



Featured ▾ [IAF Articles \(/pagecontent.cfm?start=1&end=30&page_title=IAF Articles&contenttype_id=5&soci](/pagecontent.cfm?start=1&end=30&page_title=IAF%20Articles&contenttype_id=5&soci)

IAF Articles

[IAF Editorials \(/pagecontent.cfm?start=1&end=30&page_title=IAF Articles&contenttype_id=1&socialmedia_id=C](/pagecontent.cfm?start=1&end=30&page_title=IAF%20Articles&contenttype_id=1&socialmedia_id=C)

The Democratic Crisis in Arab Political Systems

(<http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php>)  COMMENTS (0)

 Like

By Muhammad Adel Zaky

(1)

“The correctness of solving any problem depends on the correctness of posing it.”

Starting from our belief in this principle, we offer in the following pages several methodological observations on the problem of democracy in Arab political systems. Much of the intellectual confusion and the haphazard movement on the ground stems, in fact, from the persistent insistence on ignoring this very principle.

(2)

The issue of democracy in Arab political systems has generally been approached from a single fundamental starting point, agreed upon by most intellectual treatments: namely, that democracy does not exist in these systems. From this premise, the objective becomes predetermined—namely, the continuous call to apply democracy in its various manifestations: rotation of power, neutrality of the mechanisms through which authority is assigned, freedom of the opposition, subjection of administrative action to the rule of law, respect for judicial decisions, separation of powers, openness and transparency, respect for human rights, and familiar features of democracy in Western political systems.

The problem here—even after the protest movements witnessed in parts of the Arab world—is the deliberate indifference to the central proposition that clearly states:

“The institution of governance in Arab political systems, through its historical formation within global capitalism, possesses a substantial level of authoritarianism that stands in structural contradiction with Western democracies.”

Given this, the quest for the desired democratic objectives becomes a form of utopian pursuit, unless we develop a structural awareness of the historical formation of political authoritarianism in the Arab world, so as to understand the objective law governing the crisis—a crisis that began to take shape on ground with the earliest modern assaults of international capital on the Arab world through European colonial incursions into various Arab regions.

Some have considered our central proposition to be merely an observation of lived, daily reality. This is a methodological error that must be highlighted: central proposition necessarily transcends such reduction, for it stands as a foundational premise governing a secondary proposition:

“There exists a democratic crisis in Arab political systems.”

Any attempt to detach our central proposition from this context falls outside our concern here, simply because we never argued for such detachment in first place.

(3)

The starting point, then, lies in:

An awareness of the historical formation of authoritarian Arab governance, an awareness that cannot be methodologically separated from an understatement of the historical formation of social and economic underdevelopment in Arab societies.

Here, one must also acknowledge the specificity of the political systems in the Gulf states. This specificity arises from the dominant mode of production which has not yet allowed for the transformation of oil surpluses into capital. This may partially explain the low likelihood—at least for now—of revolutionary uprisings against the ruling systems of the Gulf. Yet in the long term, true uprisings become highly plausible, once Gulf populations begin experience the negative consequences—expectedly—of the dialectical tension between state-collected rent and the profit appropriated by major imperial companies in oil and mining.

At that point, the defenses of the monarchies may prove inadequate in the face of what may unfold, especially if the media loses its power, red lines lose their sanctity, and new generations—poorly integrated into the labor market—confront corrupt political institutions at a time of declining American commitments, shifting regional political orders, and oversold promises of public spending that may strain even the richest Gulf budgets.

(4)

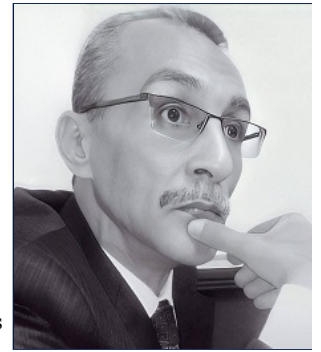
Developing an awareness of the historical formation of Arab authoritarianism cannot be achieved without a critical understanding of five key considerations:

First: The world today is a single whole: a global capitalist system (in which 350 individuals enjoy an annual income equal to that of 2.5 billion people; of the population control 80% of global natural resources; the wealth of the three richest individuals equals the GDP of the poorest 48 countries; and the wealth of the richest 200 exceeds the combined income of 41% of the world's population). The Arab region is but one geopolitical component of this global whole.

Second: This interconnected (yet inherently uneven) whole did not emerge suddenly. It is the result of a long historical accumulation requiring awareness of several ideas:

(a) The historical formation of capital—not as a sum of money but as a social relation. The state, as a social organization, exists within this relation, not outside it. Thus, we cannot study the state as something separate from or external to the capitalist system.

(b) The role of European colonial expansion in integrating Arab economies into the modern global economy: the French assault on Egypt and the Levant 1798; the British in 1807; France's occupation of Algeria in 1830; Britain's occupation of Aden in 1839; France's occupation of Tunisia in 1881; Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882; British control over Sudan and Oman (1891); the French-Spanish protectorate over Morocco (1912); Italy's occupation of Libya (1912); Britain's mandate over Palestine (1917) and Iraq (1920); and France's mandate over Syria and Lebanon (1920).



(c) The integration of Arab economies as dependent economies, reflecting most of the features resulting from their insertion into the international capital market and their assigned role within the international division of labor. Contrary to what official theory claims, social and economic underdevelopment is the result of integration into the global capitalist system, not the cause of its absence. This integration continually reshapes the international division of labor in favor of international capital seeking to impose its dominance over all backward sectors of the global system.

(d) Such integration requires one of two things:

Either

- restructuring political and social institutions to suit the interests of the dominant powers—supporting internal coups against any nationalist regime; or
- maintaining and reinforcing compliant local structures to preserve the economic gains secured during colonial rule and to ensure their continuation after formal independence.

(e) Understanding the laws governing the movement of the international capitalist economy.

Third: This uneven global system must be understood through the historical process of primitive accumulation, which requires rejecting mythological explanations and examining:

- the secret of primitive accumulation, as the separation of the producer from the means of production;
- and the specific mechanisms through which accumulation was achieved in the colonies, especially in the Arab world.

Fourth: Economic and social underdevelopment is accompanied by cultural and epistemic underdevelopment (and consequently legal and political underdevelopment), manifesting fully in ideological fetishes—religious or quasi-religious—that offer metaphysical escape from daily authoritarianism or alternatively, extreme materialist expressions.

These fetishes, in their aimless pursuit and performative approach, ultimately integrate wholly within the global capitalist system while claiming to resist—often without any understanding of what is being resisted.

Thus, bizarre alliances emerge: in countries like Egypt and Algeria, liberals stood with the state against Islamist movements—despite the state having repressed them earlier. Leftists, too, wavered between viewing Islamist movements as fascistic regressions or as progressive movements of the oppressed against imperialism, the latter view prevailing in Iran and among segments of the Arab left. At times, some leftist currents—out of despair—declared temporary alliances with bourgeois regimes in the hope of eventually achieving a communist society.

Fifth: As the backward sector becomes economically dependent, the reproduction of its conditions becomes tied to developments in the advanced sector. Consequently, the entire society becomes politically dependent on the centers of decision-making in the advanced countries. This dependency aligns with the historically formed social structure of the backward sector, fully subordinated to confused and complicit political regimes that—even after protest movements—often obscure their alliances with global American imperialism.

This is particularly evident in political Islam in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, whose history is rich with suspicious alliances, especially with the British crown in the 1930s and 1940s, followed by later attempts to build bridges with the American system.

(5)

Taking the above into consideration, we can confidently pose a set of methodological questions:

(a) Is it important to ask how Arab societies integrate into the global capitalist system?

Or is the more important question: To what extent are they integrated, and since when?

A glance at the curious “Special Convention between the Sheikh of Bahrain and the British Government” in 1892 may help. It states:

“I, Isa bin Ali, Sheikh of Bahrain, in the presence of Lieutenant-Colonel A. S. Talbot, the Resident in the Gulf, hereby declare of my own free will that I bind myself, my descendants, and my successors to the following:

First: not to enter into any agreements or communications with any foreign power other than Great Britain.

Second: not to permit, without the consent of the British Government, the establishment of any agent or representative of any foreign power on Bahrain soil.

Third: not to sell, lease, mortgage, or grant by any means any part of Bahrain to any foreign power except Great Britain.”

(b) What is the extent and depth of corruption in Arab political systems? Answering this requires examining the historical roots of corruption, the social composition of the ruling systems, the nature of the authority, and the class it represents.

(c) What is the level of collusion between capital (as a social relation), its international institutions, and the ruling authorities in dependent Arab political systems?

(d) What is the nature of the contradiction between capital (as a social relation) and the ruling authority (as a counter-social relation), contrary to the ideological claim of a harmonious alliance?

This ideological claim serves to neutralize the masses—first by lumping them together despite their divergent class interests, and second by placing them outside the sphere of contradiction between the two poles of political decision-making, including decisions surrounding economic reproduction and control over its conditions.

This control cannot be achieved without a national political system—something global capitalism consistently opposes, often succeeding in aborting national liberation movements and crushing attempts to break from the advanced centers.

(6)

In attempting to answer the three preceding questions, we must take care to avoid three fundamental shortcomings:

(a) Failing to ground our analysis in a dialectical-materialist understanding of the historical formation of social phenomena.

(b) Abandoning revolutionary solutions or overlooking the latent—at least morally latent—power inherent in the Arab peoples.

(c) Lacking awareness that authority is not merely an adversary in itself, but also functions as an instrument for entrenching the dominance of a single culture and a singular way of life—one that deprives life of meaning and purpose. This is the capitalist mode of life led by the United States, which main 500 military bases across 145 countries, staffed by 250,000 civilian employees and 650,000 soldiers, after assuming global leadership from Europe following its political, economic, and cultural marginalization.

(7)

If we address our earlier questions with full awareness of all that has been outlined above, we may arrive at two fundamental conclusions:

(a) On the intellectual level, there exists a primary crisis—what we term “the crisis of understanding the crisis.”

(b) On the practical level, there is movement in the wrong direction, towards the wrong objective, in pursuit of something undefined.

Muhammad Adel Zaky is an Egyptian researcher specializing in the history of economic thought. He is the author of Critique of Political Economy, a book that has gone through six editions. His research explores the evolution of economic ideas in relation to social and historical change.

Comments in Chronological order (0 total comments)

Post a Comment

Report Abuse (<mailto:registration@ia-forum.org>)

[Contact Us \(/Contact/\)](#) | [About Us \(/About/\)](#) | [Donate \(/Donations/index.cfm\)](#) | [Terms & Conditions \(/About/Terms.cfm\)](#) [\(http://x.com/IA_Forum\)](#) [\(http://www.facebook.com/help/?page=1029#/pages/Cen](#)

All Rights Reserved. Copyright 2002 - 2025