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draft

Monarchies versus other autocracies in the Middle East:

A fault-line or a converging system?

The post colonial period saw an intense rivalry between Arab monarchies and the other Arab autocratic states, leading to some wars by proxies (in Yemen, in Western Sahara, or through Palestinians as in Jordan during the early 70'). This rivalry decreased in the nineties following two events: the perception of Islamic Iran as a common threat (except for Syria), but also a structural change in autocratic regimes that are bringing them closer to the monarchical systems.

Monarchies in the Middle East had for long (1950-1990) many assets comparing with autocratic regimes in the region:

- a more entrenched legitimacy, even if, for Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the monarchies came into existence rather recently (in the 1920's).
- a possibility to embody a national identity not based on partisanship or identification with a specific "aşabiyya" (a tribe, an ethnic group, the army, a party etc.), even if, in Saudi Arabia, the monarchy was born from a specific clan (but it used wahhabism as a way to define a supra-tribal religious identity).
- a greater political stability through the dynastic succession principle.
- a state apparatus less based on party affiliation, links with the army or with the "mukhabarât" (services).
- deeper social roots in the tribal system and in "big families".
- a far less bloody record when dealing with opposition.
- a well established tradition of collaboration with conservative religious elites.
- a more flexible and liberal economic system, even if the oil rent is state-managed.
- a more stable framework of international (not regional) relations.

On the other hand, the autocratic regimes needed an ideological legitimacy (Arab nationalism for most, Islam for Iran) to justify more repressive and bloody domestic politics.

They took tough stands against monarchies accused to betray such ideological commitments (Algeria versus Morocco, Egypt and later Iraq versus Saudi Arabia, Iran against Iraq, Syria against Jordan), thus appealing directly to the monarchies' public opinions, but also comforting in the eyes of Western countries the image of pro-western monarchies. They were often ridden by coups d'état and assassinations (Syria, Iraq); statist and rigid economic system led to stagnation. Successions led to crisis (Algeria after Boumedién), more autocratic regime (Tunisia) or weakening of the leadership (Syria).

Ideologies have for long been a major asset of the autocratic regimes. Ideology played a big role in the war through proxies that erupted in the 80s between Iran and Saudi Arabia, when the former used its own Islamic revolution to delegitimize the very concept of monarchy. By supporting a combination of Arab nationalism and Sunni religious identity against Iran, and by playing on the internecine feuds between Arab nationalists (Baath numerous splits), the monarchies have nevertheless been able to compensate their lack of ideological appeal and, for Saudi Arabia, to play the broker in many crisis (Taef agreements to end the Lebanese civil war).

Nevertheless, the lines between autocratic regimes and monarchies are now more and more being blurred through a dual evolution: an evolution of autocratic regimes towards "quasi-monarchies" and a growing gap among monarchies between the elites on one hand, and low middle class or impoverished low classes, as well as conservative religious milieus on the other hand.

The evolution of autocratic regimes:

On different levels autocratic regimes have borrowed some patterns of the monarchies:

-succession: autocratic regimes are turning to the "dynastic principle" (Syria, Egypt), with the notable exception of Algeria, where the constant feuds for any potential succession are undermining the stability of the State.

-ideology plays less and less a role in favour of "local" nationalisms (Egypt, Syria with the Golan, and Algeria with the postponing of the friendship treaty with France). Only Iran could be seen as an exception, because, although it has a very strongly nationalist foreign policy, the policy towards Middle East is a mix of a paradoxical "Arab" nationalism (support for Hamas and Hezbollah) and Islamism.

-economy: most of the autocratic regimes turned to a more open, free market economy.

Privatizations have increased the number of the economic players, and have created an extended social basis for the regimes, except when corruption at the higher level of the state runs against the new private entrepreneurs (Tunisia).

-a decrease of the grasp of ideological political organizations on the state apparatus (ruling party, services, army), allowing more flexibility and cooptation among other segments of the population, and specifically the educated middle class or “big families, estranged until recently from the power circles.

-endorsement of the conservative religious establishment: although most autocratic regimes were created on a secular ideology, they all came to endorse conservative Sunni Islam (except the Syrian regime, who would like to do it, but lacks credibility because of its “alawi” origin; nevertheless the regime is also helping orthodox Shiism to make a breakthrough in the society). Algeria has sentenced converts to Protestantism; Cairo has given more power to al-Azhar authorities and is openly prosecuting “deviants” like homosexuals.

The result from privatization and de-ideologization is the increase of a non-politicized middle class. Access to wealth and economic positions is not directly linked to the seizure of political power, decreasing the incentive to contest the present regimes, which has lost the monopoly of the control of the resources.

Autocratic regimes are gaining in flexibility and social support among the middle classes (except Tunisia), at the expense of an impoverishment of lower social classes.

They have also increased their status in the eyes of Western countries, by putting an end to their systematic anti-western approach, by re-adjusting their diplomacy before (Egypt) or after the fall of Soviet Union, and by appearing as bulwarks against Islamism and Iran (except Syria).

New challenges for monarchies:

So the comparative advantages of the monarchies in comparison with the autocratic regimes are less obvious than it used to be two decades ago.

Nevertheless, monarchies have still an asset: the ability to democratize the political field without fear of being swept away in the process of democratization. Most of the autocratic regimes (including Iran) are stepping back from an already rather shy endeavour to democratize themselves, precisely because they are afraid of the unravelling of the whole

political system. It seems rather clear now that talks of democratization were to be heard as a response to the pressure of the US administration in the wake of the establishment of the strategy for reshaping the Middle East. As soon as the autocratic regimes understood that Washington was stepping back from the democratization policy and is leaning now towards the “bulwark approach” (anything except the Islamists), they stopped to make any progress; this attitude has a very negative side-effect: to allow the Islamists to appear as true democrats. So autocratic regimes are facing the risk to see the Islamists being able to federate a common opposition against them.

The monarchies are less susceptible to confront such a dilemma because they are not stuck in a “we or them” approach towards opponents. Channels of communication exist between them and even jihadist opponents, through family and tribal ties. The lack of ideological commitment makes easier for them to speak, if not negotiate, with opponents. Civility and a political culture of consensus may allow, not a debate, but a more open approach to dissidents. To grant a pardon is not a sign of weakness, but of grandeur for a monarch. The policy of de-radicalization waged by the Saudi government to transform jihadist into turn-coats, through religious re-education and family ties, is more effective than the Egyptian, Syrian and Tunisian policy of crushing any opponent. Autocratic states have less room of manoeuvres when they are dealing with opponents, because they have precisely ignored or contested the traditional forms of civility in the name of new ideologies (nationalism); even when they have given up such ideologies, they have a problem to reconnect with traditional forms of civility and negotiations: doing that would be seen as proof of weakness. Unwilling to go further towards democracy, unable to go back to traditional means of finding a balance between political forms, the autocratic regimes have little choice than become more autocratic.

But, even if we consider, that monarchies could create a safer track towards opening the political scene, the challenge of democratization is that it is mainly based on cooptation and consensus, and thus remains an elite process (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain); only the Moroccan monarchy seems to keep a possibility to make direct appeal to the people, as King Hassan used to do (the Green Marche for Western Sahara). All monarchies seem to embark now on this process of cooptation and opening, while autocratic regimes seem to make a pause.

The reasons of the pause are complex: fear not to master the process and presence of well entrenched political opposition (Muslim brothers in Egypt), as we saw. But there is, for the autocratic regimes, another reason: the limitations of the remaining shares of the pie to be

distributed (Algeria, Syria), because of the privatization process, leading to tensions inside the elite.

The issue for monarchies is not so much the sharing of the pie; they have more resources, the ruling families and their clients already constituted personal wealth that do not require any more a permanent tapping on state resources (although the demographic increase of new generations of “royalties”, that is young princes in Saudi Arabia, might also have a negative impact by putting them in competition with a burgeoning non aristocratic upper class).

But even among the monarchies, there is a risk of a growing gap between the old and new elites on one hand and a comparatively impoverished lower middle class. The fact for instance that more and more Saudi are on the labour market with little comparative advantages may break the consensus on the monarchy.

The second issue is a growing uneasiness with religious conservative milieus: religious dissidents found their way among Saudi wahhabis, islamist movements are lately making a breakthrough in Morocco, while, in Jordan and Kuwait, conservative religious members of parliament, elected thanks to the process of political opening, are waging a campaign to contest a supposed encouragement given by the authorities to westernization, -for instance the status of women. Modernization create tensions between the conservative milieus and the monarchies, while many opponents, who are far less religious minded, join the chorus in the name of the fight against imperialism, Zionism and neo-colonialism. While autocratic regimes become more and more conservative in terms of culture and society (as illustrated by the re-introduction of gender discrimination in the Algerian family law in 1984), monarchies take the risk of imposing progressive measures (like the reform of the family law in Morocco) at the expense of their alliance with the conservative clergy.

Nevertheless, the blurring of the lines between autocratic regimes and monarchies, due to the “monarchisation” of the former may also bring two positive elements:

-Autocratic regimes, except Iran, do not need any more a “monarchy bashing” policy, and lost both the will and the opportunity to play on ideological alternative (republic versus monarchy).

-monarchies could now build on an “arabo-sunni” nationalism against Iran, and their legitimacy in doing that cannot be contested by the Arab autocratic regimes. Regional role of the monarchies has thus recently been enhanced, but still is a ground of discontent for large

part of the public opinion (anti-Zionist Arab nationalists, shi'as), on which Iran can play. Iran remains the only autocratic regime that can challenge the legitimacy of the monarchies.