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Rethinking Democratization

Arab Politics after the Uprisings

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Arab Politics after the Uprisings
Still Searching for Legitimacy

Michael C. Hudson

Reprising Arab politics: A personal reflection

Lebanon might appear to be an odd place to begin contemplating the problem of legitimacy in Arab politics. After all, it seems idiosyncratic in the Arab world – a country with a highly contested identity and a weak state. But arriving there as a graduate student in the 1960s, I quickly discovered that it was a splendid spot to view the political dramas unfolding in the surrounding neighbourhood. Lebanon was a magnet, or maybe a honey-pot, for politicians from all over the Arab world. It was a forum where activists and intellectuals could express themselves freely, organize and perhaps plot to reshape politics in their authoritarian home countries. Lebanon itself was a mirror for competing formulas of legitimacy, from the Nasserist socialist–nationalist, anti-imperialist left to the capitalist, pro-Western conservative right. Lebanon tried with mixed results to steer a course between competing models – a pluralist consociation with a spectrum including Maronite ethno-nationalists, cosmopolitan merchant bankers and landlords, communists, Arab nationalists, Muslim social movements. It was clear as well that the struggle for legitimacy and stability in this little country was not a matter for the Lebanese alone – outside powers, near and far, projected significant influence. As a young scholar in Beirut I had a front-row seat to witness what Malcolm Kerr called ‘the Arab cold war,’ in which global and regional powers and their local clients manoeuvred for position in a turbulent region. Lebanon was a uniquely valuable site for future comparative analysis.

As a graduate student at Yale I shared in the intellectual excitement that the cutting-edge theorists of the time – scholars such as Karl W. Deutsch, Gabriel Almond, Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom – were generating. Employing the new approaches of modernization and political development theory, and buttressing them with the empirical, quantitative methods championed by the ‘behavioural revolution’ in political science, we thought it possible to plot the trajectory of politics in the countries of the newly liberated ‘developing areas’. Perhaps we were naive. What I would call the ‘optimistic’ early version of modernization theory proposed that socio-economic modernization – measured by indices of urbanization, economic growth, educational
development and media exposure – could lead to legitimate, stable democratic orders. A subtext, which may have driven the government funders of research along these lines, was that these new states would also be pro-Western and anti-Communist. The classic works of Daniel Lerner and Manfred Halpern applied these notions to the Middle East.

By my recollection, two concepts that dominate the scholarly debate today – democracy and Islam – did not feature prominently in the debates of the 1960s. Reflecting perhaps some of the priorities of the leading revolutionary leaders of the time – such as Nasser, Nehru, Sukarno, Nkrumah and Chou en-Lai – political scientists emphasized growth, development, and equality. (They downplayed those leaders’ anti-Western rhetoric.) If, as David Apter had observed in his studies of Africa, the ‘mobilization system’ was the instrument for achieving these ends, then so be it (Apter 1965). Politics might become more ‘participant’ and a culture of empathy and tolerance might emerge, but democracy as such was not often presented as an outcome front and centre. As for political Islam, it did not appear to be on the horizon; rather, the main competitors were revolutionary ‘socialist’ nationalism versus ‘traditional’ patrimonial leadership in tandem with a feudal-bourgeois, pro-Western elite. Not that Islam was completely overlooked: Halpern warned of ‘neo-Islamic totalitarianism’ as a deviant offshoot of modernization.

But a more ‘pessimistic’ version of modernization theory soon emerged. I came upon this in Samuel P. Huntington’s powerful book Political Order in Changing Societies. I am an admirer of this book, though I cannot say the same for his subsequent excursion into the ‘clash of civilizations’. When he invited me to Harvard to revise my dissertation on Lebanon for publication, I came to appreciate the ‘darker’ side of modernization. The social upheavals associated with modernization, he argued, could just as well lead to instability. Instead of inculcating a consensus on tolerance and moderation, in the absence of accepted institutions, these forces could unleash parochialism and extremism. The essential ingredient for an orderly development would be institutions and procedures that carried broad legitimacy. Huntington’s playful example: the local high school in Cambridge was just a ‘structure’ while Harvard was an ‘institution’. The trick, of course, then and now, was how to build such institutions. The lesson has served me well as I survey the chaotic unfolding of politics in several of the post-uprising Arab states.

Finally, looking back on these formative influences, I must mention the classic work of my former colleague at the City University of New York, Dankwart Rustow, whose early formulation of the prerequisites of democratic development in what we used to call the Third World insisted on the need for the political community to be in agreement on the question of national unity. ‘The vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-be must have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to’ (Rustow 1970). In addition, I would add, there needs to be a similar consensus on the form of legitimate authority. Somehow there has to emerge some consensually accepted legitimacy formula. But how to do it? As the post-uprising Arab states struggle to establish a new order this, in my view, is the crucial question. And surely now the emphasis has to be on consensus. In our earlier analyses we implicitly assumed that an effective ‘legitimacy formula’ was something that the incumbent regime could construct. Influenced perhaps by our colleagues who studied the Soviet system – I think of Nathan Leites’s study of the ‘operational code’ of the Politburo – we took a ‘top down’ approach (Leites 1951). Clearly, today this will not do. Of Rustow’s three prerequisites, today the most important and contentious is authority.
Enter Max Weber. In my 1977 study of *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, Weber was my starting point. His tripartite typology seemed quite tailor-made for the Arab Middle East. The monarchies embodied his *traditional* form of legitimating authority. I may be the only political scientist who has learned from Gilbert and Sullivan as well as Weber, among others; and as *The Mikado* so trenchantly put it: ‘In a fatherly kind of way I govern each tribe and sect.’ Weber’s *charismatic* type was also on display. My coming of age, as it were, as a political scientist of the Middle East, was the age of Gamal Abdel Nasser. I remember a warm 23 July, the anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, sitting on a balcony in Beirut listening to Nasser’s speech. But we didn’t need to turn on the radio because the whole neighbourhood was also listening on their radios. Weber’s third category was *legal-rational*. Having recently spent four years in Singapore, I think I know what a legal–rational political order is. There weren’t many of those in the Arab world in the 1960s, nor are there today. Israel perhaps stands out as the best, maybe the only case, where rules matter. Egypt, one might have thought, had an embedded bureaucratic order but it was subservient to the whims of the *ra’is*, the president. Lebanon, weak state notwithstanding, operated according to a consociational logic that was substantially autonomous from individual politicians. Strange as it may seem, another case, now disappeared, that seemed to me to lean in that direction was the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. I happened to go there around 1973 (one of the few Americans to do so) and was impressed by the way its Marxist one-party system had tried to create a rules-based system rationally (if imperfectly) harnessed to a developmental program. Hardly democratic, of course, but committed to pulverizing traditional *wasta* and tribal–religious authorities.

In my *Arab Politics* I adopted David Easton’s neo-Weberian typology of legitimizing strategies (Easton 1979). One type was *personal*. I argued that successful personal (charismatic) leaders in the Arab world were actually few and far between, notwithstanding the tendency of its authoritarian systems to privilege the top man (no women were in sight). Throughout the larger Middle East in modern times my ‘A’ list would have included only Nasser, ‘Abdel-Aziz Ibn Sa’ud, Kamal Ataturk, King Hussein of Jordan, David Ben Gurion and Yasser Arafat. You might have thought that Arafat was the antithesis of the charismatic hero, but in his ‘resistance’ phase *Al-Khityar* (‘the old man’ as he was affectionately known) elicited broad and deep support. My ‘B’ list is a mixed bag: Saddam Hussein and Hafez Al-Asad (in the Stalinist mode), and Muammar Gaddafi, who pretty much defies classification.

States and regimes enjoying *ideological* legitimacy (Easton’s second category) in times gone by would have included the Nasserist and Ba’thist projects in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the two Yemens (with qualifications) and, again with qualifications, Algeria – where the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) made that country the poster child of the Third World developmental state. Nationalism(s) proved to be powerful political glue. An interesting question here, which I may not have addressed adequately in *Arab Politics*, is whether or to what extent ‘tradition’ is an ideology. Back in the 1970s we might have assumed that tradition was an obstacle to be overcome; possibly even certain progressive monarchs themselves, such as Faisal in Iraq, Faisal in Saudi Arabia, and Qaboos in Oman, might have thought the same thing. But Arab monarchs more recently, even if they are not progressive, have discovered that tradition can be an important ideological resource. Witness the assiduous construction of tradition in the Gulf states today. To today’s kings, museums matter.
Institutional legitimacy, after Weber’s legal–rational category, existed but in what liberal-democratic analysts (I count myself as one) might have described as deformed. These were and are the mukhabarat states. Their power is indicated by their euphemisms: ‘Le Pouvoir’ in Algeria; ‘al-nidham’, the order, in most of the other Arab ‘republics’ – notably Iraq, Syria, Libya and Tunisia. Certainly the nationalist officers and middle-class intellectuals who drove the ‘republican-revolutionary’ movement across the Arab world in the 1960s were keen to develop legitimate institutions to implant the shallow and perhaps fleeting legitimacy accorded to ‘revolutionary command councils’. Efforts to create ‘democratic’ electoral and parliamentary systems were largely cosmetic and recognized as such by all concerned. More attention was given to legitimizing the single-party bureaucracy as the institutionalization of the regime. Along with the other big bureaucracies they constituted a public environment which ordinary citizens were encouraged to become habituated to if not respected, let alone revered. What, then, of the monarchies? It would be incomplete simply to classify them as running on formulas of personal legitimacy. For here too, behind the Emir, King or Sultan, is the institution of the mukhabarat. More euphemisms: in Jordan young men sent to the downtown prison in Amman would wryly refer to it as ‘the hotel’, where the service left something to be desired.

This, then, was the state of my thinking about the puzzle of Arab political legitimacy three or four decades ago. The attentive reader today will note at least two glaring omissions: political economy and international relations. Perhaps they are a function of the disciplinary barriers in American academia. Economics was and remains, in the academy at least, a discipline unto itself with little regard for the more practical side of economic life. Why were we allergic, or at least inattentive to class-based analyses? The answer lies to some extent in the boundary markers around scholarship smacking of Marxism in American political life. To a lesser extent academic international relations too is tone-deaf to regional peculiarities in the search for universal generalizations. Yet, one thing my work on Lebanon should have taught me is that the Arab region is highly permeable to exogenous influences. Models that are essentially country-bound will miss the explanatory power of the outsiders, regional and global, who seek to enhance or diminish the legitimacy of incumbent regimes in this volatile area.

The uprisings that began at the end of 2010 have forced us to reconsider the question of legitimacy in Arab politics. One lesson is clear: we need to broaden our focus from state and regime toward society, economy, culture and regional/global pressures. If it even makes sense to talk about legitimacy formulas in the post-uprising phase, it is incumbent on us to include society and the global environment as well.

Lessons from the uprisings after three years

After three years the Arab uprising phenomenon continues to surprise analysts. The first surprise was that they happened at all. That surprise, as far as academic political science is concerned, was largely due, I believe, to a fixation on ‘persistent authoritarianism’ and a neglect of understanding societal change. The second surprise was the ‘spill-over effect’ from one Arab country to another within the space of a mere month or so. Nobody expected that the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia would seemingly precipitate a wave of protest that has shaken the whole Arab world – and not just those six countries that have experienced full-fledged rebellions. The third surprise was that the uprisings were not captured by political Islam. Not that Islamists have not
tried, as we can see from the post-uprising history in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, in particular. Some analysts had thought that Islamists, being the best organized force outside the state, would carry the day. The jury is still out, of course, but three years onward it appears that Islam is not the solution. But the fourth surprise was that ‘transitions to democracy’ are very slow in coming, if at all, notwithstanding a substantial body of analysis – not to mention US policy assumptions – that has supported this proposition.

**Fixation on ‘persistent authoritarianism’**

Quite a lot has now been written on why political scientists working on the Middle East were taken by surprise. Gregory Gause, who wrote an important essay in *Foreign Policy*, was not alone in noticing that much of the most interesting recent work has been focused on trying to explain why the Arab world has exhibited persistent authoritarianism while other parts of the world underwent what some called a ‘third wave’ of democratization. It was not difficult to over-explain persistent authoritarianism. Most obvious was the *mukhabarat* state argument: incumbent regimes had devoted vast resources to developing the security and military apparatus to such an extent that popular opposition was impossible to sustain. Others pointed to the role of the US and other outside powers in strengthening and protecting friendly Arab dictators. Another argument dwelt upon the nature of the post-colonial ‘deep’ state, with its entrenched elites and autonomy from society. The wealthy oil-exporting states of the Gulf and their dependencies exemplified the rentier model, according to which a tacit bargain was struck between rulers benefitting from large streams of exogenous income traded generous welfare policies for societal abdication from political participation. And Steven Heydemann made an interesting case for ‘authoritarian upgrading’, observing that these regimes demonstrate astuteness and agility in capitalizing on new technologies and claiming democratic legitimacy with practices that are cosmetic rather than genuine. All well and good, but this preoccupation with authoritarian robustness diverted analytical attention and resources from societal and economic conditions. It was left to political anthropologists, sociologists and economists to try and draw attention to the behaviour of ordinary people, whose presumed passivity apparently had limits after all.

**The ‘Arab Spring’: Singular or plural?**

A few months into the uprisings I wrote an article for the online site Jadaliyya subtitled ‘An awakening, cataclysm, or just a series of events?’ I confess that I was partial to the ‘awakening’ school and still am, even though the evidence of an Arab political renaissance so far is very thin indeed. Those of us who argued that the uprisings are an historical event with long-term consequences rather than just a collection of random protests were, I think, correct. I did not and do not subscribe to the ‘cataclysm’ school, which seems to be much favoured in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, to such an extent that they have mounted a veritable counter-revolution and employed a variety of carrots and sticks to immunize their regimes from further popular ‘contagion’. I never believed that the sudden explosion of massive popular protests were just coincidental. This is not to say, obviously, that there was a foreign conspiracy behind them, as some people in the Arab world believe. But what
was the nature of this ‘epidemic’? A political epidemiologist might look to channels of new media and social communication and the salience of key legitimacy demands to explain how the uprisings spread.

Is Islam the solution? Maybe not

During the first wave of protests observers noted that Islamists were conspicuous by their absence. The crowds who shook regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria were not demanding the imposition of Islamic rule; they were objecting to the arbitrary, incompetent, corrupt and often cruel behaviour of rulers. The main Islamist organizations in Tunisia and Egypt were caught by surprise and initially were uncertain as to how they should respond. But while the youth, the educated professionals, the women and the unemployed could come together for impressive demonstrations, they lacked the leadership and organization to push ahead once the dictators were gone. The regimes had done a good job of encapsulating or co-opting the relatively secular political parties, labour organizations and professional societies. But they were unable to neutralize Islamist organizations such as the Nahda Party and the Muslim Brotherhood, and once the dictators were gone these socially rooted organizations emerged to try and lead the opposition. In Tunisia and Egypt they briefly succeeded in forming governments, but they found that a legitimacy formula so heavily weighted toward Islam was insufficient to guarantee their domination. The military and the under-organized ‘secular’ forces still had the ability to check the Islamist tide. As for the other uprising countries, Islamists found themselves constrained or prone to extremist tactics that eroded their popularity. In Yemen the Islah was partially compromised by its ties with the old regime, while Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula was better at violence than politics. In Libya Islamists found themselves embroiled in the chaos of regional, tribal, and clan politics following the overthrow of Gaddafi. In Bahrain the monarchy sought to define the uprising as Shi’ite sectarianism underwritten by Iran in a manoeuver intended to discredit its democratic aspirations. And in Syria the brutality of the regime’s response to the initial popular protests, which were not driven by Islamism, drove elements of the opposition to adopt extreme Islamist ideology and violence in response, creating debilitating disunity: once again, a purist Islamist legitimacy formula was unable to produce a broad consensus, and it reduced outside support (especially from the US). The Assad regime, rejecting the accusation that it was sectarian, sought to persuade the world that it was pluralist – protective of Christians as well as Sunnis and Druze, and opposed to ‘Islamist terrorism’. Doubtless, Islam is an exceedingly powerful symbolic legitimizing force, but the last three years suggest that it alone is not the solution.

Democratic transitions: Not so easy, not so quick

The Arab uprisings provided a unique ‘laboratory’ for testing theories of democratic transition. The way matters have unfolded in the early post-uprising years has been an unpleasant surprise for ‘transitologists’ and democracy promotion advocates. Democracy was much on the minds of the first wave of protesters in 2011, but it was far from being the sole goal. Initially, protesters poured into the streets in order to rid themselves of ‘bad leaders’. The protests, then, were couched in negative terms: ‘the people desire the fall of the regime’. While polling has revealed that Arab public opinion is
highly favourable towards democracy and human rights, these abstractions must compete with the post-uprising realities. Clearly, people also were expecting better government and improved economic conditions. And, as post-uprising politics became ever more chaotic, the demand for stability and normality has grown. ‘Uprising fatigue’ has driven people who had initially risen up against military and police-dominated regimes to look to the military for a solution. The irony is not lost on liberal democrats in Egypt. A main proposition of transitions theory is that in confrontations between an incumbent authoritarian regime and a radical-reform opposition a compromise can be reached by bringing together the ‘soft-liners’ from the regime and the ‘moderates’ from the opposition, thus appealing to the rationality of all parties. Something like this may have happened in the post-Bin Ali Tunisia case in which the Nahdha Party-dominated government compromised with moderate opponents. While Tunisia is so far the sole case of a domestically driven consensual transition process, another case where a democratic transition of sorts might be occurring is Yemen, where ‘moderates’ from the regime of Ali Abdallah Saleh (who remains in Yemen and politically active) and a multi-factional opposition have held a National Dialogue, but within the framework of an agreement brokered by an external actor, the Gulf Cooperation Council. In Egypt, however, there appear to have been no ‘soft-liners’ in the confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood government of Muhammad Morsi and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). The same must be said for Bahrain, notwithstanding accounts of ‘moderate’ elements within the royal family. In Libya after three post-Gaddafi years the opposition appears to be so fragmented that it is hard to speak of hardliners or soft-liners. And the worst case – Syria – remains paralysed, with no discernible soft-liners in the Assad regime. Despite the horrific human losses and mediation efforts by the UN and Arab League representative, conditions have deteriorated, turning what originally was a citizen protest against a brutal authoritarian regime into a militarized civil war deepened by the intervention of armed elements on both sides. Thus, after three years the situation remains at a bloody impasse.

Opening the black box of ‘civil society’

What can we learn from these lessons? Each of the surprises can be traced to an insufficient understanding of civil society in the Arab world. ‘Civil society’ itself is a contested term, inasmuch as significant components are not obviously ‘civil’ – tribes, for example; and the boundaries between the domain of the state and the public domain, at one end, and the private domain, at the other, are not clear. But it is in this zone that the uprisings were generated. For too long it was under-theorized. Orientalist approaches treated the ‘masses’ as inert and undifferentiated, but when aggravated likely to behave irrationally.

Now we know better. Demands for constitutional reform in Turkey, Iran and Egypt around the turn of the 20th century signalled the beginnings of political openings. Later, after World War I, the region witnessed the growth of mass movements, nationalist, communist and Islamist. What Albert Hourani dubbed the Liberal Age saw limited parliamentary and electoral practices and the formation of political parties. The curtain came down in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of authoritarian regimes and the top-down mobilization of masses, accompanied by the suppression of autonomous societal groups, associations and parties. Although largely marginalized these movements did not disappear. While political scientists have focused most of their
attention at the state level, anthropologists, sociologists, and political economists have drawn our attention to the role of professional associations, youth, women and labour organizations. The communications revolution driven by the transistor radio, television, the tape recorder, the fax machine, satellite television, mobile ‘smart’ telephony and the internet multiplied the mobilization effect set in motion a century earlier with the rise of the press. Local political networks and neighbourhood politics may have constituted a kind of springboard for the ‘Arab Spring’.

The problem is that we do not have a sufficiently comprehensive body of knowledge about this domain, notwithstanding the good work that has been done so far. Had we known more we might not have been surprised that the Khaled Said and Muhammad Bouazzizi killings would trigger that explosion of popular protest across the region. And perhaps with a deeper knowledge of the cleavages and fragmentation that characterize this ‘intermediate sphere’ we would have been less surprised at the failure of these activated societal actors to form effective and coherent structures for converting social protest into coherent political power in the post-uprising phase. Why has an Arab ‘centre’ been so slow to emerge? Why is trust in such short supply? What accounts for polarization and a zero-sum mentality? Why does contentious identity politics overshadow cooperation to achieve shared political objectives? We need to dig deeper – but carefully – into the murky realm of ‘political culture’ and encourage more research on social movements and organizations. New information technologies and social media have helped create, perhaps, a new ‘public square’ beneath the radar of regimes. And while new players with new support bases may be waiting in the shadows, it is important not to neglect the place of established elites. The messy post-uprising history of Egypt suggests that incumbents and newcomers need to come together to construct new legitimacy formulas.

Rethinking legitimacy in the Arab world

Failure of the old legitimacy formulas

Broadly speaking, in the last half of the 20th century the Arab monarchies employed tradition to legitimize their rule and the ‘republics’ employed an ideological cocktail of pan-Arabism, Palestine, anti-imperialism and egalitarian reform. A few leaders emnated charisma – Nasser, Hussein, perhaps Arafat. None of the Arab political systems really embodied Weberian legal–rational legitimacy. While the picture is mixed and exceptional cases could be found, on the whole these legitimacy formulas proved inadequate for underpinning stable, competent and authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) governance.

It has been argued that ‘tradition’, and in particular the traditional norm of patrimonialism, accounts for the relative stability of the Middle East monarchies. There is something to this argument, but it must also be noted that several monarchies collapsed – in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Iraq, Iran and North Yemen. This suggests that patrimonial traditionalism was perhaps a waning legitimacy resource. Moreover, in the surviving monarchies even the most solid – Morocco and Jordan – suffered several attempted coups and, in the Jordanian case, a brief civil war. Today the oil-rich monarchies of the Gulf deploy massive revenues to hold bay the populist currents that have roiled the region. They are also working to strengthen or perhaps even invent ‘tradition’ through promoting museums and ‘traditional’ cultural identity.
As for the ‘revolutionary republics’, although they enjoyed periods of legitimate rule by deploying charismatic and ideological resources, on the whole those formulas have not withstood the test of time and events. Arabism and Palestine, while significant, no longer carry the symbolic weight that they once did, perhaps because leaders themselves have proven so impotent in advancing these causes. Islamism, widely seen as a powerful new ideological resource, has lately shown its limitations. Political systems like Saudi Arabia, founded on a presumptive Islamic legitimacy, have proven vulnerable to more ‘purist’ Islamist opposition movements claiming that they are not Islamic enough. Yet the purists, represented by Al-Qa’ida and other groups, have been unable to mobilize sufficiently broad support to govern at all, let alone govern legitimately. And the turn of events in Egypt in 2013 showed how hollow or ephemeral an Islamist government’s legitimacy can be. That said, it must also be noted that liberal democracy has proven to be surprisingly feeble as a legitimacy resource. Liberal democrats – the so-called Arab centre – have been unable to displace monarchical or military-authoritarian systems, at least until now. Little Lebanon stands as a qualified exception. Perhaps the shadow of the ‘façade’ liberal parliamentary experiences in the post-colonial Arab state helps to account for this weakness. As Nasser declared:

We were supposed to have a democratic system during the period 1923 to 1953. But what good was this democracy to our people? … Landowners and Pashas used this kind of democracy as an easy tool for the benefits of a feudal system … I want to liberate the peasants and workers both socially and economically … This in my view is the basis of freedom and democracy.  

(Owen 1993: 21)

If it is true that the Arab states have been suffering a legitimacy deficit, one might reasonably ask why then have many of them experienced quite long periods of stability (although broken in some countries by coup attempts, ‘corrective movements’, terrorist waves, and civil wars!) especially from the 1970s into the 21st century. The answer, I think, lies in the mukhabarat state. Fear, rather than legitimacy, underpinned the longevity of rulers such as Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Bin Ali and Al-Assad. Even the ‘softer’ regime in Egypt under Sadat and Mubarak survived more on fear combined with the habit of obedience than on genuinely legitimate foundations. The uprisings of 2011 revealed the hollowness of their legitimacy claims.

Towards new legitimacy formulas

The turbulent developments in the post-uprising states suggest that new and durable legitimacy formulas will take time to be created and take root. Twenty-first century global, regional and domestic realities have rendered some of the old formulas obsolescent. Charismatic leadership alone will not carry the day; nor will shop-worn ideological formulations. The uprisings, at least in their initial stages, seemed to indicate the importance of the following principles:

- an end to arbitrary and often brutal governance;
- ‘governmentality’ – the requirement that governments must perform better than they have in delivering quality education and economic development;
- transparency and effective curbs on corruption;
the promotion of inclusive civic identity beyond clan, tribe and sect – with a meaningful sense of citizenship and a public space open to all without fear of retribution;

- liberal nationalism tolerant of other communal identities;

- an ongoing commitment to a just solution to the Palestine tragedy;

- order and stability – values that have assumed greater priority in light of the turbulent immediate aftermath of the uprisings;

- and the Palestine cause remains an important legitimacy resource for those who can credibly claim to be doing something positive on its behalf. The downside is that failure to do so will be a drain on legitimacy.

It is not enough for the rulers emerging in the post-uprising era to proclaim such principles; they must show the ability to implement them. In Egypt the stunning reversal of fortunes for the Muslim Brotherhood is accounted for in large part by their incompetence in governing and their rejection of inclusivity.

The Egyptian case also suggests two characteristics of the current search for legitimacy. First, ‘revolutionary legitimacy’ may have a short shelf life. The euphoria accompanying the overthrow of Mubarak gradually dissipated as the struggle to craft an alternative order went on. Similarly, the ‘revolutionary legitimacy’ accorded to Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi after the overthrow of Morsi, in the opinion of some Egyptian observers, might also begin to wane in light of Egypt’s intractable post-uprising economic problems. The second point is that ordinary people came to prioritize stability and order after undergoing many months of political turmoil.

A case for long-term optimism

We have scaled back our expectations for democratic transitions in the immediate post-uprising period. Yet in the longer term I think there are reasons for optimism. The emerging global multi-polar world may positively affect the possibilities of developing new legitimate and stable political orders. The decline of American hegemony with its preference for supporting friendly authoritarian rulers could open windows of opportunity for reformists – notwithstanding Washington’s hollow ‘democracy promotion’ stance. Social media and the internet have energized society so as to challenge incumbent regimes’ ability to dominate political discourse. The likelihood that emerging post-uprising governments will be weaker than their predecessors may make them more ready to engage rather than suppress critics and reformers. The risk here, of course, is the possibility that weak governments will be unable to ensure the stability that so many people crave. If there is a learning curve for new leaders and governments then one might expect them to abandon crude nationalist, Islamist or sectarian programs and instead try to foster more inclusive stances. Leaders who come to power through genuine, even if imperfect, popular mandates, may eventually realize that it is in their interest to build centrist coalitions and marginalize extremists.

The Arab uprisings have dramatically revealed that the social and political landscape of the Arab world has changed fundamentally. Legitimacy formulas that were effective for an earlier age clearly are not any more. The Arab world today is a region of multiple identities, new groups, movements and organizations, and is far more exposed to and integrated with global norms and institutions than ever before. It is a region beset with enormous problems: poverty, inequality, the inferior status of women, inadequate
educational systems and dysfunctional governments. But it also has impressive human and natural resources. As Clovis Maksoud has remarked, the Arab world is a rich nation of poor people. The challenge, then, for intellectuals, scholars and politicians is to point the way for new formulas that reflect and accommodate these new realities.

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