

WORKSHOP 2:

CIVIL SOCIETY DYNAMICS UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Outline of the topic

The failure of the war in Iraq to deliver democracy through ‘imposition’ has made international actors question the validity of such a forceful approach to democratisation, leading them to adopt alternative policies to spark processes of democratic change in the Middle East and North Africa. Both the European Union, through the renewal of the Euro-Med partnership and its transformation into the European Neighbourhood Policy, and the United States, through the Middle East Partnership Initiative, now see civil society playing a central role in fostering regime change and devote significant resources to its development in partner countries (Hawthorne, 2004).

The current focus on the perceived causal link between civil society activism and democratisation derives much of its theoretical and empirical validity from the experience of Eastern Europe and Latin America. In these two regions, it is often assumed that civil society significantly contributed to transitions to democracy, and it is on these positive experiences that current strategies in the Middle East, North Africa and other authoritarian settings are built. However, there also exist a number of studies, both theoretical and empirical, challenging the claim that civil society was a decisive factor in the democratisation of Eastern Europe and Latin America (Tempest, 1997; Carothers 1999, Encarnacion, 2006). We are thus confronted with two sets of scholarly work examining the influence and role of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts from conflicting perspectives and with conflicting empirical evidence.

It follows that, the linkage between civil society and democratisation might not be as straightforward as current policies assume because the literature on the topic is much more divided and conflicting than many believe it to be. A number of studies (Putnam, 2000) convincingly argue that democracy can only be sustained in the long term if civil society activism remains high and warn that a weakening of such activism leads to a decrease in social capital with negative effects on democratic institutions and

citizens' participation, but civil society activism in authoritarian contexts might work quite differently and recent studies claim that civil society activism in authoritarian settings leads in fact to a reinforcement of authoritarian practices rather than to the development of pro-democracy social capital (Jamal, 2007).

The purpose of this workshop is to examine the theoretical and comparative perspectives on civil society activism under authoritarian constraints and offer a better understanding of its relationship with regime change. Specifically, we are interested in examining the differences that seem to exist within authoritarian contexts when it comes to the role of civil society in processes of regime change or survival. Are there significant regional differences that can be accounted for? More specifically, is civil society activism in the Middle East and North Africa different from civil society activism in Eastern Europe, Latin America or Africa, and if so, why? Does the structure and type of the authoritarian regime influence the role of civil society? Do the policies of international actors make a difference in how civil society dynamics are structured? Do dynamics of conflict resolution combined with issues of democratisation affect how civil society operates?

Such questions lead to a broad theme, which guides this workshop: what are the dynamics that affect the relationship between civil society activism and regime change in authoritarian settings? By examining the different factors that affect the concept and practical role of civil society, participants will provide a better and more refined theoretical understanding of the notion 'civil society' together with evidence-based findings. Examining civil society activism under conditions of authoritarian rule is particularly important because it is within civil society that we find 'opposition politics' taking place given the weakness of established political parties in many authoritarian countries. This is even more significant in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa where Islamist movements and parties largely function as broad social movements, but the same might be said for the post-soviet states in Central Asia.

Empirical papers should focus on examining the causal links between the vibrancy and activism in civil society and the initiation and development of processes of regime change. These empirical papers can be single case-studies and, preferably,

comparative analyses with small and large N. While it is important to deal with the role of civil society in the MENA region, it is equally important to have papers dealing with other regions and other cases in order to emphasise potential differences and similarities. Papers with a cross-regional comparative focus are most welcome. Theoretical papers should focus their attention on the normative value of the concept of civil society, its relationship to social capital and how all this affects the political game in authoritarian settings, which provide different structures of incentives and opportunities to political and social actors.

Relation to existing research

This research focuses on a highly topical issue and is connected to ongoing research dealing with the factors that can foster a transition to democracy. While the literature on democratisation has explored in the past the connections between civil society and democratic change, this literature needs to be updated in light of new theoretical and empirical findings. It is particularly important to understand how civil society under authoritarianism is subject to different opportunities structures than civil society in established democracies. Understanding how this is the case and what kind of differences might exist between diverse authoritarian regimes will provide a clearer understanding of the concept of civil society and will also lead to better policy-making formulation in light of current international strategies of democratisation. It should however be underlined that civil society activism in non-democratic contexts might not necessarily be linked to democratisation per se and that it can be examined by assuming that current authoritarian systems are not on the path towards democracy, but represent new modes of governance.

Broad cross-regional comparisons and detailed examinations of single case studies can provide useful generalisations. The research conducted in the context of this workshop will deepen our knowledge of the dynamics characterising the relationship between civil society and democratisation. One of our specific aims for this conference is to produce a special issue of a journal and/or an edited volume on this topic.

Participants

This workshop will include political analysts and social scientists concerned interested in the relationship between civil society activism and democratisation. It will also involve foreign policy specialists with an interest in strategies of democracy promotion.

Type of paper

This workshop will have a combination of theoretical and empirical papers. The general aim is to develop an informed comparativist approach.

Funding

We will be actively seeking funding support from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and the Social Sciences, the Royal Irish Academy.

Biographical note

Ellen-Lust Okar is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Yale University (USA). She is the author of *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and co-editor of *Political Participation in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner Press, forthcoming 2008) with Dr. Saloua Zerhouni. She has also published articles on the politics of the Middle East and North Africa in *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Democratization*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Middle Eastern Studies* and other volumes. She is currently working on the politics of authoritarian elections, as well as how social, economic and political changes in Africa and the Middle East affect governance development projects there.

Francesco Cavatorta is a Lecturer in International Relations in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University (Ireland) and will spend the academic year 2008/2009 as Visiting Professor at the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark (Odense, Denmark). He is the author of *The International Dimension of the Failed Algerian Transition. Democracy Betrayed?* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2009) and is the co-editor of the book *Democratization in the Muslim World* (Routledge, 2007) with Dr. Frédéric Volpi. He

has published articles in *Democratization*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Journal of North African Studies*, *West European Politics*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Contemporary Politics*, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *Government and Opposition* and *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (forthcoming, 2008). He is currently working on a project examining the role of civil society in four Arab countries.