

Special Feature

Democratic Learning, Moderation and Exclusion in the Arab Middle East

Preface

No longer can the certitudes of democratization or democracy be taken for granted. Political events around the world belie the preoccupation with a single model that ought to be desirable and adopted by others. The notion that democracy can be diffused from a Euro-American center to external peripheries has been questioned by both theory and practice. Academic studies focused on the variety of post-colonial experiences have initiated and strengthened lines of inquiry into the central role played by local forms of knowledge. In the Arab world, political and social actors have embarked, notwithstanding the obvious challenges of authoritarianism, in a search for good government. The five contributions, one article and four research notes, in this special feature identify and explore a case study or aspect of democratic learning and its concomitant struggle for good government.

In addition, the special feature is part of the ongoing four-year Qatar National Research Fund [QNRF] project of “Transitions of Islam and Democracy: Engendering ‘Democratic Learning’ and Civic Identities.” Arab and Muslims states are the focus of the dynamic of transition shared by religious tradition [Islam] and civil tradition [democracy]. Different lenses are applied to study various case studies of democratic learning combining bottom-up and top-down forms of politics. The “Transitions of Islam and Democracy” project aims to conceptualize from an entirety novel perspective, an indigenous frame of reference, the processes that are identified to be examples of democratic learning in the contemporary Arab world in in the last decade. Specifically, the three dimensions or values of civic/democratic learning of moderation, inclusiveness and mobilization constitute this project’s primary subject of interpretation and understanding. This special feature pursues the line of inquiry outlined by the QNRF project in directions that rethink the ties between political inclusion and moderation at the level of local social capital.

Moderation does not merely refer to the eschewal of violence but a norm

which is part of a broader cultural repertoire of citizens seeking to transform their political orders. Individuals and groups thus acquire the value and habits associated with moderation through a complex process of ‘democratic learning’ in a local milieu. Civic and religious traditions allow citizens to participate in politics with reference to a cultural repertoire that endows certain behaviour and institutions with formal or informal legitimacy. The wider Middle East provides many illustrations of the peculiarly local nature of political learning in contexts that range from sectarianism to pseudo-theocracies. However, the absence of total control or repression has created spaces in which political and social actors have coalesced around shared campaigns of discontent, accountability and empowerment to sustain, expand and legitimise those very spaces.

Indeed, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East seek to contain both peaceful and violent challengers from unravelling their domination and the sources that keep it intact. Although the use of coercion is essential, overall alternate strategies of exclusion and inclusion, political, economic, social and cultural, also contribute to regime maintenance. Opposition movements in the Arab world dwell across different spheres of public life. Exclusion in one arena may very well be accompanied by inclusion in another located in a milieu stamped more by the unevenness of political domination than virtual totalitarianism. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has been proscribed for most of its existence and yet it constituted both the largest opposition bloc in the 2005 parliament and the most organized social group in recent decades. Mass demonstrations in the public spaces of Iraq signal the challenge of informal modes of politics to institutionalised and exclusionary forms of decision-making. The ‘Arab uprisings’ and their legacy have questioned the correlation between anti-systemic forces and the use of peaceful methods or violence. A complex set of factors, from economic marginalisation to pro-Palestine campaigns, gave rise to political dynamics that may lead to a politics of protest. In this multifaceted context, individuals and groups can and do learn democratic values, concepts and behaviour that enable them to form and spread movements for political transformation. This special feature pays careful attention to the political factors that constitute the local milieux of the Arab world. Each contribution is devoted to a single aspect or case study of democratic learning.

Larbi Sadiki’s article provides the theoretical canvas for the research notes in this special feature in its rejection of the “one-size-fits-all” theorising behind the signifier of democratization. His discussion on democratic knowledge is a syncretic attempt to blend Bloom’s taxonomy and Martin Heidegger’s conceptions of learning

and unlearning. A democratic learning loop is proposed by Sadiki to identify and interpret the specificities of the democratic moment found in the Arab Spring. The article's central analytical concepts of democratic learning and unlearning are grounded in an explicit normative basis in politics. Sadiki's theoretical insights derive their interpretative power from stressing the didactic nature of democratization. Hediegger's broadly conceived notion of education is drawn upon to situate democratic learning in a transcultural context. The investigation into democratization begins with the consideration of knowledge-making in a critique of Orientalism culminating in the outlining of a democratic learning loop framework.

Mohammed Moussa's research note seeks to illustrate democratic learning in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 with reference to Islamist political practice. Political parties such as Freedom and Justice, Egyptian Current and Strong Egypt were founded in a post-Mubarak political setting. Moussa argues that a collective movement enables Islamist actors to acquire political knowledge. Moderation acquired through democratic learning is found not to occur along a linear sequence from radical to moderate. The research note analyses the adoption and impact of the norms of moderation and cooperation among Islamist actors. Moussa proposes the existence of a cultural repertoire to explain how former and current members of the Muslim Brotherhood were involved in projects of popular change.

Layla Saleh's research note is principally interested in ongoing political change undertaken by bottom-up forces in a Syrian context shaped by the Assad regime and international actors. Civic and violent modes and practices, that are broadly defined as resistance, against an authoritarian political order are not restricted to a single geographic setting. The research note studies the involvement of political actors in a process of democratic learning and "unlearning" which is also characterised by efforts at trust-building and voluntarism for the objective of revolutionary change. Saleh finds civic and violent expressions of political mobilization not to be mutually exclusive among activists, local council members and opposition politicians.

Fouad Jabir Kadhém and Ahmed Khudhair Abbas al-Ramahi focus on the history of opposition in modern Iraq and the outbreak of mass demonstrations in 2019. The authoritarianism of the post-Ottoman state had long marginalised social groups in the country. Following the American invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, newly created institutions of political representation had enabled previously excluded Iraqis to mobilize and participate in regular elections. However, the rise of political parties

seems to have contributed to the exclusion of certain groups in Iraqi society. Kadhem and al-Ramahi argue additional pressures in the region have reinforced existing ethnic and sectarian cleavages in a climate of mutual mistrust. Recent mass demonstrations are indications of a process of democratic learning that casts suspicion on formal party politics.

Abdel-Samad M. Ali, Satoshi Hoshino and Shizuka Hashimoto adopt a capabilities approach to social exclusion in their research note based on Amartya Sen's work. The multidimensional indicators employed by the authors are derived from the assumption that poverty is first and foremost a question of capability deprivation. In Egypt's Assiut province, social exclusion is recognised to be a dynamic process rather than being static. An interplay exists between social exclusion and inclusiveness. Indeed, inclusiveness in the research note is primarily concerned with the democratic learning of individuals and groups and their participation in political struggles such as youth activism in the age of the Arab uprisings.

The contributors to this special feature seek to go beyond the seemingly one-size-fits-all model of the inclusion-moderation thesis and its assumption of the latent or actual violent nature of Muslim actors. Indigenous perspectives of knowledge-making are of primary importance in the case of democracy and animate the behaviour of social and political actors. 'Democratic knowledge,' norms and practices, in the Muslim world demonstrate the essentially contested nature of the very idea of democracy and democratization.

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