



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

New Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/>

Review of Stephen J. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa*

Author(s): Oğuzhan Göksel

To cite this article: Göksel, Oğuzhan, review of Stephen J. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), *New Middle Eastern Studies* 3 (2013), < <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archive/1136>>

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archive/1136>

Online Publication Date: 25 July 2013

Disclaimer and Copyright

The NMES editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information contained in the e-journal. However, the editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability for any purpose of the content and disclaim all such representations and warranties whether express or implied to the maximum extent permitted by law. Any views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and not the views of the Editors or the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.

Copyright New Middle Eastern Studies, 2013. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from New Middle Eastern Studies, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed, in writing.

Terms and conditions:

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa

Stephen J. King

Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009, 279 pp., \$26 / £16.99,
Paperback

ISBN: 978-0-253-22146-9

REVIEWED BY OĞUZHAN GÖKSEL

PhD Candidate and Teaching Assistant, School of Government and International Affairs, University of Durham; email: oguzhan.goksel@durham.ac.uk

The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa is one of the numerous works that focuses on studying the concept of authoritarianism in the region. Unlike the majority of works in the discourse which emphasized the ‘absence of democracy’ in the Arab societies of the region, King attempts to analyse and deconstruct authoritarianism by focusing on what it actually is, rather than what it is not. With this perspective, the book offers an in-depth analysis of the inner mechanisms and political economy of authoritarian regimes in four country cases, the Arab republics of Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. The selection of these four countries makes the book particularly interesting as all of these authoritarian regimes, except Algeria, witnessed mass uprisings with the Arab Spring, resulting in the collapse of the old regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and a civil war in Syria.

Even before the Arab uprisings that have shaken the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since 2011, the topic of authoritarianism attracted much interest from the scholars as demonstrated by the great numbers of books and articles that had been published on the issue. It must be noted that many of the arguments voiced in these works, such as the alleged dynamism and resilience of authoritarianism in the MENA region, have become obsolete in light of the Arab Spring. Yet King’s book manages to preserve its validity to a large extent and forms a valuable contribution to the discourse, particularly in terms of successfully accounting for the evolution of the nature of authoritarian regimes in the Arab republics.

The book is comprised of six chapters titled: 1) political openings and the transformation of authoritarian rule in the Middle East and North Africa, 2) sustaining authoritarianism during the third wave of democracy, 3) the old authoritarianism, 4) the new authoritarianism, 5) political openings without patronage-based privatization and single-party institutional legacies and 6) transitions from the new MENA authoritarianism to democracy? The first two chapters give a historical account of the initial establishment of authoritarianism. The most original chapters of the book are the third and fourth chapters that focus on the differences between what the author calls as the ‘old’ and ‘new’ authoritarian regimes in the Arab republics. The last two chapters compare and contrast the political and economic liberalisation experience of Arab republics with experiences in other regions such as Eastern Europe and South America, while an attempt is also made to forecast the future of the authoritarian regimes which, in retrospect, forms the main weakness of the work.

The main contribution of the book to the literature is the challenge it poses to the mainstream understanding of the connection between political liberalisation, economic liberalisation and the impact of economic opening on the nature of authoritarian regimes. Contrary to the conventional neoclassical political economy approach which suggests that there is positive correlation between economic liberalisation and democratisation, King

demonstrates that the process of economic liberalisation that was initiated by the Arab republics in the 1970s and 1980s actually helped the authoritarian regimes to modify their state apparatus and adapt to the new conditions. Thus, economic liberalisation made it possible for the old authoritarian regimes to transform into more resilient 'new authoritarian regimes', not build pluralistic democracies as the literature previously suggested. King explains how the political and economic changes of this period ensured the survival of the elites and authoritarianism: '...the privatization of state assets provided rulers with the patronage resources to form a new ruling coalition that would be pivotal in any capitalist economy: private-sector capitalists, landed elites, the military officer corps, and top state officials, many of whom moved into the private sector and took substantial state assets with them' (pp. 4-5). Throughout the work, King successfully utilizes and repeatedly refers to the concept of 'ruling coalition' to shed light on the source of mass support and the means to gain legitimacy for the authoritarian regimes.

The strength of the work is that it is very successful in explaining the changes that occurred during the transition to new authoritarian regimes from the old authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, King argues that presidential power dramatically intensified in this era: 'Economic reform in the region and globally has been accompanied by a shift in the policymaking process to privilege-insulated technocratic change teams under presidential auspices... Presidents probably calculate that the new multi-party systems weaken both the single party and the bureaucracy relative to themselves' (pp. 12-13). The emergence of an even stronger presidency in the Arab republics during the 1980s and thereafter may account for why the anger of the masses was focused on presidents such as Ben-Ali and Mubarak during the Arab Spring.

Despite the aforementioned contributions, there is a critical flaw in the book in terms of its analysis of the resilience of new authoritarian regimes that had emerged in the 1980s. On numerous occasions, King emphasizes the newfound strength and legitimacy of the new authoritarian regimes: '...authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa is both persistent and dynamic' (p. 89). The belief in the long-term survival of authoritarianism is so strong that the establishment of new authoritarian regimes in the Arab republics is portrayed as a rational strategy for the ruling elites: 'In the new authoritarianism, ruling elites and their ruling parties have been correct for the most part to gamble that they can switch their core constituency of support toward urban and rural economic elites, while retaining the continued support of popular sectors' (p. 10). Shortly after those words were written, it suddenly became apparent with the Arab Spring that actually, the ruling elites should not have relied on the continued support of the masses. Furthermore, the book does not even consider the possibility of the loss of mass support for the regimes, still less the idea of democratic uprisings: 'Of course, it is also possible that a collapse or opening in the new MENA authoritarianism could go against the odds for dominant-party regimes and culminate in military or theocratic Islamic regimes' (p. 209). Thus, possible threats for the survival of regimes are identified as extremist Islamic movements or the military not the ordinary citizens that actually overthrew the authoritarian regimes later on. To judge this work or others on the basis of their ability to predict the Arab Spring may seem unfair, but in light of the number of works that successfully highlighted the signs of change or at least pointed to the hidden weaknesses of these authoritarian regimes, it is only right to question the validity of the strong belief in the resilience of authoritarianism.

It must be noted that if it were not for the claim of the work about the dynamism and resilience of authoritarianism in the MENA region, the book would be truly flawless. The narrative of the transition from old authoritarianism to new authoritarianism is an original contribution to the discourse and is vital to understanding the historical evolution of state and political economy in the four Arab republics and beyond. Furthermore, the counter-argument

of King that challenges the assumption of the link between economic liberalisation and democratization is highly persuasive as the experiences of all four country cases support King's position. This is a most valuable contribution to the literature that has the potential to be paradigm-shifting.