SYMPOSIUM

Teaching the "New Middle East": Beyond Authoritarianism

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In 2011 the protests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were not only unprecedented in terms of scale and political consequences for the region, they also highlighted a number of long-standing analytical and theoretical misconceptions about Arab politics. In particular, the conventional thesis privileging the idea of a "durable authoritarianism" in the Arab world was partially undermined by a cross-regional civil society that confronted the formidable security and military apparatus of the state. Although in some countries democratic transitions have continued, since they first occurred in Tunisia, other Arab states continue to witness a resilient authoritarianism and strong state repression of civil society activism. These historic events have also set the stage for a new teaching agenda in important ways. Specifically, an agenda for teaching the "new Middle East" must incorporate two important general components: first, a critical review of the influential scholarship on persistent authoritarianism with the objective of addressing past theoretical and methodological misconceptions, and second, the introduction of new conceptual and analytical frameworks relevant to contemporary political developments in the Arab world and the MENA region more generally.

For much of the last 40 years, a central empirical puzzle of Arab politics had been a striking persistence of authoritarianism. No other part of the world had proven so resistant to the so-called third wave of democratization that transformed Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, and which had also had significant effects in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In 2010, the policy institute Freedom House classified 59% of countries around the world as "electoral democracies." Of these, not one was found in the Arab world. In 2011, however, the authoritarian status quo was shattered by the "Arab Spring"—a series of Arab uprisings that unseated long-standing dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, generated mass protests and countervailing repression in Sudan, Bahrain, and Syria, and affected almost every other regime in the region in some way. Clearly something very important changed with lasting repercussions for the politics of the region. This change, moreover, was largely unanticipated by scholars of the Middle East, certainly with regard to its rapid onset and broad regional effects (Schlumber 2007). Part of the answer to why so much was missed by so many may have to do with deficient theoretical models or an insufficient understanding of the way key variables interacted. However, part of the problem may have been more deep-seated methodological problems, relating to what was being studied, how it was being studied, and which specific concepts were being generated and used within the subfield of comparative politics that focused on the Middle East and North Africa.

Not surprisingly, following the Arab uprisings, the conventional scholarship privileging the idea of a "persistent authoritarianism" in the Arab region has been partially undermined by a revitalized Arab civil society and the weakening of what hitherto was viewed as robust authoritarian regimes and formidable state security apparatus. Following in the lines of scholars of Arab authoritarianism, analysts have long insisted that the Arab world's military establishment is beholden to the government and its patron-client networks and largesse; that political party opposition is either weak, discredited, or nonexistent; and that civil society is divided and repressed by the coercive apparatus of the state. These are the factors that compelled scholars to predict the durability of authoritarian rule in the Arab world (Bellin 2004; Cook 2007; Hertog 2010; Heydeman 2007; Hinnebusch 1990; Ross 2008). Moreover, in the social sciences more broadly, scholarship that has focused on grassroots mobilization and social and economic grievances often has been neglected across the disciplines and in much of the teaching and scholarship of Middle Eastern politics. In this respect, the seemingly puzzling empirical events associated with the Arab uprisings have demonstrated the crucial analytical importance of introducing new concepts and bringing "back in" existing theoretical insights from the scholarship (across the disciplines) on social movements, political economy, and informal networks as a key framework of analysis (Bayat 2010; Tessler 1997; Wiktorowicz 2003).

More specifically, and drawing on previous scholarship, a new teaching agenda should aim to critically review the literature on Arab authoritarianism to address two primary questions that are increasing relevant to the region in empirical and theoretical terms. First, will the Arab region continue down the path of democratization or will the potential for democratic consolidation stall, resulting in a return to authoritarian rule? Second, what are the most important conceptual and theoretical models relevant to studying contemporary Arab politics across cases? Tackling these questions requires that those who teach Middle East politics take seriously the pitfalls (as well as insights) made by scholars who focused on the durability of Arab authoritarianism (Gause 2011). This pedagogical objective, in turn, hinges on a critical understanding of factors and conceptual assumptions long associated with the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and the absence of democracy in the region. These include the notion that Arab countries possess especially weak civil societies, have middle classes beholden to state patronage for their survival, and are uniformly plagued by opposition parties that are either weak (e.g., Egypt), or simply nonexistent (e.g., Tunisia, Syria). However, as the events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen

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have shown, none of these conditions precluded popular protests and the move toward the difficult and contentious path towards democratization.

Consequently, in addition to critically reviewing previous scholarship on the subject, a new teaching agenda should compel students to evaluate the role of contemporary civil-military relations and their role in authoritarian persistence and democratic transition across cases in MENA. The primary objective should be to explain the causes underlying both the common as well as the divergent political trajectories within and between Arab states. In this respect, this new teaching agenda should review the theoretical literature on Arab politics across different cases to better evaluate the relative strength of the Arab regimes' capacity for coercion in the context of resurgent civil society opposition as in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen as well as in other Arab countries where efforts at democratization and popular protests have stalled or have not occurred (e.g., Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan). In more specific analytical terms, in addition to the evaluation of the hitherto neglected nature of military-civil society relations, teaching should address variations in the states' fiscal health, which is crucial to understanding the coercive power of these states, the level of international support afforded the respective regimes, and the relative strength of civil society and political party opposition across a spectrum of Arab countries.

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Indeed, what the Arab uprisings have shown is that the teaching of the "new Middle East" must take seriously the idea that micro-level politics can potentially play an important role in regime transitions in some, albeit not all, Arab countries. More specifically, these new empirical developments have demonstrated that social networks and class- and sectarian-based mobilization may indeed produce state-level outcomes, ranging from democratization to variable forms of Islamic political mobilization (Ghobashy 2011; Tugal 2009). Indeed, if the conventional thesis privileging the idea of a "persistent authoritarianism" in the region has been undermined by a transregional civil society confronting the power of the combined forces of long-standing authoritarian rulers, and the formidable security apparatus of the state, these protests have shown that informal networks are an important variable for political change. More specifically, they have demonstrated that informal social networks as well as formal institutions such as trade federations, labor unions, and professional syndicates, operating in tandem, can generate political outcomes of revolutionary potential.

In addition, the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have clearly demonstrated that, unlike some previous scholarship that has centered on the state as the most important unit of analysis, the locus of study (and teaching) must now focus on the regional as well as the domestic level. On the one hand, for domestic level politics, the uprisings in the region have demonstrated the crucial importance of "bringing political economy back in" as a key framework of analysis. On the other hand, given the unprecedented cascade of uprisings throughout the region, these transregional developments have highlighted the importance of teaching the Middle East and North Africa in ways that bridge different levels of analysis. Specifically, these revolutionary movements have reaffirmed that the locus of study and pedagogical attention must be lodged at the global level as well as at the level of domestic politics. The notion that the role of economic globalization is of little importance in influencing domestic political change in the Middle East has been discredited by the thousands who have taken to the streets articulating clear economic grievances partially associated with decades of economic austerity measures. In Tunisia, young men and women have openly critiqued an economic model that was geared primarily to European markets and dependent on regionally based low-skilled labor in manufacturing; in Egypt, both service-sector informal workers and formal labor organized against corruption as well as certain austerity measures; and in Yemen and Sudan protestors have revolted against the misuse of antiterrorism campaigns that have targeted civil society opposition, rather than tackling the root causes of domestic or transnational militancy.

Given the emergence of strong Islamic-oriented political parties in the wake of the Arab uprisings throughout the region, courses on the politics of the region must be designed in ways that offer an advanced overview of the study of Islam and politics. Such courses should begin by critically examining current debates used to study the relationship between Islam and politics in both academic as well as policy circles. In addition, given the regional influence and remarkable diversity of Islamist movements, these courses should challenge students to apply different analytical approaches to the study of Islamic politics across different countries. In more specific terms, students should be challenged to consider the merits and deficiencies of the cultural, political economy, and social movement perspectives commonly used to understand political Islam and Middle Eastern politics more generally. Finally, this new teaching agenda should resist privileging a singular theoretical perspective or analytical approach in the analysis of the changing dynamics of Islamist politics in the context of the Arab uprisings. A useful way to accomplish this pedagogical objective is to ask students to adjudicate between different analytical frameworks in their analysis and understanding of Islamic

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movements and parties across Muslim as well as Middle Eastern cases.

In more specific terms, the ubiquitous re-emergence of Islamist movements in the context of the Arab uprisings has begged the analytical question of what role Islamist movements such as Nahda in Tunisia, or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, will play in the difficult transition from authoritarianism to democratic rule in these countries. Indeed, a central issue that should be addressed in "teaching the new Middle East" is whether these Islamist movements will accommodate themselves to democracy and political pluralism or represent an antidemocratic force in the near future. To answer this question, students should be challenged to assess these movements' political objectives; evaluate what socioeconomic, religious, and political grievances (or needs) they address; and analyze the nature of these movements (or organizations) with respect to the movement's view of the relationship of Sharia (i.e., Islamic law) and democracy, its understanding of the role of women in public life, and its political position vis-à-vis other civil society groups organized around a different Islamic sect, religion, or ethnicity.

One of the most popular and persistent misconceptions about Islamist movements that must also be addressed in teaching is that they all share similar ideological positions and political and strategic objectives. However, in the context of the Arab uprisings, Islamist organizations clearly have shown themselves to be remarkably adept at mobilizing a wide range of social forces for political objectives. To best understand where the support for these Islamist movements comes from and their influence in future political developments, students must be directed to analyze the diverse political objectives and the social and class origins that make up the base of support of these movements. Toward this end, teachers should stress the importance of the role of informal social networks and instruct students to contrast the social groups who belong to these Islamist movements with other segments of civil society that pursue other forms of political activism. In this way, this new teaching agenda will not only introduce a deeper understanding of different forms of popular mobilization; it will engender new understandings about ongoing changes with respect to the role of Islam in politics in the context of the new contemporary developments in the Arab world that builds on the insights and avoids the pitfalls of previous scholarship on, and the teaching of, Middle Eastern politics.

The Arab uprisings have generated a great deal of "new politics" for those teaching the Middle East to explore. But it has also made it essential that "teaching the new Middle East" be accompanied by a thorough assessment, and constructive critique, of past modes of enquiry. Doing this well requires developing new teaching tools that are both interdisciplinary and highly diverse in terms of theoretical and methodological orientations. ■

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