracy promotion must reflect more fully the degree of variation evident in the remaining authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Syria and Iran may share certain attributes—notably a strong recombinant capacity—yet how these manifest themselves differ considerably from case to case, and are powerfully affected by the specific historical experiences that shape ruling elites in both cases. This implies moving beyond variation in how a similar set of tools are deployed in different cases to varying the tools themselves.

2) Strategies of democracy promotion must reflect more fully the capacity of authoritarian regimes to appropriate and exploit the tools of democracy promoters to serve their own ends. To focus on capacity building within civil society or private sectors without equal attention to strategies that might contain the capacity of regimes to exploit such efforts for their purposes will undermine their efficacy and potential impact.

3) Strategies of democracy promotion must reflect more fully an understanding that civil societies and private sectors are deeply embedded within and are often expressions of authoritarian systems of rule. There are no clear boundaries separating state and society or public and private sector. In this context, suitable partners of change may well be placed close to or even within state or regime agencies, and not only outside of them.

4) To define authoritarian regimes as resilient, adaptive, and flexible, does not imply that they invulnerable. We do not argue that authoritarian governance is a given or a lasting outcome. Rather, we view it as a dynamic process involving constant adaptations. Typically, these reinforce authoritarian regimes. Yet they may also contain seeds of change that practitioners and reformers can exploit to nurture demands for democratic change.

In effect, strategies of democracy promotion must reflect attributes and qualities commensurate to those arrayed against them by authoritarian regimes. Just as rigid and unresponsive styles of governance would undermine the resilience of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, democracy promotion programs will be hampered so long as they do not reflect a comparable flexibility, or acquire the capacities needed to operate effectively against regimes that have shown themselves able to adapt and modify strategies of governance. Within the broad parameters described above, the exact form and content of "recombinant democracy promotion strategies" will necessarily depend on the specific conditions they are designed to address. Nonetheless, it is possible to generate broad outlines of how such strategies might be adapted to contexts of resilient authoritarianism in Syria and Iran.

As noted above, authoritarian governance in Syria and Iran bears witness to the shifting and hazy nature of state-society boundaries. In such contexts it does not make sense to insist on sharp demarcations between public and private actors, or indeed to expect that forces for democratic change only originate from civil society. Indeed, Islamist 'brokers' and judicial personnel in Syria and reformist state elites in Iran can be valuable and potent actors of change, not in the least because they enjoy varying degrees of access to the regimes' key policy-makers. Dismissing such actors because they operate within clientalist frameworks dominated by regimes may be missing opportunities for influence that lie outside civil society as conventionally defined.

As this suggests, moving toward a recombinant approach to democracy promotion might push implementers into uncomfortable territory. Strategies that now seem inappropriate might gain ground, while those currently favoured might receive less attention. For example, just as the Iranian and Syrian regimes operate with multiple and competing sets of economic and social policies at the same time, effective democracy promotion strategies should be able to look beyond grassroots partnerships with non-state actors to engage with authoritarian state agencies and promote top-down implementation strategies when conditions warrant.

Dismissing such approaches as inherently compromised or corrupt will isolate practitioners from the central playing fields of authoritarian politics from the outset. Instead, practitioners might find it effective to develop partnerships with GONGOs, like the Syrian First Lady's Trust for Development, or (for European democracy promotion agencies), to build frameworks for cooperation and exchange with selected state agencies in Iran. Despite their limitations, both kinds of institutions have proven to encourage a "rights"-based approach to socio-economic development that may carry political connotations, even when this might not be intended by their sponsors within authoritarian regimes. Alternately, business actors should not be assumed to represent a constituency for political reform. Rather, a focus on improving checks and balances and strengthening transparency in state regulation of economic activity could serve as more effective ways to contain and limit the arbitrary power of authoritarian elites than support for business actors who, on their own, mostly lack the autonomy and the incentives to do so.

On the other hand, just as recombinant authoritarian regimes do not set aside one set of policies or instruments as they develop new ones, there are important components of current democracy promotion strategies that can be "repurposed" as elements of a more flexible and adaptive approach to democratic reform. One of these is the field's longstanding interest in reform of judicial and legislative institutions. Promoting and assisting judicial reform, pertaining to, for example, Syria's administrative courts may underpin reformists and help bend authoritarian politics in directions compatible with greater respect for political rights and civil liberties. What is critical to such efforts, however, is to ensure that they do not become regime reinforcing, but create meaningful constraints on the arbitrary exercise of authoritarian power. Other strategies that exploit or foster cracks within ruling coalitions, strengthen the position of reformists within regimes, and foster the emergence of interest groups able to imagine that their interests are no longer entirely dependent on the persistence of an existing authoritarian regime could well prove to be a potent addition to existing strategies of democratic reform.

Similarly, work with civil society organizations should not be abandoned, but redesigned to address and mitigate the dysfunctions that mark civic sectors in authoritarian contexts. For example, the effectiveness of CSOs is often undermined by their fragmentation and legal vulnerabilities–direct by-products of authoritarian regulation of civil society. Rather than focusing on building civic capacity in the abstract, addressing the obstacles to civic collective action, improving democratic practices within CSOs, and targeting regime regulation of civic sectors as a factor that Western governments take into account in their relationships with authoritarian regimes would all be positive steps in this direction.

Regime legitimacy, fed by nationalist agendas, needs to be taken seriously in foreign-led democracy promotion. Western foreign policies, directly bearing on democracy and related to the region's core conflicts, more often than not have bolstered these agendas. Hence, for some initiatives, such as the one listed above, it may be appropriate to designate third parties who, from a nationalist perspective, are less circumspect or who may enjoy credentials congruent with the Iranian and Syrian regimes' nationalist platforms. In turn, pro-democracy activists in both countries stand a better chance to succeed if they challenge the authoritarian regimes' virtual monopoly on nationalist appeals by incorporating in their programs their own nationalist alternatives. In such attempts it is essential that nationalist themes are reconciled with values and convictions compatible with greater pluralism, political rights and civil liberties. Once again, relatively neutral third parties could be engaged and become a source of inspiration and credibility.

Conclusion

This paper by no means offers an exhaustive list of the ways in which democracy promotion strategies might be reframed to more effectively confront the sources of authoritarian resilience, and impede the recombinant capacity of the Syrian and Iranian regimes. Like current strategies, they come with risks attached, and with no guarantee of success. Perhaps these strategies too will end up playing into the hands of authoritarian rulers, and unintentionally contribute to regime resilience. Yet it is inherent to authoritarian governance that the rules of the game are disproportionately set in favour of incumbent regimes. Short of popular overthrow, which seems out of reach for these cases for the foreseeable future, democracy promoters can improve their odds by themselves becoming adaptive and recombinant in their own tactics and strategies. To be sure, efforts to move democracy promotion frameworks in this direction will be difficult. They will run into both institutional obstacles at home and pushback from the regimes they target. Yet we believe that such an investment is needed both to overcome shortcomings in existing approaches, and to more effectively equip the democracy promotion community to tackle the toughest cases of authoritarian rule in the Middle East in the years ahead.

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Steven Heydemann serves as vice president of the Grant and Fellowship Program of the US Institute of Peace, and as special adviser to the Institute's work on the Muslim world. His research and teaching interests focus on the Arab world, and include authoritarian governance, economic development, social policy, political and economic reform and civil society. From 2003 to 2007, Heydemann directed the Centre for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University. He has also served as director of the Social Science Research Council's Program on International Peace and Security and its Program on the Near and Middle East (1990-1997). From 1997 to 2001, he was an associate professor in the department of political science at Columbia University. Heydemann has served on the board of directors of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and is currently a member of MESA's Committee on Public Affairs. He is the author of *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Cornell University Press,1999) and co-editor of a forthcoming volume *"Comparing Authoritarianisms: Reconfiguring Power and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran".* This is produced within the framework of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia.

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About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The policy paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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