

Book Review: Larbi Sadiki, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy*, Oxford Studies in Democratization (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 288 pages.

## The Incomplete Narrative of Arab Democratization

*Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid*

The Arab world has become an intriguing puzzle for political scientists. Many of the trends which seem to be operative in other parts of the world have not been echoed in Arab lands. The end of the Cold War facilitated settlement of the disputes that had divided the superpowers after the end of the Second World War, except in the Arab Middle East. The move to a liberal economy which dismantled the state-owned sector in the former socialist countries and in many countries in the Global South left the state still in possession of a large part of the economy in many Arab countries. Finally, the “transition from authoritarianism,” which permitted elected governments, multiparty systems, and the possibility of change of government through the ballot box, has hardly hit the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean<sup>1</sup> or those of the Arab Gulf. “Arab exceptionalism” has become therefore a fascinating and also vexing theoretical and political problem for social scientists and for politicians in advanced countries as well.

Larbi Sadiki, a Tunisian political scientist who has written several books on democratization in the Arab world, decided to challenge the “common wisdom” on the Arab Middle East among the transitologues by telling a different story of democratization in this part of the world. He rejects the transitologues’ basic assumptions and looks for the building blocks of another analytical structure. However, he does not completely construct the structure, leaving this task to the future—but without any hints as to how the whole construction would look.

### Challenging Transitologues’ Conclusions

In his book, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy*, and relying heavily on writings about the Middle East by Arab and non-Arab scholars, Sadiki easily has managed to demolish the theoretical structure of the

---

**Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid** is Professor of Political Science at Cairo University and an Affiliate Professor at the American University in Cairo. <mustapha@aucegypt.edu>

<sup>1</sup> Except for the shores of Israel, which has been a liberal democracy for the Jews since its establishment in 1948.

transitologues. He objects to the generalization about democratic transition as a global phenomenon. This is self-evident since transition, in the terms used by its advocates, has hardly been echoed in the Arab world. He also rejects Samuel Huntington's account of democratic transition as occurring historically in "three waves." He argues that what was a European story should remain as it really was, a story of political change in the Old Continent, but one that loses its credibility when extrapolated to other parts of the world.

Sadiki does not share the view of those who assumed that a transition wherever it occurred would be a transition to liberal democracy. For him, a transition from an authoritarian political system might take place, but its direction would not necessarily be known. It could be a transition from one form of authoritarianism to another form of authoritarianism, from a harsh version to a softer version, as was indeed the case in most Arab countries that had experienced such transition. In fact, Guillermo O'Donnell, Philip Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, the three pioneers of the Transition studies, opted deliberately to call their three volumes of 1986 *Transition from Authoritarianism* rather than *Transition to Liberal Democracy*, because they themselves were not sure where that transition was taking transitional regimes in those parts of the world which they studied—which did not include the Arab Middle East.

The second assault focuses on the question of the sequences of transition. Sadiki does not find the same sequences of liberalization, democratization, and socialization everywhere. Each phase was supposed by the early pioneers of transition studies to have its own steps and modalities. The important lesson that one can draw from the Middle East experience is that political liberalization did not lead necessarily to democratization. A certain blend of liberal and authoritarian features could enable authoritarian regimes to survive for a long time. The term "soft authoritarianism" could aptly denote the real nature of those regimes which allow their citizens to exercise certain civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression and association, while guarding very carefully against the introduction of any mechanism that could open the way one day for a genuine transfer of power through the ballot box.

One of the mechanisms that paved the way to genuine democratization in other parts of the world and did not operate in the same way in Arab countries was that of political pacts. One could refer to several so-called formal pacts in Arab countries, particularly in Tunisia (1988) and Jordan (1989). More than two decades have passed since the proclamation of these pacts, but the reins of power have not changed hands or families. The head of state in the two countries is still the master of the political game and he decides the faithful agent entrusted with the task of translating his wishes into policies and actions. Also, he alone decides which mechanism will be used in choosing this agent: controlled election or appointment from among the ranks of the docile followers. In the case of Jordan, it was only death that removed the head of state who had enacted the pact, and he was followed by his son who wielded

the same unchecked powers of the father. In the case of Tunisia, the author of the pact is still the same, spending at present his twenty-third year and fifth term in office, winning regularly close to 90 percent of the popular vote in elections which cannot be easily recognized as free and fair.

One of the reasons that pacts did not lead to democratization in the Middle East is that Arab heads of state who inspired the proclamation of these pacts had no intention of allowing them to be the vehicle for a transfer of power through the ballot box. For them, the pacts were a ploy to manage a situation in which their authority was under threat. That threat came either from angry masses or because their authority was recently acquired and needed a measure of legitimacy to consolidate it. Once this challenging situation had passed, the letter and the spirit of the pacts were simply disregarded or interpreted in a way that contradicted the consensual basis on which they were founded. This manipulation of the pacts by Arab rulers should occasion no surprise as the masses or the so-called “democracy advocates” were never in a position to dictate their terms to Arab rulers, or even to bargain with them concerning provisions of the pacts. The pacts were seen by Arab heads of state in these situations to be simply a more popular device to run a basically authoritarian structure of power.

### **What Is So Specific about the Arab Path to Democratization?**

Sadiki, for many reasons, has no intention to tell a complete story of the Arab path to democratization. The most important of these reasons is that, in reality, no genuine democratization has taken place in the Arab world. But he is not pessimistic about the future. The story of democratization in this part of the world is open-ended. Whatever political reforms that already have taken place could pave the way for genuine democratization in the future. They also could be manipulated to block the way for further advances along that path. In all cases, if democratization does take place, its modalities and sequences will be different most probably from what has happened in other parts of the world such as in Southern and Eastern Europe and regions of the Global South. Sadiki also confirms that if transition happens, it definitely will be in a pattern that is a departure from the West European experience. He points to four specific features of this possible path, two of which are negative and the other two, positive.

Sadiki rightly dismisses the current rounds of elections which have been conducted in nearly all Arab countries as preludes for democratization. He calls the practice of elections in Arab countries “electoralism,” a belief that elections alone are the most important criterion for democratization. Most important conditions for free and fair elections are not met in the majority of Arab countries. Elections are not free in Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia because the major opposition group in each of these countries is officially barred from contesting all sorts of elections. In Egypt, semi-official newspapers are even

careful not to mention the name of this group. It is simply referenced as the “proscribed organization.”<sup>2</sup> In some other countries, almost half or more than half of the population is not considered eligible voters, either because they are women who have not been enfranchised yet, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, or because conditions of nationality and residence do not apply to them, as in the cases of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, elections are not fair, particularly in countries of the dominant party system. In these countries, the ruling party controls public administration, the media, and security forces, and uses them to limit the capacity of the opposition to run election campaigns or even to monitor voting procedures. Under these conditions, electoral fraud is not uncommon. In still other countries, rules of fair and free elections could prevail, but the ruling families manipulate the law in order to increase the electoral weight of their conservative supporters or to limit the powers of elected assemblies in favor of an appointed council. Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco offer pertinent examples to illustrate these practices. In these countries, tribal and ethnic loyalties cast their shadow over voters’ freedom of choice. And in all Arab countries, wealthy candidates are more than willing to use their wealth to bribe poor voters to support them. Sadiki’s dismissal of elections in Arab countries as a vehicle for democratization, although detailed and well-documented, is not really new. Roger Owen made a similar point in 1994 when he described these elections in his chapter in the Salame Ghassan-edited volume as elections with no choice.<sup>3</sup>

Sadiki is not of the view that calls by the United States for democracy promotion in the region were really driven by unshakable beliefs in the value of democracy. Even before the election of Barak Obama in November 2008, it was clear that the Republican administration’s rhetoric about democracy lacked credibility. The record of the United States in the government of Iraq after its invasion of the country in March 2003 was marred by flagrant violations of the most basic human rights, including the torturing of suspected Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib detention center. A major blow to the credibility of this administration’s call for democracy promotion in the Middle East was its refusal, following the election of the Hamas government in 2006, to deal with a freely elected Arab government because it did not share American views on how the Palestinian-Israeli dispute could be resolved. Arab observers could conclude that the United States would support democracy in the Arab world only if elections brought to power groups favorable to American policy in the region. In fact, the position of the United States in this regard is no different

---

<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood, which alone won almost 20 percent of all seats in the People’s Assembly in 2005, five times what all legally recognized parties attained.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Owen, “Socio-Economic Change and Political Mobilization: The Case of Egypt,” in *Democracy without Democrats: The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, ed. Salame Ghassan (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1994), 183-199.

from that of the G8 countries, which, for variety of reasons, are wary of the domestic and regional consequences of Islamists' electoral victories. Their discourse on democracy promotion in the region is merely a public relations exercise. Thus, if democratization does occur in the Arab world in the future, it will owe nothing to foreign intervention or foreign efforts.

The two other features are not only more positive but also they are quite original in the discussion of democratization in the Arab world. Sadiki calls the first feature "democratization from below," referring to food riots in Arab countries, and the second is the impact of Arab satellite television.

Arab masses have shown a degree of activism that has led some Arab governments to undertake measures that have expanded the range of civil and political rights. These riots, termed by the opposition as "uprisings-intifadas," took place on a massive scale in Egypt (1977), Tunisia (1978), Morocco (1981-1984), Sudan (1984), Algeria (1988), and Jordan (1989). The responses of Arab regimes to these riots have varied, but in the three cases of Sudan, Algeria, and Jordan, these riots preceded important shifts in the politics of these countries. In Sudan, the riots preceded a return to elected civilian government (1986-1989) following one year of transitional rule in 1985. In Algeria, they induced the head of state, General Ben Jedid, to issue a decree allowing the formation of political associations, including political parties. In Jordan, they moved King Hussein to declare the National Pact that was followed by relatively free elections in the same year.

Activism of Arab masses was not manifested exclusively over "bread and butter" issues. The invasion of Iraq by the United States in 1991 was met by widespread demonstrations in several Arab countries throughout the summer of 1990 and the spring of 1991. Also, on several occasions, large numbers of citizens in Arab countries took to the streets in solidarity with the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. The important shifts in Arab politics toward a degree of political liberalization came in three Arab countries in the wake of food riots.

Will similar "uprisings" of this sort push Arab regimes toward profound democratization? Sadiki suggests that this might be the case in the future. It should be noted, however, that responses of Arab regimes to these riots were not always the same. The food riots of January 1977 in Egypt temporarily reversed the political opening that had started in 1975 with the authorization of the establishment of different "platforms-manabir" within the Arab Socialist Union, the country's single mass organization at that time. This "opening" progressed with the formation of opposition political organizations that contested the first competitive elections in Egypt in 1976. These organizations were recognized later as political parties. Freedom of speech was curtailed, however, following the riots when President Sadat dismissed Dr. Gamal Al-Oteify, the Information Minister, and suspended political free talk shows that brought people of different political parties together in televised debates. Sadat thought that these free debates, in which opposition figures could put forward

their arguments against the government's economic policies, contributed to feelings of discontent in the country that exploded in the January riots. The political openings in Morocco in 1976 and in Tunisia in 1987 were not preceded by popular mobilization.

Such massive riots have become a rare phenomenon in Arab countries since the late 1980s, however, although some riots occurred in 2008-2009 in the aftermath of the rise in food prices worldwide. The more recent riots were more limited in scope than earlier riots and did not lead to major political developments. The reasons could vary. With the gradual rise in oil prices since the early 1990s, Arab governments in highly populated Arab states have found the resources to alleviate the suffering of their poor people. Arab governments also have learned lessons from the massive food riots of the 1970s and the 1980s. They have devised ways of cutting subsidies and reducing budget deficits without arousing the wrath of their masses.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the new communication technologies of satellite television, Internet sites, blogs, and text messages have broken the hold that Arab governments once had over the minds of their own citizens and their capacity to communicate with each other concerning political issues. Sadiki suggests that Arab satellite television, which has devoted much time to talk shows with prominent opposition figures from different Arab countries, is one possible agent of democratization in Arab countries in the future. It ended the state monopoly of information by offering to Arab citizens alternative sources of information beyond the control of their governments. It allowed the public in Arab countries to know what Arab governments wanted to keep secret. It gave opposition and human rights activists one accessible media source that could enable them to communicate with Arab citizens, in general, on issues that their governments did not want to be debated. It allowed the Arab public to come to know those opposition figures and to realize that perhaps there are alternative ways of running their countries and possibly better policies than those pursued by their governments. There is no doubt that satellite television as well as the new communication technologies have expanded freedom of expression in Arab countries and given opposition and civil society groups means of communication that broadened public space in these countries. This in itself is an important measure of a degree of democratization which will only expand in the future.

### **When Will the Narrative Be Completed?**

Larbi Sadiki did not tell a complete story of Arab democratization, because for him the story is still unfolding. However, when the narrative is completed, a

---

<sup>4</sup> Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, "The Political Economy of Food Subsidies," paper presented to the International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C., 1993.

few other chapters will have to be added to what already has been written. In other words, some impediments to democratization in the Arab world will have to be overcome before Arab regimes move to genuine democratization.

One chapter will have to examine the role of the state in Arab countries, particularly its hold over the economy, despite a measure of economic liberalization that already has taken place. Regardless of this measure of liberalization, the dominance of Arab states over the economy enables them to control a large bureaucracy and to constrain independent political action by a rising Arab bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie continues to rely mostly on the state as a source of capital accumulation and to protect the private capital that already has been amassed.

A second chapter must suggest ways of overcoming apprehension in many quarters in Arab countries of the negative repercussions of the mounting political influence of Islamists. Minority groups, and not only Christians, private sector entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and women are concerned that the presence of Islamists in state institutions will constrain the exercise of a variety of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Many of them have expressed preference, for the time being, of maintaining authoritarian regimes rather than opting for free and fair elections that could offer Islamists more power.

Finally, Sadiki has dwelt on popular uprisings in Arab countries that persuaded Arab rulers to offer concessions that expanded political freedoms in countries such as Algeria, Jordan, and temporarily Sudan. However, a third chapter should reflect on the fact that few of these uprisings were driven by the wish to democratize Arab regimes. Democracy does not seem so far to rank highly among the values that are cherished by Arab masses.

It is true that some of these issues were prominent in other writings on Arab democratization, including a study by the writer of this review published in 1991.<sup>5</sup> These issues will continue to shape the march of Arabs toward political freedom, if this march is resumed in the future.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, "Slow Thaw in the Arab World," *World Policy Journal* 8, no. 4 (1991): 711-738.

