

Working Paper

Middle East and Africa Division
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs



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Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World

Concept Note

FG6-WP No 1
March 2012
Berlin

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Abstract

The research project on elite change and new social mobilization in the Arab world examines the changes within the politically relevant elites as well as elite-society relations in the countries affected by the so-called "Arab Spring." It also probes the extent, dynamics and prospects of the ongoing transformations as well as the risks inherent in these processes and factors of constraint, and attempts to identify patterns that allow for scenarios and projections of future developments.

The research project is policy oriented in a double sense. It has, on one hand, the objective to provide sound and comprehensive analysis so as to allow for informed decisions of German and European policy makers in efforts to support transformation in the Arab world. The second objective is to contribute to the analytical and intellectual understanding of the current processes by new and upcoming intellectual elites and future leaders from the region, and their introduction to the practice of active participation in and shaping of political processes in a pluralistic society. Therefore, the involvement of and networking with Arab academics and practitioners is central to the design and objectives of the project.

Research Interest

The current upheavals in the Arab world constitute a historical turning point in the relations between Arab societies and the autocratic systems that have shaped much of the region's political culture in recent decades. For the first time, popular mobilization has successfully challenged several Arab regimes that were considered as firmly entrenched in power by means of apparently stable elite coalitions and loyal security apparatuses. In several cases, these movements forced the departure of the immediate regime elite. At the same time, the upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen radiate out even to countries where such movements are, as of yet, rather small. As a consequence, leaders in nearly all Arab countries are facing the challenge of re-inventing and re-affirming their legitimacy vis-à-vis increasingly emancipated societies.

It remains unclear, however, whether and to what extent the *change of leadership* which took place in some countries actually amounts to *regime change*, and to what extent it is possible to speak of a comprehensive

elite transformation. Are we merely witnessing a rotation within the existing political elite(s), or do we observe a substantial re-configuration and the integration of new actors, and decisive changes in political practices, objectives and norms? If so, who exactly are these new actors, how do they constitute themselves, how does this affect their ability to act? Does the composition of the protest movement change over time? As to how far does it build on or incorporate former protest movements and other organized forms of interest, such as unions, professional associations, parties, etc.? Is it the revolutionaries that become part of the newly constituted elite or do others steal the show? To what extent can they achieve a transformation of political structures, influence concrete decisions and, more generally, affect the political culture? What are the prospects for conflict and coalitions with the previous elites, who are still represented, and sometimes well entrenched, in the structures of power? Do these developments hold out alternatives to the long-held assumption that, in the region of the Middle East and North Africa, stability is conditioned on authoritarianism? Does political mobilization and the struggle against authoritarian regimes contribute to an integrative understanding of national identity based on civic participation, or will it rather prepare the ground for populism, radicalization and the deepening of existing cleavages (of territorial, ethnic or religious-sectarian nature)? Finally, how may external actors support the transformation of political systems in the region in a constructive way?

A sober and informed analysis of these questions is a prerequisite for a thorough understanding of the potentials and risks contained in the events of the "Arab Spring". Likewise, it is crucial for identifying starting points for cooperation and potential partners as well as realistically assessing their capabilities and the magnitude of existing challenges and obstacles for cooperation and support initiated by external actors to be effective. Exaggerated expectations of a rapid transition towards consolidated, democratic and pluralistic societies are likely to spawn equally premature and ultimately counterproductive diagnoses of "transformation failure".

Preliminary Work and Approach: The PRE and Social Mobilization

To tackle the questions raised above, the project builds on research carried out in the years 2001-2003 in the

framework of the SWP project "Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change".¹ Specifically, it relates to the model of the "Politically Relevant Elite" (PRE), defined as "those people in a given country who wield political influence and power in that they make strategic decisions or participate in decision making on a national level, contribute to defining political norms and values (including the definition of "national interests"), and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues" (Perthes, 2004, 5). Typically, these include, beyond the circle of the core elite of policy makers, representatives of economic and corporate interests (business elites, professional associations and unions, ethnically or religiously defined communities), and actors who influence and set agendas for public discourse (intellectuals, journalists, advocacy groups). Elite *change*, in this sense, was understood as a substantial reconfiguration of the constellations of actors with effective control or influence, whether as a result of economic reforms, partial political liberalization or increased international integration, rather than as a mere change of personnel at the top.

In the earlier project, reference was already made to the potential of social movements to gain decisive influence on or even presence in the PRE, as well as to the possible effects of the demographic change experienced by Arab societies. Recent and current developments suggest that popular mobilization, in particular of young people, has indeed acquired such influence, at least temporarily. Whether these developments will lead to a sustained and structural change of patterns of participation and politics in Arab societies, and which forms and shapes such change is taking, is one of the main issues that this research project attempts to illuminate.

Research Questions

Based on these basic conceptual assumptions, and in light of the above-presented observations, the project will investigate the following research questions:

1. To what extent are the current upheavals effecting sustainable change in the relevant political elites of the countries concerned? Are there discernible shifts in the balance of power between its various components? Are there new

¹ Cf. Perthes, Volker (2004, ed.), *Arab elites: negotiating the politics of change*, Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner.

actors on the scene, and how do they constitute themselves?

2. How will the origins and the composition of the re-configured politically relevant elites be reflected in the political agendas and visions (political, social, economical, international) they pursue? What factors determine and shape the emergence of these agendas?
3. Can the structures of collective action and the mechanisms of political influence established by the protest movements be transformed into sustainable structures of political participation (e.g., new parties and constitutional models, institutionalized civil society)?
4. Will the political mobilization achieved during the "Arab Spring" effect a sustainable transformation of the public sphere, and of the relationship between Arab societies and the political sphere? Can it help to promote integrative national identities built on civic participation that cut across existing lines of conflict? Where and under which conditions may it instead threaten to compound such cleavages?
5. What are the perspectives for the new elites, as a consequence of their composition and political orientation, to pursue cooperation with external actors and international structures? What is their assessment of German and European policies? Which factors may support an orientation towards values associated with democratic modes of governance?

Methodological Approach

Building on the theoretical framework developed for the project "Negotiating the Politics of Change", this research sets out from the assumption that, in any given country, political norms, discourses and strategies are decisively shaped and changed by the interaction of a limited number of key actors (persons and organizations), the "Political Relevant Elite" or PRE (Perthes 2004: 5). However, the situation of dynamic and rapid political change as witnessed in some Arab countries in 2011/2012 creates specific challenges for the research methodology. Research strategies that are conventionally applied by elite studies, and that were used in the earlier project, will need to be adapted accordingly – as will the model developed at the time.

Identifying the "specific empirical members of the elite population" (Knoke 1993: 30) is one of the key

tasks of any approach to elite studies, and will be an indispensable step in our research to arrive at answers to research question 1 (changes in elite composition and character). One of the methods conventionally employed in this pursuit is the strategy of looking for persons or organizations occupying key positions in the political system (**positional method**). However, during a transition period, this method is faced with the challenge that key actors may be exchanged, perhaps even several times over during the period of the project, institutions may be reformed, restructured or even abolished, and gaps between the nominal and the real power and competences of positions may expand dramatically. Also, informal power structures may acquire a significant or even decisive role. Thus, this method incurs a high risk of misidentification and omission.

The strategy to identify actors with *real* influence and power – irrespective whether constituted formally or informally – through interviews with knowledgeable interlocutors or experts (**reputational method**) has often been the method of choice when dealing with Arab societies, based on the assumption that, even in times of stability, formal positions sometimes do not mean that much, and informal networks, which this method is well placed to discover, often mean a lot. However, situations of rapid change tend to devalue the inside knowledge that can be gleaned from such testimonies. Quite frequently, the hallmark of transitional periods is precisely that *nobody knows who is really in charge*, and that contradictory and unverifiable accounts based on an inextricable mixture of unsourced facts – rumors, really – and guesswork emerge from such interviews.

Conversely, the gradual opening of the public sphere and the expansion of media freedom also implies that the transparency of decision-making processes increases, rarely to the point of full access, but definitely much beyond the opaqueness of the old authoritarian order. Accordingly, identifying actors through their participation in key policy fields and influence on strategic policy decisions (**decisional method**) through public sources (media, internet, interviews with stakeholders) becomes an option. Such an approach offers the additional benefit of making it possible to simultaneously tackle research question 2 (Does change of personnel lead to change of policies?) and research question 5 (new elites' orientation). By identifying and investigating strategic decisions in key policy fields – such as, 1) defining the relations between individual, society, and state (con-

stitutional change, values, public morality, role of religion, etc.), 2) economic and social strategies, 3) transitional justice, 4) foreign policy – it is not only possible to determine *who* are the new actors (if any) within the PRE, but also, to find out *what* is actually changing, and whether what we are looking at appears to be old wine in new skins, or a more fundamental and structural transformation.

The decisional method will be used mostly as a heuristic device for the first, mostly pre-field research phase, i.e. as a tool to compile a list of potential members of the elite. It is expected that not all members of the politically relevant elite will be equally present in all key policy fields, although ubiquitous presence will be seen as a clear indicator of far-reaching influence. It is further conceivable that the influence of some particular actors may be underreported, wrongly interpreted (perhaps intentionally so), or not reported at all. Thus, a thorough analysis will, by means of *process-tracing*, attempt to establish plausible narratives of how these decisions came about, whose interventions effected significant modifications, which actors wielded veto power, etc. *Gaps* in the plausibility of such accounts are expected to be either indicators for one of the potential flaws mentioned above, or for the existence of informal and/or unidentified or concealed structures of domination or influence. Extensive field research – interviews with experts as well as selected members of the PRE as identified in the first research phase – will probe these gaps. It will also, with the help of a mostly reputational approach, attempt to gain a more thorough understanding of the relative weight of the various actors, as well as of how the various parts of the elite network shape and constrain each other. A reputational approach will also be indispensable to identify the new and mostly informally constituted actors (“The Street”, or “The Square”) whose influence, as a result of their informal character, will not necessarily become directly apparent by looking at formal decision-making processes alone. Finally, monitoring of the selected policy fields will be maintained over the period of the project in order to identify new entries and potential changes in the power configuration, and hence capture the *dynamic* character of the transformation process.

Limits of the PRE Model: the Elites and the Mobilized Public Sphere

In addition, the transformation from authoritarian rule by means of popular mobilization raises questions about the explanatory power of the model developed at the time – of an “inner circle” of decision makers, around which “intermediate” and “sub-elites” are layered in concentric circles defined by relative influence on the center. For one, the existence of a core elite with the capacity for mediation and discretionary decision can no longer be taken for granted. It is possible that empirical research in some of the countries under study will yield evidence for the continued existence of such a structural configuration. But it is also conceivable that in other countries and societies a schematic representation of the PRE may reveal a “hollow core” (Heinz et al., 1990), a setup where elite actors form volatile clusters and coalitions which then thrash out decisions in processes of decentralized bargaining, with no central authority capable of deciding the outcome, implying the potential for recurrent occurrences of blockage and instability.

Furthermore, in order to tackle research questions (3) and (4) (impact and sustainability of popular mobilization), the model will have to be adapted to accommodate and conceptualize the likelihood that, first, popular and mass mobilization, as occurred during the events of 2011/12, or even the mere concern that such mobilization *may* occur, can function as a significant constraint on elite behavior and autonomy. Second, it will have to be adapted to conceptualize the possibility that such popular movements themselves or parts thereof – if only on a temporary basis – become direct actors within the elite structures. To that end, it will most likely not be good enough to simply consider “Tahrir Square” as just another player in the elite network. For one, such a conceptualization would only make sense if “the movement” were to emerge as one (or several) clearly identifiable actor(s) constituted through recognizable and reasonably stable structures of representation. As things stand, this does not appear to be the case. Indeed, “demands for a different kind of political and institutional representation” (Caridi 2012: 7) and the absence of unified leadership and internal structures are seen to be one of the distinguishing trademarks of these movements. Also, it is open to debate whether the old rules of intercession and mediation, which a good part of the elite – old or new – would perhaps prefer to keep in place, still apply to the new game in

town. Thus, it may also not be good enough to simply upgrade the model of inner and outer circles by a number of vectors extending from the terra incognita of the amorphous “masses” (beyond the “sub-elite” or “outer circle”) into the heart of the system to indicate that elite actors may, under certain conditions, adapt decisions and strategies in response to popular pressure. Rather, a conceptual representation has to be developed that allows to accommodate and test the possibility that the events of 2011/12 may express and effect a fundamental change to the ways that the populations of Arab countries relate to issues of representation, participation and presence in the public sphere, in other words, to political culture.

No ready-made framework exists for such an investigation. It is here where one of the main innovative contributions of this project lies, and where the concerted efforts of the research team will work to assemble a toolkit and a framework that can generate a tentative understanding of these processes. Insights of social movement theory – concerning techniques of “frame alignment”, the exploitation of “opportunity structures” and the production of “social capital” are likely to prove useful, and will also contribute to a better understanding of how these new actors are constituted and function, develop leadership and perhaps change their character over time. Habermas’ concept of “communicative power”, i.e. discursive engagement in the public sphere “exercised in the manner of a siege” (Habermas 1996: 486; a metaphor applied quite literally by the Tahrir movement) appears helpful to conceptualize the ways in which public performances can influence the “premises of judgment and decision making in the political system”, without those who engage in them being identifiable as part of the “politically relevant elite”. In some cases, process tracing may indeed establish an unequivocal line of cause and effect (e.g., plummeting poll figures for political actors after they came under attack from activist groups), yet in many cases, such influences are far more difficult to pinpoint (cf. Diani 1997: 131). Ultimately, investigating whether or not there is notable change in the mechanisms and the degree of “responsiveness of public policy to the relative weight of discourses in the public sphere” (Dryzek 2001: 656), and whether new forms and modes of participation can be distinguished, will require extensive, actor-oriented qualitative research, including participant observation, among members of the PRE and social and political activists alike.

Project Design, Case studies and Comparisons

Direct, first-hand experience with the processes and societies under study are invaluable resources for the predominantly inductive and empirical research approach of this project. Hence, inclusion of Arab researchers and practitioners will be essential. Moreover, achieving a thorough analytical and conceptual understanding of the processes described above is also and perhaps foremost a challenge for the upcoming elites of those countries themselves. It will be an essential contribution to the attempts of Arab societies at determining and building their own future. Accordingly, the research project "Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World" is designed in a way that it embraces (young and mid-career) social scientists as well as practitioners from relevant fields (NGO sector, public administration and international institutions) from different Arab countries in the context of a so-called "Arab Transformation Fellowship" (ATF), and it establishes and consolidates links with such academics and practitioners throughout the region.

Many observers have warned against reducing the events of the Arab Spring to a single cause, pointing out the significant differences between the societies involved. Yet, the simultaneous occurrence, or rather the contagious spread of protests and uprisings and the structural similarities of the social strata involved seem to make a case for a comparative approach. Also, Arab countries witnessing transformations share some characteristics that will significantly influence paths and outcomes of the post-revolt-phases while at the same time they differ with regards to other characteristics (size, societal make-up, demography, political economy, etc.). This project aims at studying transformations in those countries where significant changes at the leadership level have happened in 2011/2012 or are currently happening, i.e., Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, as well as the more limited reform processes in Jordan, Kuwait/Oman, and Morocco. Contrasting the experiences of countries as different as Morocco, Egypt, Syria and Yemen will help to put phenomena into perspective and gauge the salience of local particularities. One expected outcome of the project would be a (tentative) typology of Arab transformations. The necessary precondition for any attempt at generalization is a thorough understanding of the individual cases of transformation that we encounter: this is what this research sets out to do.

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