The People Want to Overthrow Which Regime?  
The Neo-patrimonial State and the Arab Spring  
Panel discussion with Adib Nehme, Tareq Tell, Fawwaz Traboulsi, Ziad Abdel Samad, and Rami Khouri  
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Several years after the Arab uprisings, different countries went on different trajectories. Libya is almost declared a failed state, Syria is undergoing a civil war with more than thousands of causalities, and Egypt is under military rule again. However, the stable link remains that the uprisings were only months apart and were inspired by one spark from Tunisia. In his book *The Arab Spring and the Neopatrimonial State*, Adib Nehme argues that, although different in their facades, Arab regimes are similar in their essence. He sees that what we are currently witnessing is a process of change towards a civil, democratic regime that might take decades before realization.

The characterization of regime types in the Arab world has differed significantly from one country to the other. Depending whether the focus of the characterization is political or economic, Arab regimes have been called statist, rentier, dictatorial, tribal, clientalistic, sectarian, and much more. However, the all-encompassing term for all those regimes is the neopatrimonial regime. The term patrimonial state comes from Max Weber’s definition of a regime which is “run by a state apparatus loyal to the ruler, chosen on the basis of personal relations, and does not function according to written regulations and public procedures”.¹

However, neopatrimonialism sees that the traditions are no longer the source of legitimacy, and to a certain extent, the state formally functions within a legal written framework. Thus, in neopatrimonial regimes there is a blend between the private and the public sectors where the leader uses them interchangeably for his/her own benefits. State resources are managed and divided as if they are personal resources. The neutral bureaucratic apparatus of the state becomes politicized. Elections become a ceremonial tradition that is either fully-controlled or heavily managed by the security apparatus. This applies perfectly to all the regimes in the region with certain aspects more common in some regimes than others. Thus, one can say that the Gulf countries are rentier neopatrimonial states

while Ghaddafi’s Libya was a familial neopatrimonial state. The majority of the regimes tried to preserve a populist rhetoric while adopting neoliberal economic reforms that cut all state-funded safety nets and in return did not translate into adequate job creation and an increase in the standards of living. Thus, the uprisings were the result of grievances that are deeply rooted in political and economic deprivations. Across the region, there were demands for civil, democratic and pluralist states. Those demands highlight the shortcomings of the neopatrimonial state but they also highlight the shortcomings of political parties and NGOs that were active under the neopatrimonial states of the Arab world.

Revolution without intermediary

In objectively characterizing these revolutions, we may understand them as civil society rising up against statist regimes and compare them to the collapse of the Soviet Union 20 years ago. Civil society bypassed the traditional intermediaries – such as political parties and NGOs – who were in effect limited by a state which criminalized all political or promotional activities. As a result, intermediaries were basically powerless. So civil society in these places did not mean the traditional NGOs and opposition political parties, but rather it meant grass roots activism.

What happened in Tunisia and Egypt is proof that institutionalized civil society had failed to serve as a general outlet for political movement. This is because it was believed that secular value systems could not mobilize people the same way religious or nationalist ideologies could, resulting in ineffectual activism. Although nationalist and religious movements that embraced Arab solidarity and Islamic awareness were formed, neither was able to unite class of society within these countries. They rarely served as a platform to demand change even though they often included grievances against tyrannical states. But examination of the democratic and secular demands coming out of places like Egypt and Tunisia shows us that the belief about the ineffectiveness of secular values when compared to nationalist or religious ones is a myth.

Conclusions

The Arab world does not function in a neutral political environment. Regional and international influences still play a major role in backing illegitimate regimes and propping the status quo. However, even if we are witnessing some push-backs and reemergence of dictatorial traits, we need to understand that the neopatrimonial regimes have been deeply rooted for decades and that the process of change is more challenging than it looks at the surface.