Workshop abstract

After 9/11, the Arab world climbed the political agenda of the European Union’s (EU) priorities, accelerating calls for reform in the region. In order to surround itself with prosperous and stable neighbours, the EU has sought to achieve political reforms in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East as part of a more comprehensive policy of democracy promotion. New studies on democratization have challenged the old prevailing scepticism about electoral politics in the Arab Mediterranean and suggest that elections need not to be dismissed as meaningless; instead there is a ‘politics of elections’ which deserves further investigation. This topic is very relevant to the EU, as internal electoral dynamics cannot be overlooked when developing policy tools aimed at promoting political reforms. Unless we understand the politics of authoritarian elections and their institutions we cannot distinguish between elections that create real momentum toward democratization from those that reinforce the existing status quo.

We invite both case studies and comparative analyses that cover local or national elections of Arab countries. What are the implications of domestic electoral dynamics in the Arab Mediterranean on democracy promotion efforts? In which systems and under which conditions can citizens bring about political competition over policies rather than patronage? Under which conditions programmes
intended to strengthen political parties in these countries are likely to be more successful? Where, and why, are electoral observation missions more successful in promoting democracy and changing the balance of power? Are authoritarianism and manipulated elections the sole responsible factors pushing young people toward Islamism and fundamentalism? How is EU approach to democracy promotion adapting to such phenomenon?

**Workshop description**

After 9/11, the Arab world climbed the political agenda of the European Union’s (EU) priorities, accelerating calls for reform in the region. In order to surround itself with prosperous and stable neighbours, the EU has sought to achieve political reforms in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East as part of a more comprehensive policy of democracy promotion.

Unquestionably, ‘good governance’ is among the highly desirable intended consequence of political reforms. This term, however, is wide and encompasses several intertwined issues. It can cover participation (civil society, elections, gender equality, legislation and local government), rule of law (the constitution and constitutional affairs, the judiciary and human rights), as well as transparency and accountability (financial transparency and fighting corruption). Consequently, when investigating political reforms and democratic governance, a comprehensive look at all of these issues should be ideally undertaken. While elections do not necessarily reflect complete democracy, they are a central element and expression of the concept.

Elections and electoral reforms in the Arab world have been approached with caution and scepticism by both comparativists and by scholars of the Middle East. With few exceptions for those cases where serious electoral contests have determined the highest level of executive and legislative authorities (like Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories), scholars tend to discount elections and electoral reforms in the region because of the authoritarian nature of most regimes and their unquestioned assumption whereby elections “are largely orchestrated events, in which candidates are strictly vetted and closely monitored, and outcomes are determined through ballot-box stuffing and manipulation” (Lust-Okar, 2006: 457).

A few studies are emerging filling the literature gap by introducing theoretical rigour and empirical analysis to the study of elections and the debates over electoral reforms in the Arab world. Scholars like Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Gandhi and Vreelan (2004), Geddes (1999), Hadenius and Teorell (2005), Levitsky and Way (2002), Lust-Okar (2006) have analyzed elections in the Arab world and in the Arab Mediterranean pointing out the importance of electoral behaviour in these contexts. These studies show that electoral politics in these countries is systematic and is shaped by institutions. Some patterns and regularities underlie these systems, not chaos. Consequently, elections
need not to be dismissed as meaningless; instead there is a ‘politics of elections’ which deserves further investigation and analysis.

There are ways, however, to improve the literature on elections in the Arab world. The political variables that define the relationship between authoritarian regimes and voting are not fully integrated into studies on the Arab world. In particular, the literature on elections does not explore the incentives that lead people to support current state elites rather than to create new channels for participation (for example, new political parties and civil associations), thereby creating new alternatives and real electoral competition.

This workshop, consequently, seeks analyses that investigate electoral behaviour in Arab Mediterranean countries, building on more analytical studies, like Lust-Okar’s, (2005) which focus on the behaviour of state elites in elections, as well as studies about voter turnout. We invite both case studies and comparative analyses which cover local or national elections of Arab countries. In particular, we are interested in exploring whether citizens can bring about political competition over policies rather than patronage. This will be studied under the perspective of the current channels of participation available to people within authoritarian regimes, namely elections, and how they forge a civic or a political space within the available channels (civil society, religious charity organizations etc). We are particularly interested to analyses dedicated to question the extent by which authoritarianism and manipulated elections are a main force pushing young people toward Islamism and fundamentalism as opposed of being the consequence of strategic electoral considerations or the mere expression of ideological proximity. This is particularly important as the question of whether and how democracy and good governance promotion can be put in place cannot be studied in isolation of the domestic factors that could lead to the emergence or the strengthening of destabilizing elements (such as Hamas or Hezbollah).

This topic is very relevant to the European Community, as internal electoral dynamics cannot be overlooked when developing policy tools aimed at promoting political reforms. Unless we understand the politics of authoritarian elections and their institutions we cannot distinguish between elections that create real momentum toward democratization from those that reinforce the existing status quo. The need to address the internal political dynamics that further or hamper EU democracy promotion policies in the Mediterranean region becomes, thus, apparent.

Electoral Observation Missions are considered one of the main concrete and practical activities that the EU carries out in the field of electoral support in the wider context of democracy promotion. These activities are conditional upon a formal invitation by the country concerned. This condition is greatly responsible for limiting the role that the EU could play in this field. Consequently, so far, it has conducted very few observation missions in the Arab world, namely in Lebanon (2005 parliamentary elections), in the Palestinian Territories (2006 legislative elections and the 2005
presidential elections) in Yemen (2006 presidential and local council elections) and in Mauritania (2007 presidential elections). The other, and perhaps most affective, tool the EU exerts in electoral assistance is the financial aid that it grants to several Arab countries, either through the civil society or through national authorities, in order to help them carry out several initiatives including consultations for electoral reform.¹ Recent work on Jordanian elections (Luster-Okar, 2006) shows that the weaknesses of the above activities in achieving results finds its roots in the internal electoral dynamics where the above initiatives are implemented. More work, however, is needed in this direction investigating as many countries as possible. Consequently, we invite theoretically informed articles as well as more empirically endowed papers which address several interlinked questions such as: what are the implication of domestic electoral dynamics in the Arab Mediterranean on democracy promotion efforts? In which Arab systems and under which conditions can citizens bring about political competition over policies rather than patronage? Under which conditions programmes intended to strengthen political parties in these countries are likely to be more successful? In which countries, and why, are electoral observation missions more successful in promoting democracy and changing the balance of power? Are authoritarianism and manipulated elections the sole responsible factors pushing young people toward Islamism and fundamentalism? How is EU approach to democracy promotion adapting to such phenomenon?

Bibliographic References


¹ Among its activities, the EU also provides financial assistance to help running the elections (eg. Lebanon forthcoming elections), and helps training women candidates (eg. Jordan latest elections).