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Research Note

Participation and Contentious Politics

from Below in Arab Autocracies

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Cilja Harders

Participation and Contentious Politics from Below in Arab Autocracies

The recent upheavals in the Arab world have challenged both statist and centrist assumptions of Middle Eastern politics. New social movements in the urban centres, virtual networks as well as actors and actions from the so-called periphery have changed the political landscape of the region within months. Still, these developments are rooted in long-term processes: massive social, political, cultural and economic transformations have – until 2011 – not led to regime change. The dynamics of these “transformations without transitions” (Harders 2009: 301) as well as the current developments, which range between transition to democracy and civil war, deserve a closer look.

This contribution maps a research agenda, which accounts for these dynamic, ambivalent and open-ended processes of transformation. It builds on the specific moment of academic, intellectual and political uncertainty, which came with the Arab protest movements of 2011. This moment challenges conventional categories of perception and analysis and has the potential for the development of new political science perspectives on the region, we hold. A fresh view need not dispense with old insights – of social movements, revolution or transformation research, for instance – but it is going to be required every time the old categories obstruct rather than lighten the view on the events. Political science has concentrated its focus on regime elites and questions of “stability” for a long time and in so doing has much relied on structural factors such as natural resources, international dependencies and/or religion for explanations.

We suggest an approach, which focuses on the (everyday) practices on a micro-level by mapping local actors and institutions, which shape and challenge centrally institutionalized modes of governance. We suggest to look at the micro-dynamics of participation, thus shedding light on struggles over power, resources, meaning, resistance, adaptation and resistance. The struggles are at the same time localized and globalized, connected to different scales by the constant flow of material and immaterial resources, people and ideas. Such a research agenda can be rooted in different strands of political theory and it actively seeks inter- and trans-disciplinary investigations. In this short contribution, we will first discuss our notion of participation as an heuristic tool with a focus on informal practices and its relevance in the framework of an authoritarian social contract. Then, we turn to the observation that many of the seemingly steady boundaries between the local/national/global are increasingly blurred and thus, processes of translation are crucial to the understanding of local power structures. In a third step, we discuss the relation between participation, mass mobilization and repression thus trying to account for both, the impressive dynamics and contention and authoritarian resilience and violence.

Based on the reflections of Bayart on “politics from below” (Bayart et al. 1992) and Migdals “state in society” (Migdal 2004), the “analysis of the state from below” (Harders 2002) focuses less on formal institutions and regime elites than on the dynamic and contradictory relationship between state and society. This research perspective highlights the symbolic-discursive, social, political, and economic foundations of political systems in the region by focussing on the „every day state“ (Ismail 2006: xxxiii).

At the heart of the from-below approach lies the analysis of political participation understood in a broad and encompassing sense. Participation is defined as involvement in the social, political, and economic processes of formal and informal resource-allocation in a society (Harders 2002:55). Participation has been categorized in many different ways according to the actors involved, the visibility, the legal status of actions or the degree of involvement. In authoritarian contexts, public dissent, organized oppositional activity and open contention are the exception rather than the rule. This does not imply, though, that people do not develop and deploy all types of strategies of resistance and survival well below the radar of conventional political sciences and

movement theory alike (Amar 2011a). In order to grasp these without normative bias or regime-bias, the “from-below” analysis relies on participation as a descriptive and analytical tool. This includes actions such as “infrapolitics” (Scott 1990), deploying the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985), “acting as if” (Wedeen 1999, 2008) or the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat 1997a, 1997b) as the more informal, and less visible types of involvement. Participation also includes “exit options”, boycotts, sit-ins, civil disobediences, demonstrations and other forms of protest (Rollinde/Le Saout 1999; Belakhdar 2011, 2012). Participation is depending on material and non-material resources and thus is deeply influenced by structural factors such as class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Joseph 2000; Moghaddam 2007; Al-Ali/Pratt 2009). Feminist and postcolonial research approaches stress the link between private and public, informal and formal and the powerful dynamics of the construction of gendered, securitized identities (Amar 2011, Salah 2011). We suggest to rely on Bourdieus notion of capital here in order to grasp the different access to resources in a given political field. He defines social capital as non-material resources, which can be accumulated in social networks whereas cultural capital includes the more formalized educational resources. Symbolic capital comes close to the notions of prestige and status (Bourdieu 1983). Different types of capital can be converted into each other and they – among others – determine an actors position in a given field.

The field is structured by informal and formal institutions and these are closely linked (Bouziane 2010; 2012). Familial, ethnic, social, and economic networks are the major institutions of the people, as Singerman argues building on the Egyptian case (Singerman 1995). These informal organizations serve many functions and they are a compensatory reaction in the face of crumbling state resources and social inequality (Bayat 1997b). At the same time they represent alternative mechanisms of inclusion and participation as e.g. the studies of Islamic welfare institutions in local politics in Egypt and Lebanon show (Ismail 2006; Fawaz 2000; Harb 2001). Building on the Egyptian case, too, Harders (2002) argues that informality even became the major trait of the current social contract in Egypt. State-society relations underwent a major shift in the 1990ties turning the old Nasserite social contract, which promised welfare in exchange for political loyalty into a new “informal social contract”. This authoritarian social contract takes up the anti-participatory dimension of the Nasserist social contract but qualitatively changes and quantitatively reduces the welfarist dimension. Instead of welfare and socio-political rights, it offers space for informal types of agency and participation. Thus, informalization is a major strategy of an authoritarian regime’s adaptation to the major economic and political crisis in the last decade. In addition, the Arab regimes relied and rely on violence and repression, limited political and economic liberalization and islamization. These strategies supported “regime stability” but at the same time they also created a major crisis of legitimacy.

On the other hand, established analytical distinctions like state/non-state, formal/informal, national/local/international or hegemonic/counterhegemonic have increasingly been called into question by agents constructing spaces of change that challenge – or not – the centrally institutionalized forms of governance. For example, the rise as well as the transformation of non-formal and non-state agencies interacting with older, centralized institutions has altered the relation between governing and governed well before 2011. It has blurred taken-for-granted boundaries of state and non-state, public and private, formal and informal. This, in turn, reflects on the way in which meanings and concepts are translated from one scale to another, from center to periphery and back, and how these meanings change (Lenner 2009). It is paradoxical that even though the claim that state power has shifted upwards (to international organizations), downwards (to non-Governmental Actors) and sideways (to transnational actors and organizations) seems to be common sense in political sciences (Pierre/Peters 2000, Segbers 2011), empirical evidence which follows these new power dynamics to the respective spaces is rare (Hoffmann 2012; Lenner / Vermaelen 2012). One major task for the discipline is thus to develop more appropriate theoretical frameworks and analytical categories, which will grasp the constructed and fluid nature of boundaries as well as new and old arenas of contestation and adaptation.

Finally, the most obvious challenges to autocratic regimes – at least for foreign observers – are waves of public protest by large numbers of people. Until 2011, little research has been conducted on mobilisation for protest in Arab autocracies. Arab workers' movements, farmers' mobilisations or trade unionism have been analysed in historical perspective. The decline of nationalism in the 1980s (Schumann 2008) and the rise of Islamist currents put these movements to the centre of actor-oriented research (Roy 2002; Albrecht 2010). From an analytical perspective a very valuable development of the past ten years is that scholars have begun to apply the concepts of social movement research to the study of contentious collective action in MENA states (Bennani-Chraïbi/Fillieule 2003; Wiktorowicz 2004; Beinin/Vairel 2011, Albrecht 2011, Bayat 2007). In doing so, they show that contentious politics in Arab states do not follow fundamentally different logics of action. Most area scholars thus explicitly reject the idea of a cultural exceptionalism of "Islamic societies". At the same time, they attach themselves to the participation literature by stressing the need to take existing network structures into account when studying mobilization. And more importantly, they critically note that the influence of the authoritarian context on the character and extent of contentious behaviour needs to be taken into consideration more systematically in order to adjust social movement theory to non-Western polities.

This again leads us to an analysis of the dynamic and concomitant processes and entanglements of authoritarian politics "from above" and the various forms of politics "from below" in these contexts (Kienle 2003). For this reason, it is highly important for future research to treat Western notions of 'civil society' more critically when applying them to autocratic contexts. In the context of authoritarian governance, one cannot separate state and civil society conceptually because local protest leaders and NGOs are themselves in many cases close to the regime, i.e. co-opted (Néfissa et al. 2007).

Repression is a major ingredient of authoritarian rule. There is consensus among movement researchers that repression can both decrease protest activity and make protest more likely (Tilly/Tarrow 2007). Apart from that, repression can foster collective counter-violence, as is emphasized by studies on Islamist violence in the region (Hafez 2006; Rougier 2004). In general, protest and (violent) repression interact, i.e. repressive strategies are chosen by regimes in order to respond to specific challenges, and protesters adapt their behaviour to cope with these strategies (Hoffmann 2011). This mutual relationship applies also to the everyday forms of political participation. An interactionist research perspective that overcomes dichotomous and structuralist categorizations is thus appropriate for future research (Bouziane/Lenner 2012).

Both, the study of everyday practices of participation and of individual or collective challengers of autocratic regimes offer perspectives for inter- and trans-disciplinary investigations. The approaches developed by social movement research provide valuable starting points for the analysis of the new mass movements that have formed in the past decade as well as new trends in Pan-Arabism and Islamism. This line of research could address questions like how do movements cope with the problems posed by their increasing extension and institutionalisation? Does their inclusion in formalised political processes lead to changes in political outlook or strategy? The latter question points to the opportunity and importance of carrying out accompanying research on the transition processes in the next couple of years. Such research could address the question of the role of movements not only in pushing for political transition processes but also in influencing their outcomes. This yields important contributions to both social movement research and the political science literature on transformation, which has traditionally promoted top-down research approaches. Apart from that, theories from peace and conflict studies could inform investigations on the role of violence in state-dissident interactions in general, and the dynamics of conflict escalation in cases such as Syria in particular. Major research questions are, first, how do various forms of repression affect mobilisation capacities and tactics of movements, and vice versa, what kind of regime reactions do contentious collective challenges from below provoke in different circumstances? And second, when and why overtly peaceful protest movements develop into armed rebel groups? In this respect,

the most pressing question that follows from the perspective of peace research is how to halt the ensuing spirals of collective violence, and develop constructive solutions to multilayered conflicts.

Another aspect of the past transformations and recent upheavals are developments in youth cultures and arts. Cultural studies could shed light on how music, paintings and symbols affected mass mobilization and forms of action in the Arab Spring. Interdisciplinary approaches combining theories, paradigms and methods from the social sciences disciplines (anthropology, political science, sociology, cultural studies, and linguistics amongst others) focus on the regulation of culture and identity politics and the role of its different actors on a local and global level (Eickhof 2012). Others concentrate on the perception and re/presentation as well as the possible translation of creative outcomes of the uprisings, for example the role of street art in Cairo during the upheavals (Mehrez 2012, Eickhof 2012). In a similar vein communication and media sciences will have to investigate in what way new media and social networks led to new forms of organization, e.g., the creation of broad virtual coalitions, which – in some cases and for a certain period of time – seem to have bridged the traditional gaps between secular and religious actors. At the same time, ethnographic explorations of network structures and personal relationships remain indispensable to gain an understanding of how mass mobilisation could occur, especially in rural areas and urban slums. The question is thus how both virtual and real social networks have contributed to the 2011 mass mobilizations. Regarding the latter, the question can be extended to how informal social networks were affected by the upheavals and if they are becoming more or less important in the process of regime transition. Furthermore, network analyses could benefit from taking into consideration the role of economic actors both on the local and the national level, as well as the influences of national economic policies on networks (Zorob 2011). Finally, critical approaches in geography could advance the development of new conceptualizations of the "local" in a time of global virtual networks. They are also crucial to grasp the development of spaces of change and the symbolic dimension of struggles in locations, in which state agents and challengers clash.

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