

# Authoritarianism in the Middle East

a preface

# Caveats



- Authoritarian regimes are diverse, and are a form of rule that exists on the same continuum as do Democratic regimes. They are not deviant/anomalous forms of rule.
- They are the sum total of a set of policies that ultimately buttress unaccountability by preventing power-sharing.
- Thus, authoritarian leaders devise systems that aim at
  - (a) reducing the possibility of the rise of alternative power centers, and
  - (b) maintaining some legitimacy in the process

This explains their contradictory policies/actions of reform and repression across time. Nearly everything else is subordinated to this strategy, including law, rights, and participation

# Working Definition

**“Political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.”**

**–Juan Linz**

# Breakdown of Definition

A. Authoritarian regimes typically rely on a small set of key groups/interests and prevent the expression of most other group interests (e.g., labor, business, religious groups): i.e., Authoritarian regimes allow for limited, but unaccountable, political representation (limited because most interests are not represented, and unaccountable because even those represented can be excluded or replaced if need be)

B. Auth. Regimes organize interest representation in a corporatist (not pluralist) manner. These interests are usually arranged by function. Corporatist form of representation divide society into sectors (labor, peasantry, business, syndicates, religion) that are then represented by one apex organization with a ruling board for every sector. Ultimately, this system lends itself to cooptation and manipulation by unaccountable leaders who play off sectors against one another. Some sectors, like business and religion are completely excluded under leftist authoritarian rule (the opposite under more right wing authoritarian rule, one in which labor rights are compromised). The same state logic applies to minorities of all sorts (ethnic, sectarian, regional, communal, etc.).

[C, D, E, in notes]

# ... the question of ambiguity

Note: the questions of a “gray legal area” or “ill-defined limits” is important. Authoritarian regimes thrive on ambiguity. They have laws, rules, and regulations that are often quite “democratic,” including whole democratist constitutions. But their application is subject to regime interests, especially when issues of power and empowerment are involved, of both individuals or groups. With time, as a result of arbitrary application (of laws) and suppression (of individuals/groups), most citizens predict state responses and thus become risk averse by engaging in self-censorship, reducing thereby the cost of monitoring, surveillance, and suppression by Authoritarian rulers.

# Thinking About Authoritarian Rule

1. Normative and positive modes of thinking
2. Not an anomaly
3. Not a traditional form of rule
4. Not a precursor to democracy
5. Not synonymous with Totalitarianism
6. Not a product of "popular will"
7. Importance of post-colonial state formation

# 1. Normative & Positive Modes of Thinking About Authoritarian Rule

- a) Normative modes of thinking often lead to messy methodology by not discussing what is, but rather “what ought to be.”
- b) Positive modes of thinking directly address “what is,” which is the scientific way to proceed (when we want to find out more about ‘something’ we study it, we study what it is, not what it is not).

## 2. Not an Anomaly

- a) **Authoritarian Rule** is not an anomaly or a deviance. Rather, it is a regime type with a history and structural constraints (other types of regimes include democracy).
- b) Nearly all political systems around the world have experienced a form of authoritarianism at some point (Democracy is relatively a recent phenomenon).

# 3. Not a Traditional Form of Rule

- a) **Authoritarian rule** is a thoroughly modern type of regime in terms of instruments of mobilization, representation (however limited), surveillance/monitoring, and suppression.
- b) Conflating authoritarianism with traditionalism produced flawed theories in the 1950s/1960s (e.g., Modernization Theory)

# 4. Not a Precursor to Democracy

- a) **Authoritarian rule** is not a precursor to democracy (the movement/progression/regression is not linear)
- b) Linearity is another flawed conception of normative modes of “development” associated with Modernization Theory. This thinking does not allow for reversals. In reality, reversals to authoritarianism have been abundant.

# 5. Not Synonymous with Totalitarianism

a) **Authoritarian rule (AR)** has the following characteristics as opposed to totalitarian rule:



AR lacks an elaborate ideology (a feature of totalitarianism)



AR does not involve continuous mass mobilization beyond its starting point (a feature of totalitarianism)



AR provides limited but unaccountable representation



AR allows some room for politics/difference

# 6. Not a Product of Popular Will

- a) **Authoritarian rule** is not a product of popular will because there is a logical contradiction in this claim:
-  if authoritarian rule is popular, why should we call it “authoritarian rule” (not popular rule)?
  -  Authoritarianism implies forced compliance. This means that unless a whole people are sado-masochists, the claim is flawed.
- b) This argument is quite popular in already democratic societies (in academia, media, and popular culture). Hence, the need for this discussion!

# 7. Post-Colonial State Formation

- a) Without understanding the history of the region, particularly of post-colonial state formation, it is impossible to furnish an adequate explanation for the emergence and resilience of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East
- b) Without the benefit of history (which delineated political, economic, and social factors), observers will slip back to the default explanation that ills are caused by culture—hence eliminating other influences on behavior

# Two Dominant Sources of Authoritarian Rule

## **How Do Authoritarian Regimes Come About?**

- A. Struggle for independence against external/colonial power (Populist Authoritarianism)
- B. Crisis in liberal or populist “democracies” (Bureaucratic Authoritarianism)