Contentious Politics
in the Middle East

Political Opposition under Authoritarianism
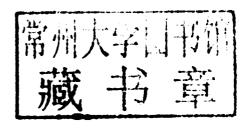
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Edited by Holger Albrecht

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For the next generation: Fanny, Finn, Joris, Kaya, Kimmy, and Lily

Acknowledgments

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My own curiosity about the topic discussed in this volume started to emerge at Tübingen University, where I spent almost fifteen years, first studying and then lecturing on Middle Eastern and comparative politics. In the course of studying political opposition in Egypt, I found that the topic was far too intriguing to leave it to a single country study. I am deeply indebted to Peter Pawelka, whose patience, guidance, and trust furthered my study. Thanks to him, I was fortunate to have enjoyed an unusual amount of freedom to reach beyond the designated topic and engage in the collaborative project that triggered this book.

During my Tübingen years, I met many bright people in the Middle East Research Forum who have, at one point or another, inspired my own ideas about the topic. At the risk of omitting one or another person, I shall say that I will not forget the stimulating discussions that I had with André Bank, Roy Karadag, Julius Kirchenbauer, Kevin Köhler, Markus Loewe, and Oliver Schlumberger. Not the least, I was lucky that people in Tübingen still remembered me when I came back in summer 2009 to escape the heat in Cairo and finalize this manuscript. I owe particular thanks to Rolf Frankenberger and Josef Schmid for facilitating my homecoming.

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time. The majority of authors in this volume joined us in Montecatini Terme; among those who contributed to our discussions, but not to this book, were Michaelle Browers, Steve Heydemann, and Eberhard Kienle. As always, Imco Brouwer and his team did a great job in organizing the meeting and making our workshop a success.

Some scholars could not come to Florence, but I met them on other occasions and had the chance to engage with them in discussions about the topic of this book; for sharing their own ideas and comments with me, I owe debt in particular to Mirjam Künkler, Ellen Lust-Okar, Samer Shehata, and Eva Wegner.

Much of my editorial work was accomplished in the first half of 2008, at the Center for the Study of Democracy at Leuphana University, Lüneburg. Many thanks go to Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, who took me on board despite the fact that I threatened not to contribute much to the study of democracy. While my colleagues in Lüneburg conceded that they did not have much expertise on authoritarianism in general, and the Middle East in particular, colleagues became friends, and I spent a short but wonderful and productive time in Lüneburg.

The fact that this book materialized neither in Tübingen nor in Lüneburg is indicative of the long period that it took to bear fruit—and it is embarrassing to say that the blame must be put solely on the editor—but also of a young researcher's vagabonding in search of a job in academia. Finally, the American University in Cairo, in September 2008, allowed me to settle in Egypt, join its political science department, and spend some time to finalize this book. At AUC, I owe gratitude to Eric Goodfield, Ann Lesch, Javed Maswood, Tim Sullivan, Dan Tschirgi, and—again, especially—Maye Kassem.

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Contents

Introduction

Contentious Politics, Political Opposition, and Authoritarianism

HOLGER ALBRECHT

On 12 December 2004, a small group of political activists gathered in front of a court building in downtown Cairo, surrounded by hundreds of security personnel. What raised particular attention of the police and bystanders was the demonstrators' message—in short, *Kifaya* (Enough)!—which expressed an outright demand to put an end to President Hosni Mubarak's rule. In February 2006, Syrians demonstrated in the streets of Damascus against the publication of cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper. On 20 September 2006, in a highly contested presidential election in Yemen, an opposition candidate representing a coalition of opposition parties, Faisal Bin Shamlan, lost to incumbent president Ali Abdullah Saleh in what came to be regarded as the first real multicandidate presidential election in Yemen.

Despite some marked differences, Syrian demonstrators, Egyptian political activists, and Yemeni opposition figures have in common the playing out of contentious politics, that is, activities in which "ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and opponents" (Tarrow 1998: 2). From a naïve perspective, the mere empirical observation of struggles in streets, parliaments, and the media might not seem very puzzling: Should power and conflict not constitute the very core of human interactions in politics?

However, a look at contemporary politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is worth a more careful treatment. In this region, authoritarian structures of political rule are robust at a time when all other world regions have experienced the emergence of democratization processes. Thus, an assumption based on our common understanding of authoritarianism could hold that the restriction of contentious politics, including political opposition

and resistance, should be critical to an authoritarian incumbency's struggle for regime stability and endurance. Surprisingly or not, while high levels of statist coercion do exist throughout the region, contentious state-society relations have emerged and prevailed over time, at high levels, in different countries, and in various social, cultural, and organizational forms: Islamist movements with strong popular backing, political parties, dissent among professional syndicates and universities, and nongovernmental organizations and self-help associations, to name only a few of these forms.

This book accounts for such various modes of contentious politics under Arab authoritarianism and focuses in particular on political opposition. The aim is to contribute to an in-depth understanding of contentious politics in a largely stable authoritarian environment, applying empirical insights to conceptualize political opposition as a specific form of contentious state-society relations in various countries of the region. Answers are proposed to a number of intriguing and interrelated topics and questions: First, what specific forms of political opposition have emerged in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and North Africa? Second, how do the characteristics of authoritarian regimes determine the characteristics of opposition groups in the countries concerned? Third, how does political opposition behave in an authoritarian environment that structures constraints and opportunities for political activism? Fourth, what are the institutional arrangements governing contentious state-opposition relations in the MENA? Fifth, what is the outcome of contentious relations between states and oppositions? And, even more intriguing: Does opposition matter in states that do not allow for the peaceful turnover of political power?

Toward a Conceptual Framework of Political Opposition

How does contentious politics work under authoritarianism? Not much has been offered conceptually to provide answers to this puzzle, primarily because a substantial bias has long obstructed research on nondemocratic states at large. Based on the assumption that authoritarian regimes would experience systemic change along certain waves of democratization processes, opposition and contentious collective activism has almost exclusively been addressed by looking at the potential overthrow of incumbent regimes; thus, terms and underlying concepts, such as *civil society* (in the context of democratization theories) and *social movement collective activism* (in the context of theories on revolutionary change), suffer from a profound democracy bias and largely fail to take into account that contentious activism might persist under stable and durable authoritarianism.

Taking these conceptual predicaments into account, this book examines at length *political opposition*, a term with an established everyday meaning that remains seriously unexplored as an analytical category in studying contentious politics. The advantage is to identify contentious state-society relations within an institutionalized political framework: opposition as an antipode to government. Political opposition is one part of a binary referential system. One needs a position in order to engender a counterposition; in the words of Niklas Luhmann, "the term opposition entails its meaning only as a momentum of differentiation between government and opposition" (1989: 13). It is this idea of an institutionalized opposition—the opposition "with a capital 'O'" (Potter 1966; Ionescu and Madariaga 1971)—which is the focus of political science students and which can also be discussed within an Islamic tradition of opposition activism (see chap. 3).

Opposition is not a catchall category, easy to employ in denoting every single form of contentious politics. Giovanni Sartori notes that "any means of 'opposing' is not what we usually call 'opposition'" (1966: 150). Considering that other forms of contentious politics—such as resistance or dissent—should be distinguished from opposition, this is not a merely linguistic adventure. Rather, in an attempt to develop a conceptual perspective on political opposition, it is necessary to denote what it is, thus enabling us to find out what it is not. A procedural minimum definition reads as follows:

> Political opposition is an institution located within a political system but outside of the realm of governance that has decisive organizational capacities and engages in competitive interactions with the incumbents of a political regime based on a minimum degree of mutual acceptance.

Some core elements of this definition warrant further investigation. First, a political opposition must have a distinguishable organizational body. Accordingly, what has been described by James Scott (1990) as the "hidden transcripts" of societal dissent—rumors, gossip, jokes, songs, social rituals, and codes—are part of a potentially ample menu of political action by which an opposition challenges and agitates against government. In the Middle East, the importance of organizational capacities (*tanzim*) is clearly recognized by Islamist movements. Comparing the respective Muslim Brotherhood organizations in Jordan and Syria reveals that states differ in granting opportunities to develop organizational bodies (see chaps. 6 and 7); this helps to explain the different strengths and capabilities of opposition actors.

Hendrik Kraetzschmar, looking at party coalition building in Egypt (see chap. 5), shows that not only the coerciveness of the authoritarian state but also the inability of opposition forces to take combined action is responsible

for their weakness as challengers of authoritarian incumbents. Still, opposition groups need more than organizational capacities in order to be successful. In comparing Jordan and Lebanon, Cavatorta and Elananza (see chap. 4) find that human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are well organized and can fall back on external support; however, they remain rather limited in their activism, mainly due to a lack of programmatic incentives attractive to a substantial proportion of the populace and to successful divide-and-rule strategies employed by the states. Thus, one lesson that can be learned from a number of the following chapters is that, in many Arab states, struggles between government and opposition do not erupt along right or wrong programmatic choices but rather along opportunities of organization and mobilization on the side of opposition forces.

A second aspect of the definition of political opposition is worth noting: Opposition is an institution *outside of government*. While this sounds self-evident, it becomes a highly critical issue when differentiating opposition from other forms of dissent, for instance, intra-party power struggles. Thus, discussion of intra-party or intra-elite opposition has found its way into discussions of political opposition. Clearly, the question of the degree of autonomy of an opposition actor vis-à-vis the state becomes important, not only from a theoretical perspective but even more so when looking at the empirical reality of opposition politics under authoritarian dominance. Boundaries between government and opposition may become blurred either through direct state intervention or through co-optation of opposition actors in existing state structures. Allal and Kohstall show in chapter 9 how opposition figures in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia are incorporated into policy-oriented committees and commissions and what effect this co-optation engenders regarding the outcome and efficacy of these institutions. In Egypt, the degree of autonomy—from state interference and co-optation—that opposition parties have at their disposal may also be an issue (see chap. 5); the same question arises regarding groups from the ambit of civil society. Even the relations between state incumbents and Islamists are sometimes not as conflict-ridden as often presumed. In a comparison of Islamist opposition in smaller Gulf states, Michael Schmidmayr (chap. 8) shows that the Islamist current in Bahrain, representing the Shi'a majority in the populace with a Sunni-dominated regime, applies a much more confrontational stance, whereas the divisions between Islamists and the ruling family in Kuwait are far less obvious.

Third, opposition is different from resistance. As another form of contentious politics, resistance is not based on mutual acceptance, by the state's incumbents or by their competitors. Albrecht points out in chapter 1 that it is often difficult for oppositions in authoritarian regimes to avoid the radicaliza-

tion trap: a deadlock that may arise when opposition groups—in an attempt to avoid public marginalization—choose to employ radical discourses for public mobilization that often, in turn, triggers coercive countermeasures of the concerned regime.

Islamist movements, as the most prominent form of antisystem opposition in the region, are especially vulnerable to this dilemma. Relations between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the regime have deteriorated over time to the extent that the Syrian Muslim Brothers has become the target of a much higher degree of state repression than in other Arab countries. In contrast, the Brotherhood in Jordan has chosen to placate the regime to a degree that may have discredited the organization in the eyes of the Jordanian public, perhaps explaining in part the dismal performance of the Islamic Action Front in the most recent parliamentary elections. Kuwaiti and Bahraini Islamists seem to have successfully maneuvered in what Albrecht calls the "gray zone of systemic loyalty." Moderate Islamists entered parliament but at the same time upheld their contacts with the radical wing of the Islamist current. Looking at all the cases under consideration in this volume, a common denominator of the Islamist expression of contentious politics seems to be that groups and actors generally favor a pragmatic approach over decisions based on ideology.

There is no doubt that the notion of mutual acceptance between government and opposition as a distinctive phenomenon of opposition is particularly critical in an authoritarian context. Accepting that authoritarian regimes rely on a much higher degree of repression than democratic states, the question arises to what degree coercion should be approved as an acceptable aspect of government-opposition relations. Mutual acceptance certainly does not exclude foul play, that is, the limited use of coercion by—in most instances—the government toward its opponent. The government may resolve a strike at a particular moment, or protesters may turn a strike into violent clashes, but the rules of the game of contestation between government and opposition remain structurally unaltered. Government and opposition are like two teams in a football match: struggling with one another in a game about political power, yet abiding by certain rules that are formulated, and overlooked, by political rules and institutions such as constitutions, the judiciary, or—more generally—culturally embedded conventions. The acceptance of formal or informal rules does not exclude foul play on one or another occasion, and the team that abides most clearly by the rules does not, thereby, increase its chances of winning.

Lebanon exemplifies the problem that arises when trying to distinguish opposition from resistance (see chap. 10). When the Syrians took control of the Lebanese government by installing their proxy security state, opposi-

tion toward government came to include resistance toward Damascus. Most prominently, we have learned from the Rafiq al-Hariri case that a shift from a pro-Syrian stance in the Lebanese state structure to the opposition benches ultimately meant loss of acceptance by the Syrian power brokers.

Clearly, Lebanon is a prominent—but not the only—case of foul play by authoritarian incumbents. However, it is intriguing to differentiate between exclusion of opposition from the ambit of opposition activism—as is the case with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—and the obstruction of certain forms and instances of activism without entirely destroying the capacities of opposition groups—as is the case with political parties in Egypt, human rights groups in Jordan and Lebanon, and the moderate Islamist current in Jordan.

While a high degree of foul play, that is, coercion, remains a common denominator of the opposition's treatment by incumbents in the Arab states of the Middle East, there is also evidence that they provide opportunities for opposition groups or single activists: Allal and Kohstall show in chapter 9 that, in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, the ruling regimes have established committees—partly due to international pressure—in order to integrate opposition actors as societal stakeholders in policy-oriented reform processes. It would probably be shortsighted to understand such processes of integration solely in the context of statist co-optation, as control. Rather, integrating opposition groups and representatives into state institutions always engenders an opportunity for political participation (Albrecht 2008).

A final topic for discussion in a general approach to opposition politics is the subject of contentious relations between governments and oppositions: *political competition*. Otto Kirchheimer states: "Any form of political opposition necessarily involves some kind of competition. The reverse does not hold true: Political competition does not necessarily involve opposition" (1966: 237). Thus, what does political opposition struggle for? In most classical readings, government-opposition struggles are viewed as a form of contestation about political power in the name of rule making, that is, in the Weberian meaning of *herrschaft* or in the Latin meaning of *imperium* (see Ionescu and Madariaga 1971: 17).

Without a doubt, this view on political opposition primarily as an institution to check political power (rule) and rulers' magnitude is rooted in the fact that those who have developed the concept of opposition have explored, at the same time, the working mechanisms of democratic rule. In order to ensure the explanatory power of the term in looking at authoritarian regimes, a broader idea of political power seems necessary. From this perspective, the notion of political power in the name of *influence* should be addressed more prominently, that is, power in the Latin meaning of *potestas*. Opposition then may

also struggle for opportunities, below the level of rule making, to influence, for instance, the diffusion of ideological orientations within society, the social implications of certain government policies, or the distribution of financial resources.

Oppositions can oppose three subjects: the incumbents of a political regime, singular policies, or the basic rules and structures of the regime.[1] In the first two cases—anti-incumbent and anti-policy opposition—groups and movements are often referred to as parts of a loyal, legal, and (particularly under authoritarian settings) tolerated opposition. Opposition against basic political rules and structures is viewed as antisystem or illegal opposition.

Regime-loyal opposition groups do not struggle with incumbents about the power to rule; rather, they strive to gain access to the political arena, either to realize material gains or to challenge particular policy areas. Albrecht argues that a sitting-at-the-table rationale might well explain why, after all, opposition forces accept working under restrictive confinement rather than shifting to a more radical and possibly violent form of contention.

Hendrik Kraetzschmar describes most of the Egyptian opposition parties as a loyal opposition the representatives of which have access to the political arena despite their very limited public support. Allal and Kohstall recognize opposition figures working within the legal ambit of the state in order to influence policy making in education reforms. NGOs in Jordan and Lebanon are good examples of opposition groups that communicate to the public and the concerned regimes an entirely antisystem discourse—discussion of democracy and human rights challenges the core principles of authoritarian rule. However, Cavatorta and Elananza argue that such groups are primarily driven by pecuniary motivations.

Other examples in the MENA region show that opponents of incumbents are very vulnerable to becoming antisystem opposition. Bassel Salloukh explains how an anti-Syrian political agenda renders opposition antisystemic in a post-Ta'if arrangement that saw Syria establish a dominant security regime in Lebanon. Peter Sluglett's account of the Iraqi Communist Party shows how the left fell victim to a repressive Ba'th regime once the regime consolidated under Saddam Husayn.

A more complex picture appears when looking at Islamist opposition. Bahraini Islamists represent a Shi'i majority of the populace; challenges to the Sunni regime of the Khalifa family contain an antisystemic element that explains the shift to violent conflicts during the 1990s. On the other hand, Islamists in Kuwait and Jordan do not pose an antisystemic threat to the respective monarchies and are therefore included as ordinary actors in the political institutions of the respective countries. These examples show that Islamists

do not necessarily strive to take over power but rather work to have their societal agenda implemented—a position that may not always be hailed by incumbents, but one that does not obviously or necessarily warrant an entirely coercive reaction, such as in Syria. In Syria, as Lawson explains, the Muslim Brotherhood triggered a fierce reaction by the state through the promulgation of a program in the early 1980s in which the group challenged some core principles of the Ba'th regime.

Political Opposition under Authoritarianism

One can derive two assumptions from these very general observations. First, a political science perspective suggests that we look at political opposition as an institution within a given systemic setting; the most simple example is that of the divide between government and opposition. Second, government and the governing system on the one hand and opposition on the other hand shape one another. More precisely, the form of the governing system—among other important factors—designates the form, characteristics, and functions of political opposition and its relationship with the incumbents occupying the realm of governance.[2] Jean Blondel states that "the only way to discover the true character of opposition is by examining first government, rule, authority, or state" (1997: 463). In highlighting the "structures of contestation" between governments and their oppositions, Ellen Lust-Okar says: "Incumbents cannot dictate their opponents' actions, but they can influence them. Through the rules they make and the institutions they establish, governments help determine which opposition groups exist and how these groups interact with each other" (2005: 34–35). Thus, we must not analyze political opposition without analyzing the government of a polity.

How are authoritarian regimes in the Arab Middle East characterized? Despite marked differences among authoritarian regimes—for instance, between traditional monarchies and the republics in the MENA region—I offer a definition of authoritarianism that is quite eclectic in that it relies on prominent aspects highlighted in previous theoretical accounts—especially by Juan Linz and Adam Przeworski;[3] at the same time, it embraces an inductive-phenomenological perspective that supports applicability in the contemporary Arab world. Authoritarian regimes are characterized by (1) extensive executivism, (2) exclusive responsiveness, (3) personalized legitimation, and (4) flexible adaptation.[4]

Extensive executivism is associated with one core trait in Linz' definition and refers to the fact that authoritarian regimes are usually occupied by a mighty leader, or—in fewer cases—by a small group, at the helm of the polity.

Executive power is firmly established and usually uncontested; if the power to rule is contested, the authoritarian regime is at the brink of breakdown. There are no constitutional guarantees or informal mechanisms that would allow for a separation of powers, let alone the emergence of an alternative power center within the polity.

The second aspect, *exclusive responsiveness*, is based on the Eastonian assumption that no political system can survive by ignoring inputs from other systems. More precisely, no political regime can survive without a measure of support from society. While political power under authoritarianism is exclusively at the hands of one or a few rulers, those who rule are not autonomous, in the fundamental meaning of being able to ignore the demands and interests of important parts of society. Thus, authoritarian regimes use coercive means of power maintenance quite deliberately toward the majority of the public, but they also create opportunities for access to the political arena and the participation of social groups. In contrast to democracies, these opportunities are not granted on an equitable basis. However, this does not mean that political participation is absent altogether. Rather, it is a phenomenon with which autocrats have to deal as much as democrats.

Third, accepting that, in order to survive, every political regime needs to create a measure of political legitimacy, authoritarian rule rests on person rather than office, that is, on *personalized political legitimacy*. In Arab authoritarian regimes, the personal capacities, achievements, and charisma of the rulers constitute the main bases for legitimacy rather than the process by which incumbents take over power, such as in democracies (free and fair elections). One can distinguish, then, between traditional, populist, and merit-based legitimation. In the majority of empirical cases, authoritarian rule will rest on a combination of such types of political legitimacy. What is common to all these forms of legitimacy is that they are primarily associated with the person in office, but not the office itself.

A fourth trait refers to the *adaptive capacities* of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. These regimes avoid the creation of stable, formalized, and reliable rules and mechanisms organizing the access to political power and administering state-society relations. While the existence of such rules and procedures is a necessary precondition for every polity, authoritarian incumbents rearrange these institutions, formal and informal, within extremely short intervals. In order to remain in control of the access to power, the incumbents show a particularly high degree of flexibility toward changing circumstances, constraints, and opportunities (see Heydemann 2007). This holds true for modern political institutions that are subject to frequent changes according to their institutional design and efficacy: written constitutions and the law, the