

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Popular Authoritarians

by Jon B. Alterman

Dictators often go to extraordinary means to project an image of popularity. Bussed-in mobs wave flags and sing songs praising the leadership, and when sham elections are held, something like 98.7 percent of voters dutifully vote for the president. No one doubts the consequences of genuine opposition—imprisonment, assault, or worse.

Underlying these displays of popularity is a broad understanding that it is all a cynical performance, perpetuated by fear. While actual opposition is unthinkable to many, the number of “true believers” in the regime may be vanishingly small. As the world saw in the Arab uprisings of 2011, once an opportunity for change arises, consent for the leadership often collapses. Democracies are stable, the thinking goes, because the democratic process ensures that governments enjoy popular support. Dictatorships are unstable because their consent arises merely out of fear.

What are we to make, then, of the rise of genuinely popular undemocratic regimes?

Many expected that the so-called “Arab Spring” in 2011 would produce democracies, but in many cases the medium-term outcome has been a return to the status quo ante. Tunisia’s vaunted democratic experiment has been more successful than most, but its leadership has strong roots in the Bourguiba and Ben Ali dictatorships. Similarly, Islamists’ leadership of the government of Morocco has done little to weaken the *makhzen*, the enduring, royal networks that exert economic and political control throughout the country regardless of electoral results.

Nowhere is the paradox clearer than in Egypt, where a broad uprising against a former general set off a chain of events that brought a former field marshal to power. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi won his election by a margin so overwhelming that any Egyptian government in the last 20 years would have considered it obscene. And yet, it would be a mistake to underestimate how broad support for Sisi and the region’s other authoritarians truly is.

In part, the authoritarians’ popularity arises from a fear of chaos. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and the Sinai all serve as object lessons for populations who think nothing can be worse than the status quo. Persistent terrorist attacks remind populations of how vulnerable they remain. (continued on page 2)

Comments on Saudi Arabia and the U.S.-GCC Summit

Following shakeups in the Saudi line of succession and in the lead up to the U.S.-GCC summit hosted at Camp David in May, Jon Alterman published several related CSIS commentaries; “[Saudi Arabia’s Shifting Line of Succession](#),” “[A Key Moment for the Gulf Cooperation Council](#),” and “[Saudi King Skips Summit](#).” He also wrote an article which appeared on CNN, titled “[Another snub for Obama?](#)” CSIS hosted a [conference call](#) with him for members of the press, and the Geneva Center for Security Policy [interviewed him](#) about a range of regional issues. ■

Wife Goes On

The big day was just as she had dreamed. In her white dress, the Saudi woman danced with her friends, following the catered reception and presentation of gifts. But most telling about the jubilant scene was the cake: on top stood a figurine of a bride cradling her groom’s head—which had been severed from his body.

Divorce parties in Saudi Arabia have come to rival weddings in both scale and emotional content. The popular song “Etalagna” (We Got Divorced), which has become an unofficial anthem for these parties, captures much of the mood. With a price tag that can reach several thousand dollars, lavish divorce celebrations are held in luxury hotels, public parks, and ironically, wedding halls. One exultant mother even mailed mock wedding invitations, attaching the epithet “deposed” to the name of the erstwhile groom.

While the divorce rate in Saudi Arabia has crept up in recent years, ending a marriage remains much less prevalent there than in the United States or Europe. That hasn’t stopped authorities’ concerns that the phenomenon is getting out of hand. The Saudi Ministry of Justice has launched a “divorce index” to track the reasons for breakups and their social effects, and clerics admonish that people should take the institution more seriously.

Celebrating divorce in such ostentatious fashion displays a defiance not often expressed in the socially conservative kingdom. For women who have escaped from abusive husbands or forced marriages, these parties celebrate newfound freedom and the beginning of a new life. And perhaps for party planners, the prospect for repeat business. ■

In part, the authoritarians' popularity stems from disgust with interim governments, which proved even less competent than the dictatorships they displaced. The interim governments' zeal to reward supporters often meant that they replaced ineffective bureaucrats with inexperienced ideologues, resulting in even worse performance.

But the most important factor seems to be the new leaders' mastery of the vocabularies of nationalism and patriotism and their ability to merge them with a vision of hope and change. In doing so, they are able to recreate the feeling of unity that many had felt through the uprisings. Today's rulers—in rich and poor states throughout the region—have blended messages of national pride alongside promises of robust economic performance. At the same time, they have been quick to identify enemies of the state that threaten both the nation and its economic success.

In the near term, the new arrangement works well enough to win popular support. Much of the public is hopeful for relief after years of uncertainty, and they are willing to give these governments a chance to perform as they promise. Similarly, many are happy to find themselves defined as being part of the solution to their countries' woes, a patriotic majority locked in common cause against a treasonous minority. The resultant governments are not democratic, but they are genuinely popular.

Problems loom down the road, however. Around the world, archives are littered with new governments' economic plans or attempts to provide security that did not meet expectations. Popularity wanes, and consent becomes more grudging. Sometimes, it vanishes entirely.

For Western governments, today's popular autocracies represent an uncomfortable category. The governments of places like the GCC and Egypt are illiberal, but they accurately represent the will of illiberal publics. Further, much of what is left of the opposition is illiberal as well, and portions may be violent. Democratization not only would not produce liberalism, but it could provide support for violent actors to embed themselves more deeply in society.

It is surely worth encouraging liberal voices, directly and indirectly, while ensuring that their incentives are to win support at home and not in Western capitals. On the government side, however, conditioning bilateral relations on progress toward democratization seems unlikely to yield positive results. It is worthwhile to think about another tack: reminding governments of the fragility and often-transient nature of popular autocracies, especially those with large, urbanized populations. Small, wealthy states that dispense massive patronage, and large dispersed states that rule lightly over inhospitable terrain can play by different rules. But in most states, the glow of popular autocracies quickly fades, the patronage networks become harder to sustain, and political repression precedes a fall.

While some might argue that economic growth will solve the autocracy puzzle, it is hard to find examples of strong economic performance in a regime with diminishing popularity, or in a country that has persistent episodes of domestic violence. Both are likely to describe the new Arab governments over the next five years. Tepid investment is likely to follow, from multinationals in the West and in Asia alike. Foreign support can play a role—as massive and long-term U.S. support for South Korea and Taiwan did during the Cold War—but the political events of the last five years in the Arab world suggest enduring problems for authoritarians.

There is no magic wand here, and all Arab governments are likely to struggle on a number of fronts. With governments' very existence at stake, outside pressure to democratize in the face of insurgency will yield little. It would be better to take a more strategic approach, encouraging countries to think about what it is they wish to become, and what components are necessary to achieve it. The U.S. government and other governments should reward holistic approaches that hold out some prospect of success, and reserve judgment on countries that seek to go their own way. Undemocratic populism has a shelf life, and the United States should not seek to preserve it. ■ 5/26/2015

Links of Interest

Cédric Schweizer of the ICRC joined CSIS scholars at an event on “Yemen's Crisis” on May 21, 2015.

Michael Herb spoke at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable entitled “Oil, Parliaments, and the Future of the Gulf” on April 16, 2015.

Jon Alterman gave an interview to Al-Mayadeen television station about current affairs in the region (in Arabic and English with Arabic subtitles).

Multiple news outlets quoted Jon Alterman about the Camp David summit and U.S.-Saudi relations, including the [Associated Press](#), [The New York Times](#), [NPR](#), [Al-Monitor](#), [Bloomberg](#), [The Washington Post](#), and [The National Journal](#).

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