

AUB Professor Samir Makdisi releases results of research study on democracy in Arab world

Wednesday, November 03, 2010

BEIRUT: The late Winston Churchill once said: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried.” To this day, the governments of the Arab World are still primarily dabbling in the latter. To understand why, an ambitious research project was launched by the American University of Beirut’s professor Samir Makdisi and the Dubai Economic Council’s Ibrahim ElBadawi, resulting in a new book, entitled “Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit” (Routledge; 331 pages; \$78.60), which comprises their own work alongside 18 renowned scholars.

Funded by a \$339,000 grant from the Canadian International Development and Research Center (IDRC), the three-year research project employs a double-pronged approach to the issue of why the Arab World has been so slow to embrace true representative government.

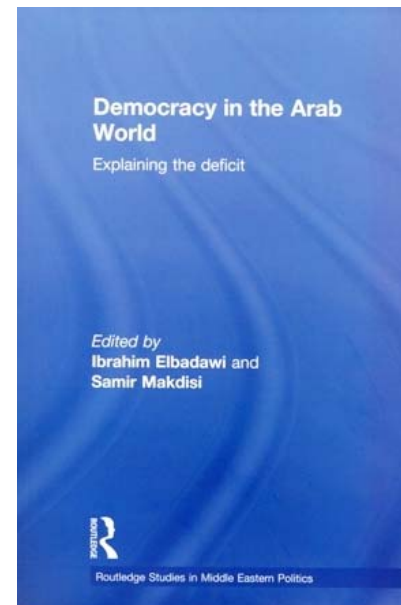
Firstly, Makdisi, ElBadawi and World Bank Economist Gary Milante develop their own cross-country model (EMM model) by testing various elements specific to the Arab region with the objective of identifying which of them explain the persisting Arab “democracy deficit” despite the region’s notable socio-economic development in the past 5 to 6 decades. Among others, these elements include regional wars, oil rents, religion and colonial history—something the researchers coin as the ‘Arab Dummy’ variable.

The three scholars then run econometric regressions within these parameters using a variety of existing tools and indices to measure the extent to which real democratic government has taken hold in the region. The most notable conclusions drawn from this study are that oil wealth and conflict, particularly the ongoing Palestine conflict, are the most relevant factors constraining the democratization process in the Arab region.

“These are the specific characteristics of the Arab region that explain the democracy deficit unlike other regions where settlements of conflict and economic development led to the democratization process,” says Makdisi. Given the importance of the conflict factor, he believes that if the Palestinian question in particular is justly resolved then oil wealth, which has been used to co-opt elites and maintain autocratic power, would be insufficient in preventing the rise of pro-reform groups who would, in turn, demand a change in existing social contracts.

Using the EMM model, members of the research team then apply it to specific country case studies to probe to what extent the major conclusions of the cross country work apply in Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the Arabian Gulf.

“In most cases oil and conflicts are identified as explanatory variables, though to varying degrees from one country to another” says Makdisi. The research concludes that countries in close proximity to the Arab-Israeli conflict suffered much more from its negative effect on the democratization process than countries further away such as Algeria or the Gulf counties. At the same time, these oil rich countries have been able to protract their autocratic rule through what the Arab Planning Institute Economist Belkacem Laabas and University of Algiers Professor



Ammar Bouhouch coin the ‘authoritarian bargain’: the tradeoff between economic welfare and political rights coupled with the fragmentation of opposition movements.

One of the more telling aspects of the research is that it empirically supports major scholarly work that discount “culturalist” explanations for undemocratic regimes in the Arab World, especially by scholars from outside the region. “It is noteworthy that other societies in the developing world have similar social characteristics attributable to Arab World, yet they still made the transition to democracy,” says Makdisi.

That said, the research does include the analysis of several prominent non-Arab scholars but draws mostly from the work of independent Arab scholars both inside and outside the Arab region. One inherent theme that runs throughout the study is that the true significance of the rentier thesis (the impact of oil wealth on governance) can be properly understood only if situated in the socio-political context of the countries concerned.

Another significant finding is that “as a religion, neither Islam nor Christianity turn out to be significant explanatory factors as to why we have had persistent autocracy, contrary to what some writers have claimed” explains Makdisi. “That does not mean that religion is not ‘instrumentalized’ to further governments’ own interests to stay in power.”

Indeed, as the University of Westminster’s Abdelwahab El-Affendi notes in the book, the notion that “an individual or class of individuals is better placed to resolve matters of dispute than the community as a whole contradicts another Islamic tenant: that no priesthood is permitted or acceptable.”

The abuse of region is only one of the many facets the work identifies as a tool of autocratic rule. Throughout the research, a vicious cycle is revealed whereby powerful autocrats claim they are the last line of defense against fundamentalism, external powers support them, opposition movements are crushed or divided, civil society and elites are co-opted, and the cycle repeats itself each time opposition to autocratic rule arises.

Having identified major elements behind the persistence of the Arab democracy deficit, Makdisi and Elbedawi have now been tasked with identifying the conditions that would lead to a transition from autocracy to democracy. As a result of their findings, the IDRC has approved a further grant to produce a sequel to the current study using the same methodology. The research is expected to take 2.5 to 3 years and research teams are currently being assembled.

“We found out that the method we used—a thematic paper followed by case studies—was quite useful and efficient and were lucky that we able to assemble a really good research team,”

Makdisi says. “We plan to follow a similar approach in the new project to uncover the conditions that ought to prevail for the Arab World to transition from a state of autocracy to a state of democracy.”