

# Working Paper

Middle East and Africa Division  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs



*Jannis Grimm*

## Mapping Change in the Arab World

Insights from Transition Theory and Middle  
East Studies

FG6-WP No 1  
June 2013  
Berlin

## Introduction

### SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute  
for International and  
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3- 4  
10719 Berlin  
Phone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

This Working Paper has been realised in the context of the project "Elite change and new social mobilization in the Arab world." The project is funded by the German Foreign Office in the framework of the transformation partnerships with the Arab world and the Robert Bosch Stiftung. It cooperates with the Ph.D. grant programmes of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the Hanns Seidel Stiftung.

SWP Working Papers are online publications of SWP's divisions which have not been formally reviewed by the Institute. Please do not cite them without the permission of the authors or editors.

# Table of Contents

## Introduction 1

### Arab exceptionalism revisited 2

Transition where to? 3

Hybridization and upgrading 4

### Conceptualizing change 6

Who is involved in change? 7

Elite cohesion and pact-making 8

Where are the people? 9

### Parameters of change 11

Socio-economic development 11

Culture and religion 13

Inclusivity and identity 15

Civil society 15

The regime's will and capacity for coercion 17

Legitimacy 19

External influences: leverage, linkage and diffusion 20

### What insights from transition theory and Middle East studies? 21

# Introduction

The vast majority of observers and academic experts on the Arab world were taken by surprise by the popular uprisings that in 2011 toppled some of the world's most entrenched authoritarian leaders and shook some Arab regimes to their very foundations. Thus, the so-called "Arab Spring" has exposed deficits and gaps in the theoretical frameworks that have been applied to the study of the region so far. However, the search for new guiding theories and models may risk the rash dismissal of useful frameworks developed in the past.

This paper wants to explore what the rich academic literature on democratic transition, political transformation and democratization can contribute to our understanding of the transformation processes initiated in some Arab countries by the 2011 events. The questions that this paper addresses include the following:

- ▶ How has the research on transition and transformation so far dealt with the Middle Eastern experience?
- ▶ Are there useful insights from research on transition in other regions of the globe?
- ▶ Which theories or approaches can help us understand how certain constellations (institutional, cultural, economic, historical, etc.) shape the trajectory and outcome of transformation processes?

This working paper is published in the framework of the SWP research project "Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World" that explores the dynamics of change in the Arab World and aims at understanding the direction and depth of the current transformations.<sup>1</sup> It represents above all a survey of conceptual approaches to identify and explain the factors and the mechanisms that affect these dynamics, and to probe their usefulness for the line of enquiry pursued by the project.

The paper is organized as follows: in the first section, the notion of a supposed "Arab exceptionalism" will be discussed. This notion has dominated the academic debate on transformation in the region but is

facing critical questions today as the nature of political systems in the region is changing. It will be shown that the misconception of the Arab world as the authoritarian exception from the global "democratization rule" is rooted in a narrow understanding of transformation as a linear process of gradual democratization. In contrast, the following section elaborates on approaches that conceptualize change instead as a contingent and open-ended process that is neither inherently linked to processes of democratization nor determined by certain structural factors. In other words, transformations, as well as transitional outcomes, are the result of choices made by political actors, if limited by and contingent on certain structures that constrain these choices but also provide opportunities for agency. The third section of this paper will therefore discuss parameters of change that have in the past been identified as crucial for transformation. It represents an attempt to systematically map some of the findings of transition research and Middle East studies that can direct empirical research on the dynamics of change in the Arab world towards essential fields of inquiry.

<sup>1</sup> Muriel Asseburg/Heiko Wimmen, *Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World. Concept Note*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2012 (FG6 Working Papers 2012/No. 01).

## Arab exceptionalism revisited

Until very recently, conceptual debates on the Arab world were mostly conducted to explain the absence of transformation. In fact, for much of the past three decades, a central puzzle for Middle East research had been its anomalous divergence from the general “democratization trend” observed in other parts of the world. Especially following the historic transitions in large parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union – all part of the so-called “third wave of democratization” – researchers working on the Arab world had looked for glimmers of democracy. Driven by the question why this region remained “so singularly resistant to democratization”,<sup>2</sup> Lisa Anderson suggested that many scholars were virtually “searching where the light shines” - that is, restricting their attention to the visible institutions of the state and formalized civil society - in their attempt to assess the chances for democracy in the Arab world.<sup>3</sup>

In the majority of cases, these enquiries confirmed the assessment of authoritarian resilience.<sup>4</sup> While authoritarian forms of governance in the so-called Third World were regarded as outdated models doomed to fail, with regards to the Arab world Francis Fukuyama’s universal assessment of “the end of history” seemed to be contrasted by the contradictory phenomenon of a “democratic recession”.<sup>5</sup> Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, observers rather diagnosed a “revitalization” or “renaissance” of autocratic rule in the region.<sup>6</sup> The notion of “Arab exceptionalism” thus

moved to become the hegemonic discourse in the academic transition literature. As a result, academics directed their attention toward explaining the mechanisms that authoritarian regimes had developed to endure international pressures and suppress or co-opt popular dissent. Since the late 1990s the number of publications on Arab autocratic regimes and the particular reasons for their durability has remarkably expanded.<sup>7</sup>

In search of explanations, the region’s exceptional political reality was consequently attributed to a range of different cultural, socio-economic, or historical factors – such as neo-patrimonial and clientelist traditions inherent in Arab societies,<sup>8</sup> regional rentier economies,<sup>9</sup> external support for Arab autocrats,<sup>10</sup> or the alleged incompatibility of Islam and democracy.<sup>11</sup>

The focus on authoritarian resilience, however, led researchers to lose sight or underestimate the potential vulnerabilities and the fragility that remained inherent in these power structures, regardless of rulers’ refined survival strategies. When, in 2011 the authoritarian status quo was shattered by the popular movements labeled as the “Arab Spring”, much of the scholarly attention also shifted from trying to understand the roots of authoritarian persistence to as-

*Politikwissenschaft*, 2 (2008) 2, pp. 1-17; André Bank, “Die Renaissance des Authoritarismus. Erkenntnisse und Grenzen neuer Beiträge der Comparative Politics und Nahostforschung”, in: *Hamburg Review of Social Sciences*, 4 (2009) 1, pp. 10-41.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive overview see Raymond Hinnebusch, “Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique”, in: *Democratization*, Vol.13 (2006) 3, pp. 373-395; Oliver Schlumberger (Ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism. Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Pawelka, *Der Staat im Vorderen Orient. Konstruktion und Legitimation politischer Herrschaft*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Among others Hazem Beblawi/Giacomo Luciani (Eds.), *The Rentier State: Nation, State, and the Integration of the Arab World*, London: Croom Helm, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Diamond, “Why Are There No Arab Democracies?”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (2010) 1, pp. 93-104.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996; Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage”, in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, 266 (1990) 3, pp. 47-60; *Ibid.*, “Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 7 (1996) 2, p. 52-63; *Ibid.*, *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East. Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective”, in: *Comparative Politics*, 36 (2004) 2, pp. 139-157.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Anderson, “Searching Where the Light Shines. Studying Democratization in the Middle East”, in: *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9 (2006), pp. 189-214.

<sup>4</sup> Holger Albrecht/Oliver Schlumberger, “Waiting for Godot. Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East”, in: *International Political Science Review*, 25 (2004) 4, pp. 371-392.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992; Larry Diamond, “The Democratic Rollback. The Resurgence of the Predatory State”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 87 (2008) 2, pp. 36-48.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Köllner, “Autoritäre Regime. Ein Überblick über die jüngere Literatur”, in: *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende*

sessing the outlook for the transformation processes initiated in some states as well as the potential for transformation in those states in which regimes remained more or less stable.

## Transition where to?

With regard to Eastern Europe, Klaus von Beyme warned in the 1990s against a “teleological advent” that might arise of an academic spirit of optimism.<sup>12</sup> It seems appropriate to reiterate his warnings in light of the current events in the Middle East. Many of the case studies published recently have fallen back into old patterns of “democracy-spotting” and the attempts to apply “objective” criteria of measurement (such as Freedom House ratings) to determine as to how far certain societies have progressed on their path to democracy.<sup>13</sup> This normative view on change reflects a frequent analytical bias in academic literature on transformation that Thomas Carothers in a seminal essay has called the “transition paradigm”.<sup>14</sup> It is the misled understanding that transformation processes are intrinsically linked to democratic development – as if there were something like a natural trend towards democracy. Consequently, the success of transformations was implicitly defined as the relative ground gained towards the establishment or consolidation of democracy.

Against the backdrop of this paradigm, the actor-centred research strand around Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, Lawrence Whitehead, and others, introduced the term “transition” which has largely replaced the “democratization” concept. By definition, a transition represents an intermediate state between

two more durable ones – an “interval between one political regime and another”.<sup>15</sup> The transition process was seen as moving on a continuum from autocracy at the one end to democracy at the other. Transitions could thus be evaluated by their progress along such a linear trajectory and notions of “stability” and “fragility” were used to depict the odds of an emerging stable democratic regime. Transitions that failed to establish Western-style liberal democratic orders were termed failed or defective, their respective regime outcomes considered to be “democracies with adjectives”.<sup>16</sup>

The transition paradigm has been widely criticized for blurring the distinctive features of different transformations. Transformation should be conceived as open-ended processes; no automatic trend towards democracy should be assumed. Thomas Carothers identifies five assumptions underlying the transition paradigm that should be carefully revisited:

- ▶ Political system changes are processes leading from authoritarian to democratic regimes.
- ▶ Democratization is a linear, sequential development from liberalization, to democratization and consolidation.
- ▶ Elections play a crucial role during this process, generating further democratic reforms and contributing to democratic consolidation.
- ▶ Structural factors do not play an important role; transitions are rather driven by elite action.
- ▶ Transitions build on consolidated statehood. Democratization is assumed to include some redesign of institutions but as a modification of already functioning state structures. Democracy-building and statebuilding are seen as mutually reinforcing or even two sides of the same coin.

Carothers asserts that empirical case studies have disproven these assumptions underlying the transition paradigm, showing instead that a great number

**12** Klaus Von Beyme, *Systemwechsel in Osteuropa*, Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp 1994, p.357.

**13** Among others Rex Brynen/Pete W. Moore/Bassel F. Salloukh/Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring. Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World*, Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner, 2012; Angel Rabasa/Jeffrey Martini/Julie E. Taylor/Laurel E. Miller/Stephanie Pezard/Stephen F. Larrabee/Tewodaj Mengistu, *Democratization in the Arab World. Prospects and Lessons from Around the Globe*, Santa Monica: Rand, 2012; Ibrahim Elbadawi/Samir Makdissi (Eds.), *Democracy in the Arab World. Explaining the Deficit*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2011; Arch Puddington, “The Freedom House Survey for 2012: Breakthroughs in the Balance”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 24 (2013) 2, pp. 46-61.

**14** Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2002) 1, pp. 5-21.

**15** Guillermo O’Donnell/Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 6.

**16** David Collier/Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives”, in: *World Politics*, 49 (1997), pp. 430-452; Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy. Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. Jerzy Máćkó, “Autoritarismen oder Demokratien mit Adjektiven? Überlegungen zu Systemen der gescheiterten Demokratisierung”, in: *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 10 (2000) 4, pp. 1471-1499; Wolfgang Merkel/Aurel Croissant, “Formale und informale Institutionen in defekten Demokratien”, in: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 41 (2000) 1, pp. 3-30.

of transformations of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s did indeed not lead to democracy. Instead, many transformations resulted in the formation of surprisingly stable hybrid regimes. Many of the newly emerged regimes carried some democratic core features, such as a pluralist party system or electoral politics, but lacked others.

As democratic elections by themselves do not make a democracy,<sup>17</sup> Robert Dahl's concept of "polyarchy" has become the main reference for defining democracy in transitology research.<sup>18</sup> The concept goes beyond elections by demanding some institutional and procedural minimal standards, against which any regime can be measured: representation via elected officials, regular free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information, and the freedom of association.<sup>19</sup> Only when these polyarchic rules of the game are successfully embedded into the socio-political context and have reached some degree of durability we can expect to speak of a successful democratization process.

## Hybridization and upgrading

Certainly no other region of the world has been equally resistant to democracy in a Dahlian sense than the Arab World. However, this does not mean that regimes and political systems in the region have not been affected by change at all.<sup>20</sup> The assumption that countries are either "democratic" or "non democratic", and that any situation between these two poles can only be transient, obscures the far more likely outcome of hybrid regime types. Scholars interested in the "grey zones" of democratization broadly seem to agree that democracy can be partial too.

<sup>17</sup> Manfred G. Schmidt, *Demokratiethorien. Eine Einführung*, 5. Aufl., Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010, pp. 94 f.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Merkel, *Systemtransformation. Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung*, 2. Auflage, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010, p. 28 ff.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 108 f; *Ibid.*, *On Democracy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 38 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Kjetil Selvik/Stig Stenslie, *Stability and change in the modern Middle East*, London: Tauris, 2011; Oliver Schlumberger, "Between 'Democratic Transition' and 'Authoritarian Consolidation', Making Sense of Political Change in the Arab World", in: Jean-Noel Ferrié (Ed.), *Can the Arab World Democratize?*, Paris/New York: Centre d'Études des Relations Internationales, 2007.

Liberalization might represent a pre-stage for democratic transformation. Yet, reforms might as well remain selective and stabilize an authoritarian regime.<sup>21</sup> In fact, a strong argument can be made that authoritarian persistence in the Arab world was not simply due to the regimes' inherent stability and their resort to the classic authoritarian toolbox, nor to an inherent anti-democratic character of Islamic or Arab culture. Instead, scholars of authoritarian resilience insist, it was rather an adaptive process of "authoritarian upgrading" whereby regimes responded to both, changes in the domestic socio-economic context and international attempts of democracy promotion via conditionality, by modifying their modalities of rule and configurations of power.<sup>22</sup> In many cases, autocratic regimes proved to be highly creative and reinvented themselves as quasi-democracies or electoral democracies embedding their authoritarian core into a formally pluralist and democratic cover structure.<sup>23</sup> This could include a partial liberalization of the political or economic sphere, the media or the civil society, as Heydemann, Schedler, Ottaway and others have shown in case studies. Such reformative steps and partial openings were intended as a substitute for, rather than a step toward, democratization.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Among others Matthijs Boogards, "How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism", in: *Democratization*, 16 (2009) 2, pp. 399-423; Koakim Ekman, "Political Participation and Regime Stability. A Framework for Analysing Hybrid Regimes", in: *International Political Science Review*, 30 (2009) 1, pp. 7-31; Leonardo Morlino, "Are There Hybrid Regimes? Or Are They Just an Optical Illusion?", in: *European Political Science Review*, 1 (2009) 2, pp. 273-296.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Washington: Brookings, 2007 (The Saban Center for Middle East Policies Analysis Paper, No. 13); Francesco Cavatorta, "The Convergence of Governance. Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World and Downgrading Democracy Elsewhere?", in: *Middle East Critique*, 19 (2010) 3, pp. 217-232.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Diamond, "Elections Without Democracy. Thinking About Hybrid Regimes", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2002) 2, pp. 21-35; Gerd Nonneman, *Democracy, Reform and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, London: Routledge, 2009; Steven Levitsky/Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> See Among others Marina Ottaway/Julia Choucair-Vizoso (Eds.), *Beyond the Facade. Political Reform in the Arab World*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008; Jennifer Gandhi/Ellen Lust-Okar,

The carefully orchestrated staging of deregulation of some sectors resulted in the gradual hybridization of Arab autocracies. Steven Heydemann in this context identifies the co-optation of elites via beneficial profit or power sharing arrangements as being an essential part of the regime's hybridization. As a consequence, the co-opted groups contribute to the legitimacy and the stability of the regime. Drawing on William Zartman's work, Holger Albrecht argues that the toleration of a legal opposition can have a paradoxical stabilizing effect in illegitimate authoritarian regimes, since it entails a certain degree of recognition.<sup>25</sup> Albrecht argues that the opposition, thus, ceases to fulfill its "natural" function. The tolerated opposition can merely imitate the function of opposition in democracies, since it has no real influence on the rules of the game and is dependent on the regime's benevolence. For the regime, in turn, tolerating controlled opposition elites, allows the channeling of societal dissent and the containment of internal demands. Moreover, allowing for a semblance of civil society allows authoritarian leaders to maintain a democratization discourse and ease external pressure for liberal reform.<sup>26</sup>

Hybrid regimes have proved to be quite enduring. Notions of incompleteness as well as the conception of hybrid regime types as "transitional" are therefore misleading.<sup>27</sup> Rather than labeling the outcomes of partial liberalization "unconsolidated democracies" or "defective democracies", such newly emerging regimes should thus be conceptualized for what they are: hybrids between authoritarianism and democracy, yet distinct from both. A range of alternative categories to the classical regime trias have thus recently emerged in the academic literature in order to properly describe such hybrids, emphasizing some of their

distinctive features, such as their "competitive" or "electoral" character.<sup>28</sup>

Mechanisms of authoritarian upgrading and regime hybridization seem just as relevant today, as they were before the beginning of 2011. In fact, to date, while many Arab countries experienced some form of protest, the latter did *not* evolve into regime threatening collective mobilization everywhere. Instead, these regimes were able to resort to their well-tried survival strategies of authoritarian adaptation, cooptation and repression. Yet, also in cases in which "critical junctures"<sup>29</sup> occurred and authoritarian leaders were displaced, hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes remain a possible or even a likely outcome of transformations as is a return to authoritarian rule – in particular in those countries in which conditions are unfavorable to the emergence and consolidation of democracy.<sup>30</sup>

"Elections Under Authoritarianism", in: *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12 (2009), pp. 403-422; Andreas Schedler, "Authoritarianism's Last Line of Defense", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (2010) 1, pp. 69-80;

**25** Holger Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism? Lessons from Egypt", in: *Democratization*, 12 (2005) 3, pp. 378-397; William Zartman, "Opposition as Support of the State", in: Adeed Dawisha/William Zartmann (Eds.), *Beyond Coercion. The Durability of the Arab State*, London/New York: Croom Helm, 1988, pp. 61-87.

**26** Nicola Christine Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007.

**27** Wolfgang Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies", in: *Democratization*, 11 (2004) 5, pp. 33-58.

**28** For a comprehensive review literature on hybrid regimes see Nicolas van de Walle, "Between Authoritarianism and Democracy", in: *Journal of Democracy* 23 (2012) 1, pp. 169-173; Mikael Wigell, "Mapping Hybrid Regimes. Regime Types and Concepts in Comparative Politics", in: *Democratization*, 15 (2008) 2, pp. 230-250.

**29** Wolfgang Merkel/Johannes Gerschewski/Alexander Schmotz/Christoph Steffes/Dag Tanneberg, "Stabilität und Critical Junctures. Legitimation, Kooptation und Repression in Autokratien", in: *WZB Mitteilungen* 133 (2011), pp. 21-24.

**30** For first empirical assessments on ongoing hybridity in transitional Arab states see Alfred Stepan/Juan J. Linz, "Democratization Theory and the 'Arab Spring'", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 24 (2013) 2, pp. 15-30.

## Conceptualizing change

It follows that neither the direction nor the outcomes of transformation processes are certain. Quite on the contrary, normative expectations entail the risk of leading research on transformative change into a teleological dead end. Indeed, following Carothers' critique, transitology witnessed a post-democratic turn that distanced itself from the wishful "democracy-spotting" of the 1990s.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, the tendency to equalize transition with regime change – even if conceptualized as an open-ended process – still limits the view. After all, transformation processes vary in depth, trajectory and outcome. Transformation is more than the formal alternation between two aggregate states – from regime A to regime B. It includes also processes of adaptation and modification that substantially alter the existing modes of functional operation and governance. Moreover, it comprises change in the structures of different political units. Transition scholars widely agree on four main units that are possibly subjected to transformation processes and thus become a reasonable focus of transformation analysis: The early explicit conceptual distinction between the "state" and the "regime" has over time been complemented to include also the "government" and the "system" as analytical categories.<sup>32</sup> As a rule, the more one moves from the smallest unit of analysis, the government, to the broadest, the system, the degree of stability increases, as does the inherent structural resistance towards change.

- ▶ **Governments** represent the most volatile objects of transformation. While the exchange of governing elites is considered an integral and constitutive feature of established democracies, it is not restricted to democracies, but can also take place in authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes. It has to be not-

<sup>31</sup> André Bank/Morten Valbjørn, "Examining the 'Post' in Post-Democratization. The Future of Middle Eastern Political Rule Through Lenses of the Past", in: *Middle East Critique*, 19 (2010) 3, pp. 183-200.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime. Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy", in: *World Politics*, 42 (1990) 3, pp. 422-440; Merkel, *Systemtransformation* [as Fn. 18], pp. 63 ff.

ed though that governmental rotation in authoritarian regimes in general does not coincide with a change in the political power structures. If anything, it expresses a modification in the internal power balance of the governing faction.

- ▶ **Regimes** undoubtedly possess a higher degree of stability than governments and rely on a certain degree of institutionalization.<sup>33</sup> However, there is no overall consensus in academia regarding the definition of regimes.<sup>34</sup> They may be thought of as the formal and informal organization of political leadership and of its relation to society. It is the regime that also determines the power relations between different sections of the ruling elites and between the rulers and the ruled.<sup>35</sup> A regime transformation is complete only if both the structure and the mode of political rule and also access and entitlement to leadership have been altered significantly and when the new regime has reached some degree of institutionalization.
- ▶ The **state** is a more durable formal structure of domination and coordination used as framework by regimes and governments to exercise their leadership. Statehood often remains unaffected by transformation processes as its organizational, functional and administrative structure is mostly (but not always – see Libya) neutral vis-à-vis regime type. The individuals filling the central roles in states are thus not necessarily the same ones as those who uphold regimes and vice versa. The military, for example, represents a central state institution, that is, however, at times rather marginal for maintaining authoritarian regimes. Such state actors that play no significant role in regime politics can be crucial to the maintenance of public order during a regime transformation, since their authority is not neces-

<sup>33</sup> Scott Mainwaring, "Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation. Theoretical and Comparative Issues", in: Scott Mainwaring/Guillermo O'Donnell/J. Samuel Valenzuela (Eds.), *Issues in Democratic Consolidation. The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, p. 296.

<sup>34</sup> A comprehensive overview of differing definitions is given in Geraldo L. Munck, *Disaggregating Political Regime. Conceptual Issues in the Study of Democratization*, Notre Dame: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 1996 (Kellogg Institute Working Paper, No. 228)

<sup>35</sup> Philippe Schmitter/Terry Karl, "What Democracy Is... and Is Not", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 2 (1992) 3, pp. 76.

sarily tied to the legitimacy of a crumbling regime.

- ▶ The **system** as the widest category of analysis not only includes all of the above, but goes even further, encompassing different societal subsystems, such as the economic order. The notion system transformation thus points to profound all-embracing transformations that extend beyond the political sphere. Its scope and abstractness make it, however, difficult to assess. Just how deep is a rupture supposed to be, and on how many levels does it have to occur, so that we can speak of systemic change?

Akude et al. lately developed an alternative theoretical framework to extend the research focus from the regime as main object of analysis to partial, sectoral and subsystemic transformations in the political sphere.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on David Easton, they identify three components in the political system: the level of the government, the level of the ruling elite, and the level of the political community. The emergence of conflict, the course and type of transformation, and the subsequent rearrangement of power relations and authority structures depend on the level that suffers from a loss of legitimacy. However, Akude et al. carefully note that even the failure or breakdown of the state, following a de-legitimization at the level of the political community does not necessarily lead to war, or the eventual return to autocracy, but can also facilitate the emergence of non-state governance and alternative patterns of authority and order. They thus stress the existence of alternative forms of rule to the classical regime trias (totalitarian, authoritarian, democratic) of Juan Linz that is based on the notion of consolidated statehood as pre-conditional framework for effective governance.<sup>37</sup> This argument seems to be of particular relevance regarding the transformation processes in Libya and Yemen, where central state control has been compromised, and in the civil war in Syria, where local structures of governance have

<sup>36</sup> John Akude/Anna Daun/David Egner/Daniel Lambach (Eds.), "Transformation politischer Ordnung. Ansätze zur Erweiterung des Transformationsbegriffs", in: *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 56 (2009) 2, pp. 142-161; Ellen Lust, "Why Now? Micro Transitions and the Arab Uprisings", in: *The Monkey Cage Blog*, 24.10.2011.

<sup>37</sup> Juan J. Linz, "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes", in: Fred I. Greenstein/Nelson W. Polsby (Eds.), *Macropolitical Theory*, Reading: Addison-Wesley 1975 (Ibid., Handbook of Political Science, vol. 3), pp. 175-412.

emerged that may perform a significant role during a possible post-conflict transformation process.

## Who is involved in change?

Following the events of the Arab Spring that strongly affected the region's authoritarian regimes, scholars of Middle East politics have renewed their interest in the likelihood of democratic transition.<sup>38</sup> Cross-regional transition research has shown the complexity of democratization processes, and since the 1990s the literature has been characterized by a coexistence of different theoretical approaches to the study of change. While the greatest strength of the functionalist approaches that dominated transitology in the 1950s and 1960s was their precise analysis of the structural parameters influencing transformation processes, they were largely unable to account for intervening variables emerging from the interest of actors.

The revival of transition theory following the democratic transitions in Latin America in the 1980s therefore focused on actors. Actor-centred transitology draws largely on the empirical works of Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl on political transition in Eastern Europe and Latin-America, as well as on Adam Przeworski's game-theoretical approach.<sup>39</sup> It is heavily inspired by the rational choice paradigm: Developments are seen as a consequence of individual cost-benefit analyses of a situation and actors' subsequent actions according to individual action logics. The collapse of the established and internalized rules of the game during a transition results in rapid shifts in political preference structures.<sup>40</sup> The questioning of habits and norms, and the dissolution of institutional frameworks associated with the

<sup>38</sup> Among others Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East. Lessons from the Arab Spring", in: *Comparative Politics*, 44 (2012) 2, pp. 127-149; Thomas Carothers, "Approach Analogies with Caution", in: *Alliance Magazine*, 1.12.2011; Ibid., "Think Again. Arab Democracy", in: *Foreign Policy*, 10.3.2011; Larry Diamond, "A Fourth Wave or False Start? Democracy After the Arab Spring", in: *Foreign Affairs*, 22.5.2011.

<sup>39</sup> Among others O'Donnell/Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* [as Fn. 16]; Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

ancien régime create a power vacuum. Consequently, political actors' room for maneuver is opened to new options. Actors can step into that vacuum and contribute to the formation of new norms and institutions.<sup>41</sup> For the actors' decisions, mutual interdependence is equally important as individual interests or preferences, and previous choices.<sup>42</sup>

While the structuralist approaches had difficulty explaining why autocratic rulers and dictators would give their consent to liberalization in the first place, actor centered research convincingly shows that the initiation of a transformation process could be expected in a situation where the political, financial and social costs for elites to keep up repressive measures in order to preserve autocratic regime structures exceed the expected costs of a controlled liberalization. Moreover, and contrary to the assumption of modernization theory, promoters of the rational choice approach also stated that there were no "mechanisms" that reliably lead from A(uthoritarianism) to D(emocracy). Transformation did not occur through a single evolutionary process but rather through multiple and not necessarily continuous or unilinear paths. Schmitter and Karl hold that these paths are defined by two factors: the strategies of elites and masses, and the relative power of incumbents and challengers. In this light, democratization can be considered as the result of *choices* of political actors that found such a system desirable and were able to prevail with their interests vis-à-vis competing interests of other actors.

With this shift in the focus of interest from structure to agent, also comes a shift regarding research questions. Actor-centred theories do not search for conditional factors for democracy. Instead, they concentrate on the functions of different actors at different junctures of a transformation, and rather focus on procedural questions: Who is involved in change and which social forces boost regime change? Are transformation processes and outcomes predictable according to identifiable patterns of interaction?

**41** Wolfgang Merkel/Eberhard Sandschneider/Dieter Segert, "Einleitung. Die Institutionalisierung der Demokratie", in: *Ibid.*, *Systemwechsel 2. Die Institutionalisierung der Demokratie*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1996, pp. 9-36.

**42** Adam Przeworski, "Some problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy", in: Guillermo O'Donnell/Philippe Schmitter/Lawrence Whitehead (Eds.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Comparative Perspectives*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 52 f.

## Elite cohesion and pact-making

In the actor centered literature, individual action is usually framed as action by elites. Non-elites are recognized as a dynamic but rather secondary parameter of transformation process.<sup>43</sup> Splits in the ruling elites are seen as a pre-conditional constellation of actors that enables or allows for the initiation of a transformative change in the first place. With the transformation proceeding, the number of actors whose actions can be regarded as relevant for the direction of the process constantly increases, including oppositional forces and the masses or wider population.<sup>44</sup> In a possible re-consolidation phase those actors that maintained or accumulated resources of power during the volatile transitional period may complement or even replace pre-existing elites in the political sphere. Such a replacement of incumbents, or the regime as a whole, may either be imposed hierarchically by new elites acting on their newly gained resources of power, or it may be the result of non-hierarchical negotiation with the old establishment.

Of these options, pact-making between emergent and "old" regime elites has attracted most scholarly attention. According to O'Donnell and Schmitter a "... pact can be defined as an explicit, but not always publicly explicated or justified, agreement among a select set of actors which seek to define (or better, to re-define) rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the 'vital interests' of

**43** Among others Barbara Geddes, "What do we know about Democratization after 20 years", in: *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2 (1999), pp. 115-144; Mattei Dogan/John Higley (Eds.), *Elites, Crises, and the Origins of Regimes*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998; John Higley/Richard Gunther (Eds.), *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. John Higley/Michael Burton/Lowell Field, "In Defense of Elite Theory. A Reply to Cammack", in: *American Sociological Review*, 55 (1990) 3, pp. 421-426; Paul Cammack, "A Critical Assessment of the New Elite Paradigm", in: *American Sociological Review*, 55 (1990) 3, pp. 415-420; John Higley/Michael Burton, "The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Break-downs", in: *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989) 1, pp. 17-32;

**44** Ellen Bos, "Die Rolle von Eliten und kollektiven Akteuren in Transformationsprozessen", in: Wolfgang Merkel (Ed.), *Systemwechsel 1: Theorien, Ansätze und Konzeptionen*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1994, p. 81-109.

those entering into it.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, O’Donnell and Schmitter’s case studies of South American transitions have shown the potential that such bargaining solutions hold for a sustainable democratic transition since they accommodate the interests of relevant societal actors and can thus bolster their commitment to the process of democratization.<sup>46</sup> O’Donnell and Schmitter argue that the basic cause for pact making between opposing elites lies in the political instability and insecurity about outcomes during a transitional phase. Pacts are meant to overcome this insecurity by offering some sort of framework for the democratization process defining the procedural objectives and limits, as well as the intended timeframe for the implementation of a transitional plan.

Even though elite pacts are themselves exclusive practices, and in most cases the product of negotiations outside institutionalized channels, between actors without sufficient or indeed any formal democratic legitimization, and even though the realization and enforcement of its content is often undertaken by the authoritarian administration, they can thus all the same incorporate first steps towards democracy, like the extension of political inclusion and participation, and thus increase the chances for a democratic trajectory. It is important to note, though, that pacts can greatly vary in their degree of transparency and their degree of formalization. Also they are not necessarily restricted to access to power and government, but may involve economic, judicial or social issues, depending strongly on the object of transformation. In fact, the more inclusive the elite settlement is, the more relevant actors will accept and protect the new democratic rules of the game, and the faster broad popular support legitimizing the system will grow. However, O’Donnell’s and Schmitter’s findings do not tell us much about the conditions under which pacts do pave the way for further democratic reforms. In fact, there seems to be a thin line between the democracy fostering effects of pacts on the one hand and their function

as co-optation mechanisms for the maintaining of authoritarian rule on the other hand.<sup>47</sup>

## Where are the people?

Moreover, actor centered approaches for the most part fail to account sufficiently for the diverse effects of social mobilization: mass mobilization is viewed not only as unnecessary, but even as endangering democratization since it urges regime elites to close its ranks.<sup>48</sup> The recent popular uprisings in the Arab world seem to make a point for a more positive conceptualization of the relevance of non-violent mass mobilization for destabilizing authoritarian regimes and paving the way for democracy. The emergence of collective non-elite actors, i.e. a mobilized public expressing itself through mass protests, at an early stage of the regional transformation processes proved to have an immediate catalyzing effect on the destabilization of Arab authoritarian regimes. Mass demonstrations in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen were certainly instrumental in creating (or deepening) rifts in the countries’ ruling elites.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, even the plausible expectation that such mobilization may occur can have an influence on elites in the sense of a “shadow of the future”<sup>50</sup> and thus function as a significant constraint on their behavior. This constraining effect works both ways though: It might lead to elites taking into account popular demands and thus foster a transitional path. However, if popular demands are consistently articulated via street politics, a democratic transition after the breakdown of an autocratic regime can be effectively hampered. Continuous mass mobilization then runs the risk of contributing to a prolonged state of

**45** O’Donnell/Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* [as Fn. 15], p.37.

**46** O’Donnell/Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* [as Fn. 15], p. 37; John Schiemann, *The Politics of Pact-making*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; John Higley/Michael Burton, “Elite Settlements”, in: *American Sociological Review*, 52 (1987) 3, pp. 295-307; John Higley/Michael Burton, “Elite Settlements and the Taming of Politics”, in: *Government and Opposition*, 33 (1998), pp. 99-115

**47** Volker Perthes (Ed.), *Arab elites: negotiating the politics of change*, Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner, 2004.

**48** Among others Gretchen Casper/Michelle M. Taylor, *Negotiating Democracy. Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996; Scott Mainwaring, *Transitions To Democracy and Democratic Consolidation. Theoretical and Comparative Issues*, Notre Dame, IN: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, November 1989 (Kellogg Institute Working Paper, No. 130).

**49** Christian Welzel/Ronald Inglehart, “The Role of Ordinary People in Democratization”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 19 (2008) 1, pp. 126-140.

**50** Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books, 1984, p.12.

instability, which may even lend itself to a reestablishment of authoritarian order.

Yet, how should the influence of heterogeneous masses, including such collective and amorphous actors as “Tahrir Square”, be conceptualized? We will have to go further than asserting that elite actors may, under certain conditions, adapt decisions and strategies in response to popular pressure. First, it would certainly be misled to conceive of the mobilized people as a unitary actor. Second, a structural understanding of masses as one variable among various other factors that condition the course of a transformative process would not be satisfactory either – as it would not take into account of the mobilized citizens’ agency.

## Parameters of change

Regime trajectories, the initiation of transformation and transitional outcomes thus seem to depend on concrete balances of power and resources among the relevant actors of a society. Must the notion of the “conditions of democracy” hence be abandoned altogether? Not necessarily so. While the different paths of transformations seem to be the result of constant processes of competition between elite and other actors, transition literature provides us with a wealth of variables that might be helpful in explaining, and sometimes even in predicting, how this competition will play out and who is to play a role in it. In this, socio-economic factors, formal and informal mechanisms of repression, cooptation and legitimation, and distinctive structural constellations identified in the literature are all to be taken into account, both as concrete resources and opportunities for actors, and as they constitute the context in which agency is channeled. Eva Bellin, in a revision of her work on authoritarian persistence, thus speaks of “structural endowments and political variables” that are favorable to transition.<sup>51</sup>

Scholars of regime change and transformation have developed a variety of diverging and more or less comprehensive compilations of the factors influencing democratic transition and consolidation vs. authoritarian persistence.<sup>52</sup> The following discussion is limited to some of the factors identified in transition research (and Middle East studies) that seem to have particular relevance for the Arab world. An empirical analysis of these factors in a given country could help in understanding the depth and direction of change currently occurring and to be expected in the future.

<sup>51</sup> Eva Bellin, *A Modest Transformation: Political Change in the Arab World after the “Arab Spring”*, Paper presented at the conference “The Arab Uprisings and the Changing Global Order”, University of Connecticut, 27.3.2012.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Juan J. Linz/Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; Larry Diamond/Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy. A Reader*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2009; Christian W. Haepfer/Patrick Bernhagen/Ronald Inglehart/Christian Welzel (Eds.), *Democratization*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

## Socio-economic development

Perhaps the most common generalization linking political systems to other aspects of society has been that the emergence and consolidation of democracy are related to the level of economic development. For a long time, Seymour M. Lipset’s considerations on democratic modernization have been the eminent paradigm for development politics and the backbone for research on transition processes. Modernization theory seemed to answer the question under which conditions democracies emerge. Originally, though, the theory had sought to explain more than just the conditions for democratization and democratic consolidation. It focused rather on the wider question of “political development”. Dankwart Rustow and Seymour M. Lipset were among the first who related this rather general model explicitly to processes of political transformation.

In his research on the “social requisites” of democracy Lipset found a close inter-relation between a society’s level of socio-economic development and its ability to sustain democratic structures.<sup>53</sup> Lipset identified a set of four indicators to measure socio-economic development: GDP per capita, level of education, degree of industrialization, and degree of urbanization. High scores with all four indicators would favour democratic development. Lipset carefully notes that reaching high socio-economic development would not automatically result in democratization, but merely have a catalyzing effect. The modernization process would involve the strengthening of the middle class. Growing wealth would then be followed by changes in the societal belief systems and an increase in social mobilization. This would express itself in particular in a widespread human desire for collective decision-making and political participation, i.e. democracy. Lipset thus saw a threefold correlation between socio-economic development, change of values, and democratization.

For more than half a century this correlation thesis has withstood repeated empirical inquiries conducted by a number of scholars following in Lipset’s and Rustow’s footsteps.<sup>54</sup> The question whether the corre-

<sup>53</sup> Lipset, Seymour M., *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, Garden City: Anchor, 1960; Ibid. “Some Social Requisites of Democracy. Economic Development and Political Legitimacy”, in: *American Political Science Review*, 53 (1959), pp. 69-105.

<sup>54</sup> Among others Robert J. Barro, “Determinants of De-

lation is sufficient to establish a causal link, raised by Rustow himself, remains unresolved.<sup>55</sup> However, despite establishing a strong correlation between wealth and democracy, modernization theory does not inform us about the concrete threshold of modernization required for democracy, a threshold beyond which authoritarianism would cease to be viable. The economic modernization levels the theory refers to are evidently not determining and merely constitute an environment that may be more or less facilitative of certain kinds of regime.

Following Lipset, Huntington has argued that economic development would merely facilitate the entering of states into an economic “transition zone”, in which autocratic regimes are destabilized provoking the spread of democratization processes.<sup>56</sup> When a country leaves the transition zone behind, the level of economic modernization would have a consolidating and legitimizing effect on newly built democratic structures, an effect that would increase proportionally with economic strength. In contrast, for autocratic regimes economic strength poses a dilemma: On the one hand, poor economic performance would lead to the regime’s loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the population. On the other hand, consolidated accounts and growing economic strength may incite demands for inclusion and participation from societal actors, such as emerging middle classes.

Even though the causal mechanism between economic development and democratization remain highly debated, there still seems to be a strong statistical correlation. However, it remains unclear if variables, such as GDP growth, are sufficient to indicate a

mocracy”, in: *Journal of Political Economy*, 107 (1999) 6, pp. 158-183; Kenneth Bollen, “Political democracy and the timing of development”, in: *American Sociological Review*, 44 (1979) 4, pp. 572-587; Robert W. Jackman, “On the Relation of Economic Development and Democratic Performance”, in: *American Journal of Political Science*, Vo.17 (1973) 3, pp. 611-621; Tatu Vanhanen, *Prospects for Democracy. A study of 172 countries*, New York: Taylor & Francis, 1997; Michael R. Alvarez/Adam Przeworski/José Cheibub/Fernando Limongi, “Classifying Political Regimes”, in: *Studies in Comparative International Development*, (1996) 31, pp. 3-36; Edward Muller, “Economic Determinants of Democracy”, in: *American Sociological Review*, 60 (1995) 6, pp. 966-982.

<sup>55</sup> Dankwart Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy”, in: *Comparative Politics*, 2 (1970) 3, pp. 342.

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic”, in: *Political Science Quarterly*, 99 (1984) 2, p. 202.

democracy fostering effect. After all, they do not provide any information on the concentration and distribution of national wealth. Increasing inequality could in fact be likely to exacerbate social conflict and weaken the prospects for democracy.<sup>57</sup>

Yet, as regards Arab countries, it was not the unequal distribution of wealth but rather the reliance on oil and political rents that was regarded as the main obstacle to democratization.<sup>58</sup> In fact, many Arab countries, the resource rich Gulf monarchies in particular, are rentier states, whose economy is marked by patronage networks and cronyism. Rentier state theory, which seeks to explain the impacts of external or resource generated rents on state-society relations and governance, has been routinely cited by scholars to account for the democracy deficit as well as the stability of autocracies in the region. Beblawi has plausibly captured the central idea of what makes a state a rentier in his 1987 definition: rents come from abroad; they accrue to the government directly; and they are not generated by productive human activity but instead by the scarcity value of natural endowments and/or through international financial aid.<sup>59</sup> The rentier state paradigm basically holds that, as long as a regime can generate large proportions of its income from unproductively earned or externally derived payments and distribute it to society, it is relieved of having to impose taxation. This in turn means that it does not have to offer goods to society, that are usually seen as the return for citizens paying taxes, such as democratic participation and civic rights, or a sustainable economic modernization perspective. Quite to the contrary, resource abundance, particularly oil wealth and political rents, often prove

<sup>57</sup> Adam Przeworski (Ed.), *Sustainable Democracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>58</sup> See for example Martin Beck, *Rente und Rentierstaat im Nahen Osten*, in: *ibid.*, *Der Nahe Osten im Umbruch. Zwischen Transformation und Autoritarismus*, Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 25-49; Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World”, in: Giacomo Luciani (Ed.), *The Arab State*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 85-98; Lisa Anderson, “The State in the Middle East and North Africa”, in: *Comparative Politics*, 20 (1987) 1, pp.1-18; Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; More recently: Martin Beck, “Political Change in the Middle East: An Attempt to Analyze the ‘Arab Spring’”, Hamburg: GIGA, August 2012 (GIGA-Working Papers, No. 203).

<sup>59</sup> Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World”, in: Beblawi/Luciani: *The Rentier State* [as Fn. 10], pp. 87 f.

a reliable tool for authoritarian regimes to “buy” support from their people.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the redistribution of benefits is used to support clientelist structures, fostering systems of patronage and nepotism, and thus limiting the democracy supporting effects attributed to economic development by modernization theory.<sup>61</sup>

The 2011 revolts in the Arab world have called the universality of the rentier argument into question. Even states with access to considerable income generated by natural resources or international rents have not proven immune from popular pressure for change. Focused on how Arab regimes achieved stability through oil riches, academic observers, as well as authoritarian leaders in the region, overlooked the destabilizing effects of globalization, economic liberalization policies, and the failure to implement redistributive socio-economic reforms that resulted in growing inequality. In particular, the uprising in Libya – a country which is among the world’s major oil exporters – challenges the assumption that oil wealth poses an insurmountable obstacle to democratization. In contrast, most of the wealthy oil abundant rentier states in the Arab Gulf have so far been able to avert a substantial regime crisis, even though some were shook by large protests. The case of Bahrain, in turn, might even serve as case in point showing the disruptive effect of diminishing rent flows for the resilience of authoritarian regimes to popular pressures.

In sum, the revolts in the Arab world may not have superseded the premises of the rentier state model, yet they have given rise to the question under which conditions the capacity of rent to buy off dissent reaches its limit. The explanatory potential of rentier theory – if not complemented by other theoretical approaches – seems to be limited, since in its pure form it assumes a generic correlation between the availability of rents and people’s consent that tantamounts to a “virtuous circle” leaving little room for change: As dissent can be bought off outright, repression is not necessary, and hence dissent is unlikely to reach a level of inten-

sity where it can no longer be bought off. In addition, rentier theory tells us little about the trajectory of transformation once an authoritarian regime has been shaken.

## Culture and religion

Scholars have also focused on Arab and Islamic culture as possible obstacles to democracy in the region. Because democratization did not happen at the mid-income levels that produced (some) democratization elsewhere, strong cultural barriers were said to have prevented the “normal” interrelation between economic development and democracy in the Arab world. Arguments that Arab societies were inherently averse to democracy because of their patriarchic nature, dominated among others by traditionalism, patrimonial structures, and religious fundamentalism, fostered the notion of cultural exceptionalism.<sup>62</sup>

However, these approaches neglect that political culture is not set in stone but rather socially constructed and thus bound to change over time. Since no compelling case can be made that there is some innate antidemocratic predisposition of Arabs making them permanently inimical to political competition and participation, it seems that there is a greater merit in concentrating research on the origins and changing determinants of political culture in order to find clues to the exceptional perseverance of authoritarianism.<sup>63</sup> With a view to this, Eva Bellin, among other scholars, has stressed the difficulties that Arab societies face in overcoming patterns of thinking and acting formed during long periods of authoritarian rule. If a country does not have a tradition of pluralism and inclusion, or a history of constructive interaction between government, opposition and civil society, this is almost certain to hinder democratic transformation.<sup>64</sup> The statement that “political culture matters” connects to the argument of path dependence that Wolfgang Merkel has suggested: The longer authoritarian regimes have been institutionalized in a country and have had

<sup>60</sup> Jay Ulfelder, “Natural-Resource Wealth and the Survival of Autocracy”, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 40 (2007), pp. 995-1018; Kevin N. Morrison, “Oil, Non-Tax Revenue, and the Redistributive Foundation of Regime Stability”, in: *International Organization*, 63 (2009) pp. 107-138; Michael L. Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?”, in: *World Politics*, 53 (2001) 3, pp.325-361.

<sup>61</sup> Gero Erdmann/Ulf Engel, *Neopatrimonialism Revisited. Beyond a Catch-All Concept*, Hamburg: GIGA, February 2006 (GIGA-Working Papers, No. 16)

<sup>62</sup> Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* Oxford University Press, 1992; Suad Joseph, “Patriarchy and Development in the Arab World”, in: *Gender and Development*, 4 (1996) 2, pp. 14-19.

<sup>63</sup> Alfred Stepan/Graham B. Robertson, “An ‘Arab’ More than a ‘Muslim’ Electoral Gap”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 14 (2003) 3, p.41

<sup>64</sup> Bellin, *A Modest Transformation* [as Fn. 51]

the chance to influence the political culture of society, the more probable it is that any subsequent regime will have substantial democratic defects.<sup>65</sup>

Among those theorists focusing on culture as *the* explanatory factor, it is probably Samuel P. Huntington's work that has had the widest influence on academia as well as the broader public. Drawing on Bernard Lewis, Huntington accords special weight to Christianity and secularism in arguing why Western civilization is fundamentally distinct from other civilizations, especially in its ability to sustain democracy.<sup>66</sup> Turning to the case of the Muslim world, the most important factor Huntington identifies to explain its specificity, is the lack of a process of secularization in the Muslim world, and thus the incompatibility of Islam and democracy.<sup>67</sup>

Yet, many have argued against this Western monopolization of modernism as a universal development path.<sup>68</sup> Johannes Reissner, for example, asserts that modernization in its secularist form is just one possibility of how the universal processes of functional differentiation (i.e. modernization) take place and shape the relations between the state and the religious sphere.<sup>69</sup> It is, thus, questionable whether the Westphalian secular model of modernization should

be seen as the universal pathway, making the Arab world the historical exception. It might rather be the secular West that represents the exception from the rule. In fact, the "return" of religion to politics in those parts of the world thought to be thoroughly secularized has struck Western observers and contributed to the demise, if partial, of the secularization paradigm.

A powerful critique of the determinist association between Islamic tradition and authoritarianism is made by Alfred Stepan.<sup>70</sup> In his milestone "Arguing Comparative Politics" he emphasizes the multivocality of all great religious traditions and provides empirical support for the possibility of Islam's reconciliation with democracy. Stepan's key claim relevant to debates on the relationship between religion, secularism and democracy in Muslim societies is that "secularism" and the 'separation of church and state' are not an intrinsic part of the core definition" of democracy.<sup>71</sup> In fact, it appears that there could be a broad range of concrete patterns of religion-state relations in political systems that would meet the definition of Dahl's polyarchy. What is needed for democracy and religion to flourish together, Stepan asserts, is a significant degree of institutional differentiation between religion and state. Stepan therefore introduces the concept of the "twin tolerations" as a basic framework for religion-state relations in a democracy. The twin tolerations represent a set of minimal boundaries to the freedom of action for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities and groups, and vice versa. According to Stepan, religious institutions should not have a constitutionally guaranteed privilege to dictate, prevent or limit policy decisions of democratically elected governments. Likewise, religious groups should have complete autonomy to worship. Also, no religious group should be excluded from advancing their interest by participation in politics as long as it does not violate the liberties of others.

Stepan's distinction is of particular relevance for today's struggle about state-religion relations in the context of constitution making in Arab transformation countries, in which secularism is seen as a European concept, often equated with laicism, and foreign to local traditions. Indeed, the relationship

65 Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies", [as Fn. 27].

66 Samuel Huntington, "A Clash of Civilizations?", in: *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (1993), pp. 22-49; *Ibid.*, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* [as Fn. 12].

67 For other cultural essentialist interpretations see Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, London: Frank Cass, 1994; Panayiotis Jerasimof Vatikiotis, *Islam and the State*, New York: Croom Helm, 1987; Martin Kramer, "Islam vs. Democracy", in: *Commentary*, 95 (January 1993), pp. 35-42; Steven Fish, "Islam and Authoritarianism", in: *World Politics*, 55 (2002), pp. 4-37; Ernest Gellner, "Islam and Marxism: Some Comparisons", in: *International Affairs* 67 (1990) 1, pp.1-6.

68 For a strong critique see Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sha-ri'a*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008; Asaf Bayat, *Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?* Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2007; Eduardo Mendieta/Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011; Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance", in: *The Nation*, 273 (2001) 12; Jürgen Habermas, "Glauben und Wissen", in: *Dialog*, 1 (2002) 1, pp.63-74.

69 Johannes Reissner, *Islam in der Weltgesellschaft. Wege in eine eigene Moderne*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP-Studie S19/2007).

70 Alfred Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 11 (2000) 4, pp. 37-57.

71 *Ibid.*, *Arguing Comparative Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 223.

between religion and politics has already turned out to be a source of contention that puts stress on the establishment of legitimate and participatory forms of governance. The differences in value systems that manifest themselves in the debate about the rightful place of Islam and the Sharia in the societal and political order, have already developed into major cleavages dividing, polarizing, and thus destabilizing transitional societies.

## Inclusivity and identity

Inclusivity is often regarded as *the* constitutive feature of democracy. It is widely believed that a democracy can only be viable if all constituents of society are included into the process of collective decision making. At any rate, in a democracy power has to be monitored and rendered accountable through intentional and engaged citizen action. This demand is mirrored in Robert Dahl's conditions for the polyarchy. In Dahl's call for the full inclusion and effective participation of all politically mature citizens lies an implicit critique of Schumpeter who has advanced the view that every polity should decide autonomously who is part of its populace and who is not.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, the challenge extends to the field of deep societal cleavages: The people may very well agree on who should be considered a citizen and be still divided into distinct groups where loyalty ultimately lies with sub-units rather than the national community, posing specific problems for participatory government. Bellin and others have emphasized this point and stressed the importance of a minimal degree of national unity and cohesiveness, or at least some sense of common solidarity for a democracy to function.<sup>73</sup> Conditions for the development of democracy are especially unfavorable if there are unresolved identity issues. Divisions over ethnic, linguistic, tribal, ideological, regional, religious, or confessional identity pose a huge obstacle when trying to build a democracy.

This, of course, has implications for the current transformations in the Arab world in which many societies, due to, amongst other factors, the colonial heritage, are deeply fragmented along several of these

cleavages. The translation of structures of collective action and the mechanisms of political influence established by the protest movements into sustainable civil society structures might be hampered if they are built on particularist identities instead of an integrative collective civic culture. Also, constitution making involves debates about identity issues, thus bringing to the fore such cleavages. Considering the existence of an integrative identity as an *ex ante* prerequisite for democracy, however, tends to obscure the degree to which such identities have been historically constructed over time, and are still being constantly (re-)constructed. Identities are not immanently immutable. There is thus a possibility that the common experience of cooperation in social protests and different formations of civil society, having a strong socializing effect, may gradually built towards such an integrative identity from below, bridging existing ethnic, religious, cultural or class-related gaps.

## Civil society

Academic research on the relations between civil society engagement and democratic governance is strongly rooted in Alexis de Tocqueville's classical liberal thought, which holds voluntary associations to be "schools of democracy" that facilitate political awareness, contribute to the formation of a more informed citizenry, and stimulate further political action. Drawing on Tocqueville, many have thus ascribed a particular democracy fostering function to civil society.<sup>74</sup> But even though there is large consensus that a strong civil society is a necessary albeit not sufficient condition for democracy, there is no agreement about its concrete definition. Neera Chandhoke has criticized that civil society has developed into a catch-all concept that has come to mean "everything to everyone".<sup>75</sup>

We can broadly define civil society as the multitude of "self-organized intermediary groups" and organizations that lie between the primary units of society and formal governmental agencies and institutions.<sup>76</sup> In

<sup>74</sup> Among others Gabriel Almond/Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes And Democracy In Five Nations*, Newbury Park: Sage, 1989; Wolfgang Merkel (Ed.), *Systemwechsel 5: Die Rolle der Zivilgesellschaft*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000,

<sup>75</sup> Neera Chandhoke, "Civil Society", in: *Development in Practice*, 17 (2007) 4/5, p. 607.

<sup>76</sup> Philippe Schmitter, "Some Propositions about Civil So-

<sup>72</sup> Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *Kapitalismus, Sozialismus und Demokratie*, Bern: A. Francke Verlag, 1950, pp. 428 ff.

<sup>73</sup> Bellin, *A Modest Transformation* [as Fn. 51]; Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies", [as Fn. 27].

this intermediary sphere, collective actors organize their interests and articulate their political viewpoints.<sup>77</sup> In its classical definition civil society institutions must therefore be autonomous of the state. Such a definition assumes, however, a dichotomous Weberian conception of state and society that has been strongly contested in academia.<sup>78</sup>

Approaching the subject from a functionalist perspective, institutions, social movements, or other forms of collective civic political engagement should fulfill an array of different functions to qualify as civil society. While nature and composition of civil society may largely differ from country to country, these functions seem fairly invariant: First and foremost, civil society should – in the liberal tradition of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes – protect the citizens against the unlimited powers of state. By asserting themselves as civil society, people demand that regimes recognize the intrinsic personal autonomy and the competence of the political public to chart out a discourse on the content and the limits of what is politically desirable. However, civil society should not merely shield the people from their regime. As an “amphibious entity” its task is to mediate between both poles, between state and society, as well as between political and non-political sphere.<sup>79</sup>

Civil society then provides a space for political reasoning and debate and thus enables political communication. Since civil society allows also for non-majoritarian or neglected interests to be articulated and introduced into the public debate, it adds significantly to a pluralist opinion forming process. Civil society can help to bridge societal cleavages by providing participatory spaces.<sup>80</sup> By participating in civil

ciety and the Consolidation of Democracy”, Wien: Institut für Höher Studien, September 1993 (IHS Reihe Politikwissenschaft, No. 10).

**77** Hans-Joachim Lauth/Aurel Croissant/Wolfgang Merkel, “Zivilgesellschaft und Transformation. Ein internationaler Vergleich”, in: Merkel (Ed.), *Systemwechsel 5* [as Fn. 74], p. 16.

**78** Among others Ayhan Akman, “Beyond the Objectivist Conception of Civil Society: Social Actors, Civility and Self-Limitation”, in: *Political Studies*, 60 (2012) 2, pp. 321-340; Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society. Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

**79** Charles Taylor, “Modes of Civil Society”, in: *Public Culture*, 3 (1990) 1, p. 114.

**80** Friedbert W. Rüb, “Von der zivilen zur unzüvilen Gesellschaft- das Beispiel des ehemaligen Jugoslawien”, in:

society associations, members are also socialized to engage in further political participation. In this light, Putnam has argued that even non-political civil society formations may be conducive for democratization in that they provide the context in which to build social capital and mutual trust that spill-over into the political realm.<sup>81</sup>

In order to play a role in advancing the development of a collective and integrative civic identity, as well as the emergence and consolidation of democracy, civil society institutions should ideally enjoy autonomy from primary units of society such as individuals, families, clans, ethnic groups, etc.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, civil society organizations should not follow exclusive racial, ethnic or sectarian agendas in the first place.

There is, however, a pertinent discussion whether the introduction of such a normative, liberal dimension into the definition of civil society leads to blocking the view on specific forms of civic political engagement that does otherwise perform the functions typically ascribed to civil society.<sup>83</sup> Particularly with regards to the Arab world Wickham has argued that efforts to study civil society based on such a normative notion “reveal more about the preoccupations of Western scholars than they do about new social configurations in the Middle East today.”<sup>84</sup> In reality, it seems that there exists a broad range of organizations and associations that were explicitly formed on the basis of religious, ethnic, or tribal affiliations that might well be considered as being an essential part of civil society.<sup>85</sup> Kopecký and Mudde, among others,

Merkel (Ed.), *Systemwechsel 5* [as Fn. 74], p. 173-201.

**81** Robert D. Putnam/Raffaella Leonardi, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

**82** Larry Diamond, “Civil Society and the Struggle for Democracy”, in: *Ibid.* (Ed.), *The Democratic Revolution. Struggles for Freedom and Pluralism in the Developing World*, Lanham/London: Freedom House, 1992, p. 7; *Ibid.*, *Developing Democracy* [as Fn. 17], p. 221.

**83** Partha Chatterjee, “A Response to Taylor’s ‘Modes of Civil Society’”, in: *Public Culture*, 3 (1990) 1, pp. 119-132.

**84** Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, “Beyond Democratization: Political Change in the ArabWorld”, in: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 27 (1994) 3, p. 509.

**85** A valuable overview over civil society formations in the Arab world is given in Jilian Schwedler/Augustus Richard Norton (Ed.), *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East: A Primer*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995; See also Augustus Richard Norton, “The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East”, in: *Middle East Journal*, 47 (1993) 2, p.

have raised concern that empirical research should study the nature of the relationship between civil society organizations and democracy rather than assume it. In order to capture the broad variety of civil society formations the concept should be stripped of its normative implications and reduced to a heuristic function.<sup>86</sup>

In addition, the normative conceptualization of civil society as engendering democracy has also been much criticized: Because of its attested democracy fostering effect, support for civil society has come to be perceived as a sure recipe for democratization by both donor agencies and large strands of academic democratization and development literature.<sup>87</sup> Especially in authoritarian contexts, civil society has been interpreted as the viable alternative to formal party politics that, often co-opted or sclerotic, had disappointed many of the “democracy-spotters”. The normative focus on enhancing participation in civil society organizations, however, lost sight of how these associations at times may also become parallel structures of governance, effectively undermining a civic democratic culture. In bypassing official governance institutions and creating pretense areas of civic participation, civil society may render popular calls for more representative political structures meaningless. This effect may even be supported by those in power in order to hedge the power of elected representatives or to counter demands for universal suffrage.

The view on civil society as an alternative to the authoritarian regime is furthermore a miscomprehension of the concept itself. First, the legal and institutional framework in which civil society operates is decided upon by the authoritarian rulers.<sup>88</sup> Even extra-institutional civic political engagement depends to a certain degree on the toleration by the ruler. It remains therefore unclear to what degree civil society can actually live up to its ascribed functions in non-democratic societies, where public space is rigorously restricted.

205-216; Ibid. (Ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. 1 & 2, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992-1995.

<sup>86</sup> Petr Kopecký/Cas Mudde: “Rethinking Civil Society”, in: *Democratization*, 10 (2003) 3, pp.11.

<sup>87</sup> Among others John A. Hall, “In Search of Civil Society”, in: Ibid. (Ed.) *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, pp. 1-32.

<sup>88</sup> Chandhoke, “Civil Society” [as Fn. 79]; Francesco Cavatorta/Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism*, London: Routledge.

Second, the pluralist character of civil society does neither ensure a society’s democratic governance, nor does it automatically imply a strengthening of the autonomy of its public sphere.<sup>89</sup> Above all, civil society is no “power free” zone. It rather provides various societal actors with a space where they can engage with and contest among each other. Moreover, it is naturally not out of the reach of regime elites or other powerful social actors, who may seek to advance their interests through the strategic creation of “grass root” structures (so-called astroturfing). Admittedly, it is debatable whether such forms of political organization [for example, governmental NGOs (GoNGOs) or royal NGOs (RNGOs)] would still be considered part of civil society, since their independence is fairly limited. Yet, in practice, a clear-cut distinction may not always be feasible. Even if that is the case, civil society is not to be confused with democracy. At best, it might support a democratic civic culture; at worst it might be a factor that undermines it.

For all the tentativeness and uncertainty associated with the civil society concept, it still remains an indispensable field of analysis because it represents *the* eminent informal area for the articulation, organization and contestation of political interests. In this regard, Jillian Schwedler writes “although the existence of civil society in the Middle East (or anywhere) does not mean that countries are on the verge of democratization, it does illustrate that citizens are both willing and able to play a role in shaping the state policies that govern their lives.”<sup>90</sup>

## The regime’s will and capacity for coercion

Indeed, while being focused on authoritarian persistence, academic research has largely ignored repeated incidents of regime contestation via substantial mobilizations by oppositional forces and civil society that the region already witnessed in the past decade. Bellin and others have therefore suggested that the secret behind the presumed Arab exceptionalism lied less in the absence of civic engagement, but rather in the will and capacity of the regimes’ coercive apparatus to suppress democratic initiative.<sup>91</sup> However, this dimen-

<sup>89</sup> Louis Roninger, “Civil Society, Patronage and Democracy”, in: *Current Sociology*, 35 (1994) 3/4, p. 210.

<sup>90</sup> Schwedler (Ed.), *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East* [as Fn. 85], p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the

sion has been neglected in recent research on the region.<sup>92</sup> Yet, the disposition of regimes to make use of its coercive apparatus has to be taken into consideration as a factor that can both hinder and channel transformative changes into a certain direction. Bellin adds that the regime's *capacity* to use repressive measures and its *will* to actually apply them are two independent factors that do not necessarily co-vary.

But under what conditions will a coercive apparatus lose the will to inflict violence in order to hold on to power and instead allow for transformative processes to unfold? In the literature, the capacities of a coercive apparatus – be it the military, riot police or other security forces – is often linked to its financing. It is assumed that when the financial foundation for salaries and supplies of arms and ammunition is compromised, the coercive apparatus will give way to transformation.<sup>93</sup> With regards to the Arab world, however, the security establishment rarely had reason to worry about its resources. The geopolitical and military conflict with Israel, as well as the prevalence of interstate conflicts in the region, has in the past prompted Arab governments to spend substantially higher percentages of income on security than in any other region of the world.<sup>94</sup>

In addition, a number of Arab autocrats have been provided with a steady inflow of military assistance and financial aid by international partners and have in exchange served as guarantors of regional stability. The security establishment is more likely to lose its will and capacity to bolster the regime's hold on power when it loses such crucial international support. Such a linkage could particularly be observed during the transitions of Eastern Europe and Latin America, where the Soviet Union and the United States respectively withdrew their support and triggered both an existential and financial crisis for the regime.

Despite the question of financing, authoritarian resilience is certainly also linked to the degree of insti-

Middle East" [as Fn 2]; Jill Crystal, "Authoritarianism and its Adversaries in the Arab World", in: *World Politics*, 46 (1994), pp. 262-289; Zoltan Barany, "Armies and Revolutions", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 24 (2013) 2, pp. 62-76.

<sup>92</sup> Steffen Kailitz, "Stand und Perspektiven der Autokratieforschung", in: *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 19 (2009) 3, pp. 437-488.

<sup>93</sup> Robin Luckham, "The Military, Militarization, and Democratization in Africa. A Survey of Literature and Issues", in: *African Studies Review*, 37 (1994) 2, pp. 13-75.

<sup>94</sup> Stepan/Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than a 'Muslim' Electoral Gap" [as Fn. 63], p.41.

tutionalization and autonomy of its coercive apparatus.<sup>95</sup> If the security forces are strongly professionalized and meritocratic, and possess a corporate identity distinct from the ruling elite, then it might seem opportune to their leaders, in cases of mass protest or other popular pressure, to withdraw support from a struggling leadership to maintain their own power base and legitimacy vis-à-vis the population. As Bellin holds: "The more institutionalized the security establishment is, the more willing it will be to disengage from power and allow political reform to proceed. The less institutionalized it is, the less amenable it will be to reform."<sup>96</sup> However, a strongly institutionalized security apparatus, firmly established beyond the regime's immediate sphere of influence, might equally pose an obstacle to transformation since it might merely allow for change of leadership but no further reform of the "deep state" that would affect its own prerogatives.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, once opposition becomes manifest, the success of attempts at repression does not only depend on the extent of coercion used; it depends as much on the size and scope of mass mobilization itself. Where ruling elites perceive yielding to popular mobilization as an existential threat, they will most certainly not hesitate to use the capacity of the security forces to suppress even large mass protests. Still, violently repressing hundred thousands of people is costly: it jeopardizes international support, domestic legitimacy, and above all the institutional integrity of the security apparatus. In cases where the coercive apparatus largely consists of a draft army, security forces might rather side with the masses or remain neutral on the sidelines than exerting violence against their fellow countrymen. This argument admittedly introduces an element of circularity, since on the one hand, the level of popular mobilization is, to some degree, shaped by the coercive capacity and will of the regime. On the other hand, even a hopeless imbalance of power may not be enough to deter mass protest. In such cases power holders are forced to open the way to change.

<sup>95</sup> Alfred Stepan, "The Military as Institution Versus the Military as Government", in: *Ibid.*, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 253-266.

<sup>96</sup> Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East" [as Fn. 2], p. 145.

<sup>97</sup> Chérine Chams El-Dine, *The Military and Egypt's Transformation Process. Preservation of the Military's Reserve Domains*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2013 (SWP Comments 2013/No. 06).

Also, where the elite does not perceive reform to be a matter of life-and-death, the cost of repression posed by high levels of popular mobilization may serve as a tipping mechanism.

## Legitimacy

The extensive use of coercion is certainly one of the constituent features of authoritarian rule. However, apart from some extreme cases, authoritarianism – like every other regime type – also has to rely on a certain degree of legitimacy to generate consent and compliance.<sup>98</sup> Or, as March and Olsen state: “Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate.”<sup>99</sup> Already in 1959, in his seminal essay on the “Social Requisites of Democracy”, Seymour Lipset underlined the utmost importance of a certain degree of political legitimacy for the stability and capacity of any political order. In fact, the lack – or rather: loss – of rulers’ legitimacy was crucial for setting the dynamics of change in the Arab world in motion. Legitimacy, of course, is not only essential for autocrats, but also for newly emerging regimes..

In general, regime legitimacy is considered to be mainly based on output, i.e. regime performance in vital policy sectors. In addition, it is often also founded on normative-ideological grounds. Autocratic regimes in the Arab world have been standing on shaky grounds with a view to both of these foundations of legitimacy. First, the grand ideologies that had supplied legitimacy to many a regime in the region – nationalism, anti-imperialism, Pan-Arabism, socialism, Baathism – have largely lost their popular appeal. If anything, only political Islam and notions of Islamic unity are still able to draw popular support and establish legitimacy. Precisely for this reason, Islamist movements have been suppressed by Arab autocracies (if to varying degrees and at times in conjunction with their cooptation), since they represented the greatest challenge to the regimes’ legitimacy. At the same

time, authoritarian leaders have resorted to religion themselves as a means for restoring legitimacy, even such regimes as Syria’s formerly expressively secular Baath regime. Second, policy performance has also been uneven at best. While nearly all states in the region expanded welfare and state employment in the period after full national independence, economic contraction, credit-shortage and the emerging international consensus, since the 1980s, of championing the private sector as the main motor of development, all forced the non-oil states to reduce and effectively scuttle the role of the state as a provider of welfare.

Mechanisms of selective and strategic co-optation helped to counterbalance the regimes’ lack of legitimacy. Via patronage networks, Arab rulers connected the interests of elites in the military, the bureaucratic apparatus, and the business establishment to their own survival, while the rest of the population was placated with handouts, subsidies for fuel and consumer goods, salary increases and waves of massive public employment in times of crisis. The works of Pawelka and Richter are of particular interest as they describe in detail the widespread neo-patrimonial rent-seeking structures among MENA elites.<sup>100</sup> These patronage networks created informal ways of access to leadership, effectively undermining the official state institutions and thus posing an obstacle for accountability, and hence legitimacy.

In this context, Albrecht and Schlumberger have identified “initiative institution building” as an established political practice of autocrats in the Middle East, in which the creation of a variety of institutions, reform commissions and advisory councils, did not create real chances for competitive power contestation. Rather, it intended to integrate and embed, and thus contain and co-opt, influential actors, such as business elites, liberal reformers and parts of the moderate opposition.<sup>101</sup> However, if institutions, such as a parliament, are not considered to be legitimate by

<sup>98</sup> Johannes Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes”, in: *Democratization*, 20 (2013) 1, pp. 13-38; Peter Burnell, “Autocratic Opening to Democracy. Why Legitimacy Matters”, in: *Third World Quarterly*, 27 (2006) 4, pp. 545-562.

<sup>99</sup> James G. March/Johan P. Olsen, “Elaborating the ‘New Institutionalism’”, in: R.A.W. Rhodes/Sarah A. Binder/Bert Rockman (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Richter, “The Political Economy of Regime Maintenance in Egypt. Linking External Resources and Domestic Legitimation”, in: Schlumberger (Ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism* [as Fn. 7], pp. 177-193; Peter Pawelka, *Der Staat im Vorderen Orient* [as Fn. 8]; Farid Guliyev, “Personal rule, Neopatrimonialism, and Regime Typologies. Integrating Dahlian and Weberian Approaches to Regime Studies”, in: *Democratization*, 18 (2011) 3, pp. 575-601.

<sup>101</sup> Albrecht/Schlumberger, “Waiting for Godot” [as Fn. 4]; Jennifer Gandhi/Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats”, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 40 (2007) 11, pp. 1279-1301.

its constituents they are likely to represent a continuous source of instability.

### External influences: leverage, linkage and diffusion

Finally, many have argued that external, in particular Western, influence is decisive for the outcome of transitions. International influences include, amongst others, demonstration effects; the diffusion of policies, belief systems and values; positive or negative conditionality; direct bilateral pressures and sanctions; discursive diplomacy; and, at its extreme, direct military intervention. If leverage mechanisms to exert influence are absent, authoritarian governments are thought to have a broader range of options because opportunity costs for repressive actions at home do not increase. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, thus, define leverage as the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes vis-à-vis external liberalization pressures.<sup>102</sup> Obviously, smaller and economically or militarily weaker states are more responsive to external pressure, whereas large states with a strong economy, resource base, and military capacities are rather immune to external pressure. Moreover, leverage might be diminished by external actors' foreign policy agendas. The implicit assumption of Western influence as being inherently conducive to democratization thus seems rather optimistic.<sup>103</sup> As Jünemann has argued, a characteristic feature of Western foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab world has been the constant "democratization vs. stabilization dilemma".<sup>104</sup> In fact, tempered by its strategic interests, the West has supported de-

mocratization only in some countries, while it has more or less explicitly endorsed repression of reform movements in other countries, most recently during the Arab Spring. Moreover, there is a possibility that even where foreign-driven reform is launched with a sincere interest in promoting liberalization and democracy, it can actually run counter a participatory culture, since citizens see no agency for themselves. They may therefore be discouraged, feeling that governance issues are effectively being pre-decided by external actors anyway.<sup>105</sup> The availability of alternative and non-democratic external supporters, such as different regional hegemons (e.g. the oil-rich monarchies in the Arab Gulf) or non-Western international powers (Russia, China) poses another limitation for the efficiency of leverage.

Levitsky and Way argue therefore that leverage alone is by no means enough to explain the initiation of processes of democratization. Only in combination with the more diffuse, continuous and decentralized effects of "linkage" can they provoke a regime change in the sense of democratization.<sup>106</sup> The term "linkage" refers to the density of cross-border flows, networking mechanisms and structural ties between authoritarian states and their liberal counterparts. Those linkages can be conceptualized as channels for diffusion and the transfer of ideas, values, morals and belief systems.

Indeed, processes of diffusion have also been critical to the Arab Spring. Satellite channels and social media networks have played a relevant role for the diffusion of protest into the whole region. This effect of regional linkage has frequently been labeled the "contagion effect". Yet, diffusion has worked in a two-fold way: It also allowed regimes to learn from each other's mistakes and adapt more quickly and effectively to societal pressures. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders have pointed to the capacity of autocrats to quickly adapt to new challenges and to learn from failures and successes of other regimes' counter-revolutionary strategies.<sup>107</sup>

**102** Steven Levitsky/Lucan Way, "Linkage versus Leverage. Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change", in: *Comparative Politics*, 38 (2006) 4, pp. 379-400.

**103** For a discussion of the deficits and dilemmas of Western and EU democratization policies see Muriel Asseburg, "Demokratieförderung in der arabischen Welt – hat der partnerschaftliche Ansatz der Europäer versagt?", in: *Orient*, 46 (2005) 2, pp. 272-290, Mustapha Kamel Sayyid, "International Dimension of Middle Eastern Authoritarianism. The G8 and External Efforts at Political Reform", in: Schlumberger (Ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism* [as Fn. 7], pp. 215-230.

**104** Annette Jünemann, "Demokratie für die Arabische Welt. Anmerkungen zu einem sperrigen Exportartikel", in: Hans-Georg Ehrhart/Margret Johannsen (Eds.), *Herausforderung Mittelost: Übernimmt sich der Westen?*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2005, pp. 115-127;

**105** Ivan Krastev, "Democracy Without a Choice", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2002) 3, pp. 39-53.

**106** Steven Levitsky/Lucan Way, "International Linkage and Democratization", in: *Journal of Democracy*, 16 (2005) 3, pp. 20-34.

**107** Steven Heydeman/Reinoud Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience. Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening'", in: *Globalizations*, 8 (2011) 5, pp. 647-653.

## What insights from transition theory and Middle East studies?

The changes we are witnessing in the Arab world represent neither necessarily the advent of a fourth wave of democratization, nor an authoritarian renaissance in democratic disguise, but rather a Middle East in “transition to somewhere”.<sup>108</sup> Taking recourse to the findings of transition research shall therefore not seduce us to relapse into searching for glimmers of democracy. Just because authoritarian regimes crumble, this does not yet signal the advent of a country’s democratic transition – not to speak of democratic consolidation.

This paper makes no claim to provide a complete account of the factors influencing the path of political transformation. It points, however, to some preeminent fields of inquiry and parameters that researchers on the Arab world should not disregard when investigating the processes of transformation that are unfolding in at least parts of the region.

Indeed, in order to understand the changes we are currently witnessing in the Arab world, actor-centered approaches promise to help investigate the reconfiguration of elite constellations that take place in the course of transformation processes. That will also allow to draw conclusions regarding the depth of change that is taking place – is it only a change of leadership or do we see a more substantial, structural change in politically relevant elites?

Still, for a thorough understanding of the transformative changes that are taking place both, the interrelation between individual and collective actors, as well as the parameters that structure and inform their interplay, need to be analyzed. Processes of transformation are contingent on different actors’ choices that are in turn informed and influenced by the structural context, above all, the socio-economic environment, the political culture, and the existence of external pressures or channels of influence.

Furthermore, the nature and scope of civic engagement plays an important role in influencing the policy options of relevant actors. It is exactly the com-

plex interplay between civic engagement and mass mobilization on the one hand and the ability of regime elites to resort to means of cooptation and coercion on the other that produces constellations conducive or obstructive to change. To date, the role of the masses in transformations has been strongly under-researched. One of the main challenges is how to conceptualize the complex set of often amorphous actors, as well as their interrelations and mutual influences.

**108** Morten Valbjørn, Morten, “Upgrading Post-democratization Studies. Examining a Re-politicized Arab World in a Transition to Somewhere”, in: *Middle East Critique*, 21 (2012) 1, pp. 26.