European University Institute – Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Workshop 9

Authoritarian Regimes and their Perpetuation in the Middle East: The Changing Politics of Class Identities

directed by

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Workshop abstract

The Middle East remains the region with the highest concentration of authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, scholars have devoted significant attention to the issue, examining the methods of state control enabling authoritarian regime survival. While many studies examine the role sectarianism, Islamism and ethnicity play in perpetuating and reproducing the dominant power structures, few examine the complex role of class in this process. Despite some historical interest in the issue of class formations and references to the important role key classes play in supporting authoritarianism, the study of the overlap between sectarianism, tribalism, ethnicity and class in perpetuating authoritarianism has been neglected. How does the dynamic overlap between these identities serve authoritarian regime stability and impede progress toward greater accountability and representation in public policy making? How are hybrid sectarian, religious, ethnic, or tribal identities renegotiated by ruling regimes to impede the emergence of class consciousness and interest- rather than identity-based demands? Class structures in the region cannot be determined strictly by economic factors; how then can we define class identity? This workshop seeks to investigate regime abuses of class identities and relations in the renegotiation of state-society relations in the contemporary Middle East. Accordingly, it calls for papers that fall into three categories: country-specific or regional studies theorizing and problematizing the meaning of class in a region where multiple identities – class, sect, ethnic, tribal, or regional – overlap ; case studies examining the interplay of factors (re)creating class structures; case studies examining challenges to the class structure (politically, economically or symbolically). Papers focussing on different political arenas and levels of government are encouraged.

Workshop description

The last two decades in the Middle East witnessed a political liberalization moment only to be followed by a longer period of de-liberalization and the reassertion of authoritarianism. Indeed, regimes largely have used the (re)introduction of elections as a tool to tighten their hold on power rather than devolve it. Most countries in the Middle East have, at best, façade democracies – 'democracies' with some liberal freedoms, political parties and regular elections, yet political power remains firmly in regime hands. Other states, such as Lebanon, enjoy greater public and personal liberties, and hold regular elections, but the political system remains constrained by sectarian affiliations and neopatrimonial clientalistic loyalties. Within these countries, dominant elites, based on ethnic, tribal, or sectarian lines play an important role sustaining regimes and reproducing their power. In many countries of the region, specific groups have been privileged and co-opted by the state through distributive strategies to ensure regime survival. A privileged socioeconomic coalition is manufactured to support ruling regimes and impede the emergence of viable alternatives. Yet ethnic groups, tribes and sects can be differentiated according to class lines – not all members of these informal associations and others benefit from the present political arrangements. Furthermore, new economic players are developing. In some cases these players cut-across and challenge the dominant political class, while in others they reinforce it. In addition, new political players, in many cases Islamists, are also challenging dominant economic and political structures. Class structure in the region thus is a reflection of a complicated array of political, economic, and social forces. It is also a consequence of regime strategies and choices aimed at consolidating control over political representation and the cooptation of emergent socioeconomic elites. In the Middle East, then, class formations and identities are made by regimes bent on reproducing socioeconomic coalitions sustaining them in power. This has led us to ask, how can class best be defined and its explanatory value understood in the Middle East and, most importantly, how does the overlap between class and other primordial identities serve authoritarian regime stability and impede progress toward greater accountability and representation in public policy making? How are sectarian, religious, ethnic, or tribal identities renegotiated by ruling regimes to impede the emergence of class consciousness and inter-sectarian/ethnic/tribal structures? And, finally, what are the various strategies deployed by regimes to serve these ends?

The question of class is of central importance in examining the durability and reproduction of authoritarian regimes and other dominant and persistent power structures at all levels of analysis in the countries of the region. While many scholars have examined authoritarianism and methods of state control in the region, little systematic attention has been paid to the pivotal role of class in these systems of domination. This workshop invites a fresh problematization of the concept of class in the Middle East to interrogate its complex and dynamic functions in perpetuating contemporary authoritarian regimes. It will focus on the inter-relationship between class structure and authoritarianism, with an emphasis on three types of papers: country-specific or regional studies theorizing and problematizing the meaning of class in a region where multiple cleavages – class, sect, ethnic, tribal, or regional – overlap; case studies examining the interplay of factors (re)creating class structures, especially regime strategies and their consequences; case studies examining challenges to the class structure (politically, economically and/or symbolically). Papers focussing on different political arenas, such as civil society, including political parties, professional associations and non-governmental associations, and on different levels of government, national or municipal, are encouraged.

Relationship to Exiting Literature

While there is a rich body of literature tracing the historical development of class formation in the Middle East (Halpern 1963; Bill 1972; Batatu, 1978; Turner, 1978; 'Abdel Fadil, 1988; Waterbury, 1991; Bromley, 1994), little attention has been paid to class in contemporary examinations of politics in the region. An analysis of socio-economic class has been notably absent from contemporary analyses on rentier politics, state control, authoritarianism, democratization, and state-society relations in the Middle East. This is particularly striking given the fact that over the last three decades there have been distinct changes in the Arab world and class structure (Farsoun and Zacharia 1995: 273).

The role of class in the process of democratization has received a great deal of attention in other contexts, most notably in studies of democratization in Latin America and in Africa (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992). A long-standing debate in the literature has been over the role played by the working-class versus the elites in regime change. Ruth Berrins Collier summarizes this debate with a question: "Is a democratic regime a result of a victory from below, in which subordinate or excluded groups wrest power from a reluctant elite, or a conquest from above, in which those in power or rising economic groups not holding power pursue their own political agendas and seek to strengthen their political position?" (1999: 1). However, as she argues, much of the literature on more recent democratic transitions has emphasized the role of elite strategic choice rather than class (Berrins Collier 1999: 5). Studies of democratization that historically analyzed class-based actors have been replaced by categories of incumbents and opposition, hard-liners and soft-liners, maximalists and moderates (Berrins Collier 1999: 7).

The same is true of the Middle East. After a two-decade hiatus in class analysis, the 1990s witnessed growing academic interest in the interaction between sectarian and other primordial identities with socio-structural variables, namely class identity, in explaining political outcomes and local actors' choices. The assumption was that sectarian and class identities are not mutually exclusive, and the primacy of either in any period of time depends on contextual socioeconomic and political conditions (Crystal 1994; Salloukh 1997). Raymond Hinnebusch voiced admirably this methodology in his study of class and state formation in Syria: "When class conflict recedes, primordial solidarities tend to reassert themselves as crucial vehicles and the cement of political action … [T]he importance of minority groups … has been their role as advance guard of an elite or as class coalitions rather than sects *per se*" (1991: 47). However, subsequent research has failed to elaborate this research design, and has turned instead to explain changes under authoritarianism but short of democratization. This latter literature does not articulate the role of class identity and loyalty in regime strategies to restructure allied inter-ethnic/sectarian/tribal socioeconomic coalitions, nor does it explore the impact of regime survival strategies on the making of new class identities across ethnic, sectarian, and tribal divides (Waterbury 1993; Ehteshami and Murphy 1996; Waterbury 1997; Anderson 1997; Henry 1997; Brownlee 2002; Moore and Salloukh 2007).

Yet, despite the relegation of class analysis to the background, empirical evidence indicates that socio-economic class continues to play an important role in democratization processes and in determining the survival strategies adopted by authoritarian regimes, the subject of this workshop, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. Some of the few studies on the Middle East to take class into account are those on rentierism and semi-rentierism. These studies focus on how rentier and semi-rentier states have been able to shape regime relationships with opposition forces (Robinson 1998; Brynen 1992; Farsoun and Zacharia 1995; Salloukh 1996; Moore 2001; and Moore and Salloukh,

2007). These states are able to maintain stability and co-opt opposition forces through the economic redistribution of externally generated rents. This fuels neo-patrimonial networks based on family, sect, tribe and proximity to the ruling class, and organizes new identity-based ruling coalitions. In the case of Jordan, Rex Brynen argues that this in turn leads to a decline in class consciousness (1992: 74). However, these studies take only a narrow view of class based on economic position. Furthermore, they do not address how the strategies of regimes in rentier and semi-rentier states differ when dealing with economically powerful and independent actors with less social status but greater economic independence from the state. Similarly, studies examining the survival strategies of authoritarian regimes, including strategies of political liberalization and/or the (re)introduction of elections, focus on the regime's ability to renegotiate new corporatists arrangements to maintain elite privilege and limit the appeal of or impede more fundamental political change (Brumberg 1995; Brynen 1998; Brand 1992; Brumberg 1992; Owen 1994; Kramer 1994; Anderson 1991; Vandewalle 1997; Robinson 1998). However these studies also omit specifying the consequences of regime strategies on class consciousness, formations, and coalitions.

A more recent literature providing some insights into how socio-economic class plays a role in political life in the region is the growing 'network analysis" literature. In the introduction to his edited collection, *Networks of Privilege* (2004), Steven Heydemann argues that processes of reform in the Middle East have taken place through forms of bargaining and negotiation, and therefore are not easily explained through existing theoretical frameworks (5). Consequently, wherever economic reforms have been implemented in the Middle East, some privileged economic actors have been shielded from the presumed effects of such transitions and have been able to maintain a situation whereby they collaborate to capture the gains from particular sets of regulatory arrangements and economic institutions (Heydemann 2004: 6). Thus, economic and political reforms are affected by powerful economic networks, and vice versa. However, the studies in this volume largely confine themselves to economic elites and networks that cut across the boundary separating the nominally private from the nominally public, namely state-business networks (Haddad 2004; Sfakianakis 2004; Wurzel 2004; Wils 2004; Leenders 2004; Hibou 2004; Cassarino 2004; Cammett 2004; Kienle 2004). For example, Oliver Wils, in his analysis of state-business interaction and fiscal policy reform in Jordan, examines the high degree of collusion between leading businessmen and senior bureaucrats and how this has shaped the process of fiscal reform (2004: 134). He asserts that the changes in composition and sources of rent income to the state have conditioned the nature of state-business cooperation, which has ranged from formal negotiation to individual, informal rent-seeking (2004: 134). Economic elites are unlikely to push for economic reforms as long as they are able to maintain their current rent-seeking arrangements. The question that Wils and other scholars in this volume have largely left unanswered is how new elite actors who remain excluded from networks that serve to protect their economic interests will react and how much influence they will be able to exert over the regime, and consequently public policy.

A significant number of case study research on the region examines the class base of specific formal and informal associations, such as tribes and Islamists, in the region (Clark 2004) and the interests and changes in specific classes, such as labour (Posusney 1997). Volker Perthes, for example, in his edited volume entitled Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change (2004) provides an overview of changes within Arab elites to identify their recruitment patterns and agendas and the degree to which elite change has facilitated democratization. Saloua Zerhouni, for example, notes that in Morocco, despite the ascension of the new king, there has been little elite change; however, this continuity will be challenged by an increasing lack of resources and the political opening that has lead

to a greater dynamism in the third circle of elites (2004: 81-82). Rola al-Hussaini examines the integration of former leaders of the warring factions during the civil war into Lebanon's present political sphere (2004: 261). In the case of Egypt, Gamal Abdelnasser discusses scenarios of possible elite change as the present elite nears retirement; two of these include the rise of elites with Islamist characters (2004: 133-134). While all the researchers in the study present excellent examinations of elite change, they do not analyze why elite change is not sufficient for democratization (Bank and Schlumberger 2004; Zerhouni 2004; Perthes 2004; Abdelnasser 2004; Glosemeyer 2004; Werenfels 2004; Erdle 2004; al-Hussaini 2004; Rabe 2004). In addition, while beyond the scope of the study of the project, they do not examine non-elites, the formation of class consciousness, or the interactions between different socio-economic classes.

Workshop Contribution

By bringing together diverse scholars whose work covers different countries and theoretical fields, this workshop aims to address the aforementioned gaps in the study of the dynamic relation between, on the one hand, the making of class identities and formations, and, on the other, the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East. We are especially interested in the nexus of dynamics among hybrid class, tribal, sectarian, and ethnic identities, and how these dynamics, whether engineered by regimes or ethnic, sectarian, or tribal elites, sustain authoritarian regimes. Filling this crucial gap in the literature on Middle East authoritarianism will not only contribute to our explanations of the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East; it will also underscore the dynamic strategies involved between class and what are often considered to be static, primordial identities. Ultimately, the aim of the workshop is to produce an edited volume on the subject, one that includes both theoretical and empirical contributions.

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Directors' individual paper abstracts

Class and State Control in Jordan

Janine A. Clark

The literature on authoritarianism in Jordan consistently notes the degree and methods by which the successive regimes have used the manipulation of ethnic identity as a means of state control. Scholars typically examine the differential treatment of Transjordanians and Palestinians, with the former being privileged over the latter in return for loyalty and support for the regime. While both communities in Jordan are weakened as a result of their internal class–based divisions, scholars of Jordan have neglected examining, on the one hand, the strategies by which the regime fosters ethnic identities at the expense of the development of class-based identities and, on the other hand, those by which "ethnic elites" ensure that members of their own community do not form a class consciousness that would challenge the power structures within their own communities. How are ethnic and tribal identities renegotiated by ruling regimes to impede the emergence of class consciousness? What are the various strategies deployed by regimes to serve these ends? And how do ethnic and tribal elites reinforce their dominance and, by extension, those of the authoritarian regime by preventing the emergence of class consciousness? Based on primary data gathered in 2006 and 2007, this paper seeks to address these questions and examine how and the degree to which these strategies serve to reinforce authoritarianism in Jordan.

'Human, All-Too-Human': Elite Strategies and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon

Bassel F. Salloukh

How have ethnic politicians impeded the emergence of inter-sectarian class consciousness in Lebanon? What strategies have been employed by ethnic politicians to impede the emergence of cross-sectarian class identities and, subsequently, ensure the hegemony of sectarian loyalties? Combining theoretical tools from constructivism and the instrumentalist approach in the study of ethnic conflict, this paper unpacks a genealogy of ethnic elite strategies in postwar Lebanon. The paper examines two pertinent cases that highlight ethnic elites' strategies aimed at the disarticulation of class identities in postwar Lebanon: First, the ethnic elite's pulverization of the General Confederation of Labor (GCL) to deny the latter bargaining rights vis-à-vis the state and its neoliberal economic agenda. This has heightened sectarian identities in the labor movement and the working classes in post-war Lebanon. The second case examines the use of elite negotiated cross-sectarian electoral alliances in postwar elections. These alliances have been deployed by ethnic politicians to monopolize intra-sectarian political representation and, subsequently, deny class-based, secular groups political representation. This research is based on primary sources, but especially open-ended interviews with leaders of the labor movement and secular political parties. The paper contributes to the instrumentalist and constructivist theoretical literature in ethnic studies; it also advances our understanding of the non-static relation between, on the one hand, (what are often considered static) primordial identities and, on the other, class affiliations in the making of state-society relations in postwar Lebanon and the contemporary Middle East more generally.