

LARBI SADIKI, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009), Pp. 288.

In 'Rethinking Arab Democratization', his second major work, Larbi Sadiki, a well-known scholar on this general subject, feels the pulse of democratic reforms within the Arab Middle East. Particularly, he looks at how the widespread onset of election contestation has affected democratization in the region. Divided into six essential chapters and a conclusion, this work has a wide scope as much in its theoretical context of the democratization scholarship as well as the recent history and current state of play of democratization. In the first chapter, a general discussion of the theoretical democratization literature both in the Arab world as well as beyond is provided. The next two chapters follow the emergence of hybrid forms of electoral authoritarianism in the post-cold war period but also examine its historical precedents across the region. Chapter four deals with Western agendas of 'democracy promotion' such as the 'Greater Middle East Initiative' and the 'Broader Middle East Initiative' that were driven by the Bush administration. Chapter six looks at bottom-up driven forms democratization such as bread riots and examines their transformative potential. The final chapter examines the recent trans-regional phenomenon of Al-Jazeera and its potential to create a more unified and conscious Arab vox populi that can address the failings of the individual regimes.

Truly comprehensive in the historical and geographical focus of his analysis, Sadiki charts a methodological course that sails determinedly against the wind of conventional democratization scholarship, especially the transitology school of thought. In this sense, he uses the occasion to fire off several broadsides against the already discredited notion that universally valid and teleologically deterministic models of sequential democratization can be derived from the particular points in time and space such as Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1980s or Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The Huntingtonian dogma that similar specifically ordered processes of institutionally-driven democratization travel the world at intervals in 'waves' is made short shrift of. Instead, referring to Laurence Whitehead, Sadiki maintains that collective experiences of democratic learning should be interpreted within their specific contexts and ascribes to them a dynamic, flexible and open-ended quality which makes them resistant to systematic and scientific estimation.

In his examination of the development of electoral regimes and top-down political reform in recent years as well as in the earlier decades of the 1970s and 1960s in chapters two and three, Sadiki transplants Ibn Khaldun's terms of retreat (*farr*) and advance (*karr*) to the context of political evolution within the Arab Middle East during this period to illustrate his argument that processes and experiences of democratization are by nature fluid and open-ended rather than teleologically deterministic. While processes of electoral contestation have a deep-rooted history in many countries throughout the region, one of the book's key arguments is that these mechanisms have not led to the onset of wider reforms pertaining to participatory governance. Instead, they often mask the continuity of authoritarian rule in these regimes and legitimate them both to internal and external publics. These electoral mechanisms thus constitute 'badges of democratic pretence' for the regimes' political elites. Sadiki coins the term 'election fetishism' to describe the unhealthily single-minded focus on electoral traits both in academia and within the international community as the yardstick by which to measure a political regime's democratic credentials.

In chapter four, the role of external actors in democratization efforts is evaluated via the two big democracy promotion plans of the Bush administration, 'Greater Middle East Initiative' and the 'Broader Middle East Initiative'. Sadiki finds these initiatives to be unimaginative and condescending and unhelpful, concerned mainly with electoral reforms and free market liberalisation. The discourse frames the initiatives in a way that gives US government ownership over democratizing efforts in the Middle East. Attention is also given to the hypocrisy of US 'democratization via invasion' in Iraq as well sabotaging the democratic victors of elections when party in question is Hamas or Hizbullah. An important point is made in emphasising that the Arab Middle East itself can draw on a rich and diverse bank of vital local experiences of democratic learning such as Kuwait's parliamentarism or Lebanon's pluralist civic society that should receive far more attention in informing the region's democratization struggles.

In the final two chapters, Sadiki explains that bottom-up struggles and the new space of expression represented by trans-regional media phenomenon constitute a far more hopeful avenue for genuine transformative agency in the Arab Middle East. Bread riots, as in Egypt in 1977, have sometimes led to significant advances in political democratization as they put intense pressure on authoritarian and rob them of vital legitimacy. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera has evolved to constitute a new transnational space of expression and opinion formation through its topics, news-shows and online-polls that could be the midwife of the first truly transnational Arab vox populi, able to contribute and come together, though only online for now, to discuss and engage with the issues that the denizens have in common, among them the democratic failing of their regimes.

Sadiki's book is a vital contribution to the literature on democratization processes and experiences in the Arab Middle East. He approaches the theory and praxis of democratic learning and reform in the Middle East in a manner that displaces it from the world of Western interests and perspectives and seeks to re-appropriate it for a truly progressive, bottom-up focus on popular struggles that connect the drive for representative, accountable, participatory governance with wider struggles of social justice. This thoroughly anti-hegemonic and passionately argued agenda makes this work truly exciting to read and it also provides a good and coherent overview of the recent electoral developments in the region.

Marc Axel Herzog

PhD Candidate, University of Exeter