
This is an interesting and instructive book, which will be of considerable value to scholarly as well as to general audiences interested in Middle Eastern affairs, modern political trends, the study of democracy, and the evolution of military regimes.

The author tackles one of the most important problems in the annals of the contemporary Middle East head-on—namely the lack of any major democratization, at the very time when democracy and democratization are all the rage worldwide. As to lip service and rhetoric, democracy is also at the center of the political discourse in the Middle East and the Arab world. However, the fact that there is no democracy in this part of the world is too obvious a fact to be ignored or glibly dismissed.

The failure of democracy should not be minimized, but must be explained seriously, in a scholarly way that stands up to critical, theoretical and factual scrutiny. Stephen J. King makes a valiant attempt to do just that, with a good deal of success, although his explanations, in the final analysis, are only partial and not entirely convincing.

Still, the book is well written, well researched and ably constructed. It reads well, follows a clear and consistently logical structure, and draws on a rich variety of sources. Moreover, the book tries hard, and for the most part successfully, to bring together macro-theories of political science and political sociology with a detailed study of the reported facts by the given Arab countries, demonstrating a high level of expertise in both. In general, the author's arguments are fair, responsible and balanced—no mean feat when dealing with issues as complex and sensitive as authoritarianism versus democracy in the Arab world.

King studies four countries, namely Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Syria. This is a good sample, because it includes two North African countries, one in the Eastern Arab world and one that constitutes a bridge between the Arab East and the West, namely Egypt, the most salient Arab political actor. Of course, one could take issue with this particular selection, wishing for a greater variety of cases, perhaps for it to include such important actors as Iraq, to mention just one salient example.

Still, the four countries chosen present a sufficient number of in-depth case studies. The author shows how the old authoritarianism worked in each of these four cases, which is in itself a valuable exercise. King then goes on
to demonstrate how each of the four regimes in question have responded to the challenges of the global trends of democratization, which have forced the governing elites in the Arab world to deal with new forces, demands, and fashions.

The first, and perhaps most important finding, of the author is that the four regimes have proven to be extremely adept at adjusting to the new age. By and large, they have learned how to combine old-fashioned methods of outright oppression with new and more sophisticated strategies for coopting the emerging forces of globalism and capitalism onto the local scene.

To the author’s credit, he is very good at avoiding the pitfalls of treating each case in isolation, preferring the comparative-analytical approach of modern political science. In so doing, not only does he compare the four cases studied in the book, but he goes beyond this, trying to engage in occasional—albeit not always systematic and consistent—comparisons with other instances of tension between authoritarian and democratic processes, for example in Brazil and Spain.

In the final analysis, what we learn from all this is that authoritarianism has prevailed and has, by and large, defeated the forces of democratization. It is clear why the ruling elites have resisted democratization, and it is also clear why they have chosen a multiple-level strategy of cooptation, basically bringing into the good graces of the regime the aspiring new economic elements that have been given a chance to make good on their financial ambition by embracing the regime—at the expense of the general public.

This is the crux of the story told by King. He shows how the new deals have solidified the ruling regimes in each of the countries studied, by making wealth more attainable and by improving the lives of the common people, but without creating real democratic political openings.

The real questions do remain largely unanswered, however. For instance, King tells us that “in terms of national culture, claims that Arab and Islamist societies were impervious to democracy did not fit the democratic impulses in the region nor its diversity. Nonetheless, patronage politics did act as a historically specific cultural factor that contributed to sustained authoritarian rule” (p. 90). It is not easy to make sense of this kind of argument, particularly when the reader sees that according to King, “It was the combination of the mobilization of society, severe enough to threaten the political system as a whole, and the choices of the regime elite ... that drove the democratic transformation in Spain.” (p. 198)

Why did this kind of mobilization threaten the regime in Spain, but not in the four Arab countries? Why did the Spanish elite make choices in the