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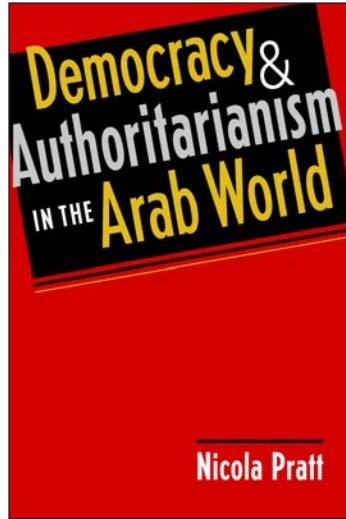
Democracy and
Authoritarianism
in the Arab World

Nicola Pratt

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Reconsidering Democratization in the Arab World

SINCE THE FALL OF COMMUNISM, and with the “Third Wave” of democratization engulfing much of the world (Huntington 1991), academics and activists have been preoccupied with how to promote democratic reforms in the Arab¹ region (Brynen, Korany, and Noble 1995a: 5–6). The 1990s were a time of much optimism about the possibilities for democratization, with arguments that Arab regimes would be forced to open up in response to a more active civil society that included human rights organizations, women’s groups, and an array of NGOs (see various authors in Norton 1995 and 1996). In addition, some observers predicted that Arab regimes would have to pursue democratic reforms in tandem with or subsequent to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank-sponsored economic reforms in order to maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens (Harik 1992a; Richards 1995; Singerman 1995). Nonetheless, despite the growth in civil-society activity and the implementation of economic reforms, the expected political openings did not emerge in a sustained way.

The failure of democratization to take root has given greater credibility to those within foreign-policy circles who argue in favor of Middle East “exceptionalism,” embedded within ahistorical and essentialized notions of Arab-Muslim political culture. Authors such as Bernard Lewis, and others writing within the tradition of scholarship entitled “orientalism,” have argued that Arab-Muslim culture is incompatible with democracy because concepts associated with democracy, such as representative government, freedom, and the separation of religion from

state, are unknown within Islam and the Arab political tradition (Kedourie 1994; Lewis 1993). In “The Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel Huntington (1993) employs the concept of essentialized cultural difference between a liberal, democratic, secular West versus the “Rest,” including the Islamic world, where Western values possess little cultural resonance, to describe the emerging pattern of global politics and conflicts in the post–Cold War context.

This book aims to challenge deterministic and essentializing approaches to theorizing democratic transitions in the Arab world by examining the dynamics of authoritarianism and of opposition to it as a historically constituted political process. This involves an investigation into the development of authoritarian political systems in the Arab world, beginning with the colonial period and continuing through to the present. I argue that authoritarianism is not only determined by the type of regime that is in power and the nature of political relations under that regime. Linked to this, there exists a complex of social relations rooted in class, gender, religious, and ethnic differences. These relations are not only produced as a result of economic and institutional structures, such as the type of development strategy adopted or the structuring of state–civil society relations. They are also constituted by individuals and groups engaging in social and political interactions for the purpose of furthering their interests—whether in support of or against democratization.

These interests cannot be assumed from material circumstances, although these necessarily play a role. In addition, they are shaped by self-identities—such as belonging to a certain national community or to a certain class. Such self-identities are not fixed in stone but have evolved in response to the experiences of colonialism, the anticolonial struggle, and the process of state building in the postindependence period. It is this particular historical experience that is an important factor in understanding the apparent “exceptionalism” of the Arab world with regard to the slow pace of democratic transition.

Classifying Arab Regimes

Most authors classify Arab countries according to the nature of their regimes: “the radical, populist republics” vs. “the conservative, kin-ordered monarchies” (Ayubi 1995), “socialist republics” vs. “liberal [*sic*] monarchs” (Richards and Waterbury 1990), or “single-party regimes” vs. “family rule” (Owen 2004). Different types of regimes are associated with different types of political institutions, different political cultures,

and different relations between regime and societal groups. They are also associated at certain points in their history with different types of political economy.

This book examines the group of regimes that are characterized as radical/populist/socialist/single-party. These are the regimes of Algeria, Egypt, Iraq (prior to March 2003), Syria, and Tunisia, which share a number of features that have led scholars to group them together. First, they have all been, at one point or another, dominated by a single party: the Ba'ath parties in Syria and (prewar) Iraq, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algeria, the Parti Socialiste Destourien (PSD) (formerly, the Neo-Destour) in Tunisia, and the National Democratic Party (formerly the Arab Socialist Union/National Union/National Liberation Rally) in Egypt. These regimes have co-opted a number of functionally differentiated organizations, such as trade unions, peasant unions, and professional associations, into corporatist arrangements. These have been used to mobilize support for regimes as well as to implement regime policies. Within this system, there has been little room for political or civil-society activity independent of the regime, thereby concentrating formal political power in the hands of the regime. In sum, these regimes have demonstrated the characteristics associated with a common definition of authoritarianism (Linz 2000: 255).

Until the 1970s (or 1980s in the case of Algeria and Iraq), these countries were associated with radical nationalist ideologies and commitment to social and economic transformation aimed at addressing the injustices and underdevelopment that was seen as a legacy of colonial rule. Toward this end, they embarked upon programs of industrialization and agrarian reform, adopting state planning and taking control of the commanding heights of the economy. In addition, they provided extensive welfare benefits, including universal healthcare and education. These attempts at social engineering led them to be described as “radical” and “mobilizing.” The term “socialist” has also been utilized to define this period of regime consolidation. While socialist-type policies were pursued and there were attempts to articulate an “Arab” socialist ideology, socialism was used to describe policies conducted out of nationalist and modernizing concerns rather than ideological belief (Ayubi 1995: 198).

In the 1970s, most of these regimes were forced to turn away from their rhetorical commitment to socialism and its associated policies, as a result of economic difficulties, which were compounded by the humiliation suffered by the Arab armies in the 1967 war with Israel. Different phases of economic liberalization were introduced, either voluntarily or

as a result of structural adjustment programs sponsored by the international financial institutions (IFIs). Economic reforms were usually accompanied by a shift in foreign policy away from alliances with the Soviet bloc, toward the West and/or the conservative Gulf countries. To different degrees, regimes began to loosen some restrictions on political expression, thereby opening the way for a limited type of political pluralism. In most cases, elections to a national assembly were introduced.

By the 1990s, experiments in limited political liberalization were halted or reversed. In most cases, growing Islamist opposition provided a justification for clampdowns on civil liberties that implicated not only the Islamist opposition but other civil-society organizations as well. In the case of Iraq, the war against Iran in the 1980s afforded a similar opportunity for the repression of any sort of dissent. The situation of blocked political liberalization and restrictions on civil liberties continued throughout the 1990s.

The slow or nonexistent pace of political reform in the Arab world was largely tolerated by external actors, including the United States, until 2001. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 initiated a shift in US foreign policy toward active support for democratization in the Arab world/Middle East as a means of countering terrorism. Part of the (post-facto) justification for the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was to bring democracy to the Middle East. With the fall of the Ba‘th regime, Iraq was held up as a potential model for democratic reform within the Arab region. For some observers, and despite the ongoing violence inside Iraq, 2005 represented the year when US efforts began to pay off. A series of events appeared to signal a political sea change within the region toward greater democracy (Dickey 2005; Zakaria 2005). This was illustrated by the holding of elections and the drafting of a new constitution in Iraq, the election of a new president in Palestine, municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, the exit of Syrian forces from Lebanon forced by large street demonstrations there, and the holding of the first competitive presidential elections in Egypt.

There are many ways in which such optimism could be qualified—that the Iraqi elections took place in a context of severe violence and the outcome of the constitution drafting contributed to conflict within Iraq; that the Saudi elections were for a limited number of seats, with women being barred from voting; and that Egypt’s presidential elections were marred by many irregularities. Meanwhile, Tunisia and Syria appeared to be no closer to political reforms than they were several years previously, and Algeria launched a referendum on a national reconciliation plan that would deny justice to the many victims of atrocities committed during the civil war, while consolidating “oligarchic rule.”²

The continuing obstacles to political reform—despite the changing political economy, ideological rhetoric, and introduction of elections over time—points to the ability of Arab regimes to adapt and change in order to maintain their authoritarian rule. The longevity of authoritarian rule in the Arab world illustrates that democracy is not inevitable. Rather, there exist significant obstacles to dismantling these regimes. These obstacles are not rooted in a timeless Arab-Muslim political culture, but rather in the dynamics of authoritarianism itself. These dynamics are shaped by the historical context in which authoritarianism has emerged.

The Basis of Authoritarian Rule: Bringing the State Back In

Authoritarianism is most often defined as a regime type—in terms of personnel, rules of the game, and the structure of the polity (Linz 2000; Richards and Waterbury 1990). As noted above, scholars of Middle East politics have classified different Arab regimes according to certain characteristics: single party vs. family rule; radical vs. conservative. While such typologies can identify differences in policies, political institutions, and ideologies, they neglect to describe or understand the infrastructure that sustains these different regimes—namely, the state.

In examining the nature of the state that has underpinned authoritarian rule, I draw upon the work of three scholars of Middle East political economy—Roger Owen (1992/2004), Simon Bromley (1994), and Nazih Ayubi (1995). They argue that the process of state formation in the Arab world plays a significant role in explaining the nature of politics within Arab states. In other words, authoritarianism is not the product of certain types of regimes but rather emerges from the nature of the states over which these regimes rule.

The starting point for an analysis of the emergence of Arab regimes is the colonial period. Political and economic domination by colonial powers created a particular legacy that shaped the trajectory of state development within the Arab region. Colonial domination, in most cases, created the system of nation-states that exists today in the region. Previously, the Arab lands examined here had been part of the Ottoman Empire. With the exception of Egypt, which had a long history of territorial unity, the creation of a state system imposed new political realities and identities. The legacy of European domination created an impetus for the expansion of postindependence state institutions—including the police, the military, economic enterprises, and the bureaucracy (Owen

2004: 9–11). In turn, state expansion acted to concentrate resources and, consequently, power in the hands of the regimes that controlled the state, thereby paving the way for authoritarianism (p. 27).

Colonial rule, while not initiating the process, certainly increased the pace of the incorporation of the region into the global capitalist system and cemented its subordinate position within this system. This subordination also constitutes a major factor in the development of authoritarianism (Bromley 1994). Postindependence regimes responded to the challenge of economic modernization by initiating heavy state involvement in the economy (e.g., through the nationalization of industries, the redistribution of agricultural land, and control and the direction of trade). The degree of foreign political domination and economic penetration was uneven between different countries of the region, with different political outcomes. Those areas that escaped direct colonial control (Turkey and Iran) or were dependent on the development of a commodity that needed to be sold on the international market (that is, oil in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states) developed state systems that were *not* anti-imperialist. In these circumstances, indigenous anticolonial/national movements represented a threat to pro-Western ruling groups and were suppressed. On the other hand, in those areas where there was considerable foreign control of the economy (for example, Egypt and Syria) and economic development depended upon indigenous industrialization, state formation took an anti-imperialist direction. In this context, those classes (such as the large landowners) whose interests were associated with colonial rule were politically suppressed. Although the two patterns of state formation differ, through the suppression of certain classes, they have led to the creation of an authoritarian political system (Bromley 1994: 104).

Like Simon Bromley, Nazih Ayubi (1995) also argues that politics in the Middle East has been shaped not only by colonialism and the nature of incorporation into the global capitalist economy but also by the internal social configuration of Middle East societies. The encroaching capitalist mode of production stimulated by colonial penetration was articulated with already existing modes of production, leading to a weak and fluid configuration of classes. In such a context, no one class was able to achieve hegemony. Therefore, the regimes that came to power in the postindependence era were forced to build alliances, through processes of co-optation, in order to maintain their power. This has created states where political relations are structured through corporatist arrangements (p. 25). Corporatism represents a type of state-society relationship that is based on the linking of groups, classes, and individuals to

the state through various means (such as patronage, clientelism, welfare measures, etc.), and through various “organizational” modalities (including trade unions and other “mass” organizations) (p. 35).

Under single-party/populist regimes, state corporatism enabled capitalist accumulation (Ayubi 1995: 192). By establishing corporatist structures, regimes politically excluded those social groups that supported the precolonial arrangements, such as large landowners. Simultaneously, regimes used corporatist structures, such as mass organizations, to co-opt and mobilize those sections of society that were necessary for the state’s economic development strategy of import-substitution industrialization (ISI), namely the working classes, the peasantry, and the middle classes.

State corporatism functioned to subordinate mass organizations and other groups to the regime. Subordination was achieved by regime control of the selection of the leadership of corporatist organizations and by specifying (through a variety of laws) the limits of their organizational activities—usually defined in terms of national development objectives. Consequently, mass organizations became vehicles for implementing national development policies, such as raising productivity and eradicating illiteracy, rather than as a means of holding their regimes to account. The subordination of corporatist organizations to the regime was legitimized by a populist-nationalist discourse that emphasized the importance of national unity as a means of state building (Ayubi 1995: 206–207). It is no surprise that corporatism, as a system rooted in collaboration between different social groups/classes, should lend itself to a rhetoric of unity rather than pluralism.

The above authors identify the ways in which the emergence of authoritarianism is linked to the process of state building in the postindependence period and, in turn, the ways in which this process depended upon the construction of certain hierarchies of social relations (rooted in the economy and institutions). This process may be regarded in terms of a response to the economic problems created by colonial domination. In the process of ridding their countries of colonial influence, regimes in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, and Iraq repressed large landowners and other groups associated with colonial privilege. Meanwhile, they co-opted workers, peasants, and the middle classes whose productive efforts were deemed essential for national development. The old oligarchy was politically excluded while the popular coalition of forces were mobilized through corporatist organizations. However, this inclusion was structured in a way that suppressed competition and subordinated these groups to the direction of the executive powers. Executive

powers were enhanced by the concentration of resources in the hands of these regimes due to the huge expansion of the public sector and bureaucracy. These processes created a system of authoritarian rule.

Yet, state building should not only be seen as a top-down process. In order to succeed, it relies on the participation of ordinary people, who are the basis for the social relations underpinning the state. In other words, the emergence of authoritarianism has not only been shaped by the actions of regime elites in the sphere of state building. It has also depended upon the consent of non-elites in this process, based on some sort of self-interest. For Ayubi, the most important factor in enabling elites to secure the consent of citizens for the building of authoritarian rule was the state's provision of socioeconomic benefits, such as universal healthcare, education, workplace benefits, and subsidized goods and services, enabled by the expansion of the public sector in the early years of independence (1995: 35). The provision of these benefits served to integrate citizens into the state and to lend credence to the populist-nationalist discourse of regimes. In addition, Arab regimes constructed mass-based and functionally defined corporatist institutions, which appeared to include workers, peasants, and other working people politically and to protect and promote their interests within the political system (p. 209). An implicit bargain was struck whereby citizens ceded the exercise of political and civil rights for the consumption of social and economic benefits (Singerman 1995: 245). This socioeconomic inclusion compensated for the limitations on political participation (Ayubi 1995: 33). Simultaneously, it rendered the regime's legitimacy dependent upon its economic performance (pp. 31–32). As soon as this economic performance faltered due to the inherent contradictions of the ISI strategy, regimes were forced to narrow their political alliances in tandem with their economic strategies (p. 219). This led some observers, based on the writings of transition theorists such as Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986), to anticipate that Arab countries would be obliged to pursue democratic reforms as a means of maintaining widespread political support (for example, Ayubi 1995: 410; Richards 1995).

Yet, this democratic transformation has not occurred and poses a problem with regard to understanding political processes in terms of socioeconomic factors. Here, I turn to the writings of Antonio Gramsci (d. 1937), who attempted to understand why capitalism continued to survive in the first quarter of twentieth-century Italy, despite the existence of the objective economic conditions that would support a transition to communism. Gramsci argued that exploitative relations were underpinned by "a complex of moral injunctions that make these relationships seem

right and proper to all parties in the exchange” (Femia 2001: 139). In other words, for Gramsci, capitalism is not only a particular structure of economic relations of production but also a system of meanings that normalize those relations. This system of meanings is not imposed upon workers by the owners of capital. Rather, workers also participate in producing a culture—in the broadest sense of the term—in which capitalism is normalized (Eagleton 1991: 114). This consensus concerning the “commonsense” nature or naturalness of existing relations of power, despite their oppressive or unequal nature, is termed “hegemony” (Boggs 1976: 39).

Similarly, authoritarianism continues to exist as a hegemonic system despite the existence of objective economic factors (namely, economic deterioration since the 1970s) that would appear to undermine authoritarianism and support a process of democratization. This, I argue here, indicates that authoritarian rule is not only underpinned by socio-economic structures but also by a culture (in terms of a socially produced system of meanings) that normalizes it. By this, I do not mean to invoke essentialized and ahistoric notions of an Islamic-Arab culture or mentality. Culture should be seen as ever-changing and shaped by historical processes. It represents a social practice of “meaning-making” in which actors make the world in which they live intelligible (Clarke et al. 1976: 9–74; Wedeen 1999). These meanings do not exist only in people’s heads but are realized in the ways that people live their lives—in the choices that they make, and in their everyday behavior. As a system of meanings constructed through social practices, culture is produced, reproduced, amended, and even revolutionized in the context of changing historical conditions.

The Culture of Authoritarianism: Hegemony and Civil Society

For Antonio Gramsci, “culture” represents one of the noncoercive mechanisms by which rulers win popular consent for their rule (1971: 258). The operation of culture in normalizing the relations between the rulers and those who are ruled is illustrated by Marsha Pripstein Posusney’s 1997 study of Egyptian workers in the postindependence period. She argues that workers believe themselves to be embedded within a reciprocal relationship with the state, in which the latter provides socio-economic benefits in exchange for workers’ contribution to national development as a patriotic duty (rather than in compensation for the

withdrawal of political rights). This is demonstrated by the logic of workers' protests, which have tended to favor lock-ins and demonstrations over all-out work stoppages, in order not to disrupt their contribution to national production. The object of their demands has been the restoration of their living standards when these have fallen, rather than new rights, such as the freedom to form an independent union or to strike. Pripstein Posusney characterizes this belief in a reciprocal relationship as the "moral economy" (1997: 4–6).³ The operation of the moral economy suggests that workers have identified themselves as members of a particular national community. It is within the cultural (or ideological) framework of "nation" that workers perceive their rights as guaranteed. When workers believed that the terms of the moral economy had broken down, they sought to restore these terms through their protests rather than to construct a new framework of demands based on political and civil rights.

The above examination of workers' protests demonstrates that the hegemony of authoritarianism should not be reduced to its economic and institutional dimensions. The cultural dimension of hegemony prevents the establishment of a straightforward causal relationship between economics and political demands. As Pripstein Posusney's study demonstrates, workers have not simply abandoned their belief in the ideological validity of the reciprocal relationship underpinning authoritarianism as soon as economic benefits have been withdrawn. Similarly, we should not assume that society will demand political and civil freedoms in compensation for the loss of socioeconomic benefits. Individuals may support the maintenance of the existing hegemony on the basis of an established reciprocal relationship, which is ideologically as well as materially based. This suggests that hegemony is not a zero-sum game in which the dominant group exercises power at the expense of those who are dominated. Rather, the "dominated" contribute to and participate in their domination through their belief in the validity of the system.

The need for regimes to win the consent for their rule signifies that ordinary people must continue to believe in the system for it to work. This belief is demonstrated through the continuous participation of ordinary people "in the system," as well as by their political actions. In the above case, those workers' actions and demands that reaffirm the validity of the reciprocal relationship underpinning authoritarianism also operate to reproduce authoritarianism, even as they challenge the regime in power. Consequently, challenges to the regime should not be equated with challenges to authoritarianism.

Where regimes have faced challenges to their rule, they have often resorted to coercion in order to suppress opposition movements, demonstrations, and other protest activities. Yet, according to Gramsci, coercion alone is insufficient to maintain hegemony. Prolonged coercion entails high costs to regimes. At the most obvious level, this would appear to mean that coercion, for the most part, is threatened in order to deter people from transgressing the consensus that maintains regime hegemony. Yet, this would amount to stating that society is coerced into accepting the consensus underpinning authoritarian rule. This is contrary to the essence of hegemony as principally a noncoercive form of leadership. As Terry Eagleton argues, “the coercive institutions of a society . . . must themselves win a general consent from the people if they are to operate effectively” (1991: 114). This suggests that, although Arab regimes may be characterized as “fierce” (Ayubi 1995: 449), this level of coercion is not necessarily contested by the majority of society. Indeed, coercion is ultimately rendered ineffective as soon as it ceases to be seen as legitimate by a critical mass within society.

If the maintenance of regimes in power depends upon the existence of a consensus that sees authoritarianism as natural, how is such a world view created and diffused? In this respect, the role of civil society is key as the arena in which hegemony is naturalized (Boggs 1976: 39). For Gramsci, civil society represents the “trench systems” of the state—the position from which the battle for the hearts and minds of citizens is conducted (Femia 2001: 140). It includes those institutions, such as religion, trade unions, and the education system, that are not directly involved in production (such as economic enterprises) nor directly responsible for the exercise of political power (such as the government, the state bureaucracy, or the courts) (Gramsci 1971: 56, n. 5). This is a sphere not merely of organizational actors, but of ideas and culture, in its widest sense. It consists of the spaces in which ideological struggle takes place—such as the media, debating salons, places of worship, and community hall meetings (Cohen and Arato 1994: 429) in addition to the family/private sphere. It is within civil society that projects of anticolonial struggle, national modernization, women’s emancipation, and the nature of national identity and culture have been formulated and debated, thereby contributing to their diffusion within the wider society.

This notion of civil society differs from liberal conceptions of the term. Writers within the liberal tradition, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, see civil society as the range of institutions beyond the state that act to counterbalance state power and prevent despotic rule (Kaviraj 2001).

On the other hand, for Gramsci, civil society is an intrinsic part of the modern state (the state = political society + civil society [Gramsci 1971: 262]). Regime domination of civil society under authoritarianism does not destroy civil society. Rather, civil society under authoritarianism continues to exist but does not necessarily behave or resemble civil society in liberal democratic systems. Indeed, in the countries studied here, civil society has played an integral part in state building through the incorporation of individuals into the state as citizens. This has been achieved on several levels. Most obviously, trade unions, peasant unions, as well as other mass-based organizations have institutionally linked individuals to the state and served as a conduit for the state's provision of socioeconomic benefits. More significantly, civil society has played an essential role in supporting a national modernization project that has served to ideologically justify individuals' membership in the nation-state.

The project of national modernization was central to the demands of anticolonial nationalists across the Arab world—whether secular, Islamist, communist, or feminist—and regarded as essential to ensuring national sovereignty in the postindependence period. This project was formulated as a response to the legacies of colonial domination, which include not only the political, military, and economic domination of the region, underpinned by the West's superior material resources, but also the attempts at moral and cultural domination, underpinned by Western discourses about the Orient as the inferior "Other" (Said 1978). "Modernization" was seen to depend upon achieving and maintaining national sovereignty, while national sovereignty was a precondition for modernization to occur. National modernization meant the complete freedom from colonial domination—political, economic, and technological—thereby enabling the new nation-state to participate in the international system on an equal footing with the West.

While the project of national modernization was widely supported and, in the early years of independence, gave many people a sense of dignity, it also contained an illiberal logic that paved the way for the establishment of authoritarianism. Most significantly, national modernization led to the creation of "new social hierarchies and a field of social struggle" (Beinin 2001: 8–9) that privileged the interests of the collective (the nation-state) over the well-being of the individual and, in the process, consolidated authority in the regime as the head of the nation-state. Although nationalist leaders proclaimed new rights and benefits for citizens, these were intended to mobilize the people's moral and political support for political independence and their labor for the purpose of national development (for a comparison with India, see Chatterjee 1986:

153). Within the national modernization project, the working classes, peasants, and women represented not only agents of modernization but, simultaneously, objects of modernization—individuals and groups whose “traditional” practices had to be eliminated for the good of the nation, in order for modernization to occur (Beinin 2001: 8). Such attitudes helped to sustain a sense of paternalism in which workers, peasants, and women were clearly subordinated to those who claimed to speak on their behalf—that is, national elites, the middle classes, and the intelligentsia. Mass-based organizations channeled people’s efforts toward the goal of national modernization and enabled new regimes to politically direct civil society. Such measures were seen as necessary for protecting the nation against the internal and external enemies of national modernization—that is, “feudalists” and “imperialists.” Dominant political discourses of populist-nationalism operated to fuse regime interests with the interests of the people and, thereby, to disguise the new social hierarchies evolving as a result of national modernization. More significantly, the project of national modernization created a realm of the possible in which citizens, for the most part, consented to authoritarianism in the national interest.

A consensus within civil society supported the aim of national modernization as an objective of nation-state building. However, in the process of ensuring the success of the national modernization project, authoritarianism was normalized. Even as civil-society actors objected to the authoritarian manner in which national modernization was pursued, for the most part they have remained committed to this project. This commitment has been strengthened not despite, but because of, the military defeat of the Arab regimes in 1967, ongoing economic difficulties, and the continuing military, political, and economic dominance of the West. Yet the social and political relations created by national modernization continue to sustain authoritarianism and serve as an obstacle to democratization. Overturning authoritarianism involves contesting the national modernization project of the postindependence era and conceptualizing a counter-hegemonic project.

Democracy as Counter-Hegemony

In the same way that Gramsci was interested in how subordinated groups/classes could overturn the hegemony of capitalism, this book is concerned to explore the potential for overturning authoritarianism. Toward this end, civil society is not only considered the terrain upon which

regimes secure consent for authoritarian rule but also as the trenches in which social forces could establish their “war of position” against the hegemony that underpins that rule (Gramsci 1971: 229–238). A “war of position” represents an attack not only on the “outer edifices” of the system of rule (for example, the regime, its policies, and its institutions) but also an attack on the ideological complex that underpins that rule (Boggs 1976: 53). By this, I refer to the necessity of challenging a whole range of established ideas and practices—what Terry Eagleton refers to as “culture” in the widest sense—that structure the social relations buttressing authoritarianism (1991: 114). The contestation of dominant ideas and practices paves the way for the formulation of an alternative or “counter” hegemony.⁴

In the case of the Arab regimes examined here, I identify the project of “national modernization” as the most significant element securing hegemony in the postindependence period. Until the late 1980s, national modernization represented the major objective of civil-society actors. This has gradually been replaced by the objective of democratization. For most civil-society actors, democratization entails the introduction of political reforms to enable real alternation of power and political competition. Although a multiparty system and an elected national assembly have nominally existed since the 1970s, in the case of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq,⁵ and since the 1980s, in the case of Tunisia and Algeria, this system has not led to an alternation of power. The political opposition that is officially sanctioned has been consistently excluded from power by the absence of free and fair elections. Meanwhile, a substantial element of existing political opposition within these countries, namely Islamist movements, has been prevented from participation within electoral politics as recognized political parties. The experience of these countries demonstrates that multiparty elections do not necessarily lead to democracy and may, in fact, help to strengthen authoritarian regimes. Consequently, prodemocracy groups have focused most of their attention on demanding reforms that will guarantee those rights and freedoms necessary for free and fair elections and a real alternation of power to occur, such as freedom of the press, of expression, of association, and of assembly.

The development of support among many civil-society actors in favor of individual rights and freedoms represents a significant step in the war of position against authoritarian rule. The attention to the rights and freedoms of individuals brings into question the notion of national unity, which forms a major element in the national modernization consensus underpinning authoritarianism. In so doing, it opens new spaces

for a plurality of opinions to be represented. It challenges the relationship between regime and society that subordinates the interests of the latter to the policies and programs of the former. Yet, calls for democratic reforms, while a step toward overturning authoritarianism, do not necessarily represent a wholesale attack on the interplay of economic, ideological, and institutional structures that underwrite the hegemony of authoritarianism.

A war of position against authoritarianism would entail the elaboration of a counter-hegemonic project that not only embraces the institutional and legal framework of (liberal) democracy but also eschews other assumptions that help to maintain authoritarianism as a system (and not only as a regime). Here, I identify one particular assumption that is prevalent among many civil-society actors and that is central to the project of national modernization underpinning authoritarianism: national difference.

The discourse of nationalism that dominated the anticolonial struggle and the postindependence period is predicated on the idea of national difference between “us” and “them,” where “them” refers to the “West” as former colonizers and as the most powerful states in the international system. The concept of national difference depends upon the construction of an identity and culture that is exclusive and different from those of other nations. This logic entails recourse to “essences” that deny difference *within* nations (Chatterjee 1993). In order to maintain a fixed, monolithic identity, nationalist discourse must construct ideological boundaries that are policed, both literally and discursively, to maintain unity in the face of the “Other.” Foreign influences over national culture and identity are seen as a means for the West to undermine the nation. Consequently, ideas and practices perceived as coming from abroad, such as human rights and women’s rights, are often condemned. Indeed, some human rights violations may be justified on the grounds of protecting the essence of the nation against cultural imperialism (Pratt 2005).⁶

Ideas about gender roles and identities and ethnic/religious identities are fundamentally linked to the construction of a national identity. In constructing a national essence, certain roles and identities become prescribed and others proscribed in order to construct national “authenticity.” For example, in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia the promotion of women’s participation in the public sphere has been symbolic of national modernization. Constitutions proclaimed equality between men and women with regard to their public roles. Women were encouraged to join the work force through the expansion in state-sector employment,

which granted women generous maternity leave and provided crèche facilities (Hijab 1988). While women's visibility in the public sphere became symbolic of national modernization, simultaneously, female modesty in dress and sexual behavior has been regarded as representative of a nation's morality and cultural purity, while women's roles within the private sphere, as mothers, wives, and sisters, are seen as essential to the production of national culture (Kandiyoti 1991; Chatterjee 1993). Toward this end, women's rights within the home, as defined by Islamic-inspired family law, have evolved very slowly and enshrine inequality within the domestic sphere. This division between women's rights in the public and private spheres has acted to limit women's ability to participate publicly. This apparent contradiction may be explained by the attempts of state elites to control women's sexuality for the purpose of national processes. As potential mothers of the future generations of the national community, women's sexuality is central to the reproduction of the collectivity. Consequently, with whom women have sex and/or choose to father their children is often the object of a variety of legislation and subject to public commentary. For example, nationality laws in many countries prevent women from passing on their nationality to their children.⁷

In this sense, gender roles and identities have been an integral part of the imaginings of the national community and its myth of common origins. Women's bodies have constituted the terrain upon which different strands of national identification processes have been reconciled. On the one hand, women's public participation represents the nation's modernity "on the outside." Simultaneously, the image of women as good wives and mothers represents the nation's "authentic" "inner essence" that distinguishes "us" from "them" (Chatterjee 1993). Within this context, the continued existence of Islamic codes that enshrine strict gender roles and relations as the basis for family law may be represented as a means of affirming Middle East countries' "authentic" Islamic roots (Hijab 1988).

In the case of ethnicity, "Arabness" has constituted the predominant marker of national identity. Arabism began as a cultural-linguistic movement in the early twentieth century and later became fused with nationalism in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Pan-Arabism grew as a political movement following the Suez Crisis of 1956, thereby helping to make Arabness a central component of national identities. This was the case even as the political aims of Arab unity were downplayed and/or disregarded. The postindependence constitutions of Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia all mention the Arab identity of the

state's citizens or the state's membership of an Arab community. At a popular level, there is evidence of strong support for the concept of an Arab identity (Hinnebusch 2003: 59).

To different degrees in different contexts, Arabness has become closely associated with Islam. This is partly due to the fact that the majority of Arabs are also Sunni Muslims. In addition, the majority of elites in Arab countries are Sunni Muslim (the exception is Syria, where the regime is largely Alawite, and postinvasion Iraq, where power is largely divided between a Shi'ite and Kurdish majority). Moreover, despite being largely secular, Arab nationalism has drawn upon Islamic symbols (such as historic figures), while Arab nationalist intellectuals, such as Michel Aflaq, have seen Islam as a cultural heritage shared by all Arabs (Tibi 1997: 205).

The articulation of Arabness with national identity has been counterproductive to the construction of a project of citizenship. Arabness, as an ethnic identity and strongly associated with Islam, has become so dominant as to be regarded as the norm. Within this context, non-Arabs and also non-Muslims are often, implicitly or explicitly, subordinated within the nation. Certain ethnic and/or religious communities may face legal discrimination because of the failure of the state to recognize these social differences or because of state regulations that apply differentially to certain religious groups. For example, laws making Arabic mandatory in the Algerian education system were meant to displace French as the language of instruction. However, they served to marginalize the Berber language and identity within Algeria. Meanwhile, Coptic Christians in Egypt do not enjoy freedom of religion due to rather stringent regulations governing the building of churches. Throughout the region, Arab Jews have been regarded with suspicion and often subject to *de facto* discrimination, as they have been connected with Zionism and the establishment of Israel in 1948. Their status within Arab countries has been rendered vulnerable by a general failure of civil society to promote territorial belonging regardless of ethnicity, religion, or ideology.

National identity (not only in the Arab world but universally) has been mobilizing, at different times, in resistance to political, military, and economic interference by outside powers. History demonstrates that anti-imperialist actions, such as Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal and the struggle to regain Arab lands from Israeli occupation, serve to buttress feelings of national unity against a dangerous "Other." It is not only that the mobilization of national identity underwrites military action against the external enemy. It is important to note that the flip side of this process entails the strengthening of those ideas and structures that

suppress social differences and dissent (the “enemy” within). In this way, relations of oppression and repression are reproduced within nation-states in the name of national unity.

The question of economic development represents another important part of the hegemony of authoritarianism. State-led modernization strategies have given way to IMF and World Bank prescriptions for economic liberalization and deregulation (also justified by the rhetoric of enabling national modernization). The state’s gradual (although not complete) withdrawal from the economic sector has left those groups once protected by state largesse, namely public-sector workers and peasants, particularly women, vulnerable to the market. Meanwhile, the Arab world still suffers from serious developmental issues (*Arab Human Development Report 2002*). Unsurprisingly, there exists opposition to market reforms and the IFIs that promote them. There has been an almost near consensus across the political spectrum that the economic and social rights of working people represent one of the most important pillars of national modernization in the postindependence era and that these must be protected. Toward this end, activists in the Arab world have joined with those beyond the region in what is commonly called the antiglobalization movement. Calls for an end to neoliberal economic reforms are usually tied to support for continued state intervention in the economy, including state ownership of industries. Meanwhile, the IFIs and multinational corporations are held up as the enemy of national development. Yet, it is this economic model (state-led and nationalist) that helped to consolidate authoritarianism in the postindependence period (while simultaneously failing to engender sustained development). Both state-led modernization and neoliberal globalization entail the construction or reconstruction of structural socioeconomic and political inequalities within nation-states (Rai 2002). The emergence of new modes of thinking about economic organization is a necessary part of Arab (or any other) countries being able to negotiate a path that avoids the pitfalls of either of the currently existing models. On the one hand, this may not be totally achievable without fundamental changes to the global economic system. On the other hand, the emergence of a civil society that promotes alternative thinking about economic organization is a necessary precondition for the establishment of an alternative model (and language) of “modernization.” Transnational forums, such as the World Social Forum, may represent the beginnings of such a process.

In light of the above discussion, I argue that the dismantling of authoritarianism depends on a war of position that addresses in new ways

questions of national identity, anti-imperialism, gender relations, accommodation of ethnic and religious identities, as well as questions of economic organization and “modernization.” In this way, democratization represents a project not only of advocating political reforms but also a new world view that breaks down the dichotomies of us/them, authentic/foreign, and state/market that have helped to sustain the unequal relations of power that underpin authoritarianism. The establishment of democratic rules and institutions, without attempts to articulate a counter-hegemonic project, may simply lead to a transition away from authoritarian rule toward a “grey zone” that is not authoritarianism but is not democracy either (Carothers 2002).

Organization of the Book

This chapter presents a conceptual framework for understanding the chronology of state–civil society interactions presented in the rest of the book. In the course of writing this narrative, I draw upon the many excellent studies—within various disciplines—that have been written about the region. This is supplemented by my own primary research among civil-society actors in Egypt. Indeed, it is the process of conducting research in Egypt that led me to formulate this framework. I hope that this book will contribute to a reinterpretation of the emergence of authoritarianism in the Arab world as a means to better understanding the potential for democratization. In particular, I aim to draw attention to the role of civil society in helping to consolidate and maintain authoritarian rule, in addition to its role in attempting to formulate democratic alternatives and the process by which it may shift between these roles.

Chapter 2 examines the period from World War I to the 1960s, which I characterize as the initial phase of constructing and normalizing authoritarianism. This is the time in which the modern state system was created, nationalist movements emerged upon the terrain of civil society to struggle against European rule, and independence was won. It also includes the early years of nation-state building following independence. The aims of the nationalist struggle for national sovereignty and modernization were embodied within the process of nation-state building. State-led development, the building of a coalition of popular forces against the old oligarchy that had become powerful under colonial rule, in addition to resistance to imperialism, were all regarded as necessary for nation-state building and

were articulated through populist-nationalist discourses of various ideological currents. Support for these objectives was strengthened by the growing popularity across the region of Arab nationalism, following the Suez Crisis of 1956. However, within this logic of nation-state building, new hierarchies of social and political relations were constructed and normalized. Civil society became subordinated to the regime and state resources became concentrated in the hands of the regime. This contributed to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 3 examines the period from the 1960s onward, in which the postindependence political order experienced crisis and movements in opposition to regimes began to emerge. The failure of import-substitution industrialization as a development strategy, coupled with the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, called into question the ability of Arab regimes to deliver on the promises central to pan-Arabism—that is, national modernization. In response, regimes abandoned much of the rhetorical commitment to the Arab “socialist” policies associated with the early phase of state building. The introduction of *infitah* (literally, “the opening up” or “open door” policy) ushered in new political and economic alliances between regimes and private capital, both domestic and foreign. This was accompanied by foreign-policy shifts toward the United States and varying degrees of (nominal) political liberalization. Simultaneously, this period witnessed a series of student protests, workers’ strikes, growing opposition from Islamist movements, and other forms of contentious politics emanating from civil society. These protests sought to challenge the ability or legitimacy of regimes to deliver on the promises of national modernization. Despite these challenges, for the most part, civil-society actors continued to support the political and economic objectives of the postindependence era, such as national economic self-reliance and anti-imperialism, as essential elements of the state-building process. In many cases, they called on regimes to restore their commitment to these objectives through political or ideological renewal. Indeed, despite an adjustment in the rhetoric of regimes, there was no real abandonment of the state-led development strategy, while the 1973 war helped to maintain the anti-imperialist credentials of regimes. Consequently, the demands of opposition movements of the 1970s and 1980s, rather than challenging authoritarianism, contributed to its reproduction by continuing to normalize the social and political hierarchies that underwrite it.

Nevertheless, Arab regimes are cognizant of the threat to their authority posed by the emergence of civil-society activism beyond corporatist structures. Chapter 4 outlines the way in which regimes have attempted

to deal with the growth in contentious politics, while responding to continuing economic deterioration. These two processes represent a challenge to the economic and institutional elements of authoritarianism. A similar pattern across the region is perceived, whereby regimes initially attempt to liberalize the political system in order to co-opt dissent and to share out the responsibility for the introduction of necessary austerity measures—in the hope of offering political freedoms in compensation for the withdrawal of socioeconomic benefits. Following this, the deepening of the economic reform process has been accompanied by political “de-liberalization,” in which regimes have increased their repression of civil-society actors in order to stifle opposition to economic liberalization. However, recognizing that coercion alone is unable to guarantee their continued survival, regimes have also attempted to manipulate public culture as a means of normalizing the new social and political hierarchies resulting from economic liberalization and political de-liberalization, as well as enabling the co-optation of new constituencies of support. In most cases, this has served to intensify the contestation among civil-society actors over public culture as a crucial terrain for the formation of national identity. This has had various implications for regimes and the authoritarian systems that they head.

While the emergence of contentious politics failed to bring an end to authoritarian rule, nevertheless it represented the beginning of a process of formulating alternatives to authoritarianism. Chapter 5 examines the emergence of debates between diverse civil-society organizations—including Islamist groups, human rights groups, and women’s rights groups—that, in various ways, challenge the hegemonic project of postindependence state building and national modernization. These debates address issues that include the role of the state, the nature of national identity, and the role of women. They touch upon questions of religion, ethnic and religious diversity, and tactics in the struggle for democratization. In questioning previously held political and ideological beliefs, these discussions represent attempts at formulating a war of position against authoritarianism. In this sense, it is the desire of civil society to continue these debates, rather than the existence of civil society or a prodemocracy movement per se, that constitutes the essential ingredient in the dismantling of authoritarianism. This is not a linear process and it may be disrupted as well as strengthened by the actions of civil-society actors themselves, the regime, and/or international actors.

Chapter 6 examines the emergence of transnational links between civil-society actors within the Arab countries and those beyond the region as a potential resource in the strengthening of movements for

democratization. Three case studies are examined: the Islamist movement(s), the Palestinian solidarity movement, and the antiglobalization/antiwar movement. On the one hand, transnational movements, due to their very nature, may challenge the nationalist discourses that underpin authoritarian hegemony, in addition to providing new outside pressures for regimes to politically liberalize. Indeed, the growth of the Egyptian political reform movement “Kifaya” may be seen as an outcome of these processes. On the other hand, transnational movements may represent an internationalization of discourses that strengthen authoritarian rule, such as socially conservative Islam or Arab nationalism. Consequently, transnational links should not be perceived as essentially a route to democratization. Rather, the development of a war of position against authoritarianism must address the historical roots and dynamics of that system if it is to succeed. While transnational civil society has a role to play in that process, its formation is not a substitution for the process itself.

Finally, the concluding chapter draws together the main arguments of the book and considers how these impact upon the potential for democratization in the region. It underlines the way in which authoritarianism operates through material, institutional, and moral-ideological means. In particular, widespread adherence to the project of national modernization has helped to construct and normalize the hegemony of authoritarian rule. Authoritarianism must be challenged on all fronts as a prerequisite for democratization. The role of civil society in formulating a counter-hegemonic project is central to this process. This chapter draws out the implications of my arguments for both theorizing about democratic transitions and for policymaking/strategies for promoting democracy building. In particular, I argue that by focusing only on reforming formal political institutions and encouraging pluralism within civil society, current mainstream approaches toward democratization will fail in dismantling authoritarianism in the region.

Notes

1. I use the adjective “Arab” to designate those countries where Arabic is spoken by the majority of citizens. Simultaneously, I recognize that many people living within these countries do not consider themselves ethnically Arab nor do they speak Arabic as their first language. Moreover, the term “Arab world” is used more as a shorthand expression and not to suggest that those countries where Arabic is spoken by the majority constitute a monolithic, cultural bloc.

2. Bassam Bounenni, “Tunisia: Information Summit and Freedom of Expression,” *Arab Reform Bulletin* 3, no. 8, October 2005, <http://www.carnegie>

endowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17580&prog=zgp&proj=z
drl,zme#information, accessed 1 May 2006; Daho Djerbal, "Algeria: Amnesty
and Oligarchy," *Arab Reform Bulletin* 3, no. 8, October 2005, [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17580&prog=zgp&proj=z
drl,zme#amnesty](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17580&prog=zgp&proj=zdrl,zme#amnesty), accessed 1 May 2006; Sami Moubayed, "Syria:
Reform or Repair?" *Arab Reform Bulletin* 3, no. 6, July 2005, [http://www.carnegie
endowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17183&prog=zgp&proj=z
drl,zme#syria](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17183&prog=zgp&proj=z
drl,zme#syria), accessed 1 May 2006.

3. This concept was first articulated by E. P. Thompson (1971).

4. For a development of the concept of "counter-hegemony," see Boggs
(1984). Gramsci used the term "integrated culture" to refer to the same concept.

5. I refer to Iraq before the fall of the Ba'th regime in 2003.

6. For a discussion of the process of constructing national difference
between the West and Asia with similar effects, see Lawson (1998).

7. After decades of campaigning, this law was amended in Egypt in 2004
to allow Egyptian women to pass on their nationality to their children but still
subject to significant bureaucratic processes. See Maria Golia, "Egypt's New
Nationality Law Doesn't Bar Discrimination," *The Daily Star*, 19 May 2004,
[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=
3931](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=3931), accessed 2 May 2006.