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THE ARAB SPRING AT 10: KINGS OR PEOPLE?

Tarek Masoud

Tarek Masoud is professor of public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

A decade after a spectacular public suicide in the Tunisian backcountry touched off that season of popular uprisings we have come to call the Arab Spring, the Arab world finds itself torn between two visions of progress: One seeks to replace the regimes that dominate the region; the other seeks to replace the people who inhabit it.

The first vision is embodied in the democratic venture to which the world thrilled in the opening days of 2011, when millions of Arab citizens took to public squares to bring an end to the brutality, neglect, and venality of their leaders. Though many observers (the author of these lines included) have in the intervening years declared the Arab Spring a failure—having generated just one tenuous democracy against three failed states and one military coup—recent events in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq demonstrate that the project remains alive.

In Sudan, as Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda have documented in these pages, protests against inflation in a small, industrial town in the northeast of the country in December 2018 spread quickly to the capital, metamorphosing into a full-scale insurrection and compelling a cabal of generals—in a near-reenactment of the 2011 Egyptian uprising—to finally lower the curtain on Omar al-Bashir's thirty-year reign in April 2019.¹ When the junta, again replaying the Egyptian script, announced a "Transitional Military Council" to manage things until elections could be held, the Sudanese people proved wilier than their Egyptian neighbors, redoubling protests until the military agreed to share power immediately. Today, Sudan is administered by a half-military, half-civilian "Sovereignty Council," with elections scheduled for 2022. And although the odds of a successful transition remain long, there is similarly no denying that the Sudanese are freer today than at any point in recent memory.

The Arab Spring lives on as well in Algeria. In February 2019, shortly after learning that their octogenarian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, was looking to add another six years to the twenty he had already spent in power, Algerians commenced a great *hirak*, or movement, that first forced Bouteflika to withdraw his candidacy, then secured his resignation a few weeks later. In the months since, a civilian (albeit an establishment insider) has assumed the presidency following a more-or-less genuine election, while presidential powers have been clipped (albeit insufficiently) by a set of more-or-less popularly ratified constitutional amendments. Though, as Frédéric Volpi reminded us here, the *ancien régime* is not yet fully *ancien* and human-rights violations continue, so too do the protests. One cannot help but feel that, at the very least, Algeria's future is not yet written.²

Finally, the democratic project endures in Iraq and Lebanon. In both countries, October 2019 mass mobilizations against the corruption and mismanagement of entrenched, sectarian elites resulted in the resignations of prime ministers (in December 2019 and January 2020, respectively). Although these movements have yielded little beyond the rearrangement of ministerial deck chairs, they are also not likely to go away. As two observers of Iraq wrote recently, "it is foolish to expect that public anger will not erupt into another wave of protests," and though Baghdad is momentarily quiet, protests continue in the south of the country.³ Similarly, in Lebanon, any possibility that demands for change would soften was quite literally vaporized on 4 August 2020, when an explosion of improperly stored fertilizer in a government warehouse laid waste to a large swath of Beirut, killed and maimed hundreds, and reminded all how criminally inept their leaders had become. Even if popular pressures are unlikely to generate institutional change in the short term, we at least have proof of life.

Against this ongoing movement for democratic government is an alternative vision of Arab progress: Enlightened absolutism. As the murdered Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi wrote in 2018, "the idea of the benevolent autocrat, the just dictator, is being revived in the Arab world."⁴ This is more than just the old appeal to the need for firm hands on the tiller. In the years since the Arab Spring, the region's autocrats have transformed themselves (or at least their reputations) from stolid defenders of an unpleasant status quo to agents of much-needed change. If dictators of the old school could only offer subsidized bread, stale appeals to stability, and dark warnings of foreign conspiracies, their successors promise dynamic economies, efficient bureaucracies, and modern societies. They spend millions on Western consultants and convene glitzy conferences at which they showcase plans for shimmering new cities, new educational systems, new infrastructure projects, and new understandings of Islam. They promise to explore other planets, to liberate women, to harness the latest tech-

nologies, and to make the desert bloom. Most important, they promise to reinvent the Arabs—transforming them from a people overfed,

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indolent, and easily duped by peddlers of religious nostrums into lean, industrious folk who will singlemindedly pursue officially sanctioned programs for national greatness.

The principal exponents of this new vision of Arab progress are men such as Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Abu Dhabi's crown prince and the deputy supreme commander of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) armed forces. But echoes of the gospel are recited by leaders,

politicians, and intellectuals from Marrakesh to Manama.

Although it is easy for Western observers to dismiss these grandiose plans as so much empty propagandizing, that would be to ignore both the seriousness of the project and its genuine appeal to large swaths of the citizenry. It would also be to overlook how much of a change it represents. A decade ago, it was the democrats who had a monopoly on big ideas. For Arabs who had long sought an exit from backwardness, poverty, and foreign tutelage, it was the democratic project that presented a credible path to modernity, prosperity, and global influence. It is a measure of the intellectual lopsidedness of that era that the old dictators were never able to muster much in the way of a counter, so bereft were they of any appeals that could ignite the passions or imaginations of their people. Even in Egypt, where the men with guns put an end to an admittedly flawed democratic experiment, popular complicity in the act was less a function of enthusiasm than of exhaustion, and the deed could not have been consummated without the bayonets of the gendarmes. There was no alternative vision around which to rally—only fear and violence. If the Arab Spring had been a battle of ideas, there is little doubt which side would have won. The same cannot be said today.

A look at the numbers cannot help but reinforce an impression of authoritarianism's ascendance. Figure 1 displays the changes in the "electoral-democracy" index (compiled by the Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] project) for seventeen Arab countries between 2011 and 2019. That index captures the extent to which a country meets a minimal, largely electoral standard of democracy—routine elections and the associated freedoms necessary to ensure that they are free and fair. Only two countries, Tunisia (which in 2011 ranked in the 14th percentile of countries in terms of its level of democracy and today ranks in the 74th) and Libya (which went

from the 4th percentile to the 19th), registered significant improvements from 2011, and the latter remains without a unified central government. Other countries that recorded small improvements—Jordan (now in the 22nd percentile, up from the 20th in 2011), Oman (which went from the 9th to the 11th percentile), and the UAE (which went from the 2nd to the 3rd percentile)—are not electoral democracies.

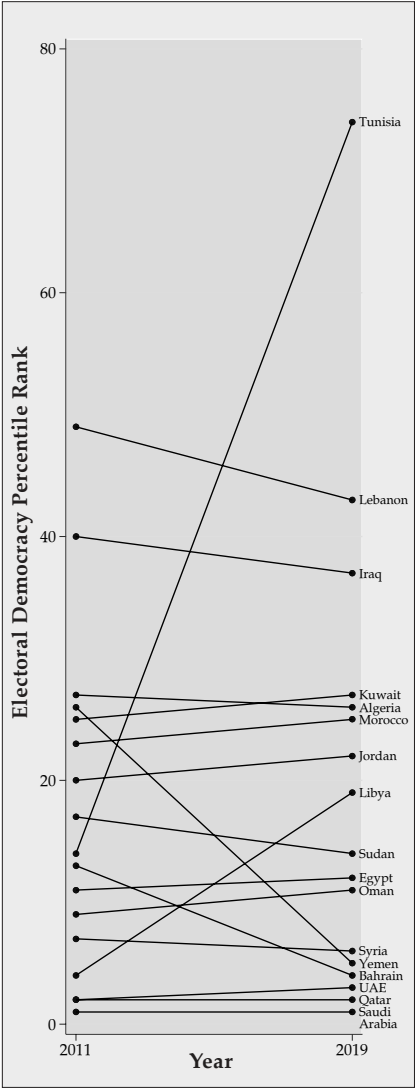
The data do not cover 2020 and so miss the latest developments in Lebanon and Iraq, but major regime events in Sudan (now in the 14th percentile) and Algeria (26th percentile) are reflected in those countries' 2019 democracy scores, both of which are actually worse than they were in 2011. And even if the current state of democracy in Iraq (37th percentile), Lebanon (43rd percentile), Sudan, and Algeria does ultimately merit reassessment, it remains the case that the region's biggest and most influential countries remain resolutely nondemocratic. And, what is more, they are now confidently so.

The Autocrats' Allure

What accounts for the momentum enjoyed by the new authoritarian project? Part of the answer must lie in the ongoing tragedies in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, from which many Arab citizens derived the lesson that upending the status quo yields only chaos and danger. Part of the answer, too, probably lies in the fact that democracy's record—in the region and around the globe—has been so poor of late. It is hard to imagine, for instance, a less appealing advertisement for representative government than the polarization and populism that grip established democracies from Brasilia to Budapest. Moreover, as Roberto Stefan Foa explained in his July 2018 *Journal of Democracy* essay, “proving liberalism’s instrumental advantages, and thus securing a broad coalition for democratic reform, has grown more difficult with the faltering economic performance of mature and transitional democracies.”⁵

But more important than democracy's failures have been the dictators' successes. As Foa points out, authoritarianism has enjoyed a comparative resurgence around the world, and this is particularly true in the Middle East. One of the most visible ways in which the region's autocrats have shown their worth has been in shoring up their notoriously weak states and battling the corruption that has long fueled popular frustration. A tour of the Arab countries' percentile scores on the World Bank's “government effectiveness” indicator—a widely used measure of state capacity—since 2011 shows most Arab countries declining, with the worst drop in war-torn Syria, which plunged from the 39th percentile to the 4th. Libya and Yemen, also conflict-ridden, have declined as well, albeit from much lower percentile rankings than the one that Syria used to enjoy. The region's three most pluralistic countries, Tunisia, Iraq, and Lebanon, all have weaker states today than they did a decade ago. Tuni-

FIGURE 1—CHANGE IN LEVEL OF ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY, 2011–19



Source: Varieties of Democracy Project Dataset, version 10.

sia has tumbled from the 56th to the 49th percentile, Lebanon has gone from the 46th to the 18th, and Iraq has slipped from the 13th to the 10th.

Only a few Arab countries had stronger states as of 2019 than they had at the start of the Arab Spring. Among them are Saudi Arabia (46th to 65th percentile), Egypt (35th to 37th), and the UAE (82nd to 89th). Examination of Arab states’ performance on the World Bank’s “control of corruption” measure reveals a similar pattern. There, Saudi Arabia—whose crown prince has launched an avid, if idiosyncratic, anticorruption campaign—has posted the largest gains, improving from the 49th percentile to the 63rd. But Egypt (26th to 28th percentile), Morocco (42nd to 46th), and the UAE (82nd to 84th percentile) also posted modest gains. Democratic Tunisia, by contrast, slipped from the 57th percentile in 2011 to the 53rd percentile today.

Although the global poster child for what Foa labels “authoritarian resurgence” is the People’s Republic of China, among the Arab countries that distinction probably belongs to the UAE. That country of ten million is not just spectacularly rich, but spectacularly well run.

A visitor could be forgiven for forgetting that she is in the Arab world at all, and that is not just because 90 percent of the UAE’s inhabitants are foreigners. Behind the grand edifices of cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi lies a governing apparatus that is, in its competence and efficiency, a universe away from the listless, bungling Arab norm. One measure of just how different the UAE is from its Arab brethren can be seen in the

country's performance during the coronavirus pandemic. The Emirates' death rate from the disease is low—60 per million inhabitants according to *worldometers.info*. Other Arab countries post lower rates, but the difference is that the Emirates' numbers can actually be believed. Moreover, the UAE has administered close to 18 million tests for a population not much more than half that number. A few countries have higher testing rates than the UAE, but none of them has more than a million inhabitants.

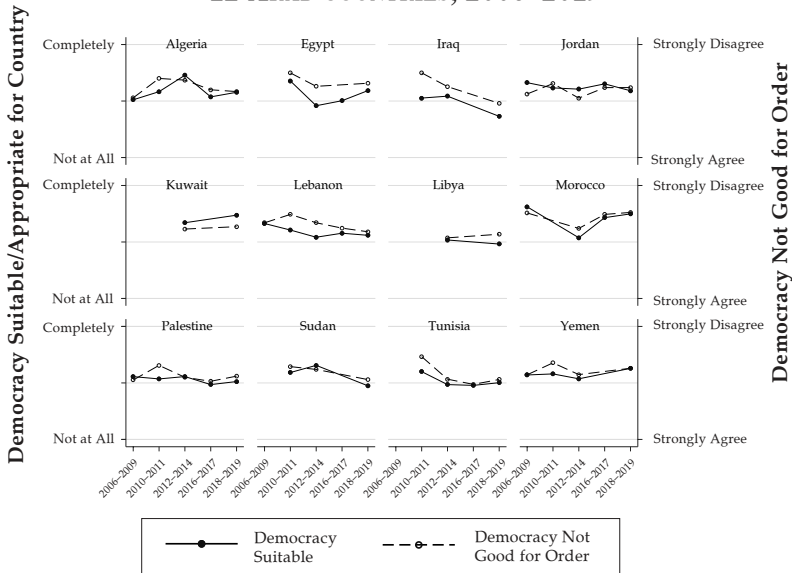
It is thus no surprise that the UAE is not only the leader among Arab countries in the World Bank's rankings of "government effectiveness," (scoring near the 90th percentile), but also outranks such OECD countries as Israel, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The Emirates has a better handle on corruption than those four countries, too, ranking in the 84th percentile, while none of them tops the 79th percentile.

With competence comes an ambition that is equal parts inspiring and, it must be said, amusing. It is common to hear Emirati officials talk of their efforts to fight global warming, their desire to take advantage of innovations in AI (the country has the world's first Ministry for Artificial Intelligence), and their ambition to settle Mars within the next century. When the Emirates quietly announces that it has built the Arabian Peninsula's first electricity-generating nuclear reactor, or when Abu Dhabi's crown prince declares it his goal "to compete with the world's advanced nations such as Finland, New Zealand, South Korea, and Singapore that have achieved success in human development, education and economy,"⁶ you can practically hear the denizens of other Arab countries wishing that their leaders thought the same way.

Contrast the Emirati state of affairs with the less than inspiring political and economic record of the Arab world's sole democracy. If the UAE exemplifies authoritarian resurgence, then Tunisia exemplifies what Thomas Carothers has labeled "feckless pluralism."⁷ Since 2011, the country has had eight prime ministers—three of them in 2020 alone. The president, elected in 2019, is a populist-leaning maverick who has spent much of his time in office battling with a raucous legislature, threatening to dissolve it to "save the state from collapse," and being accused in turn of "instigating to topple the Parliament and government."⁸ The grand corruption of the Ben Ali era has given way to quotidian petty thievery that Sarah Yerkes and Marwan Muasher say has "become endemic," and which explains why Tunisia's score on the World Bank's corruption-control index has actually worsened since 2011.⁹ The unemployment rate stands at 16 percent (the third-highest in the Arab world), while the budget deficit is 14 percent of GDP and strikes and sit-ins proliferate. This is not a performance that other Arabs would want to see emulated in their homelands.

A decade of public-opinion data from the Arab world reinforce the impression of a people who, if not given over to the authoritarian project, are sorely tempted by it. Figure 2 plots data collected by the

FIGURE 2—ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMOCRACY IN 12 ARAB COUNTRIES, 2006–2019



Source: Arab Barometer Project.

Arab Barometer since 2006 on citizens' attitudes toward democracy in twelve Arab countries.¹⁰ Each panel in the chart represents a single country, and in each panel, I plotted average responses over time to two questions about democracy: The first asks respondents to indicate, on a 10-point scale, how "suitable" or "appropriate" democracy is for their country. Average responses to this question are represented by the solid line in each panel.¹¹ The second question asks how much they agree with the proposition that "Democratic systems are not effective at maintaining order and stability." Answers could range from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," and average responses are represented by the dashed line in each panel.¹² Upward-sloping lines represent *more* favorable attitudes toward democracy (that is, belief in the complete suitability of democracy for one's country and disagreement with the notion that democracy is poor at maintaining order and stability), and downward-sloping lines represent *less* favorable ones.

As is clear from Figure 2, in many Arab countries today, enthusiasm for democracy is at a low ebb. Most alarming, Tunisians seem almost evenly divided about the suitability of democracy for their country, and a sizeable number seem to have accepted the authoritarian talking point that democracy is ineffective at guaranteeing stability and security. In Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, and Lebanon—whose democratic promise I invoked at the outset of this essay—attitudes toward democracy also seem to trend downward, suggesting that optimism about the ultimate outcomes of mass

movements in those countries might be misplaced. One could be forgiven for inferring from these charts that Arabs have lost faith in democracy.

And yet, there are contrary signs. In Kuwait and Yemen, for instance, the trendlines point upward. In Egypt, attitudes toward democracy in the latest wave of the survey (conducted after the middle of 2018) are still off from their 2011 high, but they are more favorable than they were during early 2013, a few months before the mass protests and military intervention that extinguished Egypt's first attempt at democracy. When asked to judge how suitable democracy is for their country, today more Egyptians say that it is suitable than say that it is not. Similarly, most of them today disagree with the proposition that democracy is inimical to order. We see the same pattern in Morocco. The cause of democracy, then, is not lost. But the overwhelming impression one gets from these data is of a region in the throes of a debate: Does the way forward lie with democracy, or with its opposite?

Changing the Arab Mind

The new authoritarian project that vies for the soul of the Arab world is not just about building stronger states and taming corruption, however. It is a cultural enterprise that is just as revolutionary as the democratic project to which it is opposed. If the Arab Spring was about replacing autocratic leaders with democratic ones who respond to the wants of their peoples, the new dispensation is about replacing "primitive" peoples with "modern" ones who respond to the wants of their leaders.¹³ And what Arab leaders want, above all, are subjects who will stop demanding entitlements and stop flirting with Islamism.

The first of these twin obsessions—what Calvert Jones describes as the desire to produce "a new kind of citizen" who is "modern," "globalization-ready," and "better prepared for a post-petroleum era"—is on display in many of the various "national vision" documents that Arab governments have put forth in recent years.¹⁴ The most famous of these is Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030," but the first was the UAE's "Vision 2021," which came out in 2014. More recently, the governments of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Oman have published vision statements of their own. On some statements, the fingerprints of high-priced Western consultants can be detected. Other statements, such as Egypt's and Jordan's, are clearly local products. Nearly all speak of getting people off the dole and on the job, with their hands out of public coffers.

The need is particularly acute in the oil-dependent countries, whose expedient of mass bribery through public employment and generous social benefits cannot survive tumbling oil prices. In Saudi Arabia, the state spends a quarter of GDP, only half the populace works, and current oil receipts are not enough to pay for it all. What these governments desire, therefore, is not simply to cut back subsidies and other support

programs, but to program citizens not to want or need these things in the first place. The Saudi “Vision 2030” thus outlines a “National Character Enrichment Program” that seeks to prepare Saudi youth to “contribute to building the national economy” by inculcating in them “the values of entrepreneurship, generosity, volunteering, excellence, hard work, ambition, and optimism.” Jordan’s “Vision 2025” laments that “the current development model is unable to encourage [the] young population to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the national economy,” and that “our citizens must be willing to take on the jobs that are available in our economy.” Egypt’s statement, the most laconic of the bunch, echoes the same imperative when it talks of developing “creative, responsible, and competitive” citizens.¹⁵

This need to turn dependents into taxpayers is behind one of the most seductive features of the new authoritarian project—its apparent dedication to the emancipation of women. Across the Arab countries, only about a fifth of women work outside the home—the lowest female labor-force participation rate in the world. Several Arab governments have undertaken high-profile reforms, often in the face of opposition from conservative religious establishments, to ease women’s entry into the workforce. Egypt, for instance, says that it wants to raise women’s labor-force participation from its current 24 percent to 35 percent by 2030. Recent measures such as a law making it easier to report sexual harassment are in part about making jobsites safer for women.

Saudi Arabia’s widely touted reforms include not only the push to permit women to drive, but also a law against sexual harassment, a ban on firing pregnant employees, equalization of the male and female retirement ages, and the end of regulations that required Saudi women to ask the permission of a male “guardian” before traveling.¹⁶ Although moves such as these are almost certainly meant to curry favor with Western audiences, they are also crucial if these countries are going to grow their economies enough to wean themselves off oil or fund their welfare obligations.

But there is a deeper reason for this autocratic feminism beyond the needs to grow the tax base and look good to Westerners on social media. When MBS says that Saudi women have “suffered for decades,” and are now equal partners with men “without discrimination”; or when Egypt’s president declares that “I am the minister for women”; or when the Emirati prime minister hands out a bunch of prizes (admittedly, to men) for promoting gender equality, they are signaling to their citizens the need to break with an outmoded, religiously tinted patriarchal culture, and reminding liberals that only the autocrat can make it happen.¹⁷

To those who scoff at the spectacle of jailers of women’s rights activists marketing themselves as champions of female emancipation, it is worth pointing out that one of the Arab Spring’s signal disappointments—highlighted with special sharpness in Egypt—was democracy’s inability to guarantee gender equality. Although fears that Islamists

would exploit their legislative powers to enforce veiling and promote polygamy were always overblown, it remains true that the authoritarian constitutions which bookended Egypt's brief democratic interregnum were firmer in their support of women's equality than was the one that the people's duly elected representatives drafted (and the people ratified) in 2012. Thus, when an "opposition" newspaper in Egypt declares that Sisi's presidency is a "golden age" for Egypt's women, the comparison to the days when the Muslim Brotherhood held sway is no less obvious for being unspoken.¹⁸

This brings us to political Islam. In an interview with a U.S. reporter, MBS put his case plainly: "They want to use the democratic system to rule countries and build shadow caliphates everywhere."¹⁹ In order to combat this existential threat, MBS and his camp argue, it will not be sufficient merely to outlaw Islamist parties, declare them terrorists, or hound their members into exile in Doha or Istanbul. The region's leaders have decided that they must rewire the Arab mind to render it immune to the charms of Islamic sloganeers forever after.

To hear these leaders tell it, the fight against Islamism is not about fending off a troublesome set of rivals. Rather, it is about making the Arab world safe for, if not democracy, then some measure of personal (but not political) freedom. This is why, for example, schools in the UAE offer a nondenominational "moral-education" program that is "explicitly secular and humanist in its approach."²⁰ It is also why Egypt and Saudi Arabia have added "critical thinking"²¹ to their public-school curricula, and why Saudi Arabia now teaches its students Western philosophy. As one Saudi intellectual wrote, the subject promises "training for the mind and intellectual immunization against intolerance, fanaticism, and stagnation."²²

The same impulse is behind President Sisi's constant calls for religious reform, for "re-reading our intellectual heritage in a realistic and enlightened" manner that enables Egyptians "to confront those who call for extremism and terrorism."²³ When MBS says "we would like to encourage freedom of speech as much as we can, so long as we don't give opportunity to extremism," it is hard not to read him as saying that freedom is just around the corner, once the people can be trusted not to go Islamist. Of course, one can legitimately ask whether this is all just part of the "protection-racket" politics that Daniel Brumberg has chronicled in these pages, in which Arab leaders justify despotism as necessary to fend off the mullahs, but as far as I can tell, never before has the protection racket come with a syllabus.²⁴

Unsilencing the Arab Spring

Where will all of this lead? Roberto Stefan Foa identifies two possibilities. The first is what he calls "authoritarian consolidation." In this scenario, "regime legitimacy is steadily enhanced and governance

outcomes improved to a point where antisystem pressures eventually dissipate.” We cannot know, at this early stage in the authoritarian-modernization program now unfolding in the Arab world, whether such an outcome is plausible, but it seems easier to imagine in some places than in others. For instance, the UAE—a small, wealthy, cosmopolitan entrepôt much like Singapore—could very well evolve along these lines. In larger and more diverse Arab societies, however, with sharper political fault lines, such an outcome seems less likely. And though we have seen that Arab publics today are ambivalent about democracy, it is hard to believe that people who just a decade ago rose up to demand it might so easily accommodate themselves once again to the prospect of authoritarianism without end.

The second possible outcome of the current season of authoritarian modernization is what Foa, following Jack Snyder in these pages, calls the “modernization trap.”²⁵ In this scenario, the modernizing autocrats—having built strong states, unleashed dynamic economies, liberated women, tamed religious reaction, and taught their people to think critically—will have released the forces that social scientists going back to Seymour Martin Lipset have long thought essential to the emergence of democracy. Representative government will then fall upon the Arab world like a ripe fruit from a tree. One account of Tunisia’s transition more or less conforms to this story. In that telling, the country’s founding father, Habib Bourguiba, spent thirty years of rule enacting the kinds of educational and cultural reforms that ultimately made Tunisians fit for democracy, which is why they have managed to hang onto it. Then again, one only needs to cast a glance at Turkey—home to the father of all modernizing autocrats, Kemal Atatürk, and currently a poster child for democratic backsliding—to be reminded of the limits of a modernizing autocrat’s ability to prepare a country for democracy.

Each of the alternative futures that Foa identifies—“authoritarian consolidation” and the “modernization trap”—requires the region’s modernizing autocrats to achieve their immediate goals: strong states, developed economies, and modern citizens. It is not clear, however, that they will. How much critical thinking, after all, can be learned in societies that, even at this late date in human history, restrict access to information? How much can religion be tamed when leaders still rely on religious establishments to legitimize their decisions? How much can economies develop when the surest guarantee of business advantage remains proximity to political power?

It is in the realm of economic reform that the hard limits of the so-called modernizers’ project are most obvious. According to Rabah Arezki, the World Bank’s chief economist for the Middle East and North Africa, the economies of many “reforming” Arab states remain highly noncompetitive and will struggle to achieve the levels of growth that their expanding populations require.²⁶ One need not be a market fundamentalist to see that

lessons in the culture of entrepreneurship are no substitute for a level economic playing field. And yet the most highly touted “modernizers” have been moving in the wrong direction. Yazid Sayigh has documented how,

If democracy is to come to the Arab world, it will not be because autocrats were hectorred into granting it. It will be because democracy won the argument.

under Sisi, the Egyptian military has steadily increased its economic role, often at the private sector’s expense. Egypt’s army is a major player in real estate, pasta-making, farming, fishing, and mining—with plans to “produce 3–5 percent of the world’s total supply of titanium and zirconium in the coming decade”—and other activities that are outside the purview of most modern armed forces.²⁷ With regard to Saudi Arabia, Karen Young has noted how the

crown prince’s US\$325 billion public-investment fund “is crowding out private investment opportunity,” and leaving “little room . . . for bottom-up new company growth.”²⁸ Critics have begun to view the fund as “a state-within-a-state” devoted to “white elephants” such as Neom, the “city of the future” with robot workers and glow-in-the-dark beaches that MBS is building on the Red Sea.²⁹

The modernizers’ failure to unleash their economies can be seen in the Arab countries’ performance on the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom (which captures market openness, regulatory efficiency, rule of law, and the size of government).³⁰ Unsurprisingly, the UAE performs best on this measure, once again suggesting that it is on a genuinely different trajectory than its counterparts. From 2011 to 2019, it moved from the 69th to the 93rd percentile in economic freedom. Morocco has also improved (44th to 65th percentile). Tunisia’s score has declined slightly since 2011 (32nd to 29th percentile), likely due to rigidities in the country’s labor market. But Saudi Arabia and Egypt have also fallen on the index—the former from the 63rd to the 43rd percentile and the latter from the 38th to the 22nd percentile—and those declines have less to do with protections for workers than with systemic resistance to genuine economic openness and fairness. As long as both countries control economic life as tightly as they control political life, neither “authoritarian consolidation” nor the “modernization trap” is likely to be in their futures.

Is there a third possibility? Five years ago, as the wreckage of what now must be seen as only the Arab Spring’s first stage was still smoldering, I argued in these pages that the path forward for the Arab countries might very well be through the kind of modernizing leadership that the new Arab autocrats present themselves as providing. But it may be that the assumption behind the argument—that democracy in the Arab world faces serious structural impediments that only the strongman can smash—needs to be revisited. Decades of social-scientific wisdom have

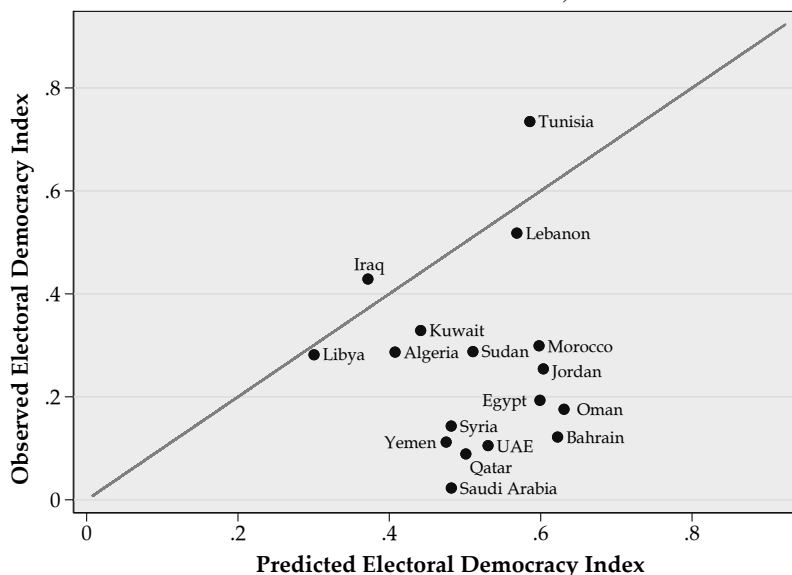
testified to the importance of industrialization, urbanization, economic development, and other structural conditions in shaping a country's democratic chances, and it is true that many, if not most, Arab countries remain fairly underdeveloped by Western standards. But, while we might not expect a lower-middle-income country such as Egypt or Morocco to sustain the same degree of democracy as France or South Korea, should we expect it to sustain none at all? Writing nearly twenty years ago, Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson pointed out that, relative to per capita GDP, many Arab countries were electoral underachievers. This does not simply mean that they perform poorly—it also suggests that they have the potential to do better.

In order to offer a rough visualization of the extent of that democratic potential, I ran a simple statistical analysis. First, I regressed the V-Dem electoral-democracy scores for all countries (except the Arab ones discussed in this article) from 1996 to 2016 against the dataset's included measures of GDP per capita, economic growth, population, the country's score on the World Bank's government-effectiveness indicator (as a proxy for state capacity), and membership in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (in order to reflect what we know about how oil distorts a country's democratic prospects).³¹ I then used the results of that regression to predict what each Arab country's electoral-democracy scores should have been in 2016, given its per capita income and other structural attributes. Figure 3 shows how each country's actual electoral-democracy score compares to its predicted one. Countries that lie below the 45-degree line have less electoral democracy than the model predicts, and the further below the line a country is, the more of an underachiever it is. Although a more sophisticated analysis is no doubt possible, and there is considerable uncertainty in the estimates, the fact that most Arab countries lie below the line illustrates what Stepan and Robertson observed almost twenty years ago: The Arab world has more democratic headroom than many of us give it credit for.

How might the Arab world deliver on that democratic potential? As a new U.S. administration prepares to take office, we might be tempted to call for renewed pressure on autocrats to respect human rights and even to allow political competition. But if democracy is to come to the Arab world, it will not be because autocrats were hectored into granting it. It will be because democracy won the argument. And for that to happen, ordinary Arabs will need evidence that it can deliver something other than chaos and discord.

It would help if the transitions in Algeria and Sudan panned out. But today, an Arab looking for a glimpse of what democracy might have in store really has only one place to look: Tunisia. We often refer to that country as being a consolidated democracy, having passed Samuel Huntington's two-turnover test in 2019, but no serious observer of Tunisia would concur. Sharan Grewal has warned us that Tunisia remains

**FIGURE 3—ACTUAL VS. PREDICTED ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY SCORES
BASED ON ECONOMIC ATTRIBUTES, 2016**



Source: Varieties of Democracy Dataset, version 10.

vulnerable to the “rise of a popular strongman” who could take advantage of the “growing disillusionment with democracy” chronicled in this essay.³² And though one should resist drawing conclusions from the results of a single, noisy regression, the analysis presented in Figure 3 suggests Tunisia to be a modest democratic overachiever given its level of development and other attributes. Just as underachievement suggests democratic potential, overachievement hints at the possibility of democratic decay. The efforts of the incoming U.S. administration—and of friends of Arab democracy everywhere—are therefore best directed at preventing that distressing potentiality. For, as Arabs wrestle with the choice between the promise of the ballot box and the daydreams of the despot, Tunisia must be made into a powerful rebuttal to the new autocratic appeal, rather than allowed to become Exhibit A in the case for it.

NOTES

The title of this essay is borrowed from Reinhard Bendix, *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). The author thanks Marsin Alshamary, Lama Mourad, Gautam Nair, Lana Salman, and Richard Zeckhauser for helpful comments.

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10. Not every country was surveyed in every wave, and not every question was asked in every country in every year, hence, some panels have fewer than five data points for each question.

11. For waves 1 and 2, respondents were presented a scale from 1 to 10. For waves 3 to 5, that scale was changed to 0 to 10 (except for Lebanon in wave 4, which used the old 1 to 10 scale). For ease of comparison across years and countries, responses are rescaled to between 0 and 1. Country-level averages are calculated using design weights supplied by the Arab Barometer project.

12. The statement was worded slightly differently in the first iteration of the Arab Barometer: "Democracies are not good at maintaining order." For ease of comparison with the prior question, responses are rescaled to between 0 and 1.

13. On this phenomenon as manifested in the UAE, see Calvert W. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

14. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 2.

15. For the Saudi statement, see <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/programs/NCEP>; for Jordan's, see <http://inform.gov.jo/en-us/By-Date/Report-Details/ArticleId/247/Jordan-2025>; for Egypt's, see https://cabinet.gov.eg/e371_8e49/GovernmentStrategy/pages/egypt%20vision2030.aspx.

16. See the Saudi press release at www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/Fact-sheet%20on%20Progress%20for%20Women%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf.

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30. See the Heritage Foundation's discussion of the index at www.heritage.org/index/about.
31. The model was estimated using Stata's xtreg command. GDP per capita and population were logged (base 10).
32. Sharan Grewal, "Tunisian Democracy at a Crossroads," Brookings Institution, February 2019, www.brookings.edu/research/tunisian-democracy-at-a-crossroads.