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ROUTLEDGE

'ECONOMIC REFORM' SINCE THE 1980s:

THE POLITICAL COROLLARIES OF A POLITICAL PROJECT

Eberhard Kienle

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Abstract

Largely following prescriptions by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank 'orthodox' economic reforms in the Arab countries have affected economies as well as politics, other policies and polities. However, implemented by authoritarian rulers, macroeconomic stabilization, structural adjustment and their avatars have prompted economic transformations that fail to meet the expectations of many of their advocates. Politically, the austerity measures associated with stabilization have not always led to an increase in repression. Conversely, adjustment with its heavy dose of economic liberalization has not prompted anything like political liberalization or even democratization. In the best of cases, economic reforms have entailed various forms and degrees of 'authoritarian upgrading' that consolidate rather than liberalize unaccountable autocracies. Elsewhere, though, they have further accentuated authoritarian rule. Partly fed by economic reforms and related discontent, the 2011 protests have only in Tunisia initiated a still precarious transition to electoral democracy.

Economic Reform Policies

'Economic reform' in most Arab countries has been identified with a set of 'orthodox' economic policies – or reforms – designed and partly implemented since the early 1980s that sought to significantly reduce unsustainable balance of payment deficits and increasingly addressed rising public debt. Strongly recommended, even prescribed, by the international financial or Bretton Woods institutions (ifis), the reforms moreover aimed to profoundly reshape largely introvert economies built around a strong public sector largely involved in import substitution activities and far reaching state intervention held responsible for the deficits. These economies were to be transformed into export-led private sector based market economies that would guarantee growth on sound macroeconomic bases. Etatist development strategies had been adopted for decades by the rulers of Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Iraq, Libya and Algeria who frequently euphemized them as 'socialist'. However, they had also been pursued by the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco which had never showed any sympathy for socialism. Ultimately the same applied to the Gulf monarchies where the government owned hydrocarbon sector dwarfed the private sector even more than in the oil rich 'socialist' states. In the hydrocarbon states the dominant

public sector in actual fact was export oriented, allowed governments to accumulate rent based assets and implement comparatively soft economic reforms without ifi involvement.

After a summary of the economic reforms concerned the contribution discusses first the political process that produced them; it then turns to their economic and political consequences, the latter largely being related to the former. Without neglecting other aspects, it will pay particular attention to processes commonly referred to as political liberalization and democratization which have been at the centre of recent debates. It will thereby illustrate the political nature of these reforms in terms of projects and measures as much as in terms of effects. Though at the heart of standard definitions of the realm of economic, variations in growth and distribution ipso facto affect the realm of the political defined as power relations or the search for common courses of action.

The reforms generally comprised two major components negotiated with the ifis or inspired by their recipes: a programme of macro-economic stabilization designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and accompanied by a stand-by loan to address with immediate effect the balance of payment deficit, and a programme of structural adjustment increasingly involving the IMF alongside the World Bank to lastingly strengthen growth. Tackling deficits and fostering growth would also help servicing public debt, avoid additional new debt and possibly even reduce debt. In some cases reforms coincided with additional measures of debt relief negotiated with the major public and private creditors.

Assuming a strong link between external and budgetary imbalances, stabilization sought to reduce public expenditure and raise additional revenues. It included cuts in public investment, the public wage bill as well as energy and food subsidies on the one hand, and new fees for government services and new indirect levies such as sales or value added taxes. Fiscal retrenchment went hand in hand with the devaluation of the currency and tight monetary policy which exacerbated austerity. For its part, adjustment intended to foster export-led growth through the market based reallocation of factors of production, in an externally open economy, a process which its architects in spite of their own projects for public sector reform (and competition among public sector companies) could only conceive of as private sector led. Accordingly, reform involved the growth of the private relative to the public sector including the privatization of publicly owned enterprises; the preponderance of market mechanisms to determine access to, and the price of, labour, capital (including credit) and commodities. In reform speak, prices, foreign trade (in actual fact the prices of imported goods), financial and labour markets and thus the economy as such would be 'liberalized' through the abolition of regulations (deregulation) that (allegedly) restricted returns on private investment. As a matter of course, such 'economic liberalization' did not necessarily strengthen the liberties of all economic actors, in particular those on the labour side. Though broadly stable over the years, the trains of measures reflected the successive iterations of ifi policies and of the Washington Consensus into which they coagulated in 1990; from the late 1990s they also paid increasing attention on the role of institutions able to foster markets and growth (Diwan et al. 2015; Hammer 2003; Evans 2005; Krueger et al 2003; Stallings 1992; Woods 2006; World Bank 2002; Fischer 2012; Williamson 2008).

Some common features notwithstanding, economic reform as implemented from the 1980s differed from policies that some countries had adopted in the early 1970s and discretely prepared since the late 1960s. Generally known as *infitah* or 'open door policies', these trains of measures also in part responded to macroeconomic imbalances which at the time already reflected the shortcomings of the particular form of public sector based development model that had been chosen some ten to twenty

years earlier. This all the more as Syria and Egypt reeled under the effects of their defeat in the 1967 war with Israel including loss of lives and territory, and the destruction of infrastructures. However, unlike the reforms implemented from the 1980s onwards, these policies were not aimed at a radical shift towards export-led growth based on private sector based market economy. They only very cautiously and selectively opened up some new areas of activity to the private sector, initially privileged foreign (Arab) and expatriate capital, and largely sought to benefit from transfers of the oil rent that after 1973 grew exponentially (Kienle 1994; Perthes 1995; Waterbury 1983; Owen 2004; Wahba 1994).

The first Arab country to embark on an ifi-sponsored reform programme was Morocco in 1983, to be followed by Tunisia in 1986, Jordan in 1989, Egypt in 1991, Algeria in the late 1980s and again in 1994, as well as Yemen in 1997; Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen did so after earlier unsuccessful attempts at stabilization that they partly had prepared on their own (Harrigan / El-Said 2010; Diwan / Akin 2015 Richards/ Waterbury 1990; Harik 1992). Egypt had already called in the IMF in 1977 but after several days of heavy popular protests shelved the programme (Waterbury 1983). Other countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Saudi Arabia implemented similar policies without ifi involvement from the mid-1980s onwards (Heydemann 1992; Perthes 1995, Vandewalle 1998; Hertog 2016).

Earlier, stabilization and adjustment had been imposed on numerous other countries unable to balance their external accounts, most famously on Mexico when it faced its famous 'debt crisis' in 1982. Having borrowed substantial amounts of money in periods of low interest rates (after having been encouraged to do so), their foreign debts became unsustainable when rates rose again (Owen 1992; Woods 2006). Arab countries tended to face these constraints slightly later because till the reverse oil shock of 1985 they directly or indirectly benefited from oil revenues: major oil producers could use them to balance their accounts, smaller ones and non-oil countries received economic assistance including budget support from the former. Simultaneously, the latter were able to export considerable numbers of workers to the former and thus benefited from the remittances sent home by their expatriate workers (Richards/ Waterbury 1990).

The balance of payment and debt related reforms from the 1980s onwards and their ramifications have dominated economic policy in most Arab countries to this day. They have been pursued with varying rigour, vigour and intensity; sometimes they have been suspended or more or less quietly rolled back. Rhetorically, however, they have been advocated throughout by the governments which implemented them or claimed to do so. They even shaped the agenda of governments otherwise keen to emphasize their independence from the ifis; moral economy considerations notwithstanding (Tripp 2006), this also applies to the Islamists who briefly governed Egypt and Tunisia after the Arab spring (Kienle 2013). Alternative projects to reorganize ailing economies have been floated here and there, but neither socialist nor state-centered options other than those already tried have ever been pursued by any Arab government in the period concerned.

The Political Crafting of Economic Reforms

Policies of economic reform are highly political in the sense that they are sets of measures through which the rulers 'authoritatively' reallocate material and symbolical values among the ruled, even if they do so under constraints. Similar to other government or 'public' policies they are the product of what is generally called a policy process (e.g. Hill 2009) in which various actors – individuals, groups and

organizations – inside and outside government in accordance with more or less formalized procedures and their own norms and perceived interests (according to the logics of appropriateness and consequences) try to shape relevant legislation and practices. Ranging from deliberation and negotiation to coercion, such *politics* may in turn be influenced by the nature of the political regime or *polity*, third element of the triad, defined as a set of institutions that more or less fits regime types defined as totalitarian, authoritarian, democratic or hybrid.

Policies of economic reform are enacted and implemented by state actors such as governments, legislatures, central banks and, further down the line, by agents of coercion such as the police or customs and excise. Most Arab and 'third world' governments act under the constraints of intergovernmental organizations such as the ifis, the WTO and the OECD, themselves dominated by the major capitalist states and ultimately by the more diffuse actors and mechanisms of global capitalism. The countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean (minus Libya and plus Jordan and Palestine) have moreover signed association agreements with the European Union (EU) governed by the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Established under the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, the partnership claims to promote cooperation in economic, political and security as well as social and cultural matters; in actual fact, though, it focuses on economic cooperation based on economic reforms in the Southern Mediterranean that is seen as a catalyst for change in the other two domains (Brieg / Sadiki 2010; Kienle 1998; White 2001). As a result, reforms were mostly designed and ultimately prescribed by actors who were external to the states concerned; in some other cases like Syria policies were more or less copied on those designed by the ifis. Debtor governments and their bureaucracies had rather limited input at the design stage but frequently affected outcomes to the extent that implementation departed from the initial design; partly they dragged their feet, partly they lacked the means to translate intentions into results, and partly they met domestic resistance that they were unable to surmount.

As most Arab countries have been ruled by unaccountable authoritarian governments, very little is known of the policy process that led to decisions and the inputs provided by the various participants in the process. The otherwise rich literature on the production of public policies remains largely silent on authoritarian regimes. However, even in Tunisia where the 2011 uprising put an end to authoritarian rule the transparency of the process does not seem to have increased (Kherigi/ Amiri 2015). Considering the balance of power between external and domestic actors, policies were no doubt drafted by the former and only marginally adapted in negotiations with the latter. It is also certain that even domestic actors in key positions or close to decision-makers did not unanimously support the reforms. Statements by individuals and debates at the conferences of the regime parties like the Ba'th in Syria or the former National Democratic Party (NDP) in Egypt sometimes illustrate a considerable difference of views (Perthes 1995, Kienle 2001, Soliman 2011). Authoritarian rule involved a degree of pluralism in the corridors of power and conflicts that were managed in the usual ways, ranging from compromise to repression or deferment.

In various cases governments recruited foreign or foreign trained economists as experts, often with the financial support of the ifis; some technocrats joined the governments as ministers. Normally friends and family of the rulers sought to benefit from the new policies, for instance by cheaply buying up privatized companies or obtaining import monopolies. Converging circumstantial evidence and accounts confirm the emergence of networks of politicians, bureaucrats, officers, entrepreneurs and business hopefuls that on the basis of mutual benefits promoted reform policies (Haddad 2012, Kienle 2001,

Heydemann 2004; Diwan/ Schiffbauer 2016). At the same time, these networks shaped reform in ways that were not necessarily intended by its conceptual architects in the ifis and beyond. As so often, policy transfers ended in the adaptation or alteration of these very policies (Bayart 2009), sometimes to the extent that, like in Egypt towards the end of the Mubarak era, technocrats opposed profiteers.

For the rulers these networks, their clientelistic ramifications and related patronage moreover offered compensation for the loss of control over an economy that they could no longer dominate with the instruments of direct government intervention. Especially, but not exclusively, in the republics like Egypt and Syria (and to a lesser extent oil rich Algeria and Iraq) that continued to celebrate their allegedly socialist credentials, economic reform implied the construction of a new social base supporting the political order and the rulers. New constituencies such as private sector entrepreneurs or business hopefuls had to be attracted as old constituencies including organized labour felt increasingly uncomfortable with the reforms. More generally, some of those coopted earlier lost out to some who were newly coopted, a process frequently pictured as the unmaking of old and the making of new coalitions (Waterbury 1989) or networks of influence (Heydemann 2004). Often sceptics were won over by new possibilities of personal enrichment that arose with economic reform so that vested interests did not suffer from reform but supported it. While shaping economic reforms, these networks and constituencies were also shaped and strengthened by the reforms; they were simultaneously agents and products of such change.

Ultimately, though, with the exception of the visible economic constraints that preceded the decisions the formulation of policies remains in a black box. In the period concerned the only real exceptions is Tunisia after 2011.

The Effects of Economic Reforms

Economic effects

The economic effects of reforms failed to meet the more optimistic expectations of some of their advocates. Stabilization was instrumental to reduce or overcome external and budgetary imbalances, though sometimes temporarily rather than permanently (World Bank Data on-line). Also, in various cases its effects are difficult to separate from those of other factors, for instance the massive debt relief that Egypt obtained in 1991 for its participation in the Kuwait war against Iraq (Diwan / Akin 2015; Harrigan 2010; Diwan et al 2015). At the onset stabilization (generally) reduced not only inflation but also growth, up to several years. In some cases it impeded growth by the very fact of restricting public spending necessary for structural adjustment. Subsequently, and once adjustment policies kicked in, growth tended to pick up, though not at constant rates and arguably again for reasons unrelated to the reforms. Thus in Morocco growth was partly the result of favourable climate conditions that increased agricultural output while in Jordan it benefited from an increase in domestic demand, itself the result of the influx of Iraqi refugees after the 1991 Kuwait crisis. Post stabilization growth stood at anything between 2-8 percent per annum, though mostly close to the lower end. Moreover, growth was extensive rather than intensive - the result of factor accumulation rather than an increase in productivity. There was little progress in the transition to the production of higher value-added commodities and services. Ifi sponsored reforms may have been most successful in Tunisia, probably

because the country had already earlier made a number of more promising economic choices (Harrigan 2010).

Adjustment ensured that the private sector grew relative to the public sector. In some countries like Egypt and Morocco a larger or smaller number of publicly owned companies were fully or partly privatized. More cautious governments like in Syria only opened up new areas of activities to the private sector, but not without restrictions. Governments also ring-fenced industries owned by the military that also produce numerous 'civilian' commodities. They moreover continued to dominate the strategically and politically important banking industries, even though the private sector made (new) inroads (Henry 1996; Diwan/ Schiffbauer 2016).

Depending on the country, public investment decreased from 14-15 percent of GDP in the late 1980s and early 90s to between 6-7 percent in the early 2000s. However, as private investment remained steady at around 10-15 percent of GDP, the growth of the private sector was indeed largely relative (Diwan / Akin 2015). Similarly, from about 1998 to 2008 the private sector share in job creation rose from 57 to 75 percent (Nabli et al. 2008) excluding the poorly known informal sector. In resource poor labour abundant (RPPLA) countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt or Jordan state expenditure decreased from about 50 to 30 percent of GDP between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s (Diwan / Akin 2015). Expansionary budget politics in the wake of the Arab spring did not lastingly arrest or reverse this trend.

Regulatory changes also affected commodity prices, foreign trade, labour and financial markets. Numerous price controls were removed; tariffs on imports were reduced, in many cases from around twenty or more to less than ten percent. New labour legislation made it easier to fire workers or hire them on a temporary basis. The revival of stock markets allowed to raise capital more easily, but in spite of new rules the allocation of credit often remained opaque and biased. The same applied to the privatization of public sector companies. In some countries the famous 'red tape' was reduced, in others not. Nor did all countries improve their ranking in the World Bank's much vaunted Doing Business survey (doingbusiness.org). The success of private enterprises heavily depended on various forms of [political patronage](#), ranging from small favours to guaranteed market shares or domination through oligopolies and monopolies. Ultimately private sector growth failed to go hand in hand with a commensurate shift towards markets in the allocation of resources (Diwan / Akin 2015; Diwan / Schiffbauer 2016; Diwan et al 2015; Kienle 2001; Haddad 2012; Matar 2016; Springborg 2017; Diwan / Galal 2016; for tensions between private ownership and market see already Waisman 1992 on Latin America).

Effects on poverty and inequality are difficult to assess in the light of available data and methodological uncertainties, including a variety of ultimately arbitrary poverty lines. However defined and measured, poverty no doubt decreased and increased depending on specific reform measures, developments in the global economy, and specific poverty alleviation programmes some of which accompanied economic reforms precisely to protect vulnerable populations. It is in any case safe to say after decades of economic reforms poverty remains widespread and often severe. Current conservative calculations or rather estimates stand at some 23 percent of the population in Arab lower income countries excluding those at civil war (well above the 17 percent referred to by the World Bank calculated at US \$ 1,90 PPP per day); according to other, entirely reasonable criteria easily 50-70 percent of the population in these countries are poor. Inequality in income and wealth also seems to have increased considerably, in

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perception and in actual fact. Even though GINI coefficients in the RPLA countries range between no more than 30-40, the gap seems to have widened, in particular between the so called middle classes and the very wealthy, especially if various shortcomings in the collection and treatment of data are taken into account (Cammett / Salti 2016; Diwan / Akin 2015). As matter of course, all other things being equal, inequality also increases poverty. Partly changes in the distribution of income and wealth were the effects of austerity measures, partly of economic liberalization and the related increase in tax regressivity (Diwan / Akin 2015; Kienle 2004) that have had similar effects in most other parts of the world, including Europe and North America (Owen 2004; Piketty 2014).

The redistribution of wealth is frequently said to have undermined the 'old social contract' (Richards/ Waterbury 1990; Youssef 2004) under which in particular the inhabitants of the formerly 'socialist' republics like Egypt and Syria are said to have traded liberties against social protection and welfare. If there is no doubt that various constituencies incurred actual or relative losses in terms of income and wealth, the contract in question was no more than a euphemized manifestation of the classical combination of legitimacy, cooptation and repression that serves to buttress authoritarian rule (Gerschowski/ Merkel 2011).

Political effects

Largely through their effects on growth and distribution, policies of economic reform had an impact on interactions among individuals and groups and thus on *politics*, on other *policies* and on *politics*. However, to the extent possible, their impact needs to be distinguished from the effects of other changes that have taken place simultaneously. In chronological terms, economic reforms often coincided with direct external pressures for political liberalization, democratization and related changes (Markakis 2015; Sadiki 2009). These pressures for instance led to more favourable conditions governing the creation and activities of civil society (or non-governmental) organizations (CSOs/ NGOs) in many Arab countries from the 1990s onwards. While charitable and development organizations could benefit from the new wealth accumulating in the hands of individuals, CSOs concerned with political reforms and human rights largely thrive on external funding (Norton 1992; Kienle 2011); by implication, their activities depended on domestic economic reforms only to the extent that they facilitated the transfer of such funds. And although economic reforms may be seen as part and parcel of globalization understood as a trend towards growing global interconnectedness, it may be distinguished from forms of interconnectedness other than those directly related to economic exchanges. Similarly, it may be subsumed to a 'neoliberal' project to reorganize the world in line with market mechanisms, and yet be distinguished from the generalization of these mechanisms to areas of activity beyond the commonly defined confines of the economy (Brown 2015; Harvey 2005) such as the provision of health and education.

At the level of *politics*, economic reform entailed a greater variety of interests that were promoted by a greater variety of actors. However limited and selective, economic liberalization nonetheless multiplied the number of economic actors, thus increasing competition for market shares and intensifying debates about the quality and value of products. Depending on the political context, various categories of actors such as textile producers began to coagulate as interest groups, while others built new or activated existing networks of influence that could enter into competition with one another (e.g. Cammett 2007;

Catusse 2008). More importantly, by increasing material inequality the new economic policies produced or deepened cleavages and conflicts among constituencies distinguished by income, status and interest.

The different interactions that these constituencies maintained with the outside world produced a yet more complex reality. Some beneficiaries of economic liberalization increasingly adopted and promoted social and cultural practices that had originated in the major capitalist countries where they did business and enrolled in universities. Their tastes in dress and music as well as their attitudes to family, authority and sexuality changed. Others opposed such practices, norms and values; frequently but not exclusively they belonged to the vast majority who did not directly benefit from economic exchanges with the heartlands of capitalism. As so often closer contact could weaken as well as strengthen perceptions of difference and collective identity (Forbes 1997; Rydgren et al 2013). Economic liberalization also strengthened exchanges with other parts of the world including Asia and at least perpetuated older exchanges between oil rich and oil poor Arab states. These contacts as well entailed both the attraction towards other practices and the aversion towards them; a product of various factors including hurtful contacts with the non-Muslim 'West', Islamisms, in particular their Wahabite inspired currents, have also been strengthened by labour migration to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, debates and conflicts over 'authentic' and 'foreign' practices have also been fueled by developments that chronologically coincided with economic reforms, for instance those dynamics of globalization that were not directly related to economic exchanges facilitated by external economic liberalization.

More diverging interests and attitudes pushed for more debate and heralded more domestic conflict, though initially at least within the limits or 'opportunity structures' of the country concerned. Authoritarian rulers frequently but not exclusively responded with the repression of those who overstepped the limits of the rather limited pluralism they conceded. The task became ever more arduous, though, as society and its demands became more diverse and difficult to contain within the limits traced by the rulers. Dominant parties such as the NDP in Egypt displayed increasing and increasingly deeper internal cleavages. People ever more frequently resorted to collective action such as strikes, demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience that could culminate in social movements. Overwhelmingly peaceful, they could nonetheless result in physical violence on the part of the protesters, for instance in 'bread riots' (Beinin/ Vairel 2013; Bennani-Chraïbi 2017). In some instances such dissent strengthened or prompted organized armed resistance, in particular by Islamist groups. In short, the rulers faced the Huntingtonian dilemma of existing institutions increasingly failing to channel and deal with divergent, even irreconcilable, popular demands (Huntington 1968) that finally exploded in the Arab spring.

The more lively and tumultuous politics in turn had an impact on *policies*, including those aimed at reforming the economy. In some cases political debate and conflict contributed to (further) dilute economic reforms, for instance by fueling government fears of protests against cuts in subsidies and other austerity measures. In terms of law and order, dissent and unrest generally could lead to the violent repression of strikes and demonstrations or, alternatively, favour peaceful approaches to the management of popular discontent. While different governments at different moments reacted in different ways, reform induced debates and conflicts had an impact on policy making in other areas. Simultaneously and more directly, economic reforms could have cascading effects on other government policies. Like in many other countries, foreign policy increasingly had to address such issues as foreign investment and export promotion. Changes to property rights required by economic reforms had spillover effects into other domains. No less did economic reforms and public declarations in their

support reshape the legitimating ideologies of governments and ideological counter-projects (e.g. Sottimano/ Kjetil 2008).

At the centre of recent debates, *polities* have clearly been affected by economic reforms, though not always as expected. Undeniably entailing material losses for numerous people, the austerity measures that are part and parcel of stabilization are generally supposed to threaten the rulers who implement them; faced with unrest and protests, they are expected to resort to various forms of repression, sometimes administered prophylactically. Depending on the domestic balance of power, the incumbents may ultimately lose or win the battle. In the former case, they either backtrack or fall, possibly bringing down the entire political regime over which they presided. In the latter case, initial repression may inaugurate or further accentuate authoritarian rule. Conversely, stabilization, and more precisely economic liberalization, has largely been seen as a harbinger of economic growth, increasing material wealth, and, partly for these reasons, of political liberalization, if not democratization. As stabilization is frequently considered the necessary but temporary preparation for adjustment, the authoritarian effects of the former are in due course expected to give way to the politically liberalizing ones of the latter.

The trajectories of the various Arab states show that these assumptions are not confirmed by events. Stabilization did not inevitably further strengthen the repressive features of authoritarian regimes, even though it sometimes did so. Adjustment, and more precisely economic liberalization, failed to prompt or only chronologically correlate with political liberalization in the sense of the substantial expansion and strengthening of positive and negative liberties (Berlin 1969). Including the freedoms of movement, expression, association, and more generally the absence of government interference in the lives of individuals, the latter over time marginally expanded in some places in some respects, but sometimes also shrank. Generally, though, such modest temporary expansion through dynamics beyond government control was quickly contained, even rolled back, by decisive government action. Positive liberties, essentially the possibility for the ruled to participate in the selection of the rulers and in the formulation of policies, failed to expand sufficiently to facilitate the transition to an electoral democracy as the minimally democratic form of government where regular and fair elections may result in the defeat of incumbents and the victory of their challengers. To the extent that liberties expanded in a context of stabilization or adjustment, the changes may best be described as 'authoritarian upgrading' that 'exploit elements of openness and contestation to reinforce systems of authoritarian rule (Heydemann 2007, p 2)' and thus continue to restrict liberties and avoid checks and balances. However, in various countries economic reforms further accentuated authoritarian rule. Occasionally, they coincided or preceded the slight expansion of the rights and freedoms of women more specifically (Kienle 2001; Held/ Ulrichsen 2012); however, by reducing public employment they frequently destroyed positions occupied by women and thus negatively affected their livelihood, independence and liberties (Assaad 2002; Moghadam 2013).

The changing face of authoritarian rule involved a number of changes to institutions and organizations. Some of these like the creation of toothless representative assemblies or closing down CSOs were inherent in the processes of upgrading or its opposite, deliberalization, already discussed. A direct corollary of economic reforms, others afforded central banks a degree of autonomy, established or revived stock exchanges as well as however weak capital market and anti-trust authorities. Frequently also the efficiency of government administrations and law courts concerned with investment issues and international economic relations was enhanced through the creation of panels of highly paid experts in

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ministries and special chambers in the courts that at the same time further accentuated the fragmentation of state institutions (Bierschenk / de Sardan 2014).

Especially in and after 2011 the distributional effects of economic reform fed the protests of the Arab spring. However, the protests were also prompted by authoritarian rule that sought to prevent people from articulating grievances and obtaining redress. Incidentally, protesters included not only economic losers, perceived or real, motivated by impoverishment or the exacerbation of inequalities associated with economic reform. They also mobilized numerous economic winners who in a Tocquevillian logic (Tocqueville 2011) demanded to be considered as equals by rulers who continued to marginalize them politically and economically. Finally, contestation reflected the broader social and cultural ramifications not only of economic reforms but of globalization more generally. In a nutshell, increasing diversification in terms of income and wealth as well as social and cultural practices entailed a Huntingtonian conundrum in which the authoritarian regimes no longer managed to respond effectively to conflicting demands emanating from society (Huntington 1968).

In Egypt, though, democratic hopes were soon dashed by the increasingly authoritarian turn of the democratically elected Muslim Brother government and its military successors. In Yemen and Libya the *ancien régimes* gave way to armed domestic conflicts. Syria was hit by the worst of both worlds – the descent into civil war combined with the survival of the old regime. In Morocco, Algeria and Jordan the incumbent regimes survived. Only Tunisia began a precarious transition to electoral democracy.

In Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and Syria economic reforms preceded or coincided with extremely limited and in many cases temporary attempts at political ‘decompression’. In Morocco, some thirteen years after the beginning of economic reforms, the 1996/7 general elections resulted in a new parliamentary majority and the formation of a coalition government led by the socialist party hitherto relegated to opposition. Though widely celebrated as a democratic milestone, the results of the elections were as carefully distilled by the royal palace as those of earlier elections. Nor did they affect the sweeping powers that the king held under a constitution that unlike those of constitutional monarchies limited the rights of citizens rather than those of the monarch. In spite of some changes other freedoms like those of the press also remained heavily restricted (Wills 2014; Boutaleb et al 2015). Adopted after the comparatively soft Arab spring protests that unfolded in the country, the new 2011 constitution slightly limited some royal prerogatives but continued to guarantee the preponderant position of the King who also remained the ‘Commander of the Faithful’ invested with religious authority. In practice the new constitution amounted to another stage of authoritarian upgrading that reflected the 2011 protests rather than economically induced societal transformations that would have tipped the domestic balance of power against the monarchy. Put differently, economic reforms and subsequent policies only contributed to political change to the extent that they fed the protests. They no doubt did so, but so did unaccountable authoritarian rule (King 2009; White 2001).

Enacted three years after the onset of the first attempts at stabilization and adjustment, the 1989 constitution in Algeria put an end to single party monopoly and allowed other political forces to compete in the first round of the 1991-2 parliamentary elections. Afraid that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) might win in the second round, the rulers cancelled the elections and turned the timid political opening into political closure. In the 1995 presidential elections, roughly a year after the beginning of the second attempt to reform the economy, more than one candidate was allowed to stand, but the regime candidate, Liamine Zeroual, was duly elected with a broad margin. In spite of new restrictions

such as those introduced by new constitutional changes in 1996 a modest degree of pluralism by and large marked subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections which, however, never failed to work out in favour of the regime and its candidates. In 1999, for instance, all competitors of Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika withdrew from the presidential race before election day. In other areas as well repression was eased intermittently, but again without entailing any meaningful transformation of the political regime. (Dillman 2000; Nashashibi et al 1998; Martinez/ Boserup 2016). Like later in Morocco, the institutional changes and their ramifications to the present are best described as a form of authoritarian upgrading. Likewise, economic grievances only contributed to the changes because they fed popular protests which - unlike in Morocco - were sometimes violent and violently repressed.

In Jordan as well stabilization and adjustment were followed by what appeared to be measures of political liberalization. In November 1989 King Husayn called the first parliamentary elections since 1967, just four months after his government had signed the first stand-by agreement with the IMF. However, once again economic reforms prompted political change only through popular protests. As a pre-requisite to the IMF loan the Jordanian government in October 1988 had severed the heavily subsidized peg of the dinar to the US dollar, thus provoking a substantial rise in prices of essential imported goods (Harrigan 2010) and heavy protests in the following spring. Economic reforms notwithstanding, King Husayn and his successor Abdallah repeatedly dissolved parliament, changed the electoral law to produce docile majorities, and at will restricted other liberties (Lucas 2003; Moore/ Peters 2009; Knowles 2005; Piro 1998). History repeated itself with the Arab spring when new, limited, protests entailed another stab at authoritarian upgrading. The 2011 constitutional amendments slightly restricted the powers of the king but others adopted in 2016 strengthened them again. Like in Algeria and Morocco, institutional changes failed to affect the actual seat of power: the armed forces in the former and the royal palaces in the latter two cases.

In Syria the stabilization measures of the 1980s were also followed by parliamentary elections that were more competitive than earlier ones. In the 1990 elections one third of the seats were reserved for candidates not fielded by the Ba'th party and its roughly leftist allies in the National Progressive Front. The new electoral law was tailored to allow wealthy Syrians to compete as independents and to coopt them as junior partners in a new domestic alliance intended to overhaul the declining economy. A year later parliament approved a new investment law favouring the private sector that the independent deputies eagerly supported. Rather than compensating the losers of adjustment, concentrated in the Ba'th's traditional constituency of the less well-off, the elections thus inaugurated the period of selective economic liberalization known as the second *infitah* and illustrated the changing social base of the regime. Repression was, temporarily, eased in some other areas as well. By and beyond coopting private entrepreneurs, the changes served to reposition the country internationally after the end of the Cold War, the demise of the Soviet Union and the related rise of the US and global capitalism (Heydemann 1992; Perthes 1995; Kienle 1994). Subsequently, the growing importance of the private sector has failed to be accompanied by additional measures of authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann/ Leenders 2013). To the contrary, the rulers harshly repressed the 2011 protests which turned into a civil war that has devastated the country.

In Egypt stabilization and adjustment that began in earnest in the early 1990s quickly and manifestly coincided with new curbs on liberties and indeed prompted many of them. In part new restrictions were imposed by the rulers in order to rein in or preempt what they considered to be perverse consequences of economic liberalization. As for instance new legislation permitted more easily the establishment of

private media companies, new mechanisms had to be found to censor journalists who unlike their counterparts in public sector media could not be dismissed or disciplined by direct government action. Similarly, the rulers sought to control a growing yet limited number of NGOs defending human and political rights that thrived on the liberalization of financial transfers from abroad. In other cases, though, new restrictions more openly reduced – already limited – liberties: thus in 1992 when a new law defined terrorism as broadly as to include demonstrations and acts of industrial action and again in the 1995 parliamentary elections when 95 percent of the seats went to the dominant party, the NDP (Kienle 2001; Soliman 2011; Springborg 2017). A new series of economic reforms in the 2000s chronologically coincided with some political window dressing, but also the reaffirmation of authoritarianism. Though again fed by economic grievances related to the reforms, the 2011 protest soon after the departure of president Mubarak were followed by the return of authoritarian rule. New stabilization measures under the current military regime have coincided with more repression.

In Tunisia the slight and selective political decompression which marked the early years of economic reform in the late 1980s quickly gave way to progressive political deliberalization. An initial alliance of sorts with non-Islamist forces merely served the rulers to repress Islamist forces and then helped them to turn against their former allies. A constitutional amendment in 2002 guaranteed the reelection of president Zin Abidin Ben Ali in 2004 and offered him life-long immunity; in power since 1987, he was the first leader to be overthrown in the Arab spring of 2011. The rulers continued to eat away at other liberties as well (Bellin 2011; Camau/Geisser; King 2003 and 2009; Wills 2014; White 2001) and possibly more than any of their Arab counterparts multiplied more subtle mechanisms of domination, for instance based on the discretionary provision of loans and access to employment (Hibou 2006). Tunisia is the only country where distributional outcomes of economic reforms in 2011 and related grievances fed protests that subsequently led to the advent of a still frail democratic regime.

In Yemen, an electoral democracy of sorts emerged in the context of the unification of the Northern and Southern parts of the country in 1990 and the political dynamics it set in motion (Bonney et al 2012). Pluralist parliamentary elections were first held in 1993, two years before a programme of economic reform was agreed with the Bretton Woods institutions (Albrecht 2010; Colton 2010; Carapico 2006; Enders et al 2002) and partly implemented. However, new parliamentary elections in 1997 and presidential elections under universal suffrage in 1999 and 2006 failed to arrest the increasingly authoritarian exercise of power by president Ali Abd al-Saleh. At the helm of North Yemen since 1986 and the unified state since 1990, he was only ousted by the Arab spring protests which like those in other countries cannot be reduced to economic grievances alone (Dresch 2000; Lackner 2018).

Though no doubt related to the reverse oil shock of the mid-1980s, the home grown economic reforms implemented in the 1980s in Iraq and Libya also sought to address additional fiscal difficulties due to the war with Iran in the former and international sanctions in the latter case. At any rate, they did not prevent the ruling groups around Saddam Husayn and Muammar al-Qadhafi to survive in power without concession till they were both overthrown by foreign intervention in 2003 and 2011 (Springborg 1986; Chaudhry 1991, Lawson 1992; Vandewalle 1998; St.John 2015).

In the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, including Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait) political reform has been extremely limited since the mid-1980s when their rulers first began to implement some measures of economic reform. Responding to the rapid decline in oil revenues from 1985, initial such measures focused on a degree of fiscal

retrenchment which ended in the early 2000s when oil prices rose again. Austerity measures adopted after the renewed decline in oil prices from 2014 have been accompanied by projects of future selective economic liberalization.

Over these decades the rulers of the GCC countries have decreed or amended constitutions, established or slightly strengthened assemblies without much clout, and held elections that made them marginally more representative. Nonetheless, representative institutions remained largely consultative or dominated by appointed members; their decisions remained subject to approval by the unelected rulers who retained concurrent legislative and sweeping executive powers. As in Morocco and Jordan (changes to) constitutions failed to transform the monarchies into constitutional monarchies. The only exception of sorts is Kuwait whose parliamentary tradition in spite of repeated interference by the ruling family reaches back to independence in 1961. More generally, repression has frequently increased, partly as a result of new anti-terrorism legislation. Ultimately, only women saw their liberties slightly reinforced, though within the overall limits and from a very low baseline illustrated in Saudi Arabia by their complete absence from the first shura council appointed in 1993 and the famous driving ban lifted only in 2018.

These institutional changes occurred partly in periods of economic downturns such as the early 1990s when rent declined and budgets were tightened, prompting freezes in public sector recruitments, higher domestic energy prices and the like. Partly they also occurred in periods of economic upturns such as the early 2000s when the oil price increased and rent could be distributed more easily. Although changes decreed in the former periods could be seen as a form of compensation for economic losses, they also came on the heels of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (itself largely prompted by budgetary issues in Baghdad); much of the blame for the lack of preparedness was heaped on the emir who had suspended parliament in 1986 and subsequently concentrated all powers in his hands. Similarly, changes in the period of economic upturns do not necessarily reflect the growing weight of the private sector which even then remained heavily dependent on the trickle down of government controlled rent. In Kuwait parliament even seemed to be include a decreasing number of business people; rather than the private sector, it served to coopt public sector and government employees. No doubt the very slight upgrading of authoritarian rule in the Gulf was as much prompted by factors other than economic reforms, including of course US pressures to 'democratize' in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The effects of more far reaching reforms including privatization that are part and parcel of the Saudi Arab "Vision 2030" launched in 2016 and similar, partly earlier, projects in other GCC countries will have to be analyzed once they begin to be implemented (Herb 2014; Hertog 2010, 2016; Chrystal 1990; Markakis 2012; Tétreault 2000; Louër 2013; Held/ Ulrichsen 2012; Halliday 2005). [However, recent events such as the temporary internment and partial expropriation of private owners of capital in the Ritz-Carlton episode in Saudi Arabia do not confirm the emancipation of the private sector from government and the state.](#)

In Sudan and Mauritania limited reforms that largely aimed at stabilization did not in any way liberalize or upgrade authoritarian rule. Finally, the political effects of economic policies pursued by the Palestinian Authority or the Hamas government in Gaza cannot be assessed independently of continued Israeli domination and its inherently authoritarian nature.

Implications for Theory

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These political trajectories fail to confirm expectations that especially in authoritarian contexts austerity closely associated with stabilization is likely to entail (yet heavier) repression (Kaufman 1986; Bangura et al 1992). Although stabilization in no Arab country led to political liberalization, it sometimes preceded and even prompted authoritarian upgrading, a conclusion that vindicates cautious assessments of its political impact (Haggard 1995, 182; Wise/ Roett 2003).

Adjustment and therefore economic liberalization implemented by authoritarian and largely unaccountable rulers primarily benefited cronies who remained dependent on the rulers and thus continued to support authoritarian rule. Economic reforms therefore failed to entail the emergence of independent power centres that could have accumulated sufficient amounts of politically relevant resources to challenge the rulers. Owners of capital, for instance, remained vulnerable to fabricated anti-corruption campaigns launched every now and then by the rulers. Threatened by the confiscation of their assets and other forms of repression they were mostly in no position to put pressure on governments.

The survival of authoritarian rule tends to challenge widely held assumptions about causal linkages between economic and political liberalization which obviously must not be confused with parallel transitions to liberal economies and to democracy (as discussed for instance by Przeworski 1991 for the period after the end of the Cold War). It contradicts - once again - claims according to which specific types of actors (or agents of change) such as (poorly defined) entrepreneurs, bourgeoisies or middle classes are almost natural defenders of political liberalism (Lipset 1959; more reserved: Huntington 1991), claims that should definitely be put to rest after parts of these groups or constituencies strongly supported military rule in Latin America and fascism in Europe (e.g. Mühlberger 2003). It similarly challenges the assumption that the growth of economic markets would automatically lead to the growth of political markets, an assumption that absurdly overstretches Anthony Downs' parallel between the two types of markets (Downs 1957). Visibly also, economic liberalization failed to establish market-based 'competitive capitalism' as a counter power to the state, an outcome expected by one of the patron saints of neoliberalism (Friedman, 1962, 8-17).

To the contrary, authoritarian rulers implementing economic liberalization have considerable leeway in selecting beneficiaries who rather than forming counter powers remain intimately linked to the rulers. In Arab countries as elsewhere, they craft economic reforms in ways to avoid the emergence of counter powers which alone could foster political liberalization (e.g. Kienle 2001; King 2009). This seems particularly easy in oil and gas producing states where revenues from the sale of hydrocarbons accrue to the state or directly flow into the pockets of the rulers and reinforces their position. With regard to the debates about the rentier state, events over the past few decades tend to confirm the view that rents work against political liberalization and democratization (Beblawi/ Luciani 1987; Herb 2005 versus Ross 2001). Economic reforms notwithstanding, the private sector has remained dependent on the state, thus illustrating an 'embeddedness' of economic transactions (Granovetter 1985) that is highly political. Sometimes owners of capitalism are the clients or cronies of political patrons, but often the latter simply use their powers to prevent the former from uniting against them. The result is a form of 'co-ordinated market economies' (Hall/ Soskice 2001) in which largely unaccountable and informal co-ordination limits markets. This being said, economic reforms implemented by authoritarian rulers illustrate the transformative effects that public policies may have on political regimes (Lascoumes / Le Galès 2004); though not leading to political liberalization or transitions to democracy, these effects are nonetheless visible in authoritarian upgrading.

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No doubt the limited extent to which the economies have been liberalized— for instance the exclusion of military and strategic industries from privatization programmes – may have worked against not only economic results (Noland/ Pack 2007) but also political liberalization. Large scale economic liberalization in terms not only of private sector but market growth that could only have been achieved with the help of greater pressures on the rulers could possibly have had different political effects. However, the crux of the matter would be the emergence of competing centres or repositories of power that check and balance one another (Rueschemeyer et al 1992). While the market may produce such an outcome, subsequent market failure would result in an oligopoly or monopoly. Most importantly, power centres that only represent competing owners of capital would hardly promote political liberalization beyond that category or class of actors. More generally, political liberties and democracy depend on the relatively egalitarian distribution of material and other politically relevant resources (Boix 2003; Vanhanen 1997) which economic liberalization actually prevents. Failing that, ‘authoritarian upgrading’ is the only possible scenario apart from stagnation or deliberalization. This is also the story of the Syrian and Egyptian *infitah* of the 1970s. Yet more modest in scope, economic liberalization was accompanied by modest political change, including the first competitive yet controlled elections in Egypt, as well as new constitutions and the transformation of the single into a dominant party in both countries. However, neither the former nor the latter established actual checks and balances or reduced the sweeping powers of the unelected rulers.

Teaching and Transmitting Heterodox Knowledge

The observations made above and the conclusions drawn are not always easy to communicate to students and other audiences accustomed to the ‘orthodox’ approaches to the study of politics and economics. No doubt under the influence of those who dominate the ‘dismal science’ and others who try to ascepticize it politically, the social and political embeddedness of economic transaction is not a commonly accepted idea. A majority of students and readers continue to consider economic activities as basically the results of self interest guided rational choices made by individuals independently of the wider context within which they operate. No doubt the institutional (or institutionalist) turn in the study of economics has helped to broaden some minds, but insufficiently so, and frequently from a rather short perspective of transferring ‘functional’ institutions into contexts where they are ‘missing’ – a venture that is fraught with more difficulties that many dare to think.

On the other hand, and in particular with regard to Arab and Muslim countries, political scientists and their students for years and decades have been obsessed with issues of religion and politics, and more precisely with the various forms of Islamism they described and distinguished from each other. If economic developments possibly helped to explain politics in Europe and North America, it was religion that allegedly explained the Middle East. The number of publications and courses on the one and the other subject is telling, and even more so the large scale absence of anything like political economy from numerous curricula and syllabi. Almost by implication, the role of religion in politics has only rarely been related to that of economic change in politics, except for simplistic assumptions of the sort of religion as opium of the people. Orientalism and caricatures of Marxist thought largely occupied the field, even though there have been welcome contributions some of which are quoted in the bibliography. There is also a growing sense among economists that politics matter, for instance among the members of the Economic Research Forum (ERF) in Cairo.

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[Hopefully this chapter will convince more readers that something important may be gained from studying the political economy of the Arab states. It has partly grown out of my previous academic research as reflected below and the politics courses I taught and the seminars I convened in Oxford, London, Cairo, Aix-en-Provence, Grenoble, Beirut and Paris. However, it also reflects more than a decade of research and institutional responsibilities in various Arab countries, in particular in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Neither political economy issue nor any other subject can be examined without meeting the actors themselves, politicians, bankers, company owners and directors, workers, street peddlers, peasants, agricultural laborers, consumers, the unemployed, the elderly without pensions, or without spending time on shop floors, market places and in government offices.](#)

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