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Polarized and demobilized: legacies of authoritarianism in Palestine

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The book overlooks a critical group of players in political dynamics in Africa. Namely, the traditional leaders. These leaders exercise important symbolic, social, and political powers over certain territories of rural Africa. Traditional leaders also shape the preferences of voters, distribute public goods and services, and function as intermediaries of central governments. It remains unclear how traditional leaders in the book interfere in the dynamics behind the pro-rural policies.

Although Harding recognizes that the transition from a rural to an urban society is rapidly occurring in several African countries, this ongoing transition wasn't factored in the book's argument. In other words, it remains unclear how forward-looking politicians favour a rural majority that seems to be rapidly shrinking. It would be pertinent to explore with depth the incentives for politicians to maintain pro-rural policies in countries where the process of continued urbanization moves at a fast pace.

By no means, these criticisms overshadow the several contributions of the book, which are heightened as follows. First, it shows that rural areas in Africa that developed competitive electoral politics fostered patterns of public goods and service distribution. Second, the book provides ample evidence that the intersection between distribution politics and territorial politics in rural areas in Africa favoured the establishment of programmatic-oriented incumbent politicians. Third, the research demonstrates that African incumbent politicians engage strategically with rural voters. This suggests that rural democracies in Africa are complex and have been oversimplified. Fourth, the book indicates that the establishment of democratic institutions and the routinization of competitive elections potentially undermine clientelist relations or can coexist with clientelism in rural Africa.

As the emergence of democracies in developing countries is commonly associated with processes of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, for a long-time urban politics has been at the centre of representative democracy research in detriment to the role of rural politics on democracy. Reducing this bias, the book demonstrates the relevant role of rural politics in the enhancement of African democracy as it performs both a representative and development function.

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Polarized and demobilized: legacies of authoritarianism in Palestine, by Dana El Kurd, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 226 pp., index, £45.00 (hardback), ISBN-13: 9780190095864

El Kurd's book aims to examine the impact of international involvement on social polarization and demobilization, with evidence from Palestine. It entails accurate conceptual reasonings and empirical findings on authoritarian resilience supported by

external powers. El Kurd investigates why, after decades of mobilization, the Palestinian society became acquiescent, torn apart by internal disillusionment. The author concludes that the United States has decisively influenced the entrenchment of authoritarianism and the repressive capacities of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The study, which addresses literatures on authoritarianism, democracy, and social movements, offers important insights beyond the Middle East.

The book first re-evaluates the 1994 Oslo Accords which, after decades of Israeli occupation, divided the Occupied Territories of Palestine in the so-called Area A (controlled by the PA), Area B (under mixed jurisdiction with Israel), and Area C (under complete Israeli rule). Until then, despite enduring military occupation and expropriation, the Palestinian society was characterized by grassroot mobilization, as demonstrated by the First Intifada. After 1994, however, with the support of the US, the PA was able to coopt, repress and demobilize the political community in Area A, better than the Israeli authorities previously did. This was evident in the Second Intifada – less coordinated with the PA and more violent. All this led to the US-supported coup d'état by Fatah in 2006, and, according to the author, helps to explain recent developments. El Kurd shows how the PA obtained and still obtains US support in exchange for security and status quo. Following this historical overview, the first chapter offers a theoretical framework on international involvement and authoritarianism. El Kurd states that international influence demobilizes the society and blocks democratization in three ways: “first[ly], creating a principle-agent problem between regime and society, thus disrupting state-society relations, secondly, increasing polarization within society, and thirdly, inhibiting political engagement” (19). The remainder of the volume combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to find evidence for this threefold argument.

The second chapter presents evidence collected through interviews with PA officials and a national survey with an experimental section. It demonstrates that international involvement shapes preferences *against* democracy of those individuals affiliated with the PA. The chapter substantiates on the first causal link of El Kurd's argument: national involvement creates a principle-agent problem between authoritarian elites and the public. The third and fourth chapters offer further evidence that US-supported repression by the PA generates polarization and impinges mobilization. El Kurd observes a greater occurrence of mobilization episodes in Area B, Area C and East Jerusalem. Her data analysis confirms that mobilization has declined where PA has *more* direct control after 1994, namely in the more populated, urban Area A (which was more mobilized during the First Intifada, and from which we should have expected more social unrest). In addition, a lab-in-field experiment illustrates that repression policies increase people's polarization and disillusionment in political participation, i.e., for those outside the PA establishment. Two case studies of spontaneous mobilization in Areas B and C and East Jerusalem against land confiscations and ethnic cleansing add anecdotal support. The final chapter validates the findings from Palestine on Iraqi Kurdistan and Bahrain, where American involvement also discourages democratization.

The conclusion reiterates El Kurd's argument that US involvement consolidates the authoritarianism and repressive capabilities of the PA, producing polarization and demobilization. It engages with the literature on social movements and authoritarianism and offers a conceptual framework to analyse how external influences block mobilization and democratization.

El Kurd lucidly examines how Palestinian elites, backed by the US, polarize and demobilize society. Anyhow, the US role in that process seems to remain overlooked. As mentioned above, the book combines experiments and surveys with qualitative historical evidence and interviews. However, it would have been beneficial to match this framework with a more detailed historical analysis of the Oslo Accords as a critical juncture, and to assess its impact on the PA authoritarian state-building and political institutions since then. More specifically, it would have been fruitful to look at police training programmes, or other institutions, effectively established under US patronage, which have increased the PA's capacity to co-opt and repress. In short, El Kurd states that "international patrons provide infrastructural power to domestic regimes" (142). However, the causal mechanisms entrenching authoritarianism in Palestine described in her analysis (polarization and demobilization) explain how the repression of authoritarian *domestic* elites works. They do not delve too much into the previous step of the causal chain, namely their international backing. Is it only a financial support, or also a technical one? Is it related to counselling and staffing? The materials from the interviews would have allowed the author to elaborate more on that. Interviews with US diplomats in Palestine may be an interesting integration for further research.

In conclusion, the book is a valuable contribution, offering novel explanations of the drivers of authoritarianism in Palestine and beyond. Its reading enriches scholars working on authoritarianism and political regimes, particularly the external (though indirect) influences on regime dynamics and developments such as de-mobilization, polarization and de-democratization.

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