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The Middle East's Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The Middle East's democracy deficit is a product of the patterns of political and economic development in the region. It is not because the region is predominantly Islamic or is somehow afflicted by purportedly undemocratic cultures. By itself, culture is not an impediment to transition to democracy as it is subject to influences from the larger polity, especially insofar as the economy and the initiatives of the state are concerned. Instead, transition to democracy is determined by the degree of society's autonomy from the state. This autonomy may result from the empowerment of society as a consequence of economic development, or the state elite's devolution of power to social actors and classes, or, more commonly, a combination of both. Assumptions about the inherently undemocratic nature of cultures such as Islamic and Confucian ones are fundamentally invalid. The key to understanding democratic transitions lies instead in the nature of state-society relations rather than the nature of society's norms and values in themselves.

Keywords

democracy, civil society, culture, authoritarianism, Middle East, state, civilizations, development

Introduction

To say that authoritarianism remains a salient feature of Middle Eastern politics is to state the obvious. Despite well-intentioned and optimistic predictions dating to a decade ago or more (El Sayyid 1994), the "third wave of democracy" has not yet caught up with the Middle East. In fact, today there is near consensus that the region is trapped instead in liberalized autocracies of various kind (Brumberg 2002). But that is where the agreement ends, and few students of the Middle East agree over the precise causes for the endurance of authoritarianism in all but a handful of Middle Eastern countries. Is it rentier economics, or undemocratic and fractured cultural traditions, or colonial legacies, or a combination of these and other forces?

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Of the multitude of explanations given for the Middle East's democratic deficit, three deserve further examination: the role, if any, of culture in keeping authoritarianism alive; the political and economic factors that have curtailed the powers of those calling for democracy; and the nature and potential role of civil society. This article examines the Middle East's democracy deficit by looking at each of these three factors from a comparative perspective. In doing so, it argues that there is nothing inherently anti-democratic about Middle Eastern cultures, however broadly or narrowly defined. In fact, in helping or hindering democratic transitions, culture in general plays at best a minimal role. This role is overshadowed by political and economic factors that result in a particular distribution of power within the polity. Only when the balance of power begins to tip against the state elites, and a greater parity develops between their powers and those of social actors, will a transition to democracy become possible. Such was the case in Eastern Europe, South America, and East Asia, where institutional and economic crises of one kind or another preceded democratic transitions. So far, the authoritarian states of the Middle East have been able to ride such crises, or to deflate their impacts by making minor political and economic adjustments. And they are likely to endure so long as they can successfully keep doing so. The Middle East's democracy deficit, in short, is far more a product of political and economic dynamics than anything innately cultural, or, more pointedly, Islamic.

The (Un)Democratic Culture Thesis

One of the most controversial, and yet increasingly popular, lines of argument for the democratic deficit in the Middle East maintains that Middle Eastern cultures are fundamentally anti-democratic. Due to the pervasiveness of values that remain deeply imbued with religion, masculinity, bedouin norms, and traditionalism, the argument goes, Middle Eastern cultures exhibit a strong aversion to the tenets of democracy. This is by no means a new or novel thesis, as the mysterious, mystical "Orient" has long been the subject of popular and scholarly attention in the West. The riddle of "Asiatic despotism" attracted the attention of no less of a "scientist" than Karl Marx as far back as the 1840s, and even Marx was in this respect following footsteps left behind by others before him (Marx 1992: 91). Nevertheless, with the increasing ferocity and conviction emanating from Islamic fundamentalism beginning in the late 1970s, and then culminating to its unfathomable violence on 9/11, the thesis that Middle Eastern cultures are irrevocably violent and undemocratic has acquired new vigor.

The authors who argue from this perspective often fall into one of two categories: either those who see Middle Eastern cultures as an impediment to

democratization, or, more pointedly, as innately prone to irrationality and violence. The differences between the two perspectives are often indiscernible, however, and are frequently a question of degree rather than substance. Invariably, proponents of this line of argument see Middle Eastern cultures as inherently undemocratic and, at the same time, menacingly fanatical, threatening, even violent.

Of the plethora of scholarly and pseudo-scholarly writings belonging to this genre, one of the most widely read is Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, first published in 1973 and reprinted and revised periodically ever since. Patai purports to examine the Arab personality by "observing the psychological effects and reactions produced in the Arab world by the salient major developments" of the recent past (Patai 1983: ix). The psychological profile that emerges from Patai's long and detailed examination is of an Arab personality, and a larger Arab culture, that is irrational, primitive, violent, and, for our purposes here, undemocratic. Irrationality, he maintains, is one of the hallmarks of Arab cultural life. "In contrast to the West, the Arab world still sees the universe running its predestined course, determined by the will of Allah, who not only guides the world at large, but also predestines the fate of each and every man individually" (Patai 1983: 147). The Arab personality, he further argues, is incompatible with democracy as it has a "proclivity for mob action." The Arab is "a human type which readily and frequently throws off the restraints of discipline and, especially in mass situations, is likely to go on rampage" (Patai 1983: 162-3). Within this context, any possibilities for democracy are dashed due to the absence of institutionalized or even rational means of conflict resolution. "At every level discord has always been present, either actually or potentially. At the slightest provocation the fighting propensity surfaces, a quarrel ensues and easily degenerates into physical violence" (Patai 1983: 225).

A second, more serious group of scholars come to the same conclusion regarding the incompatibility of Islamic/Middle Eastern culture with democracy by examining the region's political history. Often pejoratively called "Orientalists" by their critics and detractors, they point to the hostility that Middle Eastern body politics have shown toward democracy as evidence of the former's inherently undemocratic nature. One of the most respected and renowned scholars belonging to this category is Ellie Kedourie, whose writings have long shaped the discipline of Middle Eastern studies in profound ways. Oriental despotism, he claims, has long been an inseparable feature of the Middle East (Kedourie 1992a: 12). "There is nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world—which are the political traditions of Islam—which might make familiar or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government. The notion of the state as a specific

territorial entity which is endowed with sovereignty, the notion of popular sovereignty as the foundation of governmental legitimacy, the idea of representation, of elections, or popular suffrage, of political institutions being regulated by laws laid down by a parliamentary assembly, of these laws being guarded and upheld by an independent judiciary, the ideas of the secularity of the state, of society being composed of a multitude of self-activating, autonomous groups and associations—all these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition” (Kedourie 1992b, 5-6). Again and again, Kedourie maintains, efforts were made in the Middle East to foster constitutionalism and representative government. But the incongruity of such imported ideas with deeply held political values and practices resulted in constitutionalism’s chronic demise in the Middle East.

Similarly grounded in historical analysis are the arguments of Bernard Lewis, another renowned and influential historian of the Middle East. In one of his latest writings, Lewis (2002) asks a simple question: “What went wrong?” In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had gone badly wrong. Compared with its millennial rival, Christendom, the world of Islam had become poor, weak, and ignorant. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the primacy and therefore dominance of the West was clear for all to see, invading the Muslim in every aspect of his public and—more painfully—even his private life (Lewis 2002: 151). The reasons for this steady decline, according to Lewis, are rooted in the interaction of a series of historical developments. It began by military weakness and reverses in the battlefield, and was accentuated by the failure to secure material wealth and to attain economic power. There has also been a failure, or refusal, to overcome social and cultural barriers to science and technology, and, concomitantly, an inability to overcome social inequality and inequity, especially in relation to women and ethnic or religious minorities. The Middle Eastern inability to bring about a “dethronement of religion as the organizing principle of society” (Lewis 2002: 112) has only deepened the region’s emersion in a cultural milieu that is antithetical to modernity and its various accompaniments. All of this, Lewis maintains, directly undermines the prospects of democracy in the Middle East. In Western parliamentary politics, as in team sports or orchestral music, rival parties or each member of the team or the orchestra, acts in accordance with an “agreed set of rules, and in an agreed interval of time,” in harmony if not in unison (Lewis 2002: 129). This common purpose and required cooperation, so pivotal to democracy, is missing in Middle Eastern societies. Not all hope is lost, however. “Despite many reverses,” Lewis writes, “European-style democracy is not dead in the Islamic lands, and there are some signs

of a revival. In some countries, parliamentary and constitutional systems are becoming increasingly effective. In several others there have been steps, still rather tentative, towards political as well as economic liberalization" (Lewis 1995).

This glimmer of hope offered by Lewis stands in sharp contrast to the analysis and conclusions offered by the political scientist Samuel Huntington, a scholar of considerable international stature. In his seminal study on the "third wave" of democratization sweeping across the globe in the 1980s, Huntington (1991: 310) observed that "conceivably Islamic and Confucian cultures pose insuperable obstacles to democratic development." He did, nevertheless, temper his pessimism by acknowledging that cultural obstacles to democracy are not always immutable. In fact, he argued that by the 1990s economic and political dynamics had indeed made it possible, if not probable, for the Middle East to become democratic (Huntington 1991: 314-15).

Within a couple of years, Huntington's prognosis of the Middle East had become decidedly less optimistic. In fact, his outlook toward the region had become quite dark. In a subsequent article in 1993 and a book in 1996, Huntington pointed to the Middle East as the cradle of a civilization that is diametrically opposed to Western interests and values, including democracy. According to Huntington, culture and cultural identities are the cornerstones of every civilization, and religions are in turn the cornerstones of every culture and cultural identity (Huntington 1996: 41-42). Middle Easterners—for whom Islam is the defining cultural element—see Western culture as threatening to their beliefs, and as "materialistic, corrupt, decadent, and immoral." The secularism and irreligiosity of Western culture, in fact, are perceived by the Muslims of the Middle East to be "worse evils than the Western Christianity that produced them" (Huntington 1996: 213). A violent and undemocratic civilization, Huntington declared that "Islam has bloody borders" (1993: 35),¹ and it will collude with the Confucian civilization to oppose all things Western, including Western power (Huntington 1993: 46-7).

Insofar as the Middle East's democratic deficit is concerned, Huntington (1996: 29) puts the blame squarely on Islam. Islam, he maintains, is anti-Western, extremist, and imbues the believer with a "propensity toward violent conflict" (Huntington 1996: 258). As such, it is virulently anti-democratic. Instead, Huntington concluded earlier that (1991: 72-3), "a strong correlation exists between Western Christianity and democracy. Modern democracy

¹ Noting that this statement had generated significant controversy when first published in the 1993 article, three years later in his book Huntington (1996: 258) made the following observation: "Islam's borders 'are' bloody, and so are its innards" (original emphasis).

developed first and most vigorously in Christian countries [...] However, democracy was especially scarce among countries that were predominantly Muslim, Buddhist, or Confucian.”

Huntington's thesis of a clash of civilizations between a democratic West versus the rest has already received much critical attention, and an examination of its merits is beyond the scope of this paper.² But his arguments regarding the inherently anti-democratic nature of Islam and Middle Eastern culture(s) do deserve further scrutiny. While Huntington is correct in maintaining that “cultures count” (2000), his identification of Islam as the primary cause of democracy's absence from the Middle East is incorrect on three fundamental grounds. To begin with, Huntington's conclusions are contradicted by the available empirical data on the relationship between belief in Islamic values on the one hand and democracy on the other. Also, serious analytical questions can be raised concerning Huntington's use of the notion of culture and its larger consequence for the world of politics. Lastly, at least insofar as his arguments in *The Clash of Civilizations* are concerned, if not in his earlier writings (Huntington 1968), there appear to be important omissions from Huntington's analysis of the dynamics that lead to democratization.

Perhaps the biggest problem with Huntington's thesis is the fact that it cannot be substantiated by empirical evidence. An emerging body of public opinion data and other indices indicate that there is, in fact, no contradiction between belief in Islam as a religion and acceptance of democracy as a political system (Midlarsky 1998; Tessler 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2003). Using the Polity III index, Manus Midlarsky (1998: 504) comes to the conclusion that “democracy itself and Islam are not mutually exclusive, certainly not if democracy is measured by the more rudimentary political rights index.” The same does not hold, however, for more inclusive definitions of democracy, Midlarsky maintains, although the importance of international and environmental factors, as well as the consequences of economic modernization, cannot be ignored. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (1998) come to a largely similar conclusion, this time relying on the World Values Survey/European Values Survey (WVS/EVS) 1995-2001. The WVS/EVS examines cultural values in

² See, for example, Ajami, F. 1993 “The Summoning.” *Foreign Affairs*. 72(4): 3-9; Mahboubani, K. 1993 “The Dangers of Decadence: What the Rest Can Teach the West.” *Foreign Affairs*. 72(4): 10-14; Rubenstein, R. E. and J. Crocker 1994 “Challenging Samuel Huntington.” *Foreign Policy*. 96: 113-28; Fuller, G. 1995 “The Next Ideology.” *Foreign Policy*. 98: 145-58; O'Hagan, J. 1995 “Civilizational Conflict? Looking for Cultural Enemies.” *Third World Quarterly*. 16(1): 19-38; Ikenberry, G. J. 1997 “Just Like the Rest.” *Foreign Affairs*. 76(2): 162-163; Nussbaum, B. 1997 “Capital, Not Culture.” *Foreign Affairs*. 76(2): 165; Smith, T. 1997 “Dangerous Conjecture.” *Foreign Affairs*. 76(2): 163-164.

seventy-five countries around the globe, including nine with Muslim majorities.³ Norris and Inglehart's conclusions (1998: 7) are significant: "Huntington is mistaken in assuming that the core 'clash' between the West and Islamic societies concerns 'political' values: instead evidence indicates that surprisingly similar attitudes toward democracy are found in the West and in the Islamic world." Considering the vast differences in cultural values regarding gender issues, Norris and Inglehart (1998: 7) maintain that "the central values separating Islam and the West revolve far more centrally around Eros than Demos."⁴

These findings are further supported by Mark Tessler (2002), who examines data on the impact of religious orientations on attitudes toward democracy in four Arab countries. Tessler relies on public opinion data collected in Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank), Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt between 1988 and 1996. After a rigorous analysis of the data, Tessler (2002: 348) concludes that "Islam appears to have less influence on political attitudes than is frequently suggested by students of Arab and Islamic societies." More specifically, the data "offers evidence that support for democracy is not necessarily lower among those individuals with the strongest Islamic attachments" (Tessler 2002: 348). In fact, "the evidence presently available from Palestine, Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt suggests that Islam is not the obstacle to democratization that some western and other scholars allege it to be" (Tessler 2002: 350).

In addition to lack of empirical support for the claim that Islam as a religion and a belief system is largely responsible for the Middle East's democracy deficit, there are difficulties with Huntington's conceptualization of culture's role in politics in general and in relation to democratic transitions in specific. To start, contrary to what Huntington implies, culture is not a stand-alone phenomenon and is heavily influenced by the larger environment and the context within which it is formulated. In Huntington's conception, culture-cum-civilization is a straightjacket that limits the normative perspectives and the policy agendas of political leaders across the world. "Political leaders imbued with the hubris to think that they can fundamentally reshape the culture of their societies are destined to fail," he cautions (Huntington 1996: 154).

³ The Muslim majority countries in the survey include Albania, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Turkey.

⁴ Norris and Inglehart's conclusions concerning a "clash of civilizations" are just as significant: "the democratic 'clash' (if it can be called a clash) divides Post-Communist states in Eastern European (*sic.*) (exemplified by Russia, Ukraine and Moldova) which display minimal support for democracy, from many other countries that display far more positive attitudes, including both Western 'and' Islamic nations" (1998: 29; original emphasis).

Even more fundamentally, Huntington argues, culture (or civilization) drives politics and not the other way around. But anyone remotely familiar with the political history of Islam, for example, is aware that Islam or any other religion for that matter—has long been used and abused by those in power for their own political purposes. More specifically, “interpretations” of Islam have varied according to not only the specific goals of the interpreter but also the time and the context of the interpretation. In Iran, for instance, the very Islam that in the late 1970s promised liberation and political freedom became a source of repression and despotism in the 1980s. Today, more than two decades after the victory of the Islamic revolution, a vibrant debate is raging among the revolution’s heirs over the very nature of the relationship between religion and politics (Kamrava 2003). The religion itself did not change; the context within which it was put to political use and the priorities of its interpreters changed, with former revolutionaries turning into an increasingly narrow circle of power elites. Elsewhere, in Latin America in the 1970s and the 1980s, the same Catholicism that was part of the corporatist alliance with bureaucratic-authoritarian states also gave rise to Liberation Theology as it assumed different functions and political postures at the hands of different actors (Lehman 1990: 117-26).

Taking this argument one step further, the phenomenon whose manifestations are signs of Islam’s civilizational conflict with the West to Huntington is, in reality, a re-politicization of Islam, a process that dates back to the 1970s. In the West, this re-politicization is often commonly and mistakenly called “Islamic fundamentalism.” In reality, however, political Islam is far more nuanced and contextualized. At the broadest level, this political Islam is divided into three subcategories: an intellectual Islam, which is often reformist and seeks to synchronize Islam with modernity; a popular Islam, which is at the level of the masses and has led to a growth of religiosity as a more common source of cultural identity; and a fundamentalist Islam, which is literalist, politically violent, and has a comparatively narrow social base (see also article 8 by Amineh in this issue). There is, of course, complementarity between and within each of these three subcategories of political Islam. But to overlook the subtle, and often times very obvious, differences between them, and to lump all of them together as uniformly non-democratic and innately confrontational, is, at best, to over-simplify a very complex phenomenon.

A second point in which Huntington’s arguments appear to need modifications is in relation to his analysis of the role of culture in democratic transitions. Again contrary to what Huntington implies, the pre-existence of a democratic culture is not a necessary precondition for transition to democracy. While helpful, a culture needs not to have been democratized already for democratic transition to take place. It is at the stage of democratic “consolida-

tion” rather than “transition” that the prevalence of democratic norms and values among the various strata of urban society—especially among the middle classes—becomes key to the longevity and resilience of the newly democratized political system. At the stage of transition, however, what is of primary importance is the pre-transition state’s loss of internal cohesion (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 15-17) and the “political crafting” that ensues (Di Palma 1990: 8-9). As Giuseppe Di Palma (1990: 30) has argued, “genuine democrats need not precede democracy, and [...] the transfer of loyalties from dictatorship to democracy does not require exceptionally favorable circumstances. Ultimately, the viability of a new democracy can rest on making the transfer appealing, convenient, or compelling. Ultimately, it can rest on its attractiveness relative to its alternatives.”

Essentially, what this boils down to is that the relationship which Islam inheres with democracy is ultimately irrelevant. Insofar as democratic transitions are concerned, what matters are the institutional viability of the pre-transition state and the political economy arrangements on which it relies in order to exercise control over the various social classes. Culture does not even influence the nature of the transition to democracy once such a transition has already begun. The nature and course of the transition is, instead, shaped and influenced by the changing powers of the various actors who are directly or indirectly involved in it. To better understand the underlying causes of the democratic deficit in the Middle East, therefore, we must examine the strength and institutional viability of Middle Eastern states and the ways in which they interact with and rule over the various classes in society. In fact, by looking at the processes of state-building and political development from a comparative perspective, we see why the Middle East remains largely authoritarian while Latin America and East Asia have become largely democratic.

Economic Development and Democratization

By nature, “developing” countries feature processes of economic development that are inimical to democratic openings. More specifically, most though not all developing countries face what Eva Bellin (2002, 4) has called the “developmental paradox.” Societal autonomy and the empowerment of social actors in relation to the state are key to the onset of pressures for democratization. Developing states foster economic and industrial processes that constrain the autonomy of social actors in the short run while, in the long run, enhance their prospects for empowerment and autonomy from the state. As Bellin points out, “by sponsoring industrialization, the [authoritarian] state nurtures the development of social forces ultimately capable of amassing sufficient power to challenge it and impose a measure of policy responsiveness upon it.

In short, the very success of the state's strategy leads to the demise of the state's capacity to dictate policy unilaterally" (Bellin 2002: 4).

While this developmental paradox may in the long run foster conditions that favor democratic openings, it is not a natural by-product of economic development in just any developing country. It is, rather, a specific outcome of development processes unleashed by "developmental states." Chalmers Johnson (1982: 18-19) defines developmental states as those that combine the market-rationality of capitalist economies of states like the United States with the ideological-plan economies of states similar to that of the former Soviet Union. "In the plan rational [i.e. developmental] state, the government will give greatest precedent to industrial policy; that is, to a concern with the structure of domestic industry and with promoting the structure that enhances the nation's international competitiveness."⁵ Developmental states, at least in their successful variety, are preponderant in East Asia, with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan being paradigmatic cases. Elsewhere in the developing world, only the Chilean and to a much lesser extent the Argentine and the Brazilian states come close to being considered developmental, although all three were more aptly classified as "bureaucratic-authoritarian" in their pre-democratic days (O'Donnell 1973). In other parts of the developing world, most notably in the Middle East, in Central America and the Caribbean, and throughout Africa, the dynamics of economic transformation and development have been decidedly different. Whatever the inter- and intra-regional differences in the economic development of each of these remaining parts of the developing world, the one more or less consistent feature in all of them has been the state's ability to withstand being swept away as a result of the consequences of the development that it itself fostered. A partial exception is South Africa, although its democratic transition was as much a result of the relentless struggle of the African National Congress (ANC) against a state that was morally bankrupt and internationally isolated as it was a consequence of economic development and the rise of a small but articulate group of middle class, black revolutionaries (DeFronzo 1996).

Insofar as the relationship between economic development and democratization is concerned, there are two key, inter-related developments that need to occur. First, there needs to emerge a sizeable middle class that is financially autonomous of the state. Second, and concomitant with the first development, there needs to be a private sector that also retains a meaningful level of economic and political autonomy from the state. These two factors are, of

⁵ For more on Johnson's elaboration of the concept of developmental state see Johnson 1999.

course, organically linked. By definition, the middle classes outside of the civil service (i.e. financially autonomous from the state) belong to the private sector. But there are also important qualitative differences between the two, namely in levels of economic power and organizational resources. Their natural overlappings notwithstanding, the two groups serve the process of democratic opening in two distinct ways, with elements from the middle classes doing so “subjectively” while the private sector do so “objectively.”

The subjective ways in which the middle classes help the cause of democratization is through their explicit or implicit support for non-state initiatives and non-state-dictated sources of identity, especially as represented through professional associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While such activities on the part of the middle classes, if permitted by the authorities, ultimately erode the institutional, objective bases of the state (more of which below), they also help spread in society the ideals of self-empowerment, political independence (from the state), local activism, and civic responsibility. The middle classes, in other words, are critical components of civil society, so long as they have the political autonomy and the financial and organizational resources necessary to mobilize themselves into professional associations and other civil society organizations.⁶ This is not to imply that the oppositional potential of the middle classes is overwhelmingly, or even largely, subjective and devoid of direct institutional significance. In fact, this is far from the case. Through their membership in NGOs and professional associations, members of the middle classes—many of whom are responsible for the initial establishment of such alternative institutions—directly challenge the functions and performance of state institutions in specific areas, be it in the provision of particular services or the fostering of a sense of confidence that the state had long taken away. Nevertheless, as the next section demonstrates, these middle class-driven organizations contribute more to the larger societal context and atmosphere within which democratic openings occur rather than serve as the actual catalysts for authoritarian withdrawals. The defection of the private sector from the “authoritarian bargain,” however, can be far more directly consequential for the overall strength and the institutional integrity of the state. Authoritarian states, as we shall see presently, rely on authoritarian bargains of various kinds, many of which revolve around the incorporation and complicity of the private sector. For the private sector’s defection to be politically consequential, it needs to have first amassed formidable economic muscle and organizational and financial strength of its own, and, even if it initially owed

⁶ This important point will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

its good fortunes to the state and its corporatist largesse, it must first break away from the state's tentacle and become politically autonomous.

This is precisely what happened in South Korea, where a highly underdeveloped and resource-starved economy began to turn around in the mid-1960s, as the country's policymakers switched from import-substitution to an export-led policy of growth. This shift had two additional consequences. To begin with, it required the erection of a number of trade barriers to "some" imports; instead of simply encouraging exports as an engine of economic development, policy-makers exploited the country's "comparative advantage" and continued to allow for the import of goods that would have been costly to produce domestically (Kim 1997: 426). In practice, this meant a close level of cooperation between state leaders and policy-makers on the one side and private sector investors and industrialists on the other. Secondly, unlike Brazilian and Taiwanese industries, Korean firms—especially in the automotive sector—have been reluctant to rely on international subcontractors and, instead, have manufactured most components of their products in-house (Kim 1997: 427). While this was costly in the short-run, in the long run it has resulted in Korean firms emerging as more independent and, overall, more powerful. Over time, as more and more Korean firms successfully broke into international markets and developed marketing networks and resources of their own, their need on the patronage and support of the state was reduced. Gradually, by the late 1980s, they began to pull out of the state's authoritarian bargain.

Much, then, depends on the viability and resilience of the bargain struck between authoritarian state leaders and key social actors whose financial and/or organizational resources the state needs to co-opt for its own purposes. At the very least, even if the bargain does not explicitly co-opt these resources, it needs to mollify their potential for political opposition if it is to persevere. Looking at authoritarian bargains in broad strokes, we see why they unraveled in pre-democratic South America, and to a much lesser extent in East Asia, especially in South Korea and Taiwan, while they continue to persevere in the Middle East.

In Brazil and Argentina, the state adopted the import-substitution industrialization (ISI) strategy for development, through which it sought to placate middle class demands for consumer durables and, more importantly, direct targeted benefits to domestic and international investors who were part of its corporatist equation (Franko 2003: 59-61). From about the 1950s to the late 1970s the bargain worked, as military-led states fostered impressive industrial growth, kept the middle classes economically content, and held the domestic opposition at bay through indiscriminate repression. But in the face of inadequate domestic exports or other natural resources (such as hydrocarbon reserves) to finance ISI, Brazil and Argentina had to resort to massive borrow-

ing from international lenders, confronting balance of payment and debt crises by the early 1980s (Waterbury 1999: 334-5). The structural adjustments that were subsequently dictated by the so-called Washington Consensus alienated the very groups who were once the beneficiaries of ISI—the middle classes and the investors—resulting in the unraveling of their authoritarian bargains (Haggard and Kaufman 1995: 33). The Argentine military state, itself suffering from internal discord and lack of cohesion, resorted to one last desperate measure to rally middle class support when it invaded the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982. But its failed venture only expedited its collapse and the retreat of the ruling generals back into the barracks. In Argentina, the military state simply collapsed. Similarly hasty withdrawals from power also occurred in Bolivia and Peru, as well as in the Philippines, followed subsequently by elections, the democratic voracity of which are still open to debate nearly two decades later. In Brazil and Uruguay, where the military exited from power under more favorable economic and political circumstances, it was in a better position to negotiate the terms of its withdrawal, already having had committed itself to some political liberalization before the elections of the mid-1980s (Haggard and Kaufman 1995: 69).

In East Asia, meanwhile, developmental states were able to foster and in turn rest on what some observers have called “conservative coalitions.” According to David Waldner (1999: 138), “conservative coalitions are narrowly based coalitions supporting collaboration between the state and large business; significant segments of the population are excluded from these coalitions, and deliberate efforts are made to maximize side-payments to popular classes.” The South Korean and Taiwanese state elites (and the Japanese elites before them) enjoyed high levels of internal cohesion. Against a backdrop of deep-seated economic nationalism (Woo-Cumings 1999: 6), these elites, secure in their incumbency as they were, could devise economic policy without significant pressure from the popular classes (Waldner 1999: 4). Following the Japanese model, the Taiwanese and South Korean states devised elaborate agencies, as well as formal and informal mechanisms, to promote growth and success of the private sector: Korea’s Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy (originally called the MTI), and Taiwan’s Council for Economic Cooperation and Development (later renamed CEPD), successfully replicated the work of Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry, the MITI (Weiss 1998: 55-59). So long as the state’s policies resulted in the growth of private sector capital, the private sector remained ambivalent toward democratic reform. However, when “the state began to cut back on its sponsorship of private sector capital and the latter’s need for state support also declined [...] the private sector began to exhibit remarkable enthusiasm for political reform and democratization” (Bellin 2002: 163). By the early 1990s, both the South Korean and

Taiwanese states, and in a somewhat more precarious way also the Thai state, could be considered democratic.

The situation in the countries of the Middle East could not have been more different. Almost uniformly, the states of the Middle East differ from those in East Asia and Latin America in three significant ways: (1) they initially lacked elite cohesion; (2) they have relatively easy access to economic resources; and (3) Middle Eastern countries have comparatively low levels of globalization. These variables have combined to result in the emergence of authoritarian bargains that so far have been able to withstand major challenges by undergoing what amount to only minor modifications. Consequently, at a time when the unraveling of other authoritarian bargains has ushered in democratic rule in East Asia and Latin America, much of the Middle East continues to remain a bastion of authoritarianism.

First, especially unlike the states of East Asia, those in the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, had little or no initial elite cohesion. To a large extent, this was a product of the region's colonial interlude from the early 1920s to the late 1940s, when indigenous political institutions were unable to emerge and gain a hold on their own. When independence came abruptly after the end of World War II—and in Algeria in 1962 after a long and bloody war of national liberation—political aspirants competed with one another for dominance and hegemony by seeking to cultivate support among specific social groups. As Waldner (1999: 36) maintains, “intense elite conflict impels one of the competing elite factions to incorporate a mass base: the state bargains with popular classes, exchanging material benefits for popular support.”

The incorporation of the masses into the political process might have undermined the state's economic performance, but it also gave it a facade of street democracy that masked, albeit often unsuccessfully, its innately authoritarian nature. At the very least, it balanced out the grievances of the groups excluded from the bargain (e.g. workers and peasants) with support from those who were included (civil servants, for example). As many of the once inclusionary states aged over time, they resorted less and less to street theater to keep up democratic pretenses. However, they could not significantly reduce the high levels of side-payment they were paying to their constituents in society. In fact, over time, a relationship of mutual dependence has emerged between the state on the one side and certain key societal constituents on the other side, with neither being able fully to break out of the relationship. Precisely who these societal groups are, differs from one Middle Eastern country to another. Across the board, however, the middle classes are uniformly targeted for incorporation, especially through the expansive civil service and state-owned enterprises (Richards and Waterbury 1996: 210-11). Other targeted groups often include organized labor, especially in Algeria and Egypt (Pripstein Posusney

1997), or wealthier members of the private sector, as in Iraq (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001: 242) and Turkey (Waldner 1999: 71-2).

Second, this time especially unlike the states in Latin America, Middle Eastern states are able to rely on rentier economies, a phenomenon that has been discussed extensively in the political economy literature of the Middle East. Briefly, rentierism is the result of earning high profits from economic activities that do not require proportionately high levels of productivity. For example, the extraction and export of oil is a relatively easy task compared to the amount of revenues and profits that are accrued from its sale abroad. In the Middle East, in fact, oil has become a primary source of rent for most of the region's governments, and the "oil monarchies" of the Persian Gulf (Gause 1994) in particular have become rentier states "par excellence." But rent-seeking is not limited to the export of primary products at highly profitable rates. As Peter Evans (1995: 34) maintains, "rationing foreign exchange, restricting entry through licensing procedures, and instituting tariffs or quantitative restrictions on imports are all ways of creating rents." In oil-poor Jordan, for example, a rentier economy has emerged around massive infusions of foreign aid and worker remittances (Piro 1998: 63).

Rentierism has given Middle Eastern states extractive autonomy from society. In Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East, the state has been able to provide for the population without demanding much in the way of revenues in return (Piro 1998: 60). Direct forms of taxation in the Middle East, for example, remain "ludicrously low in most Arab states in which a personal income tax exists, and in a good number of them such a tax does not even exist" (Luciani 1995: 217).⁷ More importantly, by and large, the state in the Middle East has been able to avoid the vulnerabilities of debt-ridden Latin American states by continually financing the incorporation of groups dependent on it. Even the recurrent economic recessions of the 1980s and the 1990s failed to completely dislodge the rentier underpinnings of Middle Eastern economies, although they did necessitate certain economic liberalization measures (Harik and Sullivan 1992).⁸ Ultimately, however, as the once-fractured state elites have become more and more cohesive with the passage of time, half-hearted measures at economic liberalization have neither been followed-up by nor have they involuntarily yielded to meaningful political liberalization,

⁷ Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg (2001: 76-8), for example, maintain that while the average direct tax on individual income is around 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in Europe, it is 0.7 and 1.3 percent of the GDP in Egypt and Jordan respectively.

⁸ According to Henry and Springborg (2001: 76), Middle Eastern and North African "states face a major crisis because they can no longer deliver the goods. As the rents evaporate, they must tax more and presumably be subjected to greater accountability."

the hopeful expectations of outside observers notwithstanding (Korany, Brynen, and Noble 1998 and 1995).

Third, there have been comparatively less profound levels of globalization in the Middle East as compared to other regions of the developing world save for Africa. There is a strong correlation between high levels of economic and normative globalization and the prospects for democratic transitions (Simensen 1999: 394-5). However, literally all states of the Middle East, with the exception of the region's two democracies—Turkey and Israel⁹—rank consistently low on all indices of globalization. Outside of the oil sector, in fact, foreign direct investment has been lower in the Middle East as compared to levels in either East Asia (Kim 2000) or in Latin America (Franko 2003). There are a number of reasons for this, among the most important of which are weak domestic markets and uncompetitive private sectors, as well as strong opposition from so-called “moralizers” who see globalization as a threat to the authenticity of their culture, their religious and/or ethnic identity, and their countries’ national interests (Henry and Springborg 2001: 19). Far more important, however, is the fundamental threat that globalization poses to the grip that authoritarian leaders have on the reins of power. By nature, globalization requires transparency in economic transactions, free flow of information, a credible banking system, and the empowerment of civil society. Each of these phenomena on its own, and especially in combination with one another, can be lethal to authoritarian states. Not surprisingly, within the Middle East, the authoritarian “bunker” states of Algeria, Qaddafi’s Libya, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Asad’s Syria, and Sudan, as well as the region’s “bully praetorian” republics of Egypt and Tunisia, tend to be the most shy about globalization (Henry and Springborg 2001).

Authoritarianism and comparatively low levels of globalization assume a mutually reinforcing relationship with one another. In the Middle East at large and within a number of specific Middle Eastern countries in particular, state leaders have greeted globalization with considerable skepticism, seeking at most to allow it in a trickled, highly controlled manner. The official fear of and resulting restrictions on information technology that is apparent in all authoritarian states of the Middle East attests to this attempt to control the flow and nature of globalization (Teitelbaum 2002). For now, with the institutional underpinnings of dictatorial rule continuing to exhibit remarkable

⁹ While ostensibly democratic, the Turkish and Israeli political systems feature certain glaring limitations on the scope and nature of political activity—certain very pronounced red lines—that make them more “pseudo-democratic.” Given the close level of military involvement in civilian administration in both states, they may also be considered as “military democracies” (see Salt 1999; Kamrava 2000 and 1998a).

resilience, the potential that globalization would erode authoritarianism in the Middle East seems highly unlikely. And, by the same token, so long as authoritarian rule remains the norm in the Middle East, the prospects for the region undergoing globalization to the extent that Latin America or East Asia have undergone appear bleak.

In sum, economic development has a paradoxical relationship with democratization. There is no linear relationship between industrial development and democracy. The causal relationship between the two is far more nuanced and context-specific.¹⁰ If in the process of economic development, the middle classes and the private sector gain autonomy from the state on the one hand and organizational and financial resources and strength on the other, they can emerge as powerful actors in the push for state accountability and democratization. Specifically, private sector defection from authoritarian bargains can prove fatal to the longevity of state elites, as it did in East Asia and in much of South America. Similarly, increasing economic integration into the global markets (i.e. globalization)—which tends to strengthen emerging elements with civil society, foster transparency and free flows of information, and ultimately encourage greater economic and political accountability—can overtime erode the staying power of authoritarian state elites. Again, the much deeper levels of globalization in Latin America and East Asia correlate closely with the greater preponderance of democratization in these two regions. In the Middle East, however, patterns of economic development have neither fostered the emergence of an autonomous and powerful private sector or middle class, nor have they resulted in significant levels of globalization. Consequently, by and large, in the Middle East economic development has served as a hindrance and an obstacle to democratic transitions as opposed to being a catalyst for democracy.

The Role of Civil Society

In recent years, considerable scholarship has been devoted to exploring the relationship between civil society and democratization.¹¹ Along the same lines,

¹⁰ After looking at the relationship between capitalist development and democracy in Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992: 284) come to the conclusion that “factors such as dependent development, late and state-led development, international political constellations and events, and international learning, all conspired to create conditions in which the combination of causes and thus the paths to democracy (and dictatorship) were different in different historical contexts and in different regions.”

¹¹ A small sampling includes works by Gellner, E. 1994 *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*. New York: Penguin Books; Gill, G. 2000 *The Dynamics of Democratization: Elites, Civil*

a number of experts have pointed to the prevalence of civil society in regions such as South America or Eastern Europe as one of the main reasons for their greater levels of democratization as compared to the Middle East or Africa, where civil society has been more scarce (Gyimah-Baodi 1996; Lewis 1992). In specific relationship to the Middle East, many argue that the region's democratic deficit is due to the fact that civil society either does not exist in most Middle Eastern countries, or, where it does exist, it is too embryonic and fragile to be of serious consequence. It is, therefore, important to explore the precise nature of the relationship between civil society and democratization, and to see what consequences, if any, arise from civil society's predicament in the Middle East insofar as the prospects for democratization in the region are concerned.

Philip Oshorn (1995: 251-2) defines civil society as "a rich social fabric formed by a multiplicity of territorially and functionally based units. The strength of civil society is measured by the peaceful coexistence of these units and by their collective capacity to simultaneously 'resist subordination' to the state and to 'demand inclusion' into national political structures. The public character of these units allows them to justify and act in open pursuit of their collective interests in competition with one another. Strong civil societies are thus synonymous with a high level of 'institutionalized social pluralism'." As such, "because they are self-constituted, the units of civil society serve as the foundations for political democracy" (Oshorn 1995: 252).

Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996: 7) similarly define civil society as "that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests." However, they argue, civil society is a tremendously helpful but ultimately insufficient element of democratic transitions. "At best, civil society can destroy a nondemocratic regime," they maintain. For democratic transition—and especially democratic consolidation—to occur, civil society needs to be politicized and transformed into what Linz and Stepan call "political society." Political society may be defined as "that arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself to contest the legitimate right to exercise control over public power and the state apparatus" (Linz and Stepan 1996: 8).

A subtle but important distinction needs to be drawn between "civil society" and civil society organizations (CSOs). CSOs are the constituent mem-

Society and the Transition Process. New York: St. Martin's Press; Hall, J. A. 1995 (ed), *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*. London: Polity Press; Tester, K. 1992 *Civil Society*. London: Routledge.

bers of civil society, what Oxhorn calls “units of civil society.” They are the various individual groups and organizations whose collective efforts over time, and the effects of the horizontal and often also the organic links that develop among them, make it possible for civil society to emerge.¹² Frequently, CSOs are issue-specific and issue-driven, and as such have a strong sense of corporate identity. They are also politically, institutionally, and financially independent from the state and guard their autonomy jealously. In fact, they often come into existence as the very result of the state’s inability, or unwillingness, to perform those functions on which society relies on it to perform. CSOs, therefore, emerge in response to specific exigencies created by state inaction or impotence—e.g. its inability to ensure physical security, or its lack of sufficient attention to spreading literacy or giving people job skills. Therefore, the emergence over time of CSOs and later of civil society is contingent on the nature and extent of the relationship between the state and the larger society.

Since a democratic transition will not be made possible until an authoritarian regime is confronted with a crisis of power, CSOs, and even civil society are, “in themselves,” inconsequential so long as they do not directly weaken state power. What CSOs and civil society do, is to give social actors an unprecedented sense of empowerment and self actualization. But social empowerment is not the same as the institutional weakening of the state and a vacuum of official power. By itself, therefore, civil society does not lead to democratization. The existence of civil society is not even a prerequisite for democratic transition. However, in cases where it does exist, civil society not only greatly facilitates the transition to democracy but, more importantly, it facilitates democracy’s deepening in society once a new, democratic state has already been established. In fact, as Linz and Stepan maintain, it is at the stage of democratic consolidation in which civil society makes its greatest and most important contribution. Civil society does, nevertheless, provide the larger societal and cultural context within which collapsing states are replaced by democratic ones.

However conceptualized, CSOs or other similar “units” or elements of civil society have historically existed in Middle Eastern societies, whether in the form of politically autonomous *ulama* or in the form of merchant guilds. In more contemporary times, CSOs have proliferated in the form of informal religious gatherings (e.g. the Iranian *dowreh*), or, more commonly, various professional associations belonging to engineers, physicians, architects, pharmacists, lawyers, dentists, and the like (Ibrahim 1995: 51-2). However,

¹² This is not to imply that whenever there is a cluster of CSOs they will necessarily lead to civil society.

although professional associations and other CSOs may have proliferated in recent decades, they have operated in highly hostile political and economic environments. As a result, they have been largely fragmented from one another and have been prevented from establishing—or have not developed to a stage where they would want to or could establish—mutually reinforcing ties and institutional links with one another. As a result, CSOs in the Middle East have largely failed to bring about civil society, or “political society” in Linz and Stepan’s formulation.

There are two primary reasons for this. Perhaps the most important revolves around the nature and agendas of the state, or, more specifically, its paranoia and profound suspicion toward any manifestations of social autonomy. A second, related reason has to do with the pattern of state-dependent economic development that has unfolded in the Middle East, through which the powers of private capital have been largely curtailed by the state or made dependent on it. Financial dependence undermines the resources and possibilities available to social groups and seriously impedes their ability to act independently.

Almost uniformly, the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states of the Middle East—i.e. all except the Turkish and Israeli states—fear that any manifestations of civil society may seriously erode their ability to maintain their coercive relationship with society. Consequently, they view all autonomous social groups—from trade unions to professional associations, from *waqf* (Islamic charity) organizations to social clubs and informal groups—with deep mistrust. Not surprisingly, these states have employed a variety of means to curtail the growth and spread of such civil society organizations. These measures range from outright harassment and intimidation, as occurred in Egypt with the imprisonment of the renowned scholar Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the director of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development and the publisher of the journal *Civil Society* (in both Arabic and English), to the placement of state actors inside various socially-based groups.

While nearly uniform, the Middle Eastern states’ hostility to civil society has varied based on the precise nature of the state’s relationship with society. In looking at state-civil society relationships in the Middle East, the typology of Middle Eastern states offered by Henry and Springborg (2001: 20) is very useful. They divide Middle Eastern states into four broad types: “bunker” states (Algeria, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq); “bully praetorian” states (Egypt, Tunisia, and the Palestinian Authority); “globalizing monarchies” (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates); and “fragmented democracies” (Iran, Israel, Lebanon, and Turkey). Bunker states tend to have highly coercive relationships with their societies and, overall, allow for the least degree of

financial autonomy to the forces of the market and the middle classes. As such, they tend to exhibit the greatest hostility toward independent groups and organizations. Not surprisingly, civil society organizations are least developed in Algeria, the Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and in Iraq prior to the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime (Henry and Springborg 2001: 123).

"Bully praetorian" states tend to be equally suspicious of and therefore as repressive toward CSOs and independent associations, although they do foster economic conditions that are more conducive to the initial appearance and growth of such middle class-based groups. In Tunisia, for example, one finds "a large educated middle class, a society relatively unfragmented by ethnic cleavage, a vast network of associations that are training citizens in civisme and civility, and an increasingly independent class of private entrepreneurs" (Bellin 1995: 147). These are all ingredients of civil society. Nearly the same precise conditions exist in Egypt. However, both the Tunisian and the Egyptian states have employed a variety of legal and repressive tools to either suppress independent associational activities or, at the very least, to ensure their continued dependence on the state. By frequently invoking the dreaded Law of Associations (Law 32, enacted in 1964), for example, the Egyptian state "gives itself rights and puts constraints on members of the public from freely associating to promote their own individual and collective rights (e.g., basic human rights, community development)" (Sullivan and Abed-Kotob 1999: 26). In Palestine, meanwhile, the initially subtle friction between the emerging state as constituted by the Palestine National Authority (PNA), and such civil society organizations as the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad has erupted into open warfare. In recent years, other secular Palestinian CSOs have similarly felt the heavy weight of the PNA, as it has imposed legal restrictions on them and, more importantly, has sought to divert foreign aid away from them and into its own coffers (Sullivan 1995: 13).

Monarchical states tend to fall into one of the two extremes of either a relatively permissible attitude toward associational life (Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait), or combatting non-state sanctioned social activism with vigor (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates). As part of their ruling bargain, monarchies usually strike alliances with local business notables in order to pre-empt the possibility of an oppositional alliance between entrepreneurs and Islamist activists (Henry and Springborg 2001: 169). Although such a coalition can potentially strengthen the bargaining power and therefore the autonomy of the private sector, it also ensures the private sector's continued dependence on state largesse and resources. At the same time, the remaining monarchies of the region tend to rely on rather narrow institutional bases of power, or on subjective sources of legitimacy that

remain open to challenges, or both (Kamrava 1998b: 79-82). They therefore remain deeply mistrustful of independent associations and groups. Nevertheless, consistent with the relatively greater levels of political liberalization that each has permitted, the Moroccan, Jordanian, and Kuwaiti monarchies have allowed professional associations to acquire some limited breathing room. The Kuwaiti government has made allowances, for example, for a CSO named the University Graduates' Society and for others like it, in addition to reviving the parliament (Ibrahim 1995: 42). Similarly, in Morocco in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, the state did curtail some of its economic and social commitments and allowed associations to develop in defense of rights and liberties. At the same time, however, it has been reluctant to retract its tentacles from potentially powerful CSOs such as the Moroccan Workers Union (UMT) and the General Union of Moroccan Workers (UGMT) and to enable them to act independently (Desrués and Moyano 2001: 36). At best, the potential for Moroccan civil society remains seriously hampered. In Jordan, similarly, a very limited form of political liberalization has given rise to a number of professional associations, but there are some very well-defined red lines beyond which the associations' members may not step (e.g. discussing Jordan's relations with Israel).

From a comparative perspective, by far the most robust manifestations of civil society are found in the Middle East's few, and all too frequently limited, democracies. Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel all feature political systems that have more limits placed on them in their interactions with society than any of the other states in the Middle East, vast differences among them notwithstanding. Moreover, they have given rise to financial and social circumstances that make the growth of CSOs more of a possibility than is the case elsewhere. They are, in general, "less frightened of information flow, [. . . have] more developed and competitive economic institutions, lower transaction costs, and better established external linkages, and, in general, are more cosmopolitan than either the praetorians or the monarchies." Not surprisingly, conclude Henry and Springborg (2001: 221), they have "stronger civil societies." But as Henry and Springborg also mention, this is not to imply that civil society or even CSOs are completely unhindered in pursuit of their goals. Periodic press crackdowns and imprisonment of journalists are common in Iran; Turkish political parties suspected of inadequate Kemalist credentials are routinely banned; Lebanon's associational life is often a victim of the country's confessional mosaic (Rigby 2000); and many Israeli CSOs are too closely aligned with the country's left to be meaningfully independent (e.g. the Histadrut labor federation with the Labor party).

Undoubtedly, within the last decade or so there has been an unprecedented explosion of various civil society organizations and of associational life in the

Middle East, often accompanied by or a by-product of half-steps toward democratization. From Iran to Turkey to all over the Arab world, activists, scholars, and intellectuals in the region openly discuss and debate the merits of civil society and its relationship with social pluralism and democracy (Kamrava 2001; Ismael 1995; Gülen 2001). If civil society is an ideal to strive for, significant progress in its direction has been made, at least insofar as much of the preparatory groundwork is concerned. But there is still a long road ahead. Almost everywhere in the Middle East, CSOs, which are the prerequisite building blocks of civil society, remain largely embryonic in development and evolution. Where they do exist, they are closely monitored by the state and are constantly harassed, their members still subject to arbitrary arrests and imprisonment on trumped up charges. The middle classes, meanwhile, remain largely dependent on the state either directly or indirectly, and their ability to articulate political demands is highly circumscribed.

Civil society may have come a long way in the Middle East, but it still has a very long way to go to become a viable mean for society's meaningful empowerment. Only when that happens—when civil society has helped tip the balance of power in favor of society and away from the state—is it likely to become one of the factors contributing to democracy in the Middle East. So long as Middle Eastern states remain cohesive in their elite composition and do not peruse economic development strategies that undermine their own power-base, the possibilities for democracy in the Middle East remain minimal at best.

Conclusion

Democracy is ultimately a question of balance of power between state and society. It comes about when a state's powers are held in check over time by procedures and by institutional mechanisms grounded in and supported by society. Authoritarian states seek to ensure their longevity and staying power through fostering ruling bargains with key social and economic actors in which the state's resort to repression is complemented with some form of legitimacy, no matter how narrow and superficial. So long as the ruling bargain holds and the balance of power remains unchanged, with the state as the dominant actor and social groups continually dependent on it for its largesse, a transition to democracy—or any other form of regime change, for that matter—is unlikely to occur.

In carving out sources of legitimacy and deepening their subjective ties to society, states invariably manipulate cultural norms and values, and interpret them according to their own needs. Over time, these politically manipulated

cultural norms may acquire a decidedly authoritarian appearance, and the countervailing norms opposing them may become equally uncompromising and authoritarian in their own turn. By themselves, however, cultures are not inherently authoritarian or democratic but are, instead, shaped and influenced by those articulating them and by the larger context within which they are formed. All political phenomena take place in a cultural context and are influenced by it, and democratization is no exception. By itself, however, culture is not a maker or breaker of democratization. It is, in fact, far less significant of a force than the institutional, political, and financial resources at the disposal of the state elites on one side and social actors on another.

The absence of democracy in the Middle East is not a product of innately authoritarian cultures or Islam's inherent hostility toward democratic government. To be certain, authoritarian manipulations and interpretations of Islam and other cultural norms have not helped the cause of democracy in the region and have only deepened authoritarianism. Nor have the absolutist terms in which most regime opponents in the Middle East have sought to overthrow and replace incumbent elites. But the ensuing clash of authoritarianisms that characterize the politics of most Middle Eastern states has far more to do with the distribution of power and resources throughout the polity—both institutional and situational resources—than it does with the cultural context within which the political drama unfolds. In fact, assumptions about anti-democratic underpinnings in cultural milieus such as Confucianism, Catholicism, and Islam have been proven wrong with the appearance of democratic transitions—of varying forms and degrees, of course—in Taiwan, Mexico, and Iran respectively. Culture may inform the context of political developments; it does not chain and imprison them. In fact, culture itself changes based on who has the power of interpreting it and selling that interpretation to larger audiences throughout society.

Political authoritarianism owes its longevity to the continued ideological and institutional cohesion of authoritarian elites on the one hand, and their ability to perpetuate authoritarian ruling bargains that incorporate or pacify potentially oppositional social actors on the other. Particular patterns of economic development and specific developmental outcomes may in the long run erode authoritarian ruling bargains and lead to defection from them by key social groups. This occurred in East Asia and South America, but by and large it has not taken place yet in the Middle East. Only in Iran, despite the seeming regression into authoritarianism as represented by the presidency of the hardline Mahmood Ahmadinejad, is there currently a gruelingly slow, and by no means certain, process of democratic transition taking place. Again, the transition is not being hindered or helped by particular cultural dynamics. It

is, however, being shaped by the political jockeying of contending factions within a post-revolutionary establishment that has lost the ideological and institutional cohesion it once enjoyed (or pretended to have) during Ayatollah Khomeini's guiding presence. Now that Khomeini is gone and the jockeying among his heirs has begun, the political system is undergoing a gradual transformation in a direction that appears more democratic and less authoritarian.

Democratic transitions, whether in Iran or anywhere else, do not become possible unless and until democratic bargains and pacts are struck between departing incumbents and incoming elites. Pacts that are based on implicit or explicit understandings over an emerging set of rules of the game are key to sustaining new democracies. A simple collapse of the authoritarian elite is more likely to lead to their replacement by another group of authoritarian elite, not to genuine democratization. This is what happened when Romania and the Soviet Union collapsed, and is highly likely to be the case with the collapse of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Overthrowing authoritarian elites is an insufficient precondition for democratization, as the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy in 1978-79 demonstrated. Far more necessary is the existence of competing groups scattered throughout the polity, both within the institutions of the state and the strata of society, among whom a consensus emerges regarding the mutually beneficial nature of democracy. In Eastern Europe, South America, and East Asia, such a consensus developed when state leaders bankrupted themselves institutionally and economically, and social actors felt powerful enough to engage them in negotiations. For the time being, except in isolated instances, the development of similar predicaments does not seem likely in the Middle East. State leaders remain economically and institutionally powerful relative to society, and social actors find it hard to place demands on the state. Unless and until this uneven balance of power changes, the prospects for democratic transition in the Middle East appear unlikely.

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