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Factors of the Prevalence of Authoritarianism and the Push on Democratization in the Middle East

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Abstract

One of the constant concerns about systematization in the West Asian region has been the lack of a favourable political model for the countries of this region. All the fundamental challenges in the Middle East stem from a lack of legitimate governance which promotes authoritarianism and the fall of democracy. The traditional structure, weakness of civil and cultural society, lack of economic, political and social development, compatibility or incompatibility of religion with democracy, the structure of

non-democratic systems in the Middle East and psychological factors are the most important obstacles for the democracy. Also, Slower-than-expected economic growth, unfavourable socio-economic indicators such as inflation, unemployment, high poverty and inequality, lack of economic diversity, eruption of corruption, high probability of war and civil strife, and repressive and authoritarian regimes are the main reasons for promoting authoritarianism in the Middle East.

Keywords: Prevalence of Authoritarianism, Middle East, Democratization, Obstacles

1. The prevalence of authoritarianism in the Middle East

Almost all the countries in the Middle East, especially the Arab Middle East, lack a system in the true sense of the word, and are surrounded by a circle of sectarian, tribal, ideological, and reading structures based on religion. The structure and geography of these areas, along with cultural poverty and mental development, is also a major obstacle to changing the existing erosive situation, which basically does not allow software peeling of these countries (Keen, 2021) ^[1].

The elites of these countries are also the main culprits of the prevalence of authoritarianism in the whole region. Even the few countries on the path to democracy in the region, such as Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, are in a hopeless situation, and there is a significant setback in these countries from the basic rules of democracy. On the other hand, the shattered formula of democracy and the heterogeneous structures of authoritarian governments at the time of the spread of communication and information, and the political actions of some emerging parties and different generations that have raised the banner of transformation, are strongly resisted and each of these systems, by resorting to specific oligarchies, tries to escape the path of socio-political transformation. Therefore, in order to get out of this long crisis, a number of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are trying to disappoint the reformist current by making fundamental reforms in non-democratic areas and not so deep in their political structure (Baissa and Cammett, 2022) ^[2].

Although the process of reform and transformation in the Middle East has a long history, but unfortunately, despite the necessities, these reforms have never taken root and have not had a forward trend. Accordingly, what we are witnessing today in the turmoil of political behavior in the Middle East, this region will never achieve the desired reforms in the field of democracy in this way, and the final solution to change in it is only the renaissance. The phenomenon of the transition of power does not happen easily in any of the Middle Eastern countries, and in other words, the deeply inherited view of power under different headings has deprived the ruling system of a systemic attitude in these countries. If nations will and the elites of a society feel responsible, the context for change will surely be provided and geographical justice will be established (Marzo and Cavatorta, 2019) ^[3].

Democracy in the Middle East faces many obstacles, and overcoming each of these obstacles requires a great deal of expense. The process of transformation in closed governance structures is so slow that it may take until the end of the century. In general, the general situation prevailing in the political atmosphere of the Middle East countries, which generally reflects the

conditions of continuity with an authoritarian nature, is currently being warned and there is not much hope for a favorable transition.

2. Obstacles to democratization in the Middle East

The Middle East is one of the areas that has seen a slight increase in democracy. Of course, not all Middle Eastern countries are in the same situation, and therefore it is not possible to issue the same ruling for all of them to measure and develop democracy. The factors that cause the lack of development of democracy in this region are numerous and different, which are investigated in this article (Abbott, 2018)^[4].

2.1 Traditional structure

The traditional structure in developing societies poses heavy obstacles to political growth. Of course, most of the political problems that arise in these societies are due to the disruption of the traditional situation created in the growth processes. The accelerating movement of modernism to modernize societies causes divisions in society and politics. Rapid economic development combined with new values achieved by modern technology has pushed traditional values against new ones (Farzanegan and Markwardt, 2018)^[5].

The growth of new civic institutions in developing societies has created different values of traditional norms and beliefs among the new generation. Many of these values are not compatible with traditional societies and are in conflict with such societies. The growth of societies with new values has led to political growth among the middle class and increased their democratic aspirations. These demands have called into question the acceptability of traditional Middle Eastern structures.

Most Middle Eastern regimes, in order to maintain their traditional rule, not only stubbornly defend traditional structures and values, but also use ideological and even modern tools to consolidate them in a modern and traditional way of life. Using modern means, they try to sanctify their political or traditional ideology, which is based on power, and make pure obedience to them obligatory (Ansari, 2019)^[6].

It should be noted that not all traditional values are necessarily in opposition to modern values and do not impede political growth. Some scholars even believe that tradition not only does not hinder political development and growth, but can also contribute to the development of societies. Some traditions can be relied on for political growth and development. Thus, the integration of some modern and traditional values can be an effective aid in political development and the weakening of authoritarian regimes in the region.

2.2 Weakness of civil and cultural society

Civil society is a set of institutions, associations and social organizations that are free from any dependence on the government and play a decisive role in the formulation of political power. There are non-governmental actors in civil society such as political parties, trade unions, social development associations, professional associations, non-governmental organizations and some stakeholders. These independent centers can create this possibility for the people to solve many of the problems through them. These centers

are also considered as a tool to counter government interference.

One of the most important factors hindering the establishment of democracy in the Middle East is the lack of weakness of civil and cultural society in most countries in the region. Some believe that due to the existence of colonialism in the past and the absence of democratic systems in the present, most Middle Eastern societies are still not ready for the formation of civil society, and the success of the democratic process. However, it must be acknowledged that despite the nature of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, movements towards civil society are beginning and increasing (Ghadbian, 2019)^[7].

Today, tens of thousands of NGOs have sprung up in the Middle East, some of which have challenged government structures. These organizations were formed as a result of economic growth, population growth, and rising literacy rates. Unfortunately, although a large number of these organizations have grown in the Middle East, they still do not have the dynamism and ability to make an effective impact. At times, intellectual efforts by Middle Eastern elites on human rights and the spread of democracy have met with challenges and threats from political rulers. Most Middle Eastern political systems, in order to avoid the threats that human rights issues can pose to them, have described human rights as a Western tool and against the traditional and religious values of the Middle East and they are looking to create another organization instead (Chomsky and *et.al.*, 2015)^[8].

For example, Israel justifies the lack of civil liberties and peaceful rallies and demonstrations by Israeli Arabs under the pretext of security issues. Many intellectuals and human rights advocates believe that the universal process of human rights does not expose Islamic Sharia or the cultural values of Middle Eastern societies, but rather promotes human rights in the region and promotes awareness and democracy.

2.3 Lack of economic, political and social development

This readiness requires a degree of economic-political and social development. For example, according to the Human Development Organization in the Arab World, the GDP of 22 Arab countries together does not reach half of Spain's GDP. The same report states that the income of one third of the nations of non-oil Arab countries is less than two dollars a day. In most of these countries, there is majority poverty and minority wealth, which is due to the rule of a certain class of society. The percentage of women participation in Middle East politics is so low that only 3.5 percent of all seats in parliament in the Middle East go to women.

The level of literacy and awareness of the people of the Middle East is low compared to many parts of the world. According to the Organization for Human Development in the Arab World, in the late twentieth century, nearly 40 percent of Middle Eastern Arabs were illiterate, two-thirds of whom were women. Other statistics confirm this percentage of illiteracy. For example, in 1996 in all Arab countries with a population of more than 300 million there were only 140 newspapers with a circulation of 9.2 million copies, while in the same year in the United States with a population of about 270 million 2939 newspapers with a circulation of 111 million copies and in East Asia published 400 newspapers with a circulation of 102 million copies. In 2001, Internet users in the United States were 55 percent of

the population, while in the Arab world it was only 6 percent (Wilson, 2021)^[9].

Cultural poverty is one of the main obstacles to the establishment of people's sovereignty or democracy. Because people who are not aware of their rights to monitor and intervene in political and social affairs, cannot use their rights and defend it. It is due to this ignorance that the individual or the authoritarian class is able to dominate the country by force and hypocrisy, and democracy does not find an opportunity to emerge (Abed, 2015)^[10].

2.4 Compatibility or incompatibility of religion with democracy

Some authors argue that reconciliation between religion and democracy is not possible. They argue that in countries where democracy prevails, religious law cannot be applied to everyone in those societies. Because there are many differences between religious values and the values of democracy, and these differences create incompatibility between religion and democracy. In other words, religious and democratic rulings cannot fit in one container. Some extremist religious thinkers in the Middle East emphasize the incompatibility of Islam and democracy and the opposition of Islamic culture to democratic concepts and processes (Schneier, 2015)^[11].

They believe that making democratic reforms means undermining the religious and traditional culture of the Middle East. They consider Islam as the basis of the life of the people of the region, and according to the religion of Islam, in the lands where Muslims live, the government should be of the type of Islamic governments, so that the Shari'a can rule there. Therefore, according to the ideas of these extremist groups, in a land ruled by divine laws, a democratic government cannot be formed. Because in a democratic government, power is given to the people, while in Islamic lands, power is not in the hands of the people and is left to God. For example, in the religious system, there is no equality between men and women and it is not possible for women to run for office in positions such as judges or leaders. According to the interpretations of some Islamic scholars of Sharia, women are not considered as men and therefore there is no possibility for women to run for the highest executive position in the country or to take the leadership of the country (Cesari and Fox, 2016)^[12].

The laws of other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, in turn have provisions that are incompatible with the laws of democracy. For example, the Torah states that the Holy Land, which is the Nile to the Euphrates, belongs to the Jews, and that the Jews should form a religious government in that land and implement the rules and regulations of the Jewish law there. Investigating the history of medieval Europe shows as long as the church was in power, undemocratic and unscientific laws prevailed in Europe, which indicates the incompatibility of religion and democracy.

Christian clerics have argued that there is an incompatibility between religious values and democratic principles, and since religious law and democracy are different, it is not possible to combine the two in one container, and only divine law should prevail.

There is another group of thinkers who reject the theory of the incompatibility of religion and democracy and approach this issue from another angle. This group believes that in all divine religions, the principle of equality of human beings

has been considered and this principle is the most important principle of democracy. In this regard, some believe that when democracy reaches the stage of tyranny of the majority or seeks to recognize unlimited freedoms, religion can prevent immoral and wrongdoing to the extent that it imposes on human beings. The group also states that those who have a different understanding of religion and interpret religion as up-to-date, bring religion to the aid of democracy and show the compatibility between the two, and this compatibility has been proven in democratic industrial societies.

Many people in democracies believe in and adhere to religion, and churches and mosques are active. According to many moderate religious thinkers, there is nothing in religious teachings and beliefs that shows its coherence and harmony with corrupt and authoritarian regimes. It is with this approach that the group participates in democratic elections or welcomes the establishment of democratic institutions. In other words, the increase of wealth, urbanization, industrialization, specialization of works, communications, media and existing organizations have not reached the point where a civil society is formed in these societies and lays the foundations of democracy. But the efforts of modern thinkers, along with some of the processes that have begun, gradually make indigenous and religious traditions accustomed to democracy. In fact, what makes religion compatible with democracy is that religious institutions that are part of cultural institutions must distance themselves from political institutions, in other words, religion must be separated from the state (Ahyar, 2017)^[13].

This separation preserves religion and democracy, and many religious and non-religious thinkers believe in this separation. Most thinkers believe that the combination of religion and politics is a dangerous combination that is harmful to both religion and democracy. If we see the compatibility between religion and democracy in democratic societies, it is because of the adherence to the principle of separation of religion and state. Unfortunately, in most Middle Eastern countries, religion has been integrated into politics, and most regional rulers are trying to consolidate their political position by misusing religion and using tools.

2.5 The structure of non-democratic systems in the Middle East

In the Middle East, there are still monarchical and religious regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, and so on. According to the Freedom House, published in 2009, out of a total of 22 Arab countries in the Middle East, 15 are authoritarian countries and the other seven have only relative freedoms. Many of the political structures of these regimes have for many years been under the control of monarchies with tribal, and religious tendencies, and the leaders of the Middle East have used these tendencies as the logic of politics and governance for the survival of their rule. Such political systems prioritize the interests of the individual or a particular group over the interests of society or the country and do not allow other layers of society to participate in their political structure. That is why such regimes see democracy as a great danger to the survival of their regimes (Sika, 2020)^[14].

But these systems are always fighting against the modernization of the country and agree to modernization to the extent that they can use it to their advantage. In these systems, political and social freedoms are free to the extent

that sub-level and superficial issues are discussed and these issues are entertained by the masses. Authoritarian regimes are constantly trying to prevent the realization of democracy in the Middle East (Anderson, 2021)^[15].

To prevent the spread of democracy to their territory, they try to gain influence by using the mass media and using intimidation and extensive secret police networks, and sometimes even by using the army to infiltrate or develop democracy. But confronting the development of democracy that results from modernization is not an easy task for them, and they sometimes have to slow down the modernization process or unite with the military in the face of its ills and give them concessions.

Other measures of these regimes include threatening and isolating dissidents from society, raising the costs of reformism, curbing the sentiments of nationalists and democrats by placing and portraying them as westernized and anti-religious, as well as inducing danger and crisis and chaos.

2.6 Psychological factors

In this section, some of the most important psychological factors affecting the lack of development of democracy in the Middle East region will be introduced. The mental and psychological characteristics of the leaders of the Middle East region are greatly affected by the existing structural barriers and dependencies, but in any case, either in the form of reflecting the existing negative conditions or in the form of reflecting the historical events of the past, it is still considered as an important factor in the lack of development of democracy, as well as the incompatibility and lack of formation of constructive cooperation in the framework of democratic relations between the countries of the region. The most important of these mental and psychological obstacles are as follows:

1. Abstract thinking and discourse challenges: the existence of impractical and ambitious thinking among politicians, which is caused by a lack of responsibility towards the need to respond to expectations, it has caused problems in the formation of negotiations and constructive discourses based on law and democracy.
2. Disregarding the conceptual premises: The idealism of the rulers of the countries of the region and their disregard for the conceptual premises have caused the lack of a suitable platform for the development of democracy in this region.
3. Neglecting the formation of collective identity: the feeling of superiority of the important countries of the Middle East region, adherence to inflexible ideological behaviours and the difference in the function of religion in the national identity of these countries have prevented the formation of a single collective identity and the destruction of democracy.
4. The dominance of negative mindsets on regional relations: the distance between governments and civil society, the continuous emergence of revolutionary governments in the process of political and social developments, and the ideologicalization of macro-level behaviours in foreign policy, are important obstacles on the way to the realization and dominance of democratic relations in Middle East region has become (Porzoroumi, 2008)^[16].

3. Conclusion

The issue of civil society and democracy in the Middle East is challenging. This is a serious challenge because this challenge exists in almost all societies in the Middle East and the developing world and the Third World. The social situation of some countries is such that they have not yet reached political maturity, and this can lead to the spread of authoritarianism. One of the main characteristics of culture, especially in the Middle East, is religion. Religion also has fundamental and decisive characteristics in opposition to liberal democracy. But some in the region are trying to reconcile the two. Slower-than-expected economic growth, unfavorable socio-economic indicators such as inflation, unemployment, high poverty and inequality, lack of economic diversity, eruption of corruption, high probability of war and civil strife, and repressive and authoritarian regimes are the main reasons for promoting authoritarianism in the Middle East. Moreover, traditional structure, weakness of civil and cultural society, lack of economic, political and social development, compatibility or incompatibility of religion with democracy, the structure of non-democratic systems in the Middle East and psychological factors are the most important obstacles for the democracy.

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