

The Convergence of Governance: Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World and Downgrading Democracy Elsewhere?

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In a sobering 2002 article, Thomas Carothers debunked many of the notions surrounding the validity of the democratization paradigm and illustrated the problems that emerge with studying political change in authoritarian contexts only through the prism of transitology.¹ Questioning the validity of the democratization paradigm carries significant weight in the case of the Arab world where no formal transition to democracy has occurred. Building on Carothers, there have been works attempting to abandon the assumptions of the democratization paradigm, focusing instead on the daily reality of governance in the region and how it is practiced. These studies have been grouped under the label of post-democratization and have examined different aspects of the persistence of authoritarianism, as Morten Valbjørn and André Bank stated in the introduction to this special issue. This has led to a renewed interest in forms of governance that are on a continuum from authoritarianism to democracy rather than looking at the continuum as a path whereby countries are inevitably on the move toward the ‘end of history.’² This is due to the liberalizations that occurred in the Arab world over the last two decades. Thus, the concept of semi-democracy has been applied

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¹ Thomas Carothers (2002), ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm,’ *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 1, pp. 5–21.

² Francis Fukuyama (1993), *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper).

to the Arab world, where it has taken the label of ‘liberalized autocracy.’³ The problem with such studies, however, is that they reinforce paradoxically the notion of an exceptional Arab world when it comes to its form of political rule because they tend to lack a broad comparative dimension, as if the Arabs were somewhat unique in experiencing a form of political rule that mixes leadership’s unaccountability, arbitrary power, and a degree of political and economic liberalism.

This study argues against both democracy-spotting and exceptionalism, contending instead that the region displays a form of governance that has become quite widespread across the globe with a number of different political systems and regimes displaying similar dynamics. In short, liberal-authoritarian forms of rule are part of a general trend. More specifically, this analysis argues that the increasing de-politicisation of the citizenry across political systems is generating a normatively worrying trend of ‘convergence of governance.’ Thus, traditional authoritarian systems change and survive by adopting *ad hoc* liberal reforms and some democratic institutions, while democracies experience a considerable weakening of their institutions and adopt fundamentally un-democratic and illiberal policies such as the widespread use of mechanisms of surveillance of citizens.⁴

De-politicisation, understood as public apathy and detachment from institutional politics, is a characteristic often associated with liberal-democracies where the participation of citizens has been diminishing for decades, leading some to argue that the core features of democracy are weakening.⁵ De-politicisation is also a core feature of authoritarianism and therefore rather than authoritarian regimes converging toward democracy, we might be witnessing a double movement whereby both democratic and authoritarian regimes are

³ Daniel Brumberg (2002), ‘The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy,’ *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 4, pp. 56–68.

⁴ David Forrest (2009), *Abécédaire de la Société de Surveillance* (Paris: Syllepse).

⁵ Colin Hay (2007), *Why We Hate Politics* (Polity Press).

moving toward a system of governance where de-politicisation is the norm, real policy-making power is concentrated in a few hands, democratic institutions are not truly responsive and where the only difference between countries is the degree of protection for liberal rights. In this context the ‘authoritarian upgrading’⁶ occurring in the Arab world is parallel to the ‘democratic downgrading’ in democracies. The article does not argue that that political life in authoritarian and democratic systems is the same, but it contends that there is a trend toward the convergence of governance with similar policies and mechanisms of decision-making.

Going back in time to the pre demo-crazy era – or what Valbjørn and Bank in this issue coin as ‘the *first* era of post-democratization’ – can provide useful tools of analysis to explain this development. The insights of Marxism and in particular the political economy literature dealing with structural power can offer a convincing explanatory framework. In short, the shrinking of the state has negative political effects on the attachment of ordinary citizens to its institutions and to political participation across different national political systems, be they democratic or authoritarian.

Upgraded Authoritarianism in the Arab World . . .

During the demo-crazy years, the Arab world stood out as an exception to the democratizing trend. The persistence of authoritarianism, however, did not stop scholars from analyzing changes in the region as potential or real steps toward democratization, with the liberal reforms undertaken by Arab regimes deemed to increase the prospects of their democratization. For example, the growth of civil society activism was hailed as the

⁶ Steven Heydemann (2007), ‘Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world,’ (Washington: The Brookings Institution), Analysis Paper, 13, pp. 1–37. Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2007/10arabworld/10arabworld.pdf>; accessed 15 April 2010.

‘democratic ingredient’ that would deliver the Arabs from authoritarianism.⁷ Much of the same can be said about elections in the region, which often were defined as watershed founding moments in the democratization process. Finally, liberal economic reforms introduced throughout the 1990s also were hailed as having the potential to kick-start political democratization because they would provide a prominent democratizing role for the middle classes.

This demo-crazy enthusiasm today largely has subsided and, following Lisa Anderson’s advice, scholars tend to study the mechanisms through which current Arab rulers have managed to maintain power.⁸ Thus, at closer scrutiny, it emerges that civil society activism in the Arab world is not the liberating force it was believed to be, but another instrument of control on the part of authoritarian elites over society.⁹ Also, while there is no doubt that elections in the Arab world occur more regularly and fairly than in the past, they do not give elected representatives any significant policy-making power and are designed to confirm incumbents.¹⁰ The example of the 2007 Moroccan elections highlights how they did not represent a major turning point for the country, but simply another instrument the monarchy uses to strengthen its position.¹¹ Finally, liberal economic reforms, rather than creating an autonomous middle-class that would put pressure on authoritarian rulers in the

⁷ Laith Kubba (2000), ‘The Awakening of Civil Society,’ *Journal of Democracy*, 11, 3, pp. 84–90.

⁸ Lisa Anderson (2006), ‘Searching Where the Light Shines,’ *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, pp. 189–214.

⁹ Amany Jamal (2007), *Barriers to Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

¹⁰ Hendrik Kraetzschmar & Francesco Cavatorta (2010), ‘Ballots over Bullets: Islamist groups, the state and electoral violence in Egypt and Morocco,’ *Democratization*, 17, 2, pp. 326–349.

¹¹ François Burgat (2007), ‘Les élections législatives marocaines du vendredi 7 septembre 2007 ou le jouet cassé,’ available at : [http://www.hoggar.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=354&Itemid=46\(2007\)](http://www.hoggar.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=354&Itemid=46(2007)); accessed 28 April 2010.

name of rule of law and political pluralism, have reinforced corrupt networks of patronage in which new economic elites linked to the authoritarian state apparatus derive significant rents.¹²

The literature therefore has oscillated from democracy-spotting to studying authoritarian persistence. However, the current focus on the authoritarian reality of the Arab world should not obscure the fact that real political, economic and social changes have occurred in the region with a significant impact on governance, suggesting that there have been many changes within the continuity.¹³ Thus, while political rule has remained essentially authoritarian, the social coalitions supporting the regimes and the economic and social structures and the means through which the ruling elites control their countries have changed significantly. Paradoxically, the thread of all these changes is the introduction of liberal reforms. As Heydemann points out, ‘Arab regimes have conceded the commanding heights of authoritarian rule, opened limited space for civil societies, permitted opposition parties to operate more freely, broadened press freedoms, and acknowledged the legitimacy of human rights.’¹⁴ This indicates that political rule has shifted away from traditional forms of authoritarianism. More crucially, the way in which authoritarian regimes in the region transformed themselves while retaining an authoritarian core points to the fact that Arab regimes are not ‘exceptional’ because there is a generalized move towards liberal authoritarianism across the globe.

In 1997 Fareed Zakaria argued that we were witnessing the rise of illiberal democracies, a form of government of successful ‘dysfunctional equilibrium’ where

¹² Steven Heydemann (ed.) (2004), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (London: Palgrave).

¹³ Holger Albrecht & Oliver Schlumberger (2004) ‘Waiting for Godot’: Regime change without democratization in the Middle East,’ *International Political Science Review*, 25, 4, pp. 371–392.

¹⁴ Heydemann, ‘Upgrading Authoritarianism,’ p. 2.

constitutional liberalism is marginalized and mechanic democratic procedures take center stage.¹⁵ The concept of illiberal democracy suffers from a number of theoretical problems,¹⁶ but in the Arab context it was updated in Brumberg's definition of 'liberalized autocracy,' which is suited better to describe Arab political systems. Such systems display a degree of pluralism and liberal rights, although the core of political power is out of reach and unaccountable, rendering many of these liberal rights quite meaningless. Thus, as mentioned above, what we have to contend with is a 'new' political system that currently is studied in its own right. While it is certainly a worthwhile enterprise to discover the ways in which Arab regimes have been able to survive in power through the introduction of both political and economic liberal measures, there is an absence of comparative work on how such reforms fit in with political developments outside the region and, more precisely, in established and new democracies where significant changes also have occurred over the last few decades. By taking a broader comparative perspective, what emerges is a complex picture of the shifting nature of governance in both democracies and authoritarian systems.

The starting point of this study is the hypothesis that the expected convergence toward a liberal-democratic model might not occur because of the weakening of liberal-democracy itself over the last few decades. This might then point to a different future convergence.¹⁷ Accordingly, democracies might be 'meeting' up with liberalised autocracies at a convergence point between democracy and authoritarianism where fundamental governance's decisions are removed from popular and democratic decision-making. The most significant and visible trait that both systems of government are displaying at the moment is the de-

¹⁵ Fareed Zakaria (1997), 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,' *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 1, pp. 22–43.

¹⁶ Jørgen Møller (2008) 'A Critical Note on the Rise of Illiberal Democracy,' *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 43, 3, pp. 555–561.

¹⁷ Olivier Dabène, Vincent Geissier & Gilles Massardier (eds.) (2008), *Autoritarismes Démocratiques et Démocraties Autoritaires au XXIe Siècle* (Paris: La Découverte).

politicisation of citizens. By this, ordinary citizens no longer actively participate in forms of institutional politics such as elections or membership of political parties and simply opt out. This does not mean that citizens do not engage in other forms of political engagement; it simply indicates that the institutions of the state are no longer the forum where politics takes place.

De-politicization is a core feature of authoritarianism and is to be expected in semi-authoritarian systems.¹⁸ Thus, while the ability to enjoy a degree of liberal rights is a welcome development in Arab polities, the inability to have a voice in the political system saps the enthusiasm with which the liberal reforms are received because the decisions taken do not reflect what might be considered an emerging popular will. The scope of reforms in the Arab world has changed many of the aspects of traditional authoritarianism and permitted a greater space for society without, however, modifying the nature of decision-making at the highest levels of government. This has produced a society where ‘change’ is quite visible and where the exterior signs of modernity are present, but where meaningful accountability is absent. For instance, the opening up of civil society space has guaranteed new individual liberal rights to some social groups such as women, as Julie Pruzan Jørgensen highlights in her contribution to this special issue. Also, the crass intimidation of journalists and the monopoly on information to a large extent has ceased, and, while there are still cases of journalists being severely harassed, the press is generally freer and there is increased access to information from a range of different media with important repercussion on how issues are debated.¹⁹ At the same time, however, institutional reforms in favor of accountability have not occurred, and this

¹⁸ Juan Linz (1964) ‘An Authoritarian Regime: the Case of Spain,’ in Erik Allardt & Yrjö Littunen (eds.) *Cleavages, ideologies and Party Systems* (Helsinki: Transactions of the Westernmarck Society); and Abdeslam Maghraoui (2002), ‘Depoliticization in Morocco,’ *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 4, pp. 24–32.

¹⁹ Marc Lynch (2006), *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al Jazeera and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press).

undermines fundamentally the liberal reforms undertaken because democracy understood as the sovereignty, however partial, of citizens on political decisions concerning the whole polity is absent. The inability to have meaningful access and the sentiment that liberal reforms do not truly equate with genuine change de-politicize the citizenry, which ultimately switches off from political engagement and either refrains from participating or finds alternative ways of engaging that might be less overtly political. It is this retreat from politics rather than the massive use of repression that helps the rulers of liberalized autocracies to remain in power because they have obtained the de-structuration of society and perpetuated their power as a consequence.

Examples of de-politicization from the Arab world abound. The 2007 Moroccan legislative elections saw a historically low turnout of 37 percent and one-fifth of the votes cast were spoiled purposefully.²⁰ The 2009 Algerian presidential elections, despite their ostensible multi-candidate nature, did not draw the 72 percent turnout that the Minister of Interior claimed.²¹ The same findings can be generalised across the Arab world when it comes to elections, as ordinary citizens do not perceive them to be as historic as the rulers claim.²² In addition to low electoral participation, another potent sign of de-politicization is the retreat of citizens to civil society activism. Across the Arab world, civil society activism has become the refuge of those disillusioned with politics and it largely represents an ‘opt-out’ choice. The vast majority of organisations are concerned only marginally with openly political issues and even the ones that have a political motivation are usually single-issue associations focusing on narrow themes such as human rights. The absence of open political and

²⁰ LisaStorm (2008) ‘Testing Morocco: The Parliamentary Elections of September 2007,’ *Journal of North African Studies*, 13, 1, pp. 37–54.

²¹ Amel Boubekour (2009), ‘Lessons from Algeria’s 2009 Presidential Election,’ available at <http://www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=22983&lang=en>; accessed 21 April 2010.

²² There are two exceptions to this trend: the 2005 Egyptian legislative elections and the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections.

institutional participation indicates that there is a strong degree of dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in public institutions and political parties, with corruption topping the list of public problems in Arab states.²³ Significantly, as the Moroccan case demonstrates, even Islamist parties are beginning to suffer from supporters' disenchantment. A further indication of the de-politicisation of society is, paradoxically, the periodic recourse of regimes to street politics and demonstrations on sensitive foreign policy issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when ordinary citizens are allowed to express their views in bursts of outrage that, however, do not lead to any practical measure. On top of the inability to influence decision-making genuinely through routinized channels despite the formal existence of representative institutions, the vast majority of citizens have to contend with the de-structuration and pauperisation of society that market reforms have caused. The hijacking of economic reforms on the part of those connected to the regime has led to an increase in inequality and to significant political shifts.²⁴ The economic and social displacement that the radical changes in the mechanics of production and distribution produced have been devastating for the majority of Arab citizens, with regimes largely unable and unwilling to deal with the consequences of this.²⁵ Without meaningful access to responsive channels of representation, ordinary citizens

²³ On the legitimacy problems secular political parties face, see Michael Willis (2002), 'Political Parties in the Maghrib: The illusion of significance,' *Journal of North African Studies*, 7, 2, pp. 1–22; and Marina Ottaway & Amr Hamzawy (2007), 'Fighting on Two Fronts: Secular Parties in the Arab World,' *Carnegie Papers*, 85, pp. 1–25. On the issue of corruption see Guilain Denoeux (2007), 'Corruption in Morocco: Old Forces, New Dynamics and a Way Forward,' *Middle East Policy*, 14, 4, pp. 134–151; and the opinion polls published by Arab Reform Initiative (2010), available at <http://arab-reform.net/spip.php?mot80>; accessed 25 April 2010.

²⁴ On the issue of market oriented reforms in North Africa, see Bradford Dillman (2002), 'International markets and Partial Economic Reforms in North Africa: What Impact on Democratization?', *Democratization*, 9, 1, pp. 63–86; and on the same topic more broadly in the Arab world, see Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege*.

²⁵ Sami Zemni & Koenraad Bogaert (2009), 'Trade, Security and Neo-Liberal Politics: Whither Arab Reform? Evidence from the Moroccan Case,' *Journal of North African Studies*, 14, 1, pp. 91–107.

are at the mercy of global forces over which they have no control, increasing the ‘distance’ between rulers and ruled. This widespread de-politicization has allowed current Arab rulers to remain in power while also presenting a façade of successful ongoing democratization.

The de-politicization occurring in the Arab world is, for some, a temporary phenomenon linked to the stalling of reforms and therefore the success of liberalized autocracy is limited in time. Such scholars still hold that ‘the proposition that autocracies have achieved a new lease on life and are emerging today as a viable alternative...is wrong.’²⁶ They still believe that there will be a convergence of these regimes toward the established and dominant liberal democracies, but they fail to take into account the de-structuration and de-politicization of society that have become key features of democracies, making them not only less ‘democratic,’ but also less appealing as models. The transformation of governance in the authoritarian Arab world has occurred in parallel with the transformation of governance in democracies, suggesting that the semi-authoritarian limbo might not be temporary, as other countries are converging toward that. As van Kersbergen states, ‘on the one hand...we have witnessed the increasing esteem, legitimacy, and triumph of democracy as a regime throughout the world, while, on the other hand, we have been observing an increasing dissatisfaction with politics, and the loss of confidence in the performance of government in new and established democracies.’²⁷

The de-politicization of the polity is one of the reasons why liberalized autocracies survive. It follows that the teleology of democratization comes into doubt, as such de-politicization is not confined to the Arab world or liberalised autocracies; it is also a defining trait of liberal democracies. It is at this juncture that the argument of convergence of

²⁶ Daniel Deudney & John Ikenberry (2009), ‘The Myth of the Autocratic Revival: Why Liberal-Democracy will Prevail,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 88, 1, pp. 77–99.

²⁷ Kees van Kersbergen (2010), ‘Quasi-Messianism and the Disenchantment of Politics,’ *Politics and Religion*, 3, 1, p. 35.

governance toward liberal-democracy or ‘the end of history’ falters. Thus, the current governance practices in the Arab world might be the future of governance for a number, if not all, of today’s liberal-democratic regimes.

... Downgraded Democracy Elsewhere

The phenomenon of de-politicization is a significant development of political life in liberal democracies. More specifically, there are four manifestations of it that are parallel to developments in Arab liberalised autocracies. The first one is the decreasing turnout at elections. This mirrors the lack of enthusiasm of voters in the Arab world, with citizens seemingly accepting that elections are increasingly irrelevant. While some do not see this as problematic, the scale and the reasons behind decreasing turnout affect the legitimacy of the system. First of all, a higher turnout might modify the final outcome of elections because some social groups have a much higher degree of apathy than others, leading to the over-representation of specific political issues and pressure groups. Secondly decreasing turnout stains the legitimacy of elections if absenteeism becomes the norm and increases over time. For example, in the United Kingdom, turnout for the legislative elections went from 78.8 percent in 1974 to 75.3 percent in 1987 to 71.5 percent in 1992 to 61.5 percent in 2005 and finally to 65 percent in 2010. This downward trend is unequivocal for all democracies. While an argument could be made that these numbers reflect the ‘habit’ of democracy and therefore its consolidation, this cannot account for very low turnout figures in recent democracies where the ‘thirst’ for participation should be at peak levels, given the previous inability to cast meaningful votes under authoritarian rule. There are certainly cases of new democracies where the enthusiasm for politics is still manifested in high turnouts, but we have many more

cases where this is not the case.²⁸ The downward trend of turnout across new and established democracies is particularly worrying because it no longer is confined to the ‘usual suspects’ who never turned out, but it is affecting an increasing number of citizens. As Diamanti claims, ‘today’s voter needs good reasons to vote for a party or a candidate, as the time of the loyal voter is over. However, before all that, he needs good reasons to actually turn out,’²⁹ and such reasons seem to be missing today. This sentiment echoes what ordinary Arab voters experience when the system asks them to cast their ballots. Finally, turning out, in both democratic and authoritarian settings, increasingly has become a function of personal advantages that voters expect to obtain from elected representatives: voting is used to access patronage networks and in exchange for personal benefits. Ellen Lust, for example, amply illustrates this aspect of voting in her study of elections in Jordan,³⁰ as does Roberto Saviano in his analysis of voting behavior in the south of Italy.³¹

The second indicator of de-politicization is the widespread low confidence of citizens in public institutions. As van Kersbergen highlights, ‘all well established and new democracies are confronted with increasing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with politics.’³² This undermines citizens’ confidence in the representative bodies of the state and

²⁸ In Poland, for example, turnout was 62 percent in 1989 but only 40 percent in 2005, although it went up to 53.8 percent in 2007. In El Salvador, the presidential election of 2004 had a turnout of 67 percent, which decreased to 41.4 percent for the legislative elections of 2006.

²⁹ Ilvo Diamanti (2010), ‘Fenomenologia dell’Elettore Scettico,’ *La Repubblica*, April 12, available at: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2010/04/12/news/elettore_scettico-3281943/; accessed 15 April 2010.

³⁰ Ellen Lust (2006), ‘Elections under authoritarianism: Preliminary lessons from Jordan,’ *Democratization*, 13, 3, pp. 456–471.

³¹ Roberto Saviano (2006), ‘Il PM Marino: ‘Stato di Allerta in Vista delle Amministrative’. Il voto di scambio a Napoli,’ *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, April 27, available at: <http://www.robertosaviano.com/documenti/9009/>; accessed 5 May 2010.

³² Van Kersbergen, ‘Quasi-Messianism,’ p. 36.

society, including political parties, parliaments, executives, and trade unions. For example, in a recent continent-wide survey, AmericasBarometer measured the trust of citizens in political parties and the results demonstrated how low the average level of trust in political parties is in *every* single country.³³ Similar results have emerged in European surveys and find a parallel with the disenchantment of Arab citizens with their own political parties, including, in some cases, Islamist ones. More generally Hay details the net levels of trust in public institutions in the United States and the European Union and the results demonstrate how little trust political parties, national governments, and legislatures actually enjoy.³⁴

A third trend has to do with the quality of information that citizens receive and how the information is processed. Citizens in liberal democracies enjoy freedom of information and have access to an almost unlimited amount of media. They therefore are exposed to an enormous mass of information and should be able to make informed political decisions. However, the amount of information is not necessarily linked to quality, and ordinary citizens easily can be manipulated and misinformed. The media debacle over the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003 is only the most visible example of the wide gap between the amount of information, the quality of it and the ability and time of citizens to process such information, illustrating again the validity of the theory of ‘manufacturing consent.’³⁵

Technology now makes the ‘same information’ available to a world wide audience, and in the Arab world the development of the internet and satellite television provides ordinary citizens with such information. The problem with the quality of it remains and it is the mechanisms of packaging such information that is crucial. Much like in democracies and despite the presence

³³ Margarita Corral (2008), ‘(Mis)Trust in Political Parties in Latin America,’ *AmericasBarometer Insights*, 2, pp. 1–6.

³⁴ Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*.

³⁵ Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky (1988), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books).

of trans-Arab channels such as *Al Jazeera*, large media conglomerates are very close to ruling elites, have to be mindful of the imperative of profitability, and rely overwhelmingly on government and corporate sources for information. The recent media liberalization in Tunisia, for instance, gives the impression of pluralism, but members of the president own family or close beneficiaries of economic patronage networks own and control the newly licensed private TV and radio networks.³⁶ The mechanisms of information therefore are broadly similar across systems, but knowledge seems no longer to matter.

It is interesting to note that in earlier times it was political parties in democracies that packaged information and presented it to citizens. While the information was certainly partisan, citizens were not alone in the face of it because there was a wider ideological context which would make sense of a complex reality, and authoritarian systems provided unifying narratives. With the diminishing trust in political parties, media and politicians, this mechanism of transmission of information does not exist any longer. We therefore now witness, for instance, the presidentialization of politics, even in parliamentary systems where the attention is concentrated on the leader and his personality and ‘likability.’ This does not mean that the whole citizenry is poorly informed and makes choices simply based on how likeable a candidate is, but the increasing attention on the personality of candidates and leaders rather than on issues is a new development that we need to consider.

Where information is poor, the personalization of politics occurs more frequently, coupled with another perception: the idea that a single leader will be able to ‘put the country right.’ This has led to a dramatic increase in populism, driven by a focus on personality rather than policies. As David Adams argued when analysing the 2010 British parliamentary elections, ‘style and presentation have of course always mattered in politics, but only as complementary to policy. These factors have never almost completely excluded politics, as is

³⁶ Francesco Cavatorta & Rikke Haugbølle (2010), ‘Civil Society and National Media in Tunisia,’ *Final Report* (Paris: Panos Institute).

happening now. Perhaps nowadays we hold politicians in such low regard, considering them to be, without exception, such complete charlatans that rather than spend time listening to what any of them has to say, many of us simply plump for the one we consider to be the most presentable and/or likeable liar. Either that, or we choose to opt out of politics altogether.’³⁷ This new development compounds the problem of low turnout at elections because paradoxically ‘it’s hard to know whether to be more concerned about growing numbers of people not bothering to vote, or about what might be visited upon us at some stage by those who still do.’³⁸ This focus on leadership and ‘leaders’ embodying the people in democracies is reminiscent of the way in which Arab leaders portray themselves in the public sphere, where policies should not be a concern of citizens because the leader ultimately will decide in the people’s interest. Concentrating on the quality of the leader and his personal traits also has meant an increasing role for ‘first ladies,’ who are trotted out in public to point to a character’s traits that are used to create a PR-packaged image of the leader, further reducing the focus on policies. A very similar phenomenon is occurring in the Arab world, where both princesses and first ladies have become public figures active in civil society activism and providing a more modern image of the leader among key social constituencies.³⁹

Finally, de-politicization is also evident in the retreat of many to civil society activism. While there is a considerable literature linking civil society activism with the strengthening of

³⁷ David Adams (2010), ‘Triumph of style reflects shallow culture of our times,’ available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2010/0422/1224268870185.html>; accessed 26 April 2010.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For example, on the Tunisia first lady see Nicolas Beau & Catherine Graciet (2009), *La Régente de Carthage* (Paris: La Découverte). On the Syrian first lady see Mathieu Le Saux (2006), ‘Les Dynamiques Contradictaires du Champ Associatif Syrien,’ *Revue des Mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 115/116, pp. 193–209.

democracy,⁴⁰ a different take on such activism is also possible. Within democratic theory, civil society positively is linked to democracy. The civic activism of citizens is supposed to make individuals ‘practice’ democracy, and associational life therefore sustains democratic institutions and democratic legitimacy. The problem with this assumption is that it neglects to consider the side effects of such activism on the political system, which can be hijacked by special interests, rendering it less rather than more democratic. In addition, certain forms of civil society activism constitute a retreat to forms of private engagement where single-issues organisations and their members are active only in so far as the issue remains important or some specific objective is achieved, as the ‘not-in-my backyard’ phenomenon indicates. This type of activism clashes with more general political engagement because civil society seeks a ‘voice’ not necessarily ‘choice.’ This means that associations tend largely to become interlocutors with public institutions in order to achieve a very specific goal and once they are successful, their job is done. To do this they are interested in their mandate only and seek access to public authorities for ‘selfish’ reasons. If all associations behave in the same manner, the outcome is not democratic confrontation, but an attempt to corner a ‘market’ where the association becomes the monopolist. Similar dynamics are in place in the authoritarian Arab world, where the rise in civil society activism constitutes both a failure of traditional party politics⁴¹ and a means through which the different regimes can control society.⁴²

⁴⁰ Robert Putnam (2000), *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon & Schuster).

⁴¹ Vickie Langohr (2004), ‘Too much civil society, too little politics: Egypt and liberalising Arab regimes,’ *Comparative Politics*, 36, 2, pp. 181–204.

⁴² Quintan Wiktorowicz (2000), ‘Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan,’ *Comparative Politics*, 33, 1, pp. 43–61.

It should be noted that some analysts do not perceive these trends as problematic,⁴³ while others go as far as to argue that a permanently mobilized citizenry is detrimental to democratic decision-making because it would cause too much stress on the political institutions. This view might be procedurally correct in the sense that apathy and low participation do not necessarily invalidate the results of elections. However, if one takes a more substantive definition of democratic governance, the absence of widespread support for the system or the belief that individual citizens cannot have a meaningful say in decision-making fundamentally weakens the democratic covenant. Finally, if one perceives democratic institutions simply as *loci* to be penetrated to obtain advantages for a specific goal limited in time, the credibility of democracy as a set of practices to determine the common good diminishes considerably.

From this picture it emerges that a similar disenchantment of citizens toward the state, public representatives and political institutions affects both liberal-democracies and liberalized autocracies. This is, however, not the only similarity between the two systems of government. Much like democracies are afflicted by diseases that are normally associated with de-structured societies governed through arbitrary norms, liberalized autocracies display traits and characteristics that one would normally associate with democratic governments. There are two of these that seem particularly significant. First of all, liberalized autocracies are qualitatively different from the ideal type of dictatorships where the dictator is solely in charge. Liberalized autocracies are successful because they are not like that; quite the contrary they derive legitimacy and support from a wide range of social groups and the ability to deliver material and ‘moral’ resources to such groups empowers them and enables them to

⁴³ Eoin O’Malley (2008), ‘Turn Out to Turf Out?: Effects of Changes in Election Participation Rates on Election Outcomes,’ *The Open Political Science Journal*, 1, 1, pp. 31–37.

survive.⁴⁴ Secondly, public opinion plays a role in decision-making in the liberalized autocracies through a number of informal channels that convey to the leadership the type of choices that citizens largely will tolerate and the ones that are to be wholly rejected wholly. In conclusion, there is a pattern of convergence at play between liberalized autocracies and established democracies, but they are not converging where Fukuyama expected.

Marxist Neo-Dependencia

Van Kersbergen acknowledges that ‘the explanations for the disquieting reality in functioning democracies are manifold’⁴⁵ just like a number of authors emphasize the multiple reasons why a similar, and perhaps more justifiable, dissatisfaction with politics exists in the Arab world. A number of works focus on the inadequacies of citizens themselves to take advantage of political opportunities. This might be partly true in democracies, but it is less so in the case of Arab regimes, although citizens in these states are also not immune from academic criticism usually in the form of culturalist arguments.

Building on the literature about the ‘death of partisanship,’ a significant part of the explanation for this path toward the convergence of governance between liberalized autocracies and liberal democracies has to do with the acceleration of capitalist globalization that places all states under severe constraints. In its original enunciation the death of partisanship related to the idea that that ‘rising levels of trade integration and capital mobility...combined with the increasing leverage of the international financial institutions significantly constrained the preferences of domestic actors,’⁴⁶ therefore leading parties of the

⁴⁴ Raymond Hinnebusch (2006), ‘Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique,’ *Democratization*, 13, 3, pp. 373–395.

⁴⁵ Kersbergen, ‘Quasi-Messianism,’ p. 37.

⁴⁶ David Doyle (2009), ‘Pressure to Privatize? The IMF, Globalisation and partisanship in Latin America,’ unpublished paper, p. 1.

left and the right to adopt similar economic policies converging toward a neo-liberal economic model. While the inevitability of neo-liberal convergence is still under dispute, there is a considerable degree of consensus on the fact that the trend is very much one of the state's retreat from economic policy-making.⁴⁷ Although the literature focuses its attention on international pressures in the economic sphere with regard to decisions such as privatizations, tight fiscal policies, budgetary cuts, or measures to increase foreign direct investments, these international pressures linked to the development of capitalism also have a number of consequences that alter the political systems of all states, whether authoritarian or democratic.⁴⁸ This means that we need to understand political systems outside the simplistic dichotomy of democracy and authoritarianism along a nice laid out path that takes countries from the latter to the former and instead we need to focus on attempting to account for the emergence of similar phenomena such as the ones under the rubric of de-politicization that affect all states and systems.

The Marxist informed *dependencia* theory of the 1970s, a largely forgotten approach in the early studies of globalization, is a useful framework when one examines the effects of the international capitalist system on domestic political structures. Adapting this approach to current political systems can shed some light on how the international and the domestic interact across different systems of government in order to move away from the exclusive focus on the absence of democracy and the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab world and instead to account for the changes that have occurred in a much broader perspective. When stripped of its most ideological elements, 'dependency theory created a framework for analysis of Latin American political economy that invited the consideration of external factors

⁴⁷ Susan Strange (1996), *The Retreat of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁴⁸ Adam Przeworski & Michael Wallerstein (1988), 'Structural Dependence of the State on Capital,' *American Political Science Review*, 83, 1, pp. 11–29.

as well as internal ones,⁴⁹ and starting from this premise it gave a prominent role to the capitalist economy in determining the fate of Latin American domestic politics. There are certainly a number of problems with dependency theory, but some of its assumptions need to be re-examined today. For example, it assumed the international capitalist structure forced a specific type of economic development in Latin America that required authoritarian political structures particularly because the needs of the bourgeoisie in Latin America only could be satisfied through authoritarian practices. Today's neo-*dependecia*, drawing more heavily from classical Marxism, is somewhat different because it not only addresses specific regional dynamics but also deals with more issues than simply underdevelopment. Instead it seeks to speak to the issue of de-politicization and convergence of governance. The argument is that the international political economy, structured around neo-liberal economics, places similar pressures on all national governments, which react to these structural pressures similarly although they have different degrees of capabilities to deal with such pressures. Despite these different capabilities, all national governments seem to have succumbed to the requirements of globalization, leaving very little room to manoeuvre for national policy-makers to try out alternative economic policies to deal with the increased 'vulnerability' of citizens exposed to the full force of globalization.⁵⁰ As mentioned above, however, pressures from 'outside' not only occur in the economic sphere, but also have consequences for the political institutions in place as well and the way in which ordinary citizens relate to them, because economic globalization comes with a collection of other challenges to the state that go beyond economics, such as migration or cultural 'contamination.' The challenges that states face therefore are, as Hinnebusch also demonstrates in his contribution to this special issue,

⁴⁹ David Moles (1999), 'Dependencia and Modernization,' pp. 1–8, available at: <http://www.chrononaut.org/~dm/papers/dependencia.pdf>; accessed 10 April 2010.

⁵⁰ Peadar Kirby (2006), 'Theorising globalisation's social impact: Proposing the concept of vulnerability,' *Review of International Political Economy*, 13, 4, pp. 632–655.

‘universal state building challenges.’ More specifically there are three reasons that contribute to explain how neo-*dependencia* strains all political systems irrespective of the nature of political rule, making them converge over time.

First of all is the sentiment that ordinary citizens have of being deprived of any decision-making power regarding significant decisions related to economic policies and re-distribution, which also affect a number of other policy areas because of economic externalities, including the state of public services or migration. The privation of clear decision-making power is due to both the nature of the international capitalist system and the pressure that leading actors in the system, including supranational organisations, apply. The leading powers in the international system push an agenda that reflects their narrow national interests, although they also suffer from structural constraints, leading to the manifestation of similar symptoms of de-politicization found in less powerful countries. With respect to supranational organisations, people perceive them to be taking binding decisions that countries must abide by despite the potential opposition of the vast majority of citizens who then feel that they have no say in how their state’s affairs should be run.⁵¹ This is the ‘democratic deficit’ problem that most international organisations suffer from, although some scholars argue that such a deficit does not actually exist. Ultimately however the existence or absence of a democratic deficit is irrelevant, because what matters is the perception of its existence. Accordingly, what one has to investigate is how citizens perceive the procedures of decision-making that they have. In the last instance the fact that many ruling governments, be they democratic or not, utilize international organisations as scapegoats for decisions that they want to make but know are not popular does not invalidate the argument. In this case as well the de-politicization and absence of trust in public institutions are the outcome. This is highly

⁵¹ Ngaire Woods (2001), ‘IMF and World Bank: Questions of accountability,’ *International Affairs*, 77, 1, pp. 83–100.

problematic because it seems to point to the idea that the very entity ‘state,’ including the democratic state,⁵² is ill-suited to deal with the challenges of globalization.

Second is the problem of increasing inequalities that the neo-liberal economic system has created.⁵³ Rightly or wrongly, democracies traditionally have been associated with the necessity of decreasing inequalities either because of the mechanisms of decision-making which in theory involve all social groups or because of the in-built notion of equality that they have. However, income inequalities and inequalities in life-styles have been increasing on an unparalleled scale over the last three decades. This is problematic because it makes the political system responsible for addressing such inequalities that undermine access to political participation. When the system does not respond because the structure of the global economic pressures prevents it, the system as a whole loses credibility. In authoritarian regimes economic and social inequalities are believed to be in-built because in order to stay in power ruling elites have to privilege patterns of patronage that undermine any notion of equality, political or otherwise, but in democracies this is not perceived as being the case. In any case, the growth of income inequalities breeds both apathy and ‘revolutionary’ anger and, more significantly, it undermines the legitimacy of public representatives insofar as they are held to be colluding with powerful economic interests to the detriment of citizens.⁵⁴ The innumerable and recent financial and banking scandals certainly have highlighted how the issue of patronage and incestuous links between political and economic elites is not confined to authoritarian systems, but affects liberal-democracies as well. The concept of crony capitalism seems to capture the nature of the collusion between business and politics well in both systems. The checks and balances that were in place in liberal-democracies to prevent

⁵² Benjamin Barber (2000), ‘Can Democracy Survive Globalisation?’, *Government and Opposition*, 35, 3, pp. 277–301.

⁵³ Joseph Stiglitz (2002) *Globalisation and Its Discontents* (London: Allen Lane).

⁵⁴ Sergio Rizzo & Gian Antonio Stella (2007), *La casta* (Milano: Rizzoli).

precisely such abuses of power and trust quite spectacularly have failed, and one can trace these failures to the process of ‘de-regulation’ or light touch regulation that international markets required. The significant ‘distance’ between the ruling elites and citizens that political science has assumed to be a specific trait of authoritarian countries where a wealthy and powerful minority usually rules over a less well-off majority and controls it through repressive measures increasingly seems to characterize liberal-democracies as well, with the consequent loss of credibility and appeal of liberal-democratic arrangements.

Finally, both democracies and liberalized autocracies suffer from the presence of systemic structural power, whereby key social groups usually linked to big business and international economic interests have a much higher degree of access to policy-makers and therefore have the power to influence the strategic direction of policy-making.⁵⁵ The ability of business in general to indicate the policies governments have to follow substantially has increased to the detriment in many cases of the achievements that social-democracy had obtained in the previous decades.⁵⁶ The political marginalization of many lower social groups not only affects democracies, but also it is beginning to affect a number of liberalized autocracies countries, such as Syria where, at least in theory, the state still represents workers and peasants. The necessity to attract foreign direct investments and to satisfy indigenous business elites severely restricts the autonomy of policy-makers and contributes to the widespread sentiment that the state’s institutions cannot or will not take into account political demands that deviate from a neo-liberal model. What is more, the worldwide crisis of 2008 did not seem to generate a u-turn in terms of economic policy-making and consequently the

⁵⁵ Patrick Bernhagen & Thomas Bräuninger (2005), ‘Structural Power and Public Policy: A Signalling Model of Business Lobbying in Democratic Capitalism,’ *Political Studies*, 53, 1, pp. 43–64.

⁵⁶ Tony Judt (2010), *Ill Fares the Land* (Penguin Press).

political reactions of citizens to it have been the usual combination of resignation, apathy and populism.

Conclusion

The argument about disempowerment of ordinary citizens is not new and it has been a constant preoccupation of political theorists dealing both with democratic fatigue and authoritarianism. However, the increased globalization of the world economy under capitalist structures has heightened the problem of the state's autonomy and independence, restricting the menu of choices for policymakers, be they operating in liberal democracies or liberalized autocracies. Within this context it is not surprising that we witness a significant degree of de-politicization among citizens in both systems, leading them to converge at a point where a number of individual rights exist and where the formal institutions of democracies are present, but where the important policy decisions are taken in an unaccountable manner by self-serving political and economic elites. When analysed in the context of post-democratization, this leads one to question two assumptions. First of all, there is no certainty about transitions from authoritarian rule toward democracy and countries actually can get stuck somewhere on a continuum rather than making a progression or regression on a linear path. Second, liberal democracy as we know it might not in the end prevail as the system of government of all and the simplistic dichotomy of authoritarianism/democracy might no longer be useful in categorizing political systems across the globe. The suggestion here is that there is indeed a degree of convergence between liberalized autocracies and democracies, but it is one of widespread dissatisfaction with current forms of political organizations embodied in the phenomenon of de-politicization and its different manifestations. When it comes to the Arab world, this has very relevant implications because it forces scholars to look at these regimes in a broader perspective, given that the current liberal autocratic arrangements constitute an

answer to challenges that are shared by all other countries in the international system. This undermines the notion of the exceptionalism of the Arab world when it comes to its form of political rule.⁵⁷

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⁵⁷ Laura Guazzone & Daniela Pioppi (2009), *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalisation: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (Reading: Ithaca Press).

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