

Explaining the democracy deficit in the Arab world[☆]

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Abstract

This paper strongly corroborates the widely held claim about the democracy and freedom “deficit” in the Arab world and asks the natural question as to why has the Arab world experienced such a deficit. The estimation results of an extended “modernity” model of democracy (measured by the Polity IV global index) suggest that after controlling for a host of economic, social and historical variables a negative and highly significant Arab dummy effect remains. This suggests, therefore, that the modernization theory does not fully account for the democracy deficit of the Arab world. Controlling for the modernity and other determinants, oil is negatively associated with democracy while the net effect of regional conflicts in the Arab world was negative, suggesting that conflicts in the Arab world promote authoritarianism in contrast with other regions where regional wars have been associated with democratic transitions. Moreover, and very significantly the Arab dummy was no longer significant as a stand alone effect though it remains significant when interacted with regional wars.

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“There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory governance” Arab Human Development Report, 2002: p. 2.

“After we witnessed the bloody performance of the radical regimes, which oppressed the people and achieved nothing, and after we witnessed the collapse of the communist’s exper-

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iments, it dawned upon us the reality about Democracy as the best system devised by human endeavor,” George Trabishi, [on the culture of democracy](#), 1998.

“All attempts to base legitimacy on dictatorship have been inherently unstable, and have had catastrophic results. There is no alternative to democracy as a basis of government in the Sudan,” Al Sadig Al Mahdi, [on human rights in the Sudan](#), 1999: p. 11.

1. Introduction

There appears to be a broad consensus among Arab writers, statesmen, academics, journalists and ordinary citizens alike about what the recent UNDP report on Arab human development (2002) described as a fundamental “freedom deficit” in the region. Indeed, there is almost universal condemnation of authoritarianism and embrace of democracy in the Arab world today. There is also a solid recognition of the human suffering due to denial of political rights and restrictions of civil liberties by many Arab authoritarian regimes, which are also blamed for their failures to achieve sustainable and equitable economic and social development or to address the grand agenda of pan-Arab nationalism, most notably the Palestinian question.

The dire consequences of the lack of participatory governance for protection of property rights, investment and growth, and hence for the overall development agenda of the region have been emphasized by leading Arab economists, including Professor Heba Handoussa.¹ The failures of the largely authoritarian Arab regimes to sustain earlier gains or at least to contain the mounting economic and social crisis of the Arab world have, therefore, been directly linked to the non-democratic and non-participatory nature of these regimes. In particular, the apparent difficulty of managing the consequences of the frequent oil shocks – which affect all the countries, oil and non-oil producing alike – has been linked to the lack of political institutions for mediating the conflictive interests of various social groups in a way that ensures sustainability of growth-promoting policies and maintenance of basic social development agenda (e.g. Elbadawi, 2001; UNDP, 2002).

A less frequently addressed issue, at least by Arab economists, is why the Arab world has generally come to experience such a “freedom deficit”, or non-democratic regimes. Political scientists have long emphasized the effect of standard of living as the most stable and robust determinant of a country’s propensity to experience democracy (e.g. Lipset, 1959). Here it could be argued that to the extent that the Arab region has made considerable and substantial gains in economic and social development for more than two decades and a half since the early 1960s, it is puzzling that these gains have not been associated with increased political rights, much less democratization. Hence, other or additional factors must be accounted for in explaining this phenomenon, keeping in mind that some studies suggest there is no evidence of a trade-off between democracy and development (e.g. Przeworski et al., 2000: pp. 178–79). Other studies, following in the vein of the Authoritarian-Bargain thesis, point out that in addition to repression, autocracies rely for their survival on patronage relationships and the exchange of the right of political inclusion for greater economic security. Oil wealth, in particular, has helped sustain regime durability in oil rich autocratic regimes irrespective of the degree of prevailing repression while in a number of other autocracies (all outside the Arab region) economic crises have paved the way for the initiation of the democratization process (see Desai, Olofsgard, & Youssef, 2005; Smith, 2004).

¹ See for example, Handoussa (1993, 1999) and Handoussa and Mikawy (2002).

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