

Representing Change and Stagnation in the Arab World:

Re-thinking a Research Design

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Abstract

This article refutes a common approach to studying democratization in the Arab world using examples from Morocco and Egypt. Egypt is commonly regarded as a case for near-complete stagnation, whereas Morocco represents the more dynamic monarchies in the region. The article posits that the theoretical underpinnings frequently used in research hinder us to see and analyse change appropriately. Reform-minded agents that cooperate with the state should not be dismissed as “puppets of the system” because then external observers damage their credibility. It especially refutes research designs that exclude civil society from the analyses. Rather, the author argues that NGOs should be regarded as one-issue parties; a phenomenon that can also be witnessed in industrialized countries with decreasing legitimacy of political parties. The author calls for more empirical, long-term research on civil society in the region with respect to its inner, societal as well as international dynamic.

Keywords: Transformation Processes, Political Sociology, Civil Society, Semi-Authoritarian State, Arab World

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1. Representing Change and Stagnation in the Arab World: Re-thinking a Research Design

Since nearly half a century by now one research question has been posed over and over again: Why is the Arab world so resistant to democratization? And how do its authoritarian regimes persist for so long? Why is there no Arab equivalent to the Chinese student who placed himself in front of a tank on Tianamen Square? Over the years a number of reasons for the lasting authoritarianism have been examined, among them state coercion, colonial legacies, the political culture, Islam and economic factors as e.g. high rents; yet the discussion reverts forth and back.¹⁾ This essay raises some critical questions about current research on transition to democracy using examples from Morocco and Egypt. Egypt's politics and society is commonly regarded as a case for near-complete stagnation, whereas Morocco represents the more dynamic monarchies in the region. Both states were also chosen as they do not dispose of major household-income from oil revenues as it is not intended to discuss the special case of oil-driven rentier states here.²⁾

This contribution is less about political liberalization or regime change in one or the other specific Arab country but aims at discussing the researchers' language, concepts and position. It proposes to think about the language at use when we study "change" in the Arab world. "Change includes everything from minor modifications of existing constellations [...] to major, systemic transformations", as Volker Perthes (2004) summarizes. But how is "reality" being represented through the choice of a certain reoccurring vocabulary? Egypt and Morocco are both cases which very well allow to show how academia confines its analyses linguistically and thus keeps itself from recognizing important elements of change towards free and responsible pluralisation. These mechanisms will be set out below. The author argues that frequently, the theoretical underpinnings determinate the outcome of such

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- 1) A vast corpus of academic literature has been produced on authoritarianism and reform in the Middle East and North Africa over the last 40 years. For the most important publications see Albrecht's and Schlumberger's bibliography at: <http://ips.sagepub.com/content/25/4/371.refs> (download 22.11.2010)
 - 2) For a debate on natural wealth and processes of transition see e.g. Herb 2005 or Ulfelder 2007.



research in a way that we will hardly be able to see democratization - in the sense of introducing vital elements of good governance and increase participation - in the MENA region.

Research results flow in part directly via policy advice to political decision-makers or indirectly via popular science to the interested public. Surprisingly, the study of the region bears two fundamentally opposed academic viewpoints when it comes to assessing political change: one group points to macro-economic improvements (see e.g. the basic human development indicators over the last 30 years: health care, mortality rate, access to clean water and basic services etc.) as well as to empirical studies in order to provide evidence of transformations. Other researchers, by contrast, see the talk of economic liberalization and political reform as merely a policy of whitewashing whose goal is to conform to international fashions of discourse, to avoid risking the loss of Western foreign aid monies and ultimately to preserve the *status quo*. In this view, the Arab world is stagnating at best; at worst, it has turned into the biggest failure of the post-Cold War order.

In Fall 2009, Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy from the Carnegie Endowment for Peace in Washington, D.C. published 'Getting to Pluralism. Political Actors in the Arab World'. The authors are clear in their search for pluralisation. They treat incumbent regimes, liberal and leftist parties, and moderate Islamist movements. But, they explicitly bracket away civil society: "This volume on political actors that control and influence the political process in Arab countries does not include a section on civil society. This is not a careless omission, but a deliberate decision. Our research has led us to conclude that, under present circumstances, civil society organizations are not major political players in the Arab world." (2009: 8) Hamzawy and Ottaway argue that through the arbitrary registration process with the state, NGOs are carefully controlled and thus most of them resort to being "service-oriented or charitable organizations, providing health or educational services to underserved populations or helping to support people in need" (2009: 10). One could argue that these NGOs disburden the state by taking over his responsibilities and thus prolong the longevity of authoritarian systems. But can one argue that health issues are non-political? A NGO that fights against HIV/Aids, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Female Genital Mutilation or improves mother- and child-care is highly political since it challenges state policies and imposes limits on government power. Here government bodies are put on the spot and had to change policies in order



to meet the activities of the NGOs in the field. If NGOs offer literacy programs among marginalized parts of society, they give people the first tool to acquire independent information as a basis of free individual opinion-formation. If NGOs provide electricity in the countryside, they gain the mass support, which all secular oppositional groups in the region are missing until this very day and which accounts for their obvious weakness. NGOs surely are not weaker than the torso of liberal and leftist secular political parties, whom Hamzawy and Ottaway examine in “Getting to Pluralism”. In contrast, modernization studies in Sub-Saharan Africa have since long included NGOs into their analysis of social change.

In an over-view article on studying enduring (or recurrent) authoritarianism in the Middle East, André Bank (2009) identifies three main approaches: with regard to a) the institutions and its internal mechanisms, b) the political economy and c) the regional as well as international environment. Bank heavily criticizes the “one-sided focus on regimes”. Structural approaches are still the majority in Middle East Studies. In view of the existent secondary literature it is quite obvious that sociological approaches are rarely employed when examining Arab authoritarianism. For the case of Morocco, Abdellah Hammoudi has stressed that „there has been no consideration, or at best only implicit consideration, of the exact ways in which these abstract principles of legitimation are vested with an emotional impact sufficient to foster action.” (Hammoudi 1997: 2)

The interest of Middle East scholars in the theme of civil society has slumped about after a highpoint in the mid-1990s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of communitarian theories in the early-nineties, non-state actors had moved temporarily into the focus of politics and research.³⁾ If something were possible in Eastern Europe, why not in the southern Mediterranean? Today, by contrast, the mere existence of a civil society in the Arab world is questioned. Sheila Carapico proposes that “[a] certain element of Orientalist myopia may have prevented anthropologists, sociologists and economists from seeing the non-governmental sector as anything but an extension of the “three P’s”: patrimonialism, patriarchy and

3) The first study to thoroughly apply the concept of ‘civil society’ to the Middle East was Augustus R. Norton two-volume study *Civil Society in the Middle East* (1995). For a very good overview on Arabic and English secondary literature since then see Nawaf Salam (2002) <http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/ilsp/publications/salam.pdf> (download 15.8.2010).



primordialism” (2000: 13). This essay holds against this view.

2. The History of the Term ‘Civil Society’

I have argued elsewhere that it does not make sense to start from a normative understanding of civil society that sees it as something positive in itself and which regards the state as something inherently “mean” (see Hegasy 1997). But it is very useful to introduce the term for descriptive reasons. As one of the main founders of the philosophy of enlightenment, John Locke (died 1704) firstly came up with the idea of a critical potential of a civil society vis-à-vis the state. Locke advocated property rights of citizens towards the state. In his theory of the state, the individual had a natural right to property. Locke demanded that the state is obliged to protect this right. Still, the citizen is defined here as an economic inhabitant, as a bourgeois. In 1793 Fichte for the first time demanded freedom of thought which the state had to respect for every individual. He further developed the idea of a ‘citoyen’, that is a citizen who takes part in public affairs. The *bourgeoisie* was rather a class of private owners, competing with each other, who were not capable to directly exert their rule and therefore had to delegate this task to the state as an “imaginary all-capitalist” (Marx) and its bureaucracy.

“Liberté, égalité et fraternité” were demands of the citoyen not of the bourgeois. Especially in East Europe, civil society constituted itself as a counterweight and counterpower to the institutionalized power. Civil society constructed itself through the battle for its own existence. Therefore, any theory which excludes this notion of counter-weight as well as counter public space does not get much further to understand the phenomenon. The term “civil society” holds expectations of a development that would enhance individual participation in decision-making or - to put it more cautiously - enhance the pressure to be exerted by leading individuals and small interest groups on the respective political agenda. Its values rely on heterogeneity, maturity, and activism. In East Europe the term civil society was used to denote a network of informal circles, associations, church-groups, writers, artists, journalists, trade unions (*Solidarnosz* in Poland), alternative libraries, feminist and women’s organizations, etc. who all fought for a free pluralistic society. Thus the term ‘civil society’ includes religious organizations wherever these



organizations propagate an ‘open society’ (Popper) through their activities. In other words, it is not so much important what these actors do, but which understanding of the individual and which world view is connected with their deeds. These key elements can only be determined through qualitative and empirical studies and must be decided in each and every case.

In Eastern Europe, these networks finally brought down several authoritarian regimes. The victory of these networks was symbolized in the downfall of the Berlin wall. Expectations of pluralistic openings and the underlying idea of a civil society in countries with authoritarian regimes re-emerged in this context and entered the Arab discourse. When the Arab intellectuals used the term “civil society”, they were referring to the East European version.

3. Political Actors in North Africa

If one understands democratization as a process that begins with free and plural opinion-formation and increasing participation, then the formation of a civil society is an important element of it: We know that in reality a number of associations in the MENA region are so-called QUANGOs, i.e. quasi-non-governmental, too often founded by a member of the ruling family or a former minister. Furthermore, some NGOs surely cater more to the “needs” of international donor agencies than to the needs of their own constituencies. But these two categories do not constitute the majority of NGOs. The majority of NGOs should be regarded as one-issue-parties - a trend which occurs in industrialized countries currently as well with shrinking participation in political parties. It is not accidental that out of the ten group categories that Facebook offers, one is called ‘common interests’ instead of politics. NGOs in the region under review have taken on the marginalized parties’ role in regard to opinion formation and the recruitment and training of young politicians.

The Facebook group ‘Elbaradei for Presidency of Egypt 2011’ fastly gained over 60.000 members (by 12 February 2010); exactly one month later the group had reached 182.052 and on September 12th it came up to 247.816 members. The Facebook group ‘Stop Sexual Harassment in Egypt!’ (5.000 members on September 12th, 2010) has had its first tangible success in 2009 when a draft for the law was put before parliament. For sure, the Egyptian



government took the issue up out of self-interest: the campaign against sexual harassment was supported by the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism with the slogan “If you harass visitors, you’re not the only one who loses. The whole country loses.” But this does not diminish the impact of the civil society actor-quite to the contrary. Civil society has put a topic on the state’s agenda which permits that political culture starts to be abrogated from above. The essence of politics is about pursuing self-interests - there is no reason not to apply this understanding to the region in question. I suggest to view this interplay between state and civil society as a ‘bottom-top-down approach’.

The same pattern holds true for the establishment of the royal ‘Justice and Reconciliation Commission’ (*Instance Équité et Réconciliation* IER) in January 2007 by the Moroccan King Mohammed VI. The IER’s founding must be read as a reaction to the non-governmental *Forum Marocain Vérité et Justice* already founded in 1999. To this day it is the only official truth and reconciliation commission in the region. The IER represents not only a starting point for damage payment, but also an approach to compensation that goes further. As in other cases of truth commissions the perpetrators are not to be prosecuted in court. Despite its top-down establishment, the IER should be regarded as the result of long-term struggle between the monarchy and legal political opposition to expand the protection of human rights. Although 1999 saw only a transfer of power to the old king’s son, not regime change as in Iraq, Mohammed VI urged that the state should investigate and recognize human rights violations from his father’s reign and that there should be public discussion of them. His response to the human rights violations under Hassan II immediately after his death is remarkable. In Spain, it took 60 years before the Civil War of 1936-1939 was publicly worked through. By contrast, just one week after the death of his father Hassan II - still during the official 40-day mourning period - Mohammed VI announced that the human rights situation would be improved.

NGOs in the region regroup citizens who mobilize for local branches of *Attac*, *Transparence International*, *Amnesty International* or people create their own interest groups against women’s domestic abuse or unemployment of university graduates etc. Organizations like *Transparence Maroc*, *L’Association marocaine des diplômés chômeurs* or *Solidarité féminine* were all founded in the early nineties, all started clandestine and have all carried through until today.⁴⁾ Many of the early activists are still part of the aforementioned NGOs. This is not exactly a developmental mayfly but indeed



what was called in the nineties ‘sustainable’. Unfortunately it goes unnoticed.

It is conspicuous that many exiled regime critics have returned to Morocco since 1999 and many political prisoners have not left the country after their release from prison. Today they are involved in various NGOs (*Transparency Maroc, al-Amama, Forum Marocain Vérité et Justice (FVJ), Union de l’Action Féminine, Association Marocaine des Droits Humains*, etc.). Latefa Jbabdi and Driss Benzekri are just two of the many examples of former political prisoners who have taken crucial part in the IER. Today Jbabdi sits in parliament for the *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires*. Benzekri was one of the founding members of the independent FVJ. In 2003, he was appointed President of the IER by the king and thereafter, until his death in 2007, he was Chairman of the royal *Consultative Council of Human Rights*. In 1977, he had been sentenced to 30 years in prison for his membership in the underground movement *Illal amam* (Forward). Like Abraham Serfaty, the internationally best-known member of *Illal amam*, he was freed in 1991. Serfaty went into exile to France after his release; but he returned in 2000 following the death of Hassan II. Serfaty’s subsequent appointment as advisor of the *Office National de Recherches et d’Exploitations Pétrolières (ONAREP)* is another example of how state and victims are dealing with each other and with the past. Life stories like those of Driss Benzekri and Abraham Serfaty are numerous. In the political-science literature on the region, they are often interpreted as an expression of state inclusion policy or the spoils system. From a theoretical perspective of neo-patrimonialism these biographies are seen as examples of how independent minds are being bought.⁵⁾ The analysis almost always presumes that an integer human rights activist or a former political prisoner who rises to become Human Rights Minister is co-opted by the authoritarian regime and acts mostly out of self-interest. The preferred theoretical design thereby reduces the factual scope of action to zero. Representatives of civil society are regarded as destined for corruption if they indeed rise to join the political elite. In this interpretation, the appearance of new faces from the NGO-scene in a country’s leadership is regarded as a case of cooptation, and not as an indication of a possible shift in power relations, much less an effectual elite change.⁶⁾ Surely, anywhere in the world

4) For the sustainability of women’s rights NGOs see most recent Elke Duße (2010)

5) For the development of the Neo-patrimonialism concept over the last 40 years, see Gero Erdmann, Ulf Engel (2006).



people are attracted by financial bargains, but there are also people everywhere who continue to fight for their cause out of conviction. In other contexts this phenomenon is called the “long march through the institutions”; in an Arab context it is called “buying off independent voices”. If such reform-minded agents in the Mediterranean are dismissed as “puppets of the system” or “flip-floppers” from the outside, then external observers damage their credibility and thus their room of maneuver. One could also look at these actors as the necessary transmitters between the political sphere and society. They constitute the very channels through which agenda setting is performed from below to the top. But mostly, their part in processes of political change goes unnoticed or is met with academic condescendence.

4. Civil Society and Individualization

With radical demographic and educational changes under way in the Arab world, local sociological studies confirm that the authority within the family is often reversed between parents and children, partly because of the higher education of the younger generation and partly because of the prominent political role they assumed in many countries. This is of course especially true for places like the Occupied Territories where the intifada empowered youth and gave them authority over their parents. But also Mokhtar El-Harras, a Moroccan sociologist from the University of Rabat, found that “norms and ideas of previous generations have lost their effectiveness and validity for the current generation” (2007: 143). El-Harras stresses that youth in both rural and urban areas increasingly make their own decisions, thereby reducing parental intervention. He attributes this partly to the knowledge gap between children and their parents, as parents are no longer the main knowledge transmitter. Parents furthermore had to relinquish some of their moral and religious authority: “the transfer of youth socialization to extra-familial educational institutions undoubtedly contributes to the autonomy of youth.” (2007: 151)

It is important to note the increasing value attributed to individual action. Individualization among adolescents has also progressed in the Mediterranean. In a number of countries greater personal liberty has been achieved. The

6) For thorough country studies see Volker Perthes 2004.



reforms initiated by the monarchy in Morocco enjoy a high degree of legitimacy in the eyes of many of its citizens. As part of modern politics, Mohammed VI now seeks social acceptance by means of a limited political opening through new channels of participation and offers of identification for his country's citizens. Authoritarian, neo-patrimonial mechanisms and recourse to sacred components of his rule alone can no longer secure the young king's reign. On the other hand, the depiction of the king as having the "common touch" certainly holds the danger of desacralizing a monarchy that has legitimized itself for more than 300 years by claiming descent from the Prophet, for not all citizens welcome this representational shift. The adherents of political Islam could view and indeed depict this profanation as a weakness of the royal house. In other words, it is not a given that the seemingly stylish change at the top of Morocco's monarchy is automatically playing into its hands and securing its stability. The contrary might happen as well. Especially after the 2003 terrorist attacks, the call for a return to "Hassan's hard hand" was heard. The question of the monarchy's "holiness" is meanwhile openly debated in the media, as well.

A "Maroc pluriel"⁷⁾ with religious, linguistic and cultural diversity is the catchword under which Mohammed VI presented a series of new offers for identification. These should not be regarded as mere propaganda as they are helpful for reshaping a deeply conservative society. They are needed to respond to societal change and to give validity to new projects of peaceful co-existence. The monarchy's reformist orientation can be clearly pinned down: in his speeches, Mohammed VI expounded a new understanding of authority, acknowledged the Berber culture and language as a "central component of national identity and began his reform program through a dialogue with former political prisoners. These reforms bear traits of a new concept of society. The founding of a Jewish Museum by the *Fondation du patrimoine judéo-marocain* under the directorship of Simon Levy in Casablanca and the restoration of Jewish cult sites throughout the country partly funded by the state are another example of this new concept. About 4,000 out of what were once 300,000 Jewish citizens, most of whom emigrated to Israel in the 1950s, still live in Morocco. The Jewish advisor to the king, André David Azoulay, has a prominent public role. The public role of the First Lady, Lalla Selma, aims to convey a modern image of

7) Thanks to Sophie Wagenhofer for pointing this out.



woman; the present king's mother never appeared in public. And youth culture is also increasingly subsidized with a large number of theaters and meeting places in the big cities.

If these changes are not considered as part and parcel of possible steps towards democratization, the lasting authoritarianism in this part of the world seems all the more in need of explanation: the urgent question would then be how power relations can be stable if citizens' needs are obviously disregarded? Explanations often point to state repression and propaganda, which makes the Arab citizens look isolated and Arab societies like "black spots" in development⁸⁾. Or reference is made to a medieval Islamic legal concept that it is better for a community to have a poor ruler than to have none at all, in order to avoid dividing the faithful. Also often adduced are culturalist explanations according to which Muslims are more willing than other people to simply accept their fate. But these kinds of attempts at explanation, which are frequent despite their inadequacy, overestimate the lasting force of Arab-Islamic history. The collective memory of Arab societies, namely, is neither as monolithic nor as backward-looking as some publications claim (see e.g. Dan Diner 2009).⁹⁾

If everything thus indicates that the inhabitants of the Arab world, too, measure their potentates primarily in terms of improvements in their living conditions, then beyond hasty judgments the central question remains all the more: Is there change towards increased citizens' participation in North Africa and, if there is, how does it come about in detail? And do the aforementioned bottom-top-down transformations have the potential to initiate long-term democratization, or are the acclaimed steps toward liberalization only a tool of the authoritarian regime, used to remain in power and renew its legitimization?

5. The curse of the rent

A by now classical form of viewing the Middle East is the theory of

8) UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2004, New York 2005.

9) "Diner argues that „the sacred“ in Islam - which he attributes in the first place to the Arabic language - prevents social change in Muslim societies."



rent-seeking that has shaped a whole generation of researchers and their approach to studying the region. The “rent-school” basically argues that most Arab regimes stagnate due to high rents being produced by oil- and gas-exports but also through “political rents” as in the case of Egypt which secures US\$ 1.3 billion military aid per year as part of the peace treaty with Israel (no matter how functional the peace accord is at the moment). These regimes need no effective tax system which also means that their citizens cannot hold them accountable. Their policies aim at securing the rule of the incumbent family and would thus exclude all functioning mediation between politics and society. In this framework limited reforms are only regarded as a strategy for retaining power. At the same time the regimes hinder social change through corporatist and clientelist patterns of organization.¹⁰⁾

This theoretical approach occasionally even goes as far as to explain foreign governments’ and international donor organizations’ continuing support for Middle Eastern governments by reference to “successful attempts to deceive” them: “The masking of the regime’s attempts to manage crises as a future-oriented reform policy thereby serves both to veil the regime’s actual intentions (retaining power by controlling politics and economics and by suppressing potential rivals for power) and to secure the external flow of rents that depends on the leadership’s willingness to reform. Though the external donors’ false perception of the Egyptian engagement for reform is not solely based on the regime’s strategy of reform theater” (Wurzel 2000: 346, translation SH). If governments and donor organizations are indeed so easy to deceive or so ineffective to control where their democracy money goes, then they might be in urgent need of reform, themselves.

Rent-seeking theory regards civil-society’s scope of action in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems as highly limited, on principle. But, as these theoreticians sometimes themselves admit, this rigidity is one of its weaknesses: it does not account for unexpected effects and it does not offer a framework that could analyze oppositional developments from the viewpoint of the political periphery. In this model, independent groups supposedly even play a counterproductive role, since they contribute to the democratic-liberal façade of the authoritarian system and they (non-willingly) help the state to control

10) A vast number of literature exists on how especially in the Middle East the rentier state prevented changes towards increased participation and representation; see e.g. the works of Lisa Anderson (1999), Giacomo Luciani (1990), Daniel Brumberg (2003) or Michael Herb (2005); groundbreaking: Ghassan Salamé (1994).



those parts of society that they formally represent. Furthermore, NGOs are trapped in a new form of rent-seeking through the dependency from international donors. Adopted from the field of economics this “neo-Orientalizing school” assumes a strategically-egoistically acting individual devoted to maximizing his or her personal gain to the point of self-denial or even counter-productivity. Actors, whether individuals or groups, who see their gain in societal change, are not perceived from this perspective - and so there are simply none. But one should avoid reducing research questions to questions of “self-interest”, “coercion” or “theater”. These generalizations, ultimately based on value judgments, have led scientists to fail to consider a number of phenomena. And that is hardly surprising, for if everything is only “theater” anyway, then it is hard to differentiate between fake and meaningful processes of transformation and “democratic appeasement”.

The German sociologists Hans-Georg Soeffner and Dirk Tänzler (2002) have introduced the term „figurative politics“ in order to understand the esthetic as well as pragmatic dimension of political acting-performance and act-as a unity. The authors look at politics not as something that happens on two different stages: the real show hidden for the public and another show for the world that is meant to satisfy international expectations. Rather both spheres have to be analyzed hand in hand. In times of the linguistic and the cultural turn, figurative politics are regarded as one major aspect of politics; but the new term should not be understood in the colloquial sense as a cover for something else.

In order to recognize processes of democratization in the region at all and then, in a second step, to be able to explain them rather requires more research on civil society than less. Their influence on the political agenda can be shown in the successive rise of certain themes in the media and then in the domestic politics of the country in question. This has become clear in issues of health, environmental, and equality politics and in the theme of human rights and issues of national identity. But all this contradicts the common image of a region resistant to social and political change.

Some studies go as far as to conclude that certain interest groups in the Arab world are acting without recognizing their own interests. The school that is therefore proposing to see the region as solely stagnating, views that the individual has few, if any, possibilities of his own to shape matters - because of the dominant repression and the “authoritarian” values and norms that are supposed to be solidly anchored in the local political culture. This viewpoint



drove many to favor the War on Iraq in 2003 because they assumed that no matter what, a transformation will not develop from within the Arab world itself. Therefore neocolonial interventionism was justified and laden with a number of hopes for future change. These hopes were in 2003 subsumed under the “democratic domino theory” from Iraq to the Atlantic and have produced deception by today.

I posit that for North Africa and the Middle East the end of post-colonial hopes for a better, self-determined future (in a socialist, republican or even monarchical national guise) can be dated to the turn of the millennium. This is true as much for Palestinians (the promised state was not proclaimed in 1999) as it is for Algerians, Iraqis or Iranians for that matter as well; until 2000, hopes still had a basis with a number of (regime-) changes under way in the 1990ies. Surprisingly enough, opposition parties have not been able to capitalize on the following deep disillusion and deteriorating social circumstances as they are very often out of touch with the majority of their society and do exactly not work in the field of basic services. In contrast to political parties NGOs have no input-legitimacy because they are not democratically elected and their internal democracy is mostly weak, but they dispose of high output-legitimacy which political parties anywhere in the world are loosing at an alarming rate.

What we need to do with regard to the southern Mediterranean is to sharpen our instruments to see where small islands of self-organization and independent thinking mushroom. And here lies one major research gap. A perfect illustration of academic blindness is the fact that one the most renowned philosophers of rationalism, the Moroccan Mohammed Abed al-Jabri who died in May 2010 and whose work is comparable in size and depth to the works of Michel Foucault or John Rawls (to pick two philosophers that reached out of their field into the political field), is rarely known in the Western world let alone discussed. Out of his four-volume chief work ‘Critique of Arab reason’ released between 1984 and 2001, until today only one volume was translated into an European language, namely French in 2007.¹¹⁾ Its first volume published in 1984 is now supposed to come out in English in 2010 under the title ‘Formation of Arab Reason. Text, Tradition

11) Volume three was published first as it was thought that a book on Islam and politics would sell easier than the volume 1, 2 and 4. (see *La raison politique en islam*. Paris: La Découverte 2007).



and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World'.¹²⁾ That is 26 years after the fact. One can only wonder what it needs for research to disseminate such knowledge in due course. This gives us a notion of how long “news” takes for traveling from North Africa and the Middle East even when it comes to a secular, widely read philosopher of self-criticism - or maybe especially then.¹³⁾ Where self-critical intellectuals not what the Arab world was supposed to lack the most?

How is the belief in legitimacy (*Legitimitätsglaube*) cultivated in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East? An answer to this question is a vital element for examining the enduring authoritarianism in this region of the world. As it is very difficult to research the reception of discourses, strategies etc., motives for recognizing the ruler are rarely studied. Very often it is assumed that citizens are driven by fear, docility, poverty or religious obedience and thus state or institutional strategies are regarded as successful. But reasons for being loyal must be examined as part of changing social practice. Even in repressive state systems they cannot be considered a static given. As Max Weber pointed out “[...] every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience.” (Weber 1978: 212)

Free media and the development of a civil society are important components of the change underway in the MENA region. Political science interest has difficulties explaining the longevity of authoritarian regimes, because it assumes the premise of “phony politics”, meaning fake politics of transition that are used to deceive observers (see Soeffner, Tänzler 2002). Many common terms already inherently block any depiction of change: We find value judgments like “window dressing policy” and “imitative institution building”. “Democracy money” is regarded as a new form of attractive rent. In this way, research “successfully” manages to immunize itself against progressive developments in the region.

In contradiction to conventional opinion, in many societal areas there has been progress that is important for democratization in the southern Mediterranean. Among them, despite all setbacks, are an improvement in

12) Volumes 2, 3 and 4 are said to be published in English by I. B. Tauris in mid 2010: ‚The Structure of Arab Thought‘, ‚Political Arab Thought‘, ‚Ethical Arab Thought‘.

13) This is not to discard those researchers that have worked on him. See e.g. the introduction by Walid Hamameh on the Arab-Islamic Philosophy. A Contemporary Critique. Austin 1999.



human rights and women's rights, more participation, increasing media diversity, and increasingly free elections. Since 1999, election observers have attested for a majority of states that election fraud is dwindling and the intimidation of voters has decreased. Satellite television has meanwhile given rise to an informed pan-Arabic public. The role of independent Arabic¹⁴⁾ satellite television for pluralisation as well as increasing media diversity cannot be underestimated in this context.¹⁵⁾

The increasing number of associations that we witnessed over the last 20 years and their continuous activities are not only a remarkable quantitative change in itself; they must also be regarded as qualitative "agents of change": NGOs have shown to be influential in stirring and guiding social change by shaping public discourse.¹⁶⁾ Some of them co-ordinate their activities with global NGOs and thus profit from higher visibility, mobilization and impact. We see people making use of new organizational forms as well as "travelling norms" that are appropriated locally. The rise of the term 'transitional justice' and the collaboration of local NGOs with the Center for Transitional Justice in New York and Geneva (www.ictj.org/) in recent years is one good example.

Wherever an interest group is successful in the region (defined as influencing political decision making as set out above), the trajectory is the same: People gather to fight for a common cause, they found a NGO which is legalized over the course of several years, media start picking up the issue and governmental bodies follow on. Thus governmental action is pressured by civil society to answer to specific needs. This should be regarded as an important achievement.

When comparing with processes in Eastern Europe we need to remember, that we can never apply identical time meters to societies. Besides *perestroika* and *glasnost* it were the tiny elements that ended socialist rule in the Eastern bloc: the famous misconception of Günter Schabowski during a press conference on 9 November 1989 that virtually opened the Berlin wall. This is not to claim that Egypt or Morocco is currently in the year 1989 of the East German calendar. And yet in my opinion the finding of "stagnation" as

14) Here I explicitly refer to the Arabic language as Israel as well as Iran have certain hours of broadcasting in Arabic thus adding to the pluralism of opinions.

15) For further elaboration see the works of Naomi Sakr (most recently 2007).

16) See here the work of Sheila Carapico (1998) for Yemen or Sonja Hegasy (1997) for Morocco or Lisa Garon (2003) for North Africa with case studies on the political impact of local NGOs.



the dominant result of research is based primarily on the aforementioned premises, theoretical and methodological approaches that predetermine the results.

6. Conclusion

No authoritarian system, however effective, can calculate and control all ramifications of its actions. Partial reforms as an answer to societal demands, as we have experienced them in the last ten years even in such highly sensitive areas as Islamic inheritance law or human rights, thus do not necessarily or exclusively have system-preserving effects; rather, they also sensitize people to the mutability of societal circumstances. In addition, they increase people's expectations and demands. The process that after 1975 followed the Helsinki accords was based not least on this idea and "functioned", with the familiar consequences. Against the intention of many heads of states signing the document, it became an important bases on which dissident movements in Communist countries increased their space of maneuver.

The political openings we have seen in recent years in the Arab world might have a short-term system-stabilizing effect, in that they take the "rhetorical wind from the sails" of radical movements seeking revolution - or "refolution" - a hybrid of 'reform' and 'revolution' - as Timothy Garton Ash once formulated it for Eastern Europe. But in the long term, they can prove to be steps toward democratization, because they help to change the dominant political culture, anchor democratic values in a conservative society and trigger undesired reactions - or have already triggered them, for example the changes in the media landscape or the increase in strikes in the public sector in the last ten years.¹⁷⁾

The increase in public political communication processes in the Arab world over the last 15 years must be regarded as striking. This can - though to a lesser degree - also be witnessed in fiction and the arts. There is no doubt that works of art in the wider sense of the word as well as NGO activities do reflect a clear class bias, still their political character cannot be denied either. "Art might not be the best place to discuss the future of

17) See: Joel Beinin, Hossam el-Hamalawy (2007) and Siham Ali 2010.



Palestine. But it might be the only place”, as stated at the Istanbul Biennial in 2009 shows the dilemma of the highly politicized nature of cultural production all over the region. Liberalism in the region exists through a rich artistic production whose political sway cannot be neglected.

This is not to deny the authoritarian character of Arab regimes or their resistance to democratization and societal change. But to be able to register and grasp the change that nevertheless takes place, research needs more action- and actor-centered approaches. Then we will find new answers to why these authoritarian and bankrupt regimes are so long-lived, but also why fault lines keep opening up for societal changes. If change in the region continues to be interpreted as something merely staged as theater for world politics, then the internal dynamics of a monarchy or the eruptive influence of an independent union or a moderately Islamist group could one day surprise us with its societal mobilizing power as much as the East Berlin church groups in communist East Germany did more than 20 years ago.

From this standpoint, “negotiated transitions” as one answer from incumbent elites to civil society demands could lead to much more than mere face-lifting for authoritarian regimes. In the predominant approaches to studying change as well as stagnation in the Middle East, ‘society’ has not yet found its adequate place. This is also reflected in the low use of sociology or political sociology when studying the Arab world.

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