Representing Change and Stagnation in the Arab World:
Re-thinking a Research Design

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Abstract

This article refutes a common approach to studying democratization in the Arab world using examples from Morocco and Egypt. Egypt is commonly regarded as a case for near-complete stagnation, whereas Morocco represents the more dynamic monarchies in the region. The article posits that the theoretical underpinnings frequently used in research hinder us to see and analyse change appropriately. Reform-minded agents that cooperate with the state should not be dismissed as "puppets of the system" because then external observers damage their credibility. It especially refutes research designs that exclude civil society from the analyses. Rather, the author argues that NGOs should be regarded as one-issue parties; a phenomenon that can also be witnessed in industrialized countries with decreasing legitimacy of political parties. The author calls for more empirical, long-term research on civil society in the region with respect to its inner, societal as well as international dynamic.

Keywords: Transformation Processes, Political Sociology, Civil Society, Semi-Authoritarian State, Arab World

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1. Representing Change and Stagnation in the Arab World: Re-thinking a Research Design

Since nearly half a century by now one research question has been posed over and over again: Why is the Arab world so resistant to democratization? And how do its authoritarian regimes persist for so long? Why is there no Arab equivalent to the Chinese student who placed himself in front of a tank on Tianamen Square? Over the years a number of reasons for the lasting authoritarianism have been examined, among them state coercion, colonial legacies, the political culture, Islam and economic factors as e.g. high rents; yet the discussion reverts forth and back.¹ This essay raises some critical questions about current research on transition to democracy using examples from Morocco and Egypt. Egypt’s politics and society is commonly regarded as a case for near-complete stagnation, whereas Morocco represents the more dynamic monarchies in the region. Both states were also chosen as they do not dispose of major household-income from oil revenues as it is not intended to discuss the special case of oil-driven rentier states here.²

This contribution is less about political liberalization or regime change in one or the other specific Arab country but aims at discussing the researchers’ language, concepts and position. It proposes to think about the language at use when we study “change” in the Arab world. “Change includes everything from minor modifications of existing constellations [••] to major, systemic transformations”, as Volker Perthes (2004) summarizes. But how is “reality” being represented through the choice of a certain reoccurring vocabulary? Egypt and Morocco are both cases which very well allow to show how academia confines its analyses linguistically and thus keeps itself from recognizing important elements of change towards free and responsible pluralisation. These mechanisms will be set out below. The author argues that frequently, the theoretical underpinnings determinate the outcome of such

¹) A vast corpus of academic literature has been produced on authoritarianism and reform in the Middle East and North Africa over the last 40 years. For the most important publications see Albrecht’s and Schlumberger’s bibliography at: http://ips.sagepub.com/content/25/4/371.refs (download 22.11.2010)

²) For a debate on natural wealth and processes of transition see e.g. Herb 2005 or Ulfelder 2007.