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**Workshop 5**

***Political Opposition and Authoritarian Rule:  
State-Society Relations in the Middle East and North Africa***

**directed by**

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***Workshop abstract***

The appearance of political opposition is an intriguing social science puzzle when looking at countries in the Middle East and North Africa (the Arab world, including Iran). In this area, opposition emerged in different forms and expressions, and in various countries, despite the prevalence of stable authoritarian regimes. Forms of opposition include Islamist movements with a strong popular backing, political parties, dissent among professional syndicates and Universities, and Non-Governmental Organizations and self-help associations. Strikingly, social science literature did not establish a notion of political opposition as an independent analytical category. Rather, for the last two decades, concepts such as the civil society approach, democratization theory, and social movement theory served as an analytical background offering views far too narrow and confined to establish a comprehensive understanding of political opposition in the region.

This workshop attempts at redirecting the focus on opposition as an integral institution of the political systems in the Arab world. To this aim, research from various fields of the social sciences will be collected inquiring into political oppositions' roles and functions in the authoritarian settings of the Middle East. From this angle, important research issues include the notion of political contestation, forms of political opposition, state-society relationship, institution and discourse analyses, and possible future developments and processes. Contributions will be invited in three different fields: (1) *conceptual approaches*: conceptualizing the roles, structuring the traits and effects of political

opposition, (2) *systemic structures*: opposition in the wider, non-democratic political context, and (3) *potential processes*: political oppositions as possible agents and engineers of change.

### *Workshop description*

The Arab Middle East is a world region which has drawn attention from social scientists from one decisive point of view: Authoritarian structures of political rule are robust in times when all other world regions witnessed the emergence of democratization processes. However, despite high levels of statist coercion throughout the region, political opposition has emerged and prevailed over time in different countries and in various social, cultural, and organizational forms: Islamist movements with a strong popular backing, political parties, dissent among professional syndicates and Universities, and Non-Governmental Organizations and self-help associations, to name only a few of these forms.

Social science research on the Middle East has, as of yet, scarcely dealt with political opposition as an independent subject of analysis. Rather, it has been linked to the discussions on ‘civil society’ or – particularly in the case of Islamist movements – to the debate on social movements that gained momentum in recent years. While those debates are interesting in their own right – and they certainly do enrich knowledge on opposition in the Arab World – our workshop will attempt to redirect the focus more specifically on opposition as an integral part of the political systems in the region. Taking this ‘systemic’ point of departure, it is held that a focus on political opposition – and in particular on the relationship between opposition and authoritarian incumbents – will almost certainly enrich the wider debates on state-society relations and societal conflicts in the Middle East.

Helpful for this approach is a definition of *political opposition* that reaches beyond a Dahlian view prevalent in the classical literature on liberal democracies: As a minimal consent one may speak of political opposition as an institution inside a political system (in contrast to external opponents such as states or international organizations) but outside of the realm of governance (in contrast to elite factions) that has decisive organizational capacities (in contrast to timely limited eruptions of discontent or social unrest) and engages in competitive interactions with incumbents in power; in contrast to different forms of resistance or terrorism, the relationship between incumbents and opposition is based on a minimum degree of mutual acceptance.

One important general assumption is that political opposition in authoritarian settings displays functions and roles which differ structurally from those in democracies where the contestation of incumbents’ hold on political power remains the fundamental role opposition was to play in the political system. This must not necessarily hold true in authoritarian settings. In the Middle East, it has been observed that political opposition might not only comprise counter-elites that challenge state incumbents. Rather, as William Zartman put it in his seminal 1988-article, opposition may well appear as ‘support of the state’. In retrospect, it seems amazing that Zartman’s notion did not trigger a larger critical debate on the nature and performance of political opposition and its relation to political regimes over the past decades.

This constitutes a large research gap since research on the ‘authoritarian opposition’ in the Middle East will almost certainly – at least in the long run – enrich the theoretical understanding of political opposition that is so far monopolized by the literature on democratic systems. As of yet, political opposition in the Middle East was almost exclusively analyzed in terms of its potential for democratization processes: Opposition was, explicitly or implicitly, perceived as the ultimate agency

of potential or real change. While this certainly does contain an important dimension of the topic, we suggest that it should not be the only angle from which we look at the issue. Rather, the aim of the workshop is to trigger a wider debate on political opposition under Arab authoritarianism.

Apart from such more general, conceptual considerations, some questions appear particularly intriguing when looking at the Arab world: Why, when, and under what circumstances will political opposition emerge under authoritarian rule? What kinds and forms does political opposition adopt in the Middle East? How are relations shaped between political opposition and authoritarian regimes? How does the emergence of opposition reflect and/or impact on systemic transformations (democratization, revolutions) and sub-systemic change (within a given authoritarian regime)? Possible research themes in the workshop can include – but are not limited to – Islamist movements, political parties, civil organizations and self-help associations, as well as the political environment in which opposition operates, i.e. legal systems, elections, and formal or informal arrangements of state-opposition relations.

Social science research on political opposition becomes highly critical from two distinct perspectives: First, the presence of opposition is interesting to embark on from functionalist and structuralist angles when it comes to analyzing systemic political structures and state-society relations in the Middle East. Second, an actor-oriented perspective might be an intriguing point of departure for analyses of structural changes. Thus, we propose three analytical domains under which contributions to our workshop might be subsumed: (1) *conceptual approaches*: conceptualizing the roles, structuring the traits and effects of political opposition, (2) *systemic structures*: opposition in the wider, non-democratic political context, (3) *processes*: political oppositions as possible agents and engineers of change (in whatever direction).

## **1. conceptual approaches**

- Opposition and their roles and functions as political institutions in different systemic settings: democracy vs. authoritarianism; questioning political contestation
- Opposition vs. militant resistance, protest, social unrest: types of opposition; anti-system opposition; Islamist movements in the Middle East
- Political opposition and social movement theory

## **2. systemic structures: opposition in the authoritarian realm**

- Opposition and authoritarian state-society relations: mechanisms of co-optation; channels and modes of communication between incumbents and counter-elites; forms and levels of state coercion and bargaining.
- Opposition in the context of authoritarian survival strategies and systemic resilience; opposition and political legitimacy
- Institutional analyses: elections, councils, political parties and parliaments; legal and institutional frameworks for political opposition; formal institutions vs. informal arrangements
- The social bases, fabric and composition of oppositional forces; their organizational structures, efficacy and capacities; social outreach of opposition movements; their ideological backgrounds and programmatic incentives; interest-based groups vs. ethnically/religiously based groups
- Inter-opposition relationships: Islamist mass movements vs. elitist political parties; discourses among and between leftist, nationalist, secularist and Islamist currents

### 3. potential processes: revolutions, democratizations, and authoritarian re-equilibration

- The potential of opposition forces to induce systemic or sub-systemic changes (change of regime vs. change *in* regime)
- What is the degree of opposition's autonomy from states and incumbents in power; what can actor-oriented approaches from the 'transitology literature' tell us about opposition in the MENA?
- How can an 'authoritarian opposition' trigger revolutions 'from below'?
- The role of opposition in processes of liberalization and de-liberalization
- The external dimension: Western democracy promotion; how does the involvement of Western governments and international organizations impact on roles and discourses of opposition movements as well as on regime-opposition relations?

Taking political opposition as an analytical point of departure, we expect to attract a number of contributions that draw a comprehensive picture on the selection of topics outlined above. At the same time, they will allow for open and divergent discussions particularly among those who advocate research on questions of democratization and those who concentrate on the stability and the resilience of authoritarian rule in the Middle East. Thus, it is a key intention of the workshop to bring together contradictory views in order to trigger a lively debate. However, participants are expected to bear in mind that – while taking different angles and points of departure – the common denominator of all contributions is the focus on political opposition.

Ideally, the combination of individual papers will cover all of the following three approaches: policy- or actor-oriented research, conceptual and/or comparative work, and studies based on rich empirical data. Papers may comprise single case studies as well as quantitative analyses; comparative pieces (cross country and/or cross time) are particularly welcome. We hope to attract contributions from a variety of social science disciplines – in particular political science, but also economics, law, sociology, international relations, history, and anthropology. The focus of the workshop is on opposition within authoritarian polities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including Iran, but excluding Israel and Turkey as systemically different contexts. We welcome first-handed, up-to-date, original, and unpublished contributions of close-to-submission quality since it is our aim to publish some or all of the papers in an edited volume. While some authors have begun work on the subject along the lines suggested here, such a volume is, as of yet, lacking. The workshop will contribute to filling this research gap with its results.

#### *Directors' individual papers*

#### *Opposition, Democracy, and Arab Authoritarianism. Some Conceptual Remarks*

##### **Holger Albrecht**

The paper highlights two critical issues. First, it will be distinguished between different forms of political oppositions according to the systemic setting in which they operate. We must assume that political opposition in a democracy and that in an authoritarian realm are not the same. Rather, they display different roles and functions within the respective political environment. In order to explore the different forms opposition can take, the paper will highlight some important aspects: the

contestation of power; the question of statist coercion (vs. acceptance) towards opposition; the issue of anti-system political behavior; actors and origins of opposition; aims and strategies of opposition.

While the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism – and the one between the respective forms of opposition – is of prime importance, the paper aims at offering a minimum definition to encompass all forms of political opposition which will also make it possible to determine what political opposition is, and what it is not. The second aim of this paper is to inquire more in depth into the roles and functions of political opposition in an authoritarian context. This could not be better pursued empirically than taking Arab regimes in the Middle East and North Africa as illustrating examples. Here, authoritarianism is robust and persistent, though many countries witnessed the emergence of opposition in various forms and expressions: From ‘regime-loyal’ to ‘tolerated’, ‘authorized’, and also ‘anti-system’ opposition. While the paper’s approach and arguments are decidedly conceptual, empirical examples and illustrations will be given from various Arab states.

### ***Human Rights Organizations as Political Opposition in the Middle East***

**Maye Kassem**

This paper examines the emergence of Human Rights Organizations (HROs) in the Middle East and the opposition role they have come to play in the region. The first section of the paper will examine the nature of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with special reference to HROs on a conceptual level. The structure and functions of HROs in the West and their role in the Western political arena will be evaluated. Turning to the Middle East, I will look at how, in the absence of strong and autonomous socio-political groups, HROs have emerged as prominent political participants in the region. Various examples from the Middle East will be used to illustrate the point.

While from a Western viewpoint, the role of HROs, in general, have come to be viewed as highly commendable organizations worthy of disparate forms of support, the second part of the paper examines why this view does not seem to be shared by the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Governmental tactics aimed at constraining the activities of NGOs in general, but specifically HROs are discussed within this context. Moreover, the negative image created within governmental and media spheres of them as entities dependent on foreign funding with the objective of creating instability and threatening national unity is also assessed. In view of the above constraints, the paper will conclude by examining the future and durability of HROs in their role as political opposition in the region.

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