Remembering Our Roots

NATHAN J. BROWN
Institute for Middle East Studies, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.; e-mail: nbrown@gwu.edu
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Scholars of the Middle East based in social science disciplines—especially my own, political science—are likely to feel a bit more welcome by their colleagues as a result of recent events in the Middle East. Not only will we be informative conversationalists in the hallways for a while because of our regional expertise, but also, far more profoundly, the sorts of things that political scientists study, from voting patterns to regime change, are suddenly interesting subjects in the region. This is not to say that Middle East elections were not studied in the past or that research on political change was not undertaken—far from it. But the questions posed, the terms used, and tools employed were often different from those more prevalent in the discipline. Political scientists focusing on the Middle East are therefore likely to find this a gratifying time, ripe with opportunities for comparative and cross-regional analysis. And those nonregional specialists whose interests lie in a wide variety of topics from voting behavior to revolutions may work harder to incorporate Middle Eastern cases into their own work.

But as welcome as they may come to feel, scholars of Middle East politics oriented to the broader discipline of political science should not forget how much of regional politics they had missed or overlooked in recent years. The extent of political discontent, the attempt of protest movements to organize large constituencies, the authoritarian nature of regional regimes—all this was well known and thoroughly explored. But the rapidity with which the protests spread, the populations that were rapidly mobilized, the language and terms of the protests, the reactions of various political forces—all this came as a surprise to most specialists (just as it was to many opposition leaders and top officials). There is much ground to explore here that will require more intensive efforts to understand the societies of the region. This is not an argument for Middle Eastern particularism. On the contrary. But it is a call for continuing receptivity to the multidisciplinary insights that an area studies framework can provide. It has always been the case that research on the region (and even comparative work with other regions) has been deeply enriched by cultural, historical, and linguistic understandings and approaches. This is hardly the time to forget that truth.

Liberation Meets the State

DIANE SINGERMAN
Department of Government, School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington, D.C.; e-mail: dsinger@american.edu
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Watching the uprisings unfold in the Middle East, as well as the opposition to them, leads me to appreciate the insights of social movement theory, which suggests that

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heterogeneous forces can unite in coalitions around super targets when political opportunities suddenly and serendipitously emerge. In this historic moment of change and resistance, will we see the unfolding institutional transformation of the state as it responds to a more participatory ethos, or will former regime stalwarts reconstitute themselves? Elected officials and new governance strategies will still confront serious distributional and economic challenges as states remain enmeshed in neoliberal policies. Political scientists are already studying constitutional change and debates about electoral design, party construction, and other institutional changes to democratize the polity, but we should also look to different transition models that seek to redress deep structural inequalities following decades of repression and rent seeking. Should principles of political or economic affirmative action be incorporated into new institutional designs of transitology?

We still have much to learn about how networks of patronage, coercion, and profit were deployed to keep regimes in power as well as the circumstances under which these networks fell apart. Fascinating revelations will emerge from our investigations of fallen regimes and their allies, but how will we utilize these insights to better understand how power might be more effectively constrained and limited in the Middle East? A problem-driven research agenda may encourage a more dialogic conversation with former leaders of civil society organizations, opposition movements, or nongovernmental organizations and new reformist technocrats as they become bureaucrats or gain leadership positions across society. Both politicians and scholars (including me) will need to move out of capital cities to understand the diverse constituencies and demands of national electorates.

A Decline of Identity Politics

Laurence Louër
Sciences Po/Center for International Research and Studies/National Center for Scientific Research, Paris, France; e-mail: laurence.louer@sciences-po.fr
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Religious actors and religious language are not absent from the Arab revolutions, but a striking feature of these movements is that they depart from Islamist identity politics, which tended to portray the problems of the Arab world as the result of Muslims' betrayal of their religious identity. Slogans referencing Islam are remarkably few, even in contexts like Egypt where Islamist movements are an important organized political force. Similar to many Islamist activists, the youth who initiated these movements are exasperated by growing economic inequalities. Unlike the former, however, they do not feel the need to frame this issue in religious terms, but rather mobilize universal notions such as democracy, freedom, justice, and equality. This is the case even in societies with sharp religious divides such as Bahrain, where the overwhelmingly Shiʿi demonstrators oppose a Sunni-dominated regime. Regardless of whether the uprisings will succeed in achieving a genuine regime change, new political movements are likely to emerge that focus on political freedom and the reduction of social inequalities rather than projects

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