Democracy, Islam, and the Study of Middle Eastern Politics

Introduction

Louis J. Cantori, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

The study of Middle Eastern politics shares the problems of area studies in general in political science. Area specialists emphasizing the language and culture of other peoples have been pressured by behavioralists to "objectify" their studies and place all peoples in the context of universals of human political behavior. The result is that the specialized knowledge of non-European peoples and regions especially have had an uneasy relationship with the political science discipline. Post-behavioral political science for a time in the 1970s recognized that the purported scientific universals of the discipline were really the ethnocentric ones of the value assumptions of European and American political science. In the 1980s and continuing to the present, these earlier "scientific" or explanatory universals of political science now arguably have been replaced by the no less ethnocentric ones of democratization and "marketization." These concepts are examined in the following essays.

Middle Eastern political science has shared the preceding problems but has added to them two additional factors. The first is that the languages and culture of the Middle East are difficult and complex. As a result, the development of a social science consciousness in political research has occurred most importantly only since the 1970s. The second is that the study of Middle Eastern politics is embedded in the historical attitude of American and European culture toward Islam and Arabism. Historically, Islam expanded at the expense of Christian Europe in the eighth century. This adversarial relation continued when European Christians mounted forays into the Moslem Near East in the Crusades of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries; with the fall of Christian Constantinople to Moslem siege in the fifteenth century; and to the near defeat of Christian Vienna by Moslem attack in the seventeenth century. Modern echoes of ancient conflict include the hostage crisis in Iran in 1979–81; the American failure in Beirut in 1983; and the insecurity of the American ally Israel. As a result, the West feels that its stereotypes constitute "knowledge" of the Middle East; consequently there is an unwillingness to pay attention to scholarly analysis or even significantly support Middle East political teaching and research at the university level.

It is against this background that the following essays are offered as glimpses of what questions, theories, and concepts are present in the contemporary study of Middle Eastern politics.

Beyond Democratization: Political Change in the Arab World

Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, Emory University

Over the past decade the paradigm of "democratization" has dominated analysis of political change, reflecting the dramatic transitions from authoritarian rule in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia. While the new literature on democratization has pointedly excluded the Arab world, a growing number of area specialists have sought to identify local developments that signal the early phases of, or at least potential for, a democratic transformation of state and society in the Middle East (Hudson 1991; Ibrahim 1993; Al-Sayyid Marzot 1990; Norton 1994). It is difficult to generalize about political change in the Arab world, as several distinct patterns have emerged, reflecting differences in institutional settings as well as in the strategies of regime and opposition elites. Nevertheless, recent developments in Egypt and several other Arab states do not fit comfortably within the democratization paradigm. Important changes have occurred, yet they have not involved the development of an independent civil society, nor have they entailed progress toward a democratic outcome. Instead, I would argue, they suggest an alternative trajectory, one that reveals the specificity of
the democratization model and challenges its utility as a general model of political change. A full elaboration is not possible here, but I will suggest some key features of this trajectory with reference to the Egyptian case.

Since 1952, Egypt has been ruled by a “soft” authoritarian regime that has maintained power through a combination of political exclusion and distribution to strategic urban middle- and lower-class groups. Over the past decade, efforts at state-led development have given way to paralysis and limited efforts at economic reform, while popular living standards have fallen precipitously during a long recession.

Unlike other regimes confronting socioeconomic or military crises, the regime of President Hosni Mubarak has neither chosen nor been forced to alter the parameters of authoritarian rule. Not only has the regime failed to initiate a genuine democratic opening, but most recently, in response to the “Islamic threat,” it has begun to crack down more widely on dissenting political expression and activity. Examples of this trend in 1993 include crackdowns on Islamic student activity on Egyptian university campuses, passage of a new syndicate law in Parliament, and the arrest and detention of Islamic opposition party leaders and newspaper editors.

Underlying continuities at the level of the regime, important change has occurred at the level of the politics. The literature on “liberalization” and “democratization” in the Middle East has tended to focus on change in formal rules, laws, and procedures. The shift from one-party rule to pluralism, or ta’addudiyah, involving the functioning of numerous political parties and associations, has been stressed (Hudson 1991). Yet the impact of such developments is limited so long as the political party’s contestation is tightly controlled from above and emergency laws remain in effect. More important, I would argue, is the change that has occurred outside the realm of formal political structures and elites. Such change has flowed less from a deliberate shift in regime strategy than from a combination of regime exhaustion from above and Islamic institution-building and mobilization from below.

The past two decades have witnessed the partial retreat of the Egyptian state from the country’s economic, political, and ideological spheres, despite its continued monopoly over coercion. This retreat, I would argue, has been fueled less by a shift in regime priorities than by an attenuation of its capacities for incorporation and control. With the platforms of liberal and leftist groups largely discredited and their organizations in disarray, the groups and associations that constitute Egypt’s Islamic movement are virtually the only forces moving into the public space left by the state’s retreat. Though denied legal status (muhjub ‘an al-shi’riya) and prohibited from forming their own party, mainstream Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood have developed a parallel network of Islamic institutions, including private mosques, health clinics, schools, banks, and investment companies. Moreover, beginning in the mid-1980s, Islamists have won control of the executive boards of professional syndicates and university faculty clubs in free and competitive elections.

Within the interstices of the authoritarian system, Islamic activists have thus developed an alternative domain in which new values are being cultivated and new styles of participation being forged. This Islamic sphere calls to mind the “parallel polis” or “parallel society” of Central and Eastern Europe, in which norms and values associated with the official order were contested well before the collapse of communist rule.

The emergence of independent sites of social and political expression within an authoritarian setting is not the same as the emergence of civil society, at least not in its liberal conception. As Sami Zubaida observed, civil society is not merely a sphere outside government but rather one endowed with a legally mandated autonomy, involving legal rights and protections backed by the law-state (Zubaida 1992). Despite its liberal trappings, the Egyptian state retains, and selectively exercises, its power to supersede constitutional rights and guarantees in defense of its own interests. Both through administrative powers enhanced by emergency legislation and through majority control of Parliament, the government has intervened in the affairs of “independent” voluntary and “official” intermediary associations when it perceives itself as threatened, as most recently through passage of a new Unified Syndicate Law. For their part, mainstream Islamic groups play by the rules of the present social and political order, yet their ultimate goal is to transform it from the bottom up. That is, they aim not to establish a civil sphere separate from and coexistent with the secular state, but gradually to extend the Islamic domain until it encompasses the state itself.

In sum, political opening in Egypt has produced an uneasy coexistence of multiple institutions backed by contesting legitimacy formulas, without a consensus regarding the rights and obligations specific to each. A pluralization of the public space has occurred, yet it has been liberal neither in intent nor in outcome.

The relationship between Egypt’s authoritarian state and the parallel Islamic sphere at its base is multifaceted and contradictory, marked by both contestation and accommodation. Instead of challenging state power directly, the Muslim Brotherhood and other reformist groups are involved in the gradual appropriation of the public space, creating new models of political leadership and community in contrast to the policies and practices of state elites. Though posing a moral alternative to the secular state, such groups are nevertheless dependent on patrons within it for support. For example, a recent study indicates that Islamic activists have cultivated ties of patronage and cooperation with employees at the lower rungs of the state bureaucracy, as well as with elected members of local municipal councils, enabling them to bend existing rules and evade control efforts from above (Ben Nefissa-Paris 1992).
To appreciate recent developments in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, we need to separate the question of political change from the study of a specific political trajectory—the shift from authoritarianism to democracy—which it has been couched. Efforts to locate civil society or other “prerequisites” of democratic reform reveal more about the preoccupations of Western scholars than they do about new social configurations in the Middle East today. Democratization is one of several trajectories of political change against which recent developments in Egypt may be contrasted and compared. As the Egyptian case suggests, transformation may occur at the level of the polity even in the absence of a change of regime; such transformation may flow as much from regime exhaustion and “societal conquest” (Stepan 1989) as from change in regime strategy; and the vision of Medina, the paradigmatic Islamic state, can be as powerful as liberal democracy in the envisioning of, and purposeful striving toward, alternatives to present forms of military-bureaucratic rule.

References

About the Author
Carrie Rosefsy-Wickham is an assistant professor of political science at Emory University. This work draws on the research she conducted in Egypt as a Fulbright Scholar in 1990–91.

Civil Society: Effective Tool of Analysis for Middle East Politics?

Eva Bellin, Harvard University

Does the Middle East’s presumed “exceptionalism” imply the disutility of “civil society” as a tool for political analysis? Although the term has gained wide usage in other areas of the world, the Middle East specialists have shown some reluctance to employ it in their own region. This reluctance stems in part from the perception that the term is ambiguous and politically loaded. Historically, “civil society” has signified everything from the peaceable society human beings enjoy under the protection of a Leviathan state (Hobbes), to the stratum of private associations that schools citizens in civic virtue (Tocqueville, Montesquieu), to the constellation of cultural institutions that guarantee the ideological hegemony of the ruling class (Gramsci). In contemporary political debate, the term has become a normative football, representing a bulwark of freedom and anti-totalitarianism to the survivors of communism’s fall in Eastern Europe while signifying the spearhead of Western imperialism to those suspicious of efforts to “export democracy” to the developing world.

But reluctance to use the term in the analysis of Middle Eastern politics goes beyond the problematic nature of the term itself and derives from a vision of the Middle East as somehow inhospitable to “civil society.” The Middle East is seen as riven by primordial cleavage, dominated by rent-swollen, power-mongering states, unpracticed in reverence for individual freedom and civil liberties. Sociology, economics, politics, and culture conspire to sabotge the development of civil society in the region and so, the reasoning goes, the term is best renounced to check premature expectations of its realization.

In the final analysis, however, neither of these objections is valid. Certainly the term civil society is ambiguous. How else might one explain the political diversity of its champions in the Middle East today? After all, state officials in the Middle East use the term “civil society” to promote their projects of mobilization and “modernization”; Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty.

Despite their diversity, however, the proponents of civil society are united in their desire to combat despotism. Now, their conceptions of despotism, its sources and remedies, vary tremendously. For some, despotism is associated with theocratic rule, and its remedy lies in the staunch separation of “church” and state. For others, despotism resides in the failure to endow men and women with the power of collective self-determination, and the remedy lies in championing the institutions of citizenship, the parties and parliaments, universal suffrage, and majority rule that transform subjects into citizens. For others, despotism derives from the passivity and ignorance that prevents the average citizen from using political institutions effectively. The remedy...