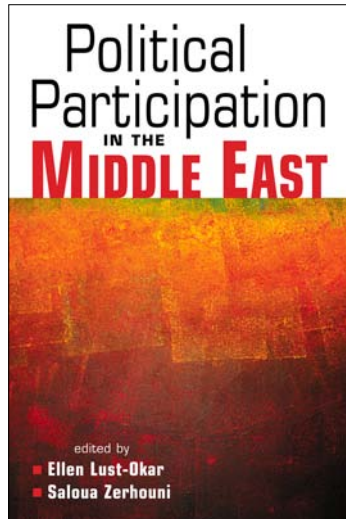


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# Political Participation in the Middle East

edited by  
Ellen Lust-Okar  
and Saloua Zerhouni

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# 1

## Taking Political Participation Seriously

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*Ellen Lust-Okar*

Since the 1980s, we have seen renewed political participation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and in authoritarian regimes more generally. Voters went to the polls, political parties (re)opened their offices, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mushroomed, and vigorous debates over political and economic reform were published in newly founded and independent media. Political activity has often coincided with, and in some cases was stimulated by, Western policies focused on democracy promotion. Funding for NGOs, election promotion, parliamentary strengthening, and other projects poured into the region, and “democratization” became the buzzword, though not the reality.

Scholars and policymakers tried to make sense of the changes in the context of democratization. Studies of elections, political parties, and other civil society actors questioned whether, and how, such political participation could promote democracy. Later, as the prospects for democracy went unmet, attention turned toward studies focusing on the endurance of authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup>

Whether viewed with optimism or despair, examining participation in elections, political parties, and other “democratically oriented” institutions through the lens of democratization is problematic. Scholars have tended to disregard the reforms that have taken place, largely ignoring important changes that permit political participation. The tendency to dismiss these venues as meaningless charades, often played for the pleasure of international forces, is also particularly disturbing. While this approach may indicate why regimes provide these institutions, it underestimates the agency of citizens within these states: Why do candidates and voters participate in such vacuous exercises? And how can such frameworks help to explain who participates, when, and how?

## 2 Political Participation in the Middle East

This volume aims to shift attention away from questions of democratization and enduring authoritarianism, toward the politics of participation in nondemocratic regimes. It seeks to move away from the state-centered approach, which has been the fundamental basis of a range of studies—from those that distinguish different types of authoritarianism and foundations of its stability,<sup>2</sup> to those that examine civil society and political liberalization—in order to discern the potential for democracy.<sup>3</sup> The chapters in this volume continue to recognize the importance of state institutions, but in addition they focus heavily on societal factors.

The volume seeks to bridge the gap between studies of authoritarian politics that view participation largely through formal, “democratic” institutions (e.g., elections, political parties, parliaments) and those that focus on informal institutions (e.g., kinship networks, informal mediation mechanisms). There is a tension between scholarship that essentially dismisses participation through formal venues, and scholarship that focuses on these institutions (particularly on their potentially democratizing effects); scant attention is paid to the informal institutions and coalition politics within which these formal venues are embedded. As Laila Alhamad and Holger Albrecht discuss herein, the debate over whether important political participation takes place within formal *or* informal venues is likely misguided. Political participation is best understood through the interface of informal and formal politics.

This volume seeks to expand our understanding of political participation *as it exists* under authoritarian regimes of the MENA region. It addresses three questions: How do we define and determine the venues of formal and informal political participation in these authoritarian regimes? How do we understand actions and strategies that different actors take within these venues? To what extent does the nature of participation in these venues vary across time and space? We aim to provide a catalyst for an important shift in the prevailing work on the region, which has tended to focus on the possibilities for democratization of these regimes, rather than on the politics of authoritarianism. We also hope to challenge the tendency to dismiss participation within formal arenas—whether in elections, parliaments, political parties, or trade unions—and the tendency to underestimate the importance of informal mechanisms of rule, seeking instead to explore the important intersections of these forces.

### ■ Outline of the Volume

The authors of this volume turn our attention to recognizing the various forms of political participation in the MENA region, and to how new and existing spaces for political participation affect both the strategies and the venues through which actors attempt to influence decisionmaking in nonde-

mocratic regimes. The authors bring diverse analytical perspectives to the table—including anthropology, history, and political science—in their examination of a wide range of cases, from Bahrain to Palestine.

Part 1 provides a conceptual framework for studying political participation in the Middle East and North Africa. In Chapter 2, Holger Albrecht asks a fundamental question: How should we conceptualize “political participation” in nondemocratic regimes? He argues that understanding political participation is “not only *applicable* in authoritarian states of the Middle East and North Africa . . . but also *critical* to a comprehensive understanding of state-society relationships in this region.” Yet he notes that several distinctions must be recognized when applying this concept to MENA states. Perhaps most important, in authoritarian regimes, the “political” sphere frequently overlaps with other spheres, such as the social and economic. Thus the salient issue is whether participation is intended to influence the state, not whether it takes place in ostensibly “political” venues. In addition, Albrecht suggests that analyses need to be cognizant of the various venues of participation (e.g., “classical channels” of political parties and NGOs, state-mobilized participation in corporatist arrangements, and informal social networks), of whether participation occurs through formal or informal channels, of whether it is initiated from above or below, and of whether it is “high intensity” or “low intensity.”

In Chapter 3, Laila Alhamad focuses our attention further on the various mechanisms and forms through which the population expresses itself in the public arena. The chapter juxtaposes participation through civil society (i.e., organizations that fill the space between the citizen and the state) and participation through informal venues (i.e., the networks, assemblies, and various other vehicles that prevail throughout society but are not always within purview of the state). Alhamad argues that the objectives of participation in these channels are manifold, and include sharing information, having a voice in political, economic, and social affairs, and finding mechanisms through which to access services and public resources. While this participation is more difficult to see and certainly more difficult to measure, recognizing the various forms of political participation is critical if we are to dispel the myth that MENA states are culturally indisposed to participation, ascertain the deficiencies of formal institutions, and propose ways to enhance participation to achieve better governance.

Part 2 explores electoral participation in Iran, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine. Elections are particularly interesting, for they are overt opportunities for political participation, and yet many of the incentives that apparently drive candidates and voters to participate in democratic elections (namely policymaking and elite turnover) are arguably less important in nondemocratic regimes. What is it, then, that drives participation, and how does it play out in the MENA states?

#### 4 *Political Participation in the Middle East*

The first two chapters in Part 2 explicitly explore the role that elections play in authoritarian regimes. In Chapter 4, Güneş Murat Tezcür examines the 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran. He argues that Iranian elections provide a mechanism to resolve intra-elite conflict. They are neither catalysts of democratization nor mechanisms that solidify and consolidate the regime's control over society; rather they serve to perpetuate pluralistic authoritarianism. Ultimately, elections provide formal channels of sustainable political participation that regulate limited competition and pluralism within the boundaries set by the guardians.

In Chapter 5, in contrast, I show how elections under Jordan's authoritarian regime provide an arena for significant competition over access to state resources. This "competitive clientelism" is both systematic and shaped by institutions, although in ways that are fundamentally different from electoral politics in democratic regimes. Most important, voters and candidates behave in ways that are both systematic and strategic, but also that tend to shore up the regime.

In Chapter 6, based on a very similar view of elections, Samer Shehata provides fascinating insights into electoral politics through an ethnographic study of the reelection campaign of a sitting Egyptian parliamentarian, Mounir Fakhry Abdelnour. Shehata demonstrates that candidates attempt to gain support, and citizens understand the role and function of parliamentarians, largely within a "service" framework. Parliamentarians are expected to deliver selected goods and services rather than large-scale public policies. Moreover, he shows how the Egyptian "election season" provides temporary economic relief for coffeehouse owners, potential voters, and others.

Chapter 7 focuses on the politics of local elections in Palestine, another case where elections play a more important role in elite turnover. Dag Tuastad analyzes local elections in Gaza as a space for competition over political authority among different factions whose main motive is to preserve their position. He demonstrates how the elections increase intra-elite conflicts as the power of incumbents becomes threatened. Indeed, the recent violence following the annulment of municipal election results in Gaza demonstrates the alliance of two sets of antidemocratic elites: Fatah, which controlled the formal authority in the area, and the traditional elite, the large families. In the face of a potential Hamas victory, these forces allied to undermine the electoral results, even using violence to undermine the ballot box. In a context characterized by violence, neopatrimonial rule in Palestine constitutes a major handicap to efficient participation.

Part 3 examines the multiple venues of political participation through case studies of Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. In Chapter 8, Katja Niethammer further demonstrates how the formal and informal arenas of political participation overlap in sometimes surprising ways. In her study of

Bahrain, Niethammer outlines various arenas of participation, varying in degrees of formality, and then focuses on three groups of actors that have different positions toward state institutions, ranging from adoption to rejection. She demonstrates that these groups have developed divergent strategies directed both toward exerting pressure on the government and toward competition with other oppositional groups. Indeed, the fragmentation of Bahrain's society and the resulting high level of distrust between the participants and boycotters, and more fundamentally between the various religious and ethnic groups, has severely constrained most political actors and reshaped political participation.

In Chapter 9, Nihad Gohar maps the most important channels of participation in Egypt, such as political parties, syndicates, and civil society organizations, both secular and religious, and explores the intersections between official and parallel venues of participation. She analyzes the relative weaknesses and strengths of the various channels of participation, as well as their boundaries and restrictions.

In Chapter 10, Driss Maghraoui examines the political significance of civil society organizations in Morocco, specifically the Equity and Reconciliation Commission and the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture. He demonstrates that NGOs not only offer space for political activity, but also serve as mechanisms by which the Moroccan monarchy can ease social tensions. On the one hand, these organizations represent the monarchy's specific response to major social and political problems. At the same time, the palace uses them to mobilize, divide, and balance various tendencies within society, thereby helping to ensure its survival. The chapter therefore demonstrates how NGOs, and other venues of participation, should not be seen as exogenously created institutions through which citizens participate, but rather as institutions created in response to—and that also shape—the dynamics of state-society relations.

In Chapter 11, Saloua Zerhouni examines political participation in the Moroccan parliament. The inclusion of parliamentary activity in a study of political participation may at first seem curious; however, as Holger Albrecht notes, given the permeable nature of the boundary between politicians and participants, aimed at influencing the political process, the activities of parliamentarians are perhaps best thought of as political participation. Zerhouni therefore considers the incentives behind parliamentarians' participation in the legislation process and in government oversight.

In Chapter 12, Delphine Cavallo explores the General Labor Union of Tunisia as an arena of both legal and illegal political expression. As a national organization, this union participates in decisions concerning labor rights and laws. At the same time, however, the union sometimes engages in struggling against political and social decisions. Like many other state-created institutions in authoritarian regimes, it plays an ambivalent role, pro-



viding a site of activity for supporting the state, but also a space for contestation between actors more and less concerned with political and economic issues, and with supporting or undermining state authority.

## ■ Preliminary Insights and Implicit Debates

This volume presents a number of lessons and underlying debates. All contributors generally agree that political participation in the MENA region must be taken seriously. However, they disagree on a number of major issues: the nature of participation—who participates, where and how, and whether the significance of participation lies in the behavior of elites or average citizens; how to characterize the boundaries between informal or formal institutions, the extent to which these venues are integrated, and the degree to which each should be emphasized; the role that international forces play in shaping participation; and finally, the ways in which participation varies across regime types and the availability of other arenas of participation.

There is some debate over the very definition of participation. For instance, the question of intent lies at the heart of a debate between Holger Albrecht and Laila Alhamad. For Albrecht, political participation must be intentionally aimed at influencing public policy. In contrast, Alhamad takes a much broader view, adopting the position of scholars who have defined participation more broadly, not limited to an intentional action aimed at influencing decisionmaking.

The authors also take different approaches to the questions of who participates, and whether participation of average citizens or elites should be studied seriously. Laila Alhamad emphasizes the ways in which a broad public engages in politics, from the man on the street growing a beard in Algeria to the shaikh acting as an intermediary between state and society. Dag Tuastad and Samer Shehata demonstrate a similar breadth of focus. Exploring the politics surrounding elections, they highlight the wide range of actors who engage in politics—from the average citizen mobilizing in support of candidates or exerting pressure on local elites, to local and national party elites attempting to shore up their power. Similarly, I too emphasize the participation of a range of actors, arguing that rural, less educated actors are actually more likely to participate in the case of Jordanian elections.

Other contributors focus their attention primarily on existing and rising elites. For instance, although Holger Albrecht argues convincingly for broadening the notion of participation, he nevertheless pays most attention to the predominantly urban, educated sectors of society. Similarly, Güneş Murat Tezcür and Katja Niethammer focus their efforts on examining how contending elites, at times strengthened by popular mobilization, use vari-

ous institutions in struggles over political power in Iran and Bahrain. Examining very different venues, Delphine Cavallo and Saloua Zerhouni emphasize how Tunisian trade unions and the Moroccan parliament provide spaces for elite conflict.

Even when examining the same actors, the authors differ in the motivations they attribute to participation. The chapters on elections present very different perspectives on the motivations driving voters. In both Samer Shehata's study of Egypt and my study of Jordan, the prospect of obtaining services and access to state patronage through winning candidates lures voters to the polls. Alternately, in Tezcür's study of Iran, voters are brought to the polls by the need to obtain a stamp on their identification card, without which their access to state services is impeded. This has important implications, for it is not the specific candidate who wins that will determine whether or not voters benefit from turning out at the polls, but the general act of voting that matters. Finally, although Dag Tuastad's study of Palestinian elections is not focused on the motivations of voters, he portrays a society in which both voters and party elites appear to believe that elections can provide a vehicle for fundamental change in the ruling elite—as indeed they did—and in essence change their lives. Such change, particularly at the top levels, is unthinkable in Egypt and Jordan.

Indeed, to some extent, fundamental differences in regime types may be responsible for variations in both the motivations of actors and the range of actors who participate politically. There are enormous distinctions between the nondemocratic regimes in the MENA region: the monarchies of Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco function very differently than the dominant party states of Egypt and Tunisia, for instance. Even within these broad regime types, there are stark contrasts in the level of contestation within the public sphere, socioeconomic structures, and the nature of the regime. Jordan is not Bahrain, and Tunisia is not Egypt. Consequently, differences in regime type may explain the apparently conflicting interpretations of voters' motivations. The same venue of participation—such as elections—may play a very different role in Palestine, where the distribution of decision-making power among competing elites is at stake, than it does in Jordan, where elections may be better understood as a competition over access to state patronage.

As well, the extent to which high turnout and an appearance of “democracy” is evident may vary, across both regimes and time. At a time when Iran is under enormous pressure from Western, democratic nations, Tezcür is likely correct when he argues that “the regime perceives high turnout rates as a confirmation of the Islamic Republic's public legitimacy and portrays voting in the elections as a national, patriotic duty.” Moreover, in a system with large blocs of competing elites in the innermost circles of the regime, elections can become a mechanism of managing factional conflict

that is not necessary for the maintenance of the contemporary Egyptian or Tunisian regimes, or the Iranian regime under the Shah.

More generally, the role and impact that various venues for participation play in the distribution of resources and policymaking in authoritarian regimes depend not only on the legal framework that regulates an institution (be it parliament, civil society, etc.), but also on frameworks that regulate other venues. For instance, Nihad Gohar points out that in Egypt the role of political parties is determined not only by laws governing political parties and elections, but also by laws restricting the judiciary, civil society, and other possible sites of participation. The decision to turn to different institutions to voice demands, and the ways in which other institutions are used, can only be understood as part of a larger, interconnected whole.

Thus, how important one institution, whether formal or informal, is as a venue for raising political demands depends in part on the availability of alternative sites. Delphine Cavallo argues that tight restrictions on formal political institutions led Tunisians to use the labor union as a site to make political, as well as economic, demands: it “is an arena that offers competing actors a means to express themselves, to organize themselves, and to be heard.” As such, “the UGTT [General Labor Union of Tunisia] remains an important arena for contestation over the balance of power among actors, and indeed for contestation over the boundaries of the state.”

For some contributors, the formal political arena has become so restricted as to be rendered nearly meaningless. In this vein, Laila Alhamad argues, “probably the most ubiquitous forms of participation in the MENA region are those of the informal realm, many of which are perpetuated by the rigidity of the formal political sphere. When the state, through its formal institutions, represses, excludes, or fails to listen or respond to people’s needs, people resort to the informal realm.” The political space within which actors participate has important implications, however. Strengthening participation in the informal realm undermines formal institutions, influences society, and ultimately shapes participation. As Alhamad continues, “This underworld of participation perpetuates a short-term and individualistic vision of society. Promoting ties of patronage, distorting incentives, eluding the rule of law, and evading accountability, these networks do not measure up to the ‘good governance’ criteria for sustainable political and economic development.”

Other contributors present a more complex picture of interactions between formal and informal participation. For example, Katja Niethammer, in her chapter on Bahrain, illustrates how parliamentarians, boycotters, and the more radical opposition, who are engaged in competition with each other as well as with state elite, use both formal and informal participation channels mobilization mechanisms depending in part on the relationship between these actors and the state. The most obvious example

is that parliamentarians can use the Shura Council to voice demands, while boycotters and radical opponents cannot. Niethammer also demonstrates, however, the complex relationships between these arenas, which, while distinct, are not entirely divorced from each other. Thus, for instance, a deputy chairman of the elected parliamentary chamber attempted to negotiate with boycotters not by addressing them through political parties, but rather by first informally approaching a leading Shiite cleric. Dag Tuastad's discussion of negotiations over the 2005 local elections in Gaza demonstrates similarly fluid maneuvering between formal and informal political institutions. There, not only did Fatah try to shore up power by reinstating the role of the mukhtar, which itself reinforced and politicized family structures, but negotiations over the violence that followed the elections also took place through both formal and informal political channels. Boundaries between formal and informal arenas are porous, bringing into question the extent to which primacy should be given to either formal or informal channels of participation.

A third approach focuses on participation in formal arenas but recognizes that social structures and informal political institutions affect participation in these channels. From this perspective, elections, parliaments, and other formal venues are given primary attention, and the institutions within them shape participation. Thus, for instance, Tuastad's chapter on Palestine and my own chapter on Jordan both demonstrate how election laws, districting, and institutions affect political participation and representation. Yet kinship networks and sectarian relations also play major roles in the elections in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and Bahrain. Indeed, formal institutions may have very different implications where these social networks are salient than they do elsewhere. Thus the majoritarian electoral laws put in place in Jordan, where tribal networks are salient, acted to fragment the political system rather than to strengthen a small number of political parties, as they do in most established, Western democracies. Social structures and informal mechanisms of obtaining resources significantly shape participation in formal political arenas. From this perspective, formal political arenas and institutional structures within them matter; however, participation in these arenas cannot be understood independently of social identities and informal venues (e.g., tribe, sects, gatherings, and weddings).

A final point of some debate concerns the role that international forces play in promoting and influencing political participation in the MENA region. All contributors agree that international forces have played a major role in the region's domestic politics, although some have addressed this issue more directly than others. There is some disagreement over the impact these forces have had. For Katja Niethammer, international actors—and particularly the National Democratic Institute (NDI)—have played a positive role in mediating between competing elites, bringing them to the nego-

tiating table to resolve differences when all else fails. In a similar respect, Nihad Gohar suggests that, in Egypt, international pressures have combined with internal pressures in “forcing the government to (somewhat) succumb to vocal opposition in the media.” The United States and other governments, global civil society organizations, intergovernmental organizations, and international donors voicing concerns about freedom, good governance, and democratization have all provided catalysts for change in Egypt.

Others contributors are much more critical. Laila Alhamad most directly voices this alternative view, arguing that the efforts of international organizations tend to foster an appearance of political reform and democratization while simultaneously shoring up the authoritarian regime:

Quick and simplistic recipes for political reform, such as those that are put forward by a number of Western governments and scholars, and that figure so prominently in the media and policy debate, provide as cosmetic an attempt at reform as that which MENA governments wish to undertake. Indeed, these have helped to somewhat reduce popular frustration, served to make the West feel good about its efforts, and shed a positive light on MENA governments’ perfunctory attempts at political reform.

Other chapters reveal similar perspectives, including my own analysis of Jordan, which suggests that elections (often the centerpiece of international democratization efforts) help sustain the Jordanian monarchy, and Holger Albrecht’s analysis of Egypt, which suggests that only a small segment of the population shows interest and confidence in political parties and electoral politics.

However, despite disagreements on the role of international forces, all contributors would agree with Alhamad’s recommendation: “To remedy this situation, the debate on democratization in the region needs to move away from its focus on funding and quick fixes, to consider options for political change based on the reality on the ground.” Both the more optimistic scholarly works on democratization and democratization programs, and the fairly pessimistic writings on enduring authoritarianism, have more frequently focused on the nature of political participation in democracies than on the reality of participation in nondemocratic regimes. Mapping a strategy to achieve democracy without first taking careful account of where nondemocratic regimes currently are is almost bound to fail. The chapters that follow aim not only to provide readers with a better understanding of the many venues of political participation in a diverse set of nondemocratic regimes in the MENA region, but also to turn our attention back to “what is.” Doing so sheds much-needed light on the politics of nondemocratic regimes in the MENA region, specifically, and grants invaluable perspective to those engaged in democracy promotion more broadly.

■ **Notes**

1. See, for example, essays in Posusney and Angrist 2005 and Schlumberger 2007.
2. This large literature, which spans decades and a diverse set of approaches, cannot be cited fully here. It includes such works as Hudson 1977; Hinnebusch 1985; Sharabi 1988; and Wedeen 1999.
3. Most notably, see contributions in Norton 1995, 1996; and Brynen, Korany, and Noble 1995, 1998.