Forgetting Democratization?

Recasting Power and Authority in a Plural Muslim World

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Over the last few years, the international community has focused much of its attention on political developments in the Muslim world. In particular, the issue of the absence of democracy in much of the area has been at the centre of both academic and policy-orientated debate. After the end of the Cold War, many believed that authoritarian regimes worldwide would quickly disappear to be replaced by western-style liberal democracies and, indeed, this trend seemed to hold true for some time. The successful processes of democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America justified this early enthusiasm and contrary to popular belief, the Muslim world itself has not been immune from this greater push for democratization. Regimes across the Muslim world have had to contend with liberalizing and democratizing pressures coming both from within and from without. This is confirmed by the fact that even before Eastern European countries decisively moved towards greater democratization, Tunisia and Algeria were already experimenting with democratic reforms.[1]

In spite of these encouraging early trends, results in terms of actually successful democratic transitions have been largely disappointing and very few countries in the

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Muslim world, and in particular in the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA), can today be considered successful democracies.[2] Due to these poor results, scholars and policy-makers have concentrated their attention on the causes for the absence of substantial democratic reforms in those parts of the world. This debate has generated a number of very different answers to the question of the failure of democratization in the Muslim world.[3] To complicate the issue further it is also the case that these answers are given at a time where political Islam is presented in some academic and policy-making quarters as a global challenger to the western political, economic and social hegemony. In this context, one of the most conspicuous (if not altogether very new) answers to the supposed absence of democracy in the Muslim world is directly linked to the regressive and authoritarian precepts of Islam as a system of beliefs and social organisation.[4] From this perspective, the Muslim world is presented as a monolithic entity incapable of dealing with the requirements of modernity – and most particularly liberal democracy – and responsible for generating an atmosphere of violence targeting 'infidels' both within and outside the Muslim world. Evidently, once one begins to think of democracy and Islam as fixed categories that are necessarily in opposition with each other, this approach vitiates *a priori* the possibility to think of the two as being capable of speaking to and influencing each other in a positive manner.[5] But at the same time, such grand cultural explanations do provide a parsimonious explanation of the noted difficulties of democratization in the great majority of Muslim countries. Indeed, one can legitimately ask whether it would still make sense to analyse a region such as the 'Muslim world' if one were to abandon those grand cultural schemes. In this collection, we will attempt to do just that by pointing out that there is a 'Muslim world' that can be either substantively

defined or, at the very least, analytically posited for the sake of a better understanding of the contemporary political processes of democratization.

This collection proposes to shift the focus away from grand culture-based explanations of democratization in the Muslim world, while retaining political Islam as its defining characteristic in the current socio-historical context. We suggest that this analytical distinction is practical and meaningful in the context of the study of democratization because a key factor of change in all those polities is the role played by Islamist parties or movements – be it directly through challenging the powers-that-be or, indirectly, through the counter-measures that are preventively put in place by incumbents to keep them out of office. To be sure, the agency of Islamist movements is but one of the factors that contribute to creating the democratizing dilemmas of the Muslim world. Yet it is the one strategic factor that is specific to this region of the world and, other things been equal, it *constitutes* the Muslim world as a set of polities with a common political developmental drive, even when the considerable differences among these movements are taken into account. We are fully aware of the self-reflexivity of this argument; and in particular the fact that such a perspective is relevant to the analysis of democratization in the Muslim world today because of the tendency and willingness of political players worldwide to view these Islamist movements as the main negative determinant of the problem (with all the implications that it may have as a self-fulfilling prophesy).[6]

For analytical purposes we seek to separate the practical role played by Islamist movements as institutional actors for political mobilisation from the more diffuse cultural and religious underpinnings of social mobilisation. In other words, we leave aside the

meta-questions over Islam and democracy to be able to better explain the practical dilemmas of political Islam and democratization. As Daniel Brumberg pointed out, 'the challenge is not to figure out whether Islamism is 'essentially' democratic versus autocratic, or liberal versus illiberal. Instead, it is to see whether this or that Islamist group is acting within a hegemonic political arena where the game is to shut out alternative approaches, or else within a competitive – let's call it dissonant – arena where Islamists, like other players, find themselves pushed to accommodate the logic of power-sharing.'[7] Needless to say that what is true of Islamist movements is also true of the secularised nationalist elites (and the military) that hold the reins of power in so many countries of the region and, to some extent, it is also true of the liberal forces in the Muslim world who are quite unsure themselves of the level of liberalism and democracy that they can afford to promote.[8]

At one level of analysis, only the political players themselves can provide an answer to the abovementioned dilemma, as they come to grip with the process of political change. The study of democratization may only have yielded relative few insights for the Muslim world so far but the one finding whose relevance remains highly relevant is that it is through the very process of democratizing the polity that one can promote the collective learning of democratic ways of solving political problems.[9] This collection contributes to this debate by examining the global reach of Islamist and democratic politics and by presenting country-specific studies of some of the most relevant Muslim polities of the post-Cold War and post-September 11 era. By analysing the tactical choices that are made in those countries, one can better understand which strategic orientations are not only theoretically possible but practically relevant. Our objective is to

avoid creating an artificial comparative framework that would aggregate as many putative causal factors of democratization in the Muslim world as possible in order to assess which ones are the most relevant. To be sure, such frameworks have their merits but since every process of democratisation is, in the end, unique, we emphasise here a more nominalist approach to the issue of the political dilemmas of democratization. This approach has the added advantage of not presenting polities as being at odds with theory, but rather theory as being 'at odds' with the 'real world'. Indeed, note the conundrum encountered in the sophisticated comparative analysis of democratic consolidation proposed by Schneider and Schmitter: 'we should not anticipate that autocratic regimes would be able to sustain political liberalization over extensive time periods. Yet, this is precisely what we found in our sample of MENA countries'.[10] The case studies suggest a more practical way of looking at the complex issue of democratization by examining how seemingly contingent causal mechanisms fostered (or derailed) a democratizing synergy in those countries, and by outlining the rationale for the emergence of such typical situations.

In particular, the collection aims to clarify three key issues of the debate on democratization in the Muslim world.

First of all, it stresses the malleability of Islamic discourses and political movements in the face of changing opportunities for democratisation as well as the reconfiguration of authoritarian regimes in the face of changing dilemmas of political liberalization. It indicates that such changes in the dominant political positions (or positions which claim to be dominant) take place within a complex and usually global debate about what democracy and Islam ought to be. Within the parameters set by this

formal debate, democratization like Islamization are the more mundane processes which aim at reconciling everyday social and political practices with the kind of institutions and practices that the *demos* and the faithful would like to have.

Secondly, this collection explores how institutional arrangements (including co-optation of the opposition) put in place by authoritarian incumbents utilise the procedures and the discourse of democracy to strengthen their own arbitrary rule.[11] In particular it indicates that processes like democratization and Islamization are not incrementally bringing people nearer to some pre-defined political order, that is, liberal democracy or Islamic democracy principally. Rather, it suggests that there is a narrowing of the gap between everyday experiences and political expectations; with all the well-known problems that this situation can generate (for example, the happy slave or, more commonly, the disenchanted voter).

Thirdly, the studies investigate the relationship between political violence and democratisation. While incumbent regimes may (and usually do) invoke their role of custodians of the state to use their 'monopoly of legitimate violence' to control the process of political liberalization, the non-institutionalised forms of direct action available to non-state players are more idiosyncratic and opportunistic. These two modes of violence interact not only directly between themselves but also via proxy through the democratization process (or its failure thereof). In this context, a democratization process whose end result ought to be the actual handing over of state power to democratically chosen social actors can be subordinated to the need for the securitisation of the state as an institutional asset to be secured against the (actual and potential) hazard of any handover of power.

The collection opens with a review of the recent trends in the analysis of democratization in the Middle East region. Ray Hinnebusch sheds a much-needed light on the past mistakes of various brands of democratization hypotheses, applied to a Middle Eastern context. Most often these theoretical models have been at fault due to an excessive linearity and quest for parsimony in their explanation. They have painted the problems of democratization (and liberalization and development) with such broad brushstrokes that alternative forms of political development where simply not adequately considered. Thus, more than a Middle Eastern or Muslim exceptionalism, the non liberal-democratic regimes in the region illustrated which viable political models could also ensure relative stability. While coercion is certainly part of the explanation, Hinnebusch points out that it is important not to simply analyse the repressive apparatus available to authoritarian elites to account for the robustness of authoritarianism. He suggests that there is a need to study Middle Eastern and North African societies in much greater detail because 'authoritarianism persists in the Middle East in part because an accumulation of conditions are hostile to democratization; but also because such forms of governance as populist authoritarian and *rentier* monarchies represent modernised forms of authoritarianism which come out of and are congruent with indigenous societies. They are, moreover, adapting to the increased modernization of their societies through experiments with liberalised autocracy or pseudo-democracy.'

Our first two cases studies of the process of democratization in the Muslim world highlight a rather optimistic scenario as they focus on countries outside the Greater Middle East where we have witnessed some promising democratic developments in

recent years. The contributions of Douglas Webber and Ben Thirkell-White on, respectively, Indonesia and Malaysia analyse how quite successful steps toward democratization have been made with the contribution of Islamist political actors. The success of Indonesia and Malaysia is obviously only partial and by no means irreversible, but it contributes to question deeply held assumptions about the relationship between political Islam and democratic advances. Far from proving to be the key determinant in the sequencing and the configuration of democratic reforms, the specifically religious dimension of the Islamist movements has not propelled these movements in a situation of opposition to other political actors. The socio-economic and political circumstances that were those of Indonesia and Malaysia in recent years have facilitated the emergence of a working consensus on governance between varied political constituencies – a consensus to which political actors have had to adjust regardless of their political preferences. The type of 'democracy' achieved in the two countries seems to indicate that the Muslim world does not suffer from a separate 'disease' regarding the inability to put in place consensual political and social structures, but suffers instead from the rather unoriginal shortcomings and difficulties that plague most of the developing world. To be sure, although Malaysia and Indonesia appear to be moving in the right direction – in the sense that they are palpably less authoritarian than they were before – they are still confined to a situation that is to some extent that of a 'democracy with adjectives' (such as semi-democracy, liberalized autocracy, pseudo-democracy, and so on.).[12]

It would be naïve to conceive democratization in the Muslim world as a linear teleological process. Whatever may be true of the emerging democratic institutions of Malaysia and Indonesia today, nothing guarantees that the remaining authoritarian

aspects of these polities will slowly disappear to make way for a recognisably liberal democratic system. Nor should we assume that those countries are in some ways necessarily leading the way in the political transformations taking place in the rest of the Muslim world. In fact, despite recent statements regarding an Arab democratic 'spring', as soon as one moves to analyse the MENA region, the picture that emerges is one of the persistence of authoritarianism; although it may not the same type of authoritarianism that was witnessed a couple of decades ago.[13] It is therefore worthwhile outlining what, beyond coercion, can allow and facilitate the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa and how contemporary authoritarianism can operate to prevent existing challengers from defeating it. As some regimes have become very skilled at the game of survival in the face of domestic and international pressures for democratisation, it is crucial to understand the procedures and mechanisms through which they are able to win this game. Thus, while Thirkell-White's and Weber's papers examined the 'bright' side of democratization, the analyses of Algeria and Jordan by, respectively, Frédéric Volpi and Ellen Lust-Okar, focus on its darker side.

In his analysis of Algeria, Frédéric Volpi details very clearly how a pseudo-democratic model works and how an authoritarian-inclined regime is able to deflect attention from its practices by pretending to be playing the game of electoral competitiveness. Using the 2004 electoral context as a paradigmatic example, Volpi outlines how the Algerian regime is able to pre-empt veritable change through a strategy of state-managed electoral process combining pre-selection of candidates, media control and vote-fixing. All this, rather than habituating political actors and citizens to the procedures of democracy leaves the polity with an empty-shell democracy that merely

formalises and institutionalises the rupture between civil and political society and the state system. Although these practices are currently able to keep the situation under control in Algeria after the spate of violent and arbitrary rule that characterised the country during the recent the Islamist insurrection, they also ensure that 'the legitimacy of democracy as a concept and system of governance in the country and in the region is slowly but surely being eroded'.

The in-depth examination of Jordan, often considered to be rather advanced on the road to democracy by regional standards, highlights some of the same problems that Volpi raised with regards to the legitimacy of democratic procedures in a context where effective policy-making does not reside with elected representatives. Ellen Lust-Okar points out that elections should not be so easily dismissed even when taking place in an authoritarian regime because the elites take them quite seriously and do see a purpose in holding them. Thus, there is the need to study them and to analyse where their relevance lies, as there is a very substantial effort from the regime in organising electoral competitions. The need for some sort of popular legitimacy is therefore present across the whole region and points to the fact that the notion of 'rule by popular consensus' is indeed present and incumbents feel some pressure in conforming to this requirement. The problem of authoritarianism is therefore not really linked to the absence of the ideas of consensual rule and popular mandate, but to the policy-making aspect of governing. In Jordan, the real wielders of power (the Palace) have so far been able to maintain exclusive control over policy-making by institutionally marginalising the democratic procedures they set in place and this is where their strength lies. There is very little doubt that there is 'evidence that electoral institutions in authoritarian regimes can help to

stabilize these regimes' and this further undermines the very concept of democracy as an alternative political order, as Lust-Okar convincingly argues.

This erosion of the legitimacy of the discourse and process of democratization however is not simply the result of domestic political arrangements, but is also the outcome of flawed international – or 'western' after 1991 – policies in the region. By supporting a host of authoritarian regimes and by lauding their 'electoral' competitions without questioning where real power actually lies, the international community further undermines the positive connotations of democracy. For example, in the case of the 1991 Algerian elections, western actors could hardly contain their relief when the Algerian Liberation Army carried out a military coup to stop an Islamist party from gaining power via the ballot box.[14] It is an obvious truism that democratic transitions do not occur in a political vacuum and what takes place on the international stage has internal repercussions. Indeed, most of the nation-states analysed in this volume have been shaped or even created by the processes of colonisation and decolonisation, while the regimes' orientations during the second half of the twentieth century have been heavily influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War. What is peculiar about the contemporary context is that powerful external actors explicitly advocate the promotion of democracy. The problem with this external agency is that it is not entirely clear how the moral and practical imperative of aiding democratic change competes with other, more pragmatic and material, concerns of the foreign policy of those international players – and particularly 'security' after 9/11.[15] In practice, the outcome of such a clash of interests is usually the implementation of a foreign policy that falls short of its stated objectives – most notably in its continuing support of regimes that do not respect democracy. And when dramatic

actions such as the invasion of Iraq are linked to arguments about spreading democracy in the Middle East, there are widespread suspicions about hidden agenda in western policies – suspicions that play in the hands of radical elements equating western-led democratisation with imperialism.

In her contribution, Beverley Milton-Edwards analyses the impact of the US-UK invasion of Iraq and the subsequent Islamisation of the political scene. This outcome is not one that the leaders of the 'coalition' necessarily expected, and it left the 'coalition' in a very uneasy situation about the steps to take regarding the future Iraqi domestic political and legal structures. The current debate within Iraq on the role of Islam re-emphasises once more how the political process rather than ideological 'second-guessing' will influence how Islamist actors will behave, and whether Iraq is destined to be a liberal democracy, some other kind of democracy, or no democracy at all. This account also stresses how the international dimension of democratization might be decisive in determining the institutional fate of a country, but it also makes a strong case for this external intervention to be more 'subtle'. It indicates that while military intervention successfully removed one kind of authoritarian order, it did little to introduce the citizenry to the workings of a meaningful and functioning pluralistic system of governance. By relying on selected secularised Iraqi exiles on the one hand and informally institutionalising the role of the Shi'a religious hierarchy on the other hand, the provisional authority and its sponsors effectively allowed old interests groups to 'reinforce pre-existing and rigid notions of power.' Thus, Milton-Edwards suggests that only 'if the process of democratization in Iraq can become part of the locally driven reconstruction agenda through acculturation rather than direct export, then 'faith in

democracy' as expressed in the rich and varied discourse that has emanated within the Muslim world for over a century may become possible.'

The relevance of international factors, particularly in the shape of trans-national Islamic links, is especially visible in countries located at the periphery of the Muslim world where Muslims often do not constitute a majority of the population. Jeff Haynes's account of the role of Muslim communities in East Africa illustrates well how Islamic movements are actively taking part in shaping the new national political landscapes that emerge out of more or less genuine attempts at democratization and liberalization in those countries. Examining the politically active Muslim minorities in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, Haynes remarks that despite their proximity to countries harbouring radical Islamists networks, in the three countries examined 'there have been remarkably few examples of individual Islamic militants committing themselves to the wider cause of transnational Islamic militancy'. Instead, this international environment has reaffirmed the role of political Islam as a powerful tool of social mobilisation in those ethnically and confessionally divided societies. In all the cases analysed, the new political relationships under construction have had to cope with an 'Islamic agenda pursued through discussion and negotiation'. In its turn, such an agenda bears witness to the increasing role that Islam plays as a political tool to activate and frame grievances and demands in the construction of a new institutional and legal order that will impact on all citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The final contribution deals with the practical policy concerns that arise around the question of democracy, Islamism and political violence. The dramatic events that took place in Iraq illustrate not only how these three issues are inter-linked but also how

international policies have the potential to interlock them ever more strongly in a no-win situation. Katerina Dalacoura's contribution addresses the issue of how far our understanding of both the processes of democratization and violent Islamist activism can operationalised in such a way that it can meaningfully inform policy-making. It notes that the issue of democratization in the Muslim world is at the top of the political agenda of most actors within the international community not only because democracy is now widely believed to be the best form of governance, but, possibly more importantly, because the very relevant problem of political violence stemming from the region is deeply affecting the stability and the workings of the international system. In this respect, the theme of Islamism comes back in the analysis because of its association with violence as a means to attain political objectives. While 'all Muslims are not terrorists', a significant amount of political violence that has occurred over the last two decades has been carried out by non-state groups in the name of Islamism. It is at this point that the connection is often made between the persistence of authoritarianism in most countries in the Muslim world and the use of violence from groups that feel excluded from the political system and resort to violence to make themselves heard. Thus, a not uncommon belief regarding the region is that authoritarianism is not only negative because it impedes social and economic development, but also because it stimulates an armed response against incumbents who are perceived to be ruling illegitimately. Democratization would therefore be a magic bullet that simultaneously solves the domestic problem of governance and the international problem of order. However, Dalacoura suggests that 'there is no evidence that a necessary causal relationship exists between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and the emergence of Islamist

terrorism.' Following from this are considerable policy-making implications, whereby democracy promotion would only be one of many tools to decrease the risks associated with political violence.

These studies taken together allow us to better understand the problematic relationship that exists between Islam and democracy in the uncertain post-Cold War world by focusing on key issues that affect the Muslim world. Far from subscribing to the notion that Islam is a monolith, that it is incapable of coming to terms with the requirements of modernity and that democracy is also a monolith that cannot deviate from the Western liberal model, these analyses highlight the complexity of Islam as a political referent, and the institutional strategies of survival put in place by incumbent authoritarian elites.

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1. See for instance Frederic Volpi, *Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria* (London: Pluto Press 2003); Lisa Anderson, 'Political Pacts, Liberalism and Democracy: the Tunisian National Pact of 1988', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1991), pp. 244-260.

2. See Adrian Karatnycky, 'Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 99-112.

3. For a brief overview of these analyses, see Eva Bellin, 'The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East,' *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2004), pp. 139-157. For a more the more a optimistic take on this topic see, Vali Nasr, 'The Rise of Muslim Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2005), pp. 13-27.

4. This mode of thinking was particularly common during the colonial period, and even sophisticated political thinkers from Marx to Weber contributed to some extent to marking the Muslim world as being exceptional vis-à-vis historical change (or the lack of it). See for instance Bryan Turner, *Weber and Islam* (London: Routledge 1998) and by the same author, *Marx and the end of Orientalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978).

5. See most notably Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (1993), pp. 22-49; Bernard Lewis, 'The Revolt of Islam', *The New Yorker*, 19 November 2001, pp. 50-63; and more recently, Sanford Lakoff, 'The Reality of Muslim Exceptionalism,' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15 (2004), pp. 133-139.

6. For a critique of Huntington's work in terms of self-fulfilling prophesy, see John Ikenberry, 'The West: Precious, Not Unique', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76. No. 2 (March/April 1997), pp. 162-163.

7. Daniel Brumberg, 'Islamists and the Politics of Consensus', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2002), p. 112.

8. See Frédéric Volpi, 'Pseudo-democracy in the Muslim world', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004), pp. 1061-1078.

9. See, Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillipe Schmitter's 'Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies', in G. O'Donnell, P. Schmitter and L. Whitehead (eds), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986).

10. Carsten Schneider and Philippe Schmitter, 'Liberalization, Transition and Consolidation: Measuring the Components of Democratization', *Democratization*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (2004), p.77.

11. See Ellen Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); I William Zartman, 'Opposition as Support of the State', in Adeed Dawisha and I. William Zartman (eds), *Beyond Coercion: The Durability of the Arab State* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 61-87.

12. David Collier and Steven Levitsky's 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No.3 (1997), pp.430-451; Larry Diamond, 'Thinking about Hybrid Regimes', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (20020, pp.21-35; Daniel Brumberg, 'The Trap of

Liberalized Autocracy', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2002), pp.46-68; Volpi (note 8).

13. See Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Liberalization without Democratisation in 'post-populist' Authoritarian States', in Nils Butenshon, Uri Davis and Manuel Hassassian, *Citizenship and State in the Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University press, 2000), pp. 123-145; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), pp. 51-65; Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, ''Waiting for Godot': Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East', *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (20040, pp. 371-392. For a reminder of what the situation looked like over ten years ago, see the contributors to Ghassan Salamé (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994).

14. Francesco Cavatorta, 'The Failed Liberalization of Algeria and the International Context: a Legacy of Stable Authoritarianism', *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2002), pp. 23-43.

15. About the detrimental effects of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, see Richard Gillespie and Lawrence Whitehead, 'European democratic promotion in North Africa: limits and prospects', in R. Gillespie and R. Youngs (eds.) *The European Union and Democracy Promotion: The Case of North Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); Frédéric Volpi, 'Regional Community Building and the Transformation of International Relations: the Case of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership', *Mediterranean Politics* Vol. 9, No. 2 (2004), pp. 145-64.

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