Report

The Arab Political Systems beyond 2014

Where do we go from here?

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Hundreds of people have been killed in a crackdown on demonstrators by security forces after turmoil in Egypt [Reuters]

Abstract

In the famous children's book Alice in Wonderland, the little girl Alice encounters a cat sitting on a gigantic mushroom and asks it: "Where do I go from here?" The cat replies: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to" to which Alice replies: "I don't care much where." The cat smiles and says: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go." In a lot of ways, the Arab world today is like Alice: before it asks where to go, it will have to know where it wants to end up. Broadly speaking, the Arab world now has four options to choose from: fully established democracy, transitional democracy (also called anocracy), return to authoritarianism, or the continuation of authoritarianism. But what are democratic and authoritarian systems really, and how does transition between the two systems occur?In the famous children's book Alice in Wonderland, the little girl Alice encounters a cat sitting on a gigantic mushroom and asks it: "Where do I go from here?" The cat replies: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to" to which Alice replies: "I don't care much where." The cat smiles and says: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go." In a lot of ways, the Arab world today is like Alice: before it asks where to go, it will have to know where it wants to end up. Broadly speaking, the Arab world now has four options to choose from: fully established democracy, transitional democracy (also called anocracy), return to authoritarianism, or the continuation of authoritarianism. But what are democratic and authoritarian systems really, and how does transition between the two systems occur?

Explaining political change

Change as such; be it in politics, economics or even at the individual level is frequently a product of crisis. The very word crisis in English comes from the Greek word krisis meaning decision; although often thought of as a time of trouble, it is also a time when a difficult or important decision must be made. Consequently, change in political systems more often than not usually occurs as a result of an economic and political crisis. In 28 out of 39 cases of democracy death, fall in income had occurred in the two years preceding the crisis. European democracies for instance emerged in several back-and-fourth movements from the 19th century onwards as a result of large-scale economic and political problems. At that time, elites (and to some extent the middle class) did not have the means to repress popular demands for more political participation – in other words, democracy was simply the least costly option in a situation of crisis.

Change can happen both towards democracy and non-democracy. In fact, statistics show that crises are slightly more likely to produce a non-democracy.(1) Any political system therefore is seldom the outcome of a peaceful negotiated process, but one were the three components of society (elites, middle class and populace – not equal in size, obviously) struggle with each other based on their respective group's interest. Each group has its preferences when it comes to political systems, as different systems manage access to power, wealth and resources differently. Authoritarian structures emerge when one or two groups have the capability to repress the other; only when democracy is the best option for all three groups (or indeed, the least bad one), it comes into being as a complex system of consensus.

Because democracy needs to emerge from a consensus, systems with a 'winner takes it all' principle (where 51% of the votes are enough to control 100% of the system) are particularly vulnerable to a rollback in times of transition. Since this type of system hands power to the biggest group in numerical terms, elites and middle class are generally over-ruled by the popular majority, and therefore fear having no say in the decision-making process. They then can try to return to a system which works more to their advantage. Societies where the gap between wealth and poverty is pronounced – and where the middle class is small – are particularly threatened by swinging back and forth between populist uprisings or authoritarian structures; this is not unusual and did occur frequently in many Latin-American and European countries in the 20th century. The problem here is that where democracy is not established yet, uncertainty over the future leads to zero-sum thinking; all groups involved will attempt to side-line the others for fear of being suppressed by the other.

What is democracy?

Although the democratic discourse focuses a lot on political freedom, as a political system democracy is essentially about participation. Translated from the Greek dēmokratia, democracy means rule by the people. In other words, democracy seeks to establish a system in which the largest amount of people is involved in the political decision-making process. But beyond this, there are no agreed definitions on how to translate this into practical terms, as most states today are simply too large in size and population to allow for direct democracy literally involving every individual, and therefore have to be representative by default. As a result, there are several hundred definitions of democracy without one being universally agreed on – and several different systems which define themselves as democracy.

In Europe alone, there exist constitutional monarchies next to republics, parliaments with one or two chambers, heads of state that are executive or not, systems that are centralised or decentralised, federal or unitary, constitutions that have been written down or not, where the government must be from parliament or indeed is excluded from it and so on. But all of these consider themselves as democratic systems, because democracy is not defined by its formal nature, but by the practices it comes with – generally speaking, democracy is defined as a state in which genuine competition for power exists, in which mass participation on a legally equal footing takes place, where political liberties restrict the state's powers and where general deliberations on policy take place. Systems such as Italy under fascism, called authoritarian democracy, therefore do not technically qualify as democracies although elections did take place – they are void of genuine participation of the people and competition of ideas.

How democracy as an ideal is translated into actual politics depends very much on the national political culture – and in fact needs to take historical and cultural aspects into account if this democratic system is supposed to be stable. National referendums for instance do not exist in Germany, where a first experience with democracy was abused by those which did not favour democracy at all – today, Germany has installed a 'defensive democracy' which is allowed to defend itself against parties and ideologies attempting to abolish the system as it is. In France, only the currently fifth republic with a strong presidential figure proved to be stable enough to absorb the French political culture. The United Kingdom does not have a codified constitution.

Democracy has not only many faces in terms of structure; there are also different interpretations of what it is supposed to achieve. Liberal democracy for instance focuses mainly on political liberties, procedural democracy puts elections of representatives at the core of its system; communism believed to achieve economic democracy through the redistribution of wealth. Social democracy in turn can be either understood as a liberal democratic political system flanked by a socialist economic system (one where the

people decide over economic complexes rather than the owners), or indeed a system with extensive welfare and collective bargaining between for instance employers and employees. And several other ideas for democratic system have emerged over time, such as Christian democracy, consensus democracy (where not the majority rules but a complex system attempting to engage almost everyone, as in Lebanon), deliberative democracy which focuses on consensual decision-making via deliberation rather than voting, lottocracy which chooses decision-makers randomly, ochlocracy in which the masses rule in a demagogic manner (also known as the tyranny of the majority) or even non-partisan democracy which votes without political parties. In practice, most democratic systems incorporate several different elements of these schools of thought depending on their national leaning.

The key difference between democracy and authoritarian structures is therefore not necessarily political freedom as the current narrative goes, but the amount and type of people involved in the decision-making process; perhaps most importantly, democracy is a promise that this system will remain in place as it establishes provisions about how the government will change.(2) Because of its redistributive nature – even in its most liberal form – masses tend to prefer democratic systems over authoritarian ones.(3)

The continuing appeal of authoritarianism

But democracy, once established, will not survive if it does not prove to be the best possible system for its citizens. In that, it is measured against the main functions of a state, namely the delivery of security, welfare and representation. Although democracy arguably delivers on representation, its delivery the other two core functions of a state – welfare and security – will determine its survival, too. Political systems can survive if they deliver on only two out of three, but they will face unrest when they deliver one, or indeed none – this danger exists for both authoritarian and democratic systems.(4) The 18th century phrase 'no taxation without representation' echoes the idea that authoritarian systems desiring to extort money from their citizens need to deliver something in return. Where an authoritarian system delivers on security and welfare, it will be less challenged than a democratic system delivering neither, even though it puts strict limitations on political pluralism (e.g. parties, political institutions), political mobilisation as well as liberties, and bases its legitimacy on emotion.(5) Generally speaking, neither democratic nor authoritarian systems are more likely to deliver on security and welfare in the medium-term. On the long run, however, democracies are less likely to go to war with another democracy, and show higher levels of economic development.

The Arab Spring was ultimately the result of states not providing for their citizens; states had delivered on security but not on representation, and had gotten by on welfare until

food prices increased massively through 2010. They had delivered on two out of three for a long time, but were challenged once economy slid into crisis; in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria food prices tripled in the months before January 2011. Whether or not the newly emerged systems in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya will establish themselves will therefore depend largely on their performance in these three areas. Crucially, the reasons which led to the revolutions of 2011 have not disappeared; in fact, they have gotten worse. Food prices today are at the levels of 2010. In addition, security has grown into a new problem. Murder rates in Egypt have tripled; armed robbery has increased by ten. Terrorism, be it in Iraq, Libya, Egypt or Tunisia is growing into a large-scale regional problem. States, regardless of their political system, will have to deliver or face further unrest.

In addition, some groups in society favour authoritarian structures; elites do generally as they prefer to not share wealth and power which they control exclusively. The middle class is a swing voter; at times it favours democracy and at times authoritarianism. Declared by Greek thinker Aristotle as the key ingredient of democracy, the middle class is not by default a supporter of democracy; where the middle class sees democracy as key to protect its status, it will be in favour – however, where democracy evolves into a potential redistributive threat, the middle class will favour authoritarian systems. Statistically speaking, states with large middle classes have a tendency to be democratic.(6)

Arab choices

Arab political systems in transition will have to define what kind of society they want to achieve, and within which framework they want to do so. For Arab democracies in particular to institutionalise themselves several choices have to be made; not only on their general emphasis (e.g. liberal, social, procedural), but also on how the system is to take into account national, historical and cultural specificities. Simply copying other systems will not achieve a stable result.

One area where Arab transiting systems can improve on are political parties; albeit not a precondition for democracy, parties are instrumental in translating mass demands into concrete proposals; they act as conveyor belts between citizens and government. So far, Arab political parties have failed to come up with solutions, instead producing wish lists. Where parties help shape the national debate, vet and select candidates and propose solutions and visions for society, they can contribute to a system more representative of the people living in it. For this, they will need to tune in more into what their respective citizens want and how to achieve that.

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Endnotes:

1) Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.66. Barrington Moore: Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Beacon Press, 1966). Adam Przeworski et.al., Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Material Well-Being in the World: 1950 – 1990 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2) Martin Seymour Lipset, 'Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', American Political Science Review 53(1), 1959: 69–105.

3) Charles Boix, Democracy and Redistribution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

4) Rolf Schwarz, "Post-Conflict Peace building: The Challenges of Security, Welfare and Representation", Security Dialogue, 2005, 36: 429

5) Juan Linz, Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes, (Rienner, 2000), p.343

6) Francis Fukuyama, "The Future of History: Can Liberal Democracy Survive the Decline of the Middle Class?", Foreign Affairs, January/February 2012