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Nicola Pratt, Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World (London: Lynne Rienner, 2007, 235 pp.)

Mehmet OZKAN

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Mehmet Özkan
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cause of violations; laws, NGOs and more coercive tools like sanctions often will not work, no matter how they are designed. A lot of repression is driven by national security, and that limits what international norms can do. It also suggests that repression is not a discrete problem to be studied in special sections of the American Political Science Association; rather, it should also be part of broader debates, and research, on national security.

Human rights scholarship generally suffers from a strong bias for studying certain parts of the world, especially Latin America and Eastern Europe. The book presents five ‘mini cases’, but they are more fleeting literature reviews, rather than the thorough analyses required.

This book’s strength is that it offers a careful discussion of the complex contingencies of compliance – the ‘dependent variables’ at the heart of the story. It takes less care in sorting out the other side of the equation – the large and growing mass of norms and institutions that are placing pressures on states. The reader is often left wondering: compliance with what. The cases tell the reader all about the different kinds of pressures applied in Argentina and Chile, and they point to the apparent successes as well as failures with equal conviction. The cases are less successful in sorting through the pressures that did the job and those that failed, which is a hard task for any scholar as dozens of pressures are used at the same time. Much to her credit, Cardenas tries to sort this out, carefully using statistical analyses that separate out the effects of a few kinds of pressures, like sanctions and NGOs. However, the findings are hard to connect to the case studies. Despite these drawbacks, Cardenas has put forth an appealing argument about compliance with international human rights pressures and it is the argument, if not necessarily the evidence, which should spark debate.

ARUNA KUMAR MALIK

Aruna Kumar Malik is a research scholar in the Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, at the University of Hyderabad, India

GOVERNMENTS AND THEORIES OF GOVERNANCE


The nature and possible development of democracy in the Middle East has been the focus of interest for many. When looking at the existing authoritarian regimes in the region, most researchers focus on the procedural developments of democracy and good governance. Breaking this trend, Nicola Pratt’s book, Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World, analyses the democratisation process in the Arab world from a historical perspective and locates the civil society activities
within the nation-building process. In her terms, ‘this book aims to challenge deterministic and essentializing approaches to theorizing the democratic transition in the Arab world by examining the dynamics of authoritarianism and of opposition to it as a historically constituted political process’ (p. 2). She takes five countries as case studies, namely Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Tunisia, and portrays the nature of the relationship between the civil society actors and the state from the immediate post-independence period until today.

Relying on the works of Roger Owen, Simon Bromley and Nazih Ayubi, Pratt argues that ‘the process of state formation in the Arab world plays a significant role in explaining the nature of politics within the Arab states’ (p. 5). Therefore, she argues, ‘authoritarianism is not the product of certain types of regimes but rather emerges from the nature of the states over which these regimes rule’ (p. 5).

Pratt’s book consists of six main chapters and a conclusion. After outlining the theoretical and discursive underpinning of the issue in the first chapter, she characterises ‘the initial phase’ of constructing and normalising authoritarianism from World War I to the 1960s in the second chapter. Chapter 3 deals with the period from the 1960s to the 1990s that has been labelled as the ‘post-independence political order’ (p. 20), during which the authoritarian regimes were challenged by a variety of civil society groups ranging from Islamist to leftist. The title of Chapter 4, ‘Authoritarianism Renewed’, captures and summarises the next period well, as authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have gained momentum again given the increase of Islamic threats. In the following two chapters Pratt aptly summarises the internal debates among civil society actors and their transnational links.

In political thought and practice civil society organisations have been understood as a tool to balance, and, if needed, protect the democratic political system. However, Pratt argues in her book that the civil society actors have actually contributed to the consolidation and ‘the normalization of authoritarian rule’ (p. 25) in post-independence regimes in the Arab world. Their discourse on and ‘support for national modernization’ (p. 57) has specifically led to the reproduction rather than the containment or limitation of such regimes. Pratt also argues that the Europeans are partly to blame for authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. ‘Europeans established institutions ... rooted in ... liberal-national notions’, but ‘they employed mechanisms for ... political control’ that ‘contradicted and undermined’ those values (p. 27).

The author further outlines, particularly in Chapter 3, the history of the development of civil society organisations in the region. As she shows, most Arab countries possessed an assertive, diverse civil society in the 1990s, which contradicts the argument that civil society is alien to the Arab/Muslim world (p. 123). Contrary to some observers, however, Pratt argues that the nature and aim of those civil society organisations did not account for the democratisation process in the region. As most of them were ‘service-providing NGOs’, it was not a concern whether they operated under democratic or authoritarian conditions (p. 124). Similarly business associations and trade unions did not necessarily push for
democratisation as they courted the regimes. In Pratt’s understanding, the only actors that challenge the regimes (although not necessarily the nature of these regimes) are the Islamists. Although their credentials on liberal values and freedom are contested, they are not only ‘the most significant sector of civil society in the Arab world’, but could also be seen as the most optimistic part of civil society, mostly because a ‘moderate’ group exists among Islamists who are ‘committed to standard procedures of democracy’ (p. 124). The existence of such a moderate group certainly opens a new way of looking at the Islamist movements in the Arab world and their role in the democratisation process.

Against the theory, but very much in line with the nature of Arab politics, the growth of civil society in the Arab world since the 1980s has created a counter-reaction from the governments who restricted freedom and destroyed the political opposition (pp. 124–5). Departing from here, Pratt’s finding that civil society actually contributes to the authoritarian regimes rather than challenging them raises questions about how to promote democracy in the Arab world.

Overall, Pratt’s book makes a sophisticated analysis of the development and change of social dynamics in the Arab world from the perspective of civil society–state relations. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* not only offers a new way of looking at the issues in the region, but also offers significant insights for drawing policy conclusions.

MEHMET OZKAN

*Mehmet Ozkan is a PhD candidate at Sevilla University, Spain*

INTERNATIONAL HISTORY


This short but nonetheless insightful book is the product of a collection of notes taken by Joachim Fest and his publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler as they discussed the publication of Albert Speer’s memoirs with the former Reich Minister shortly after his release from Spandau prison in 1966. In barely 200 pages, Fest not only provides the reader with a fascinating picture of Hitler’s vainglorious and also deeply troubled architect, but also offers insights into the characters of several other leading Nazis, and, in my view, manages to add something important to our understanding of a much-studied period of history. It is perhaps what this book reveals indirectly about a man situated right at the heart of the Nazi machine and about his battle to understand his own past, as much as what it reveals about the period itself, that makes for truly interesting reading.

One of the central and most important insights presented in the book must surely be the picture painted of Albert Speer, the paradoxical,