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THE FUNCTIONS OF AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS

Symbolism, safety valves, and clientelism

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Abstract

Elections in advanced industrialized democracies – like the United States, Canada, and Western Europe – serve to aggregate citizens' interests and preferences. They determine which elites and political parties control institutions that wield influence over society and how that political power can be reordered over time. Elections also occur in many authoritarian systems, though irregularities and fraud often mar them. Moreover, they do not necessarily reorder political power – indeed, autocrats' right-hand men often retain ironclad control over key institutions (e.g., military, police) regardless of electoral outcomes. In light of this reality, this chapter asks what the purposes of elections are in authoritarian regimes if they do not help to genuinely signal citizens' preferences or redistribute power. This chapter addresses this topic, focusing on the different functions of elections within the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The MENA region differs from other world regions insomuch as it exhibits only solidly authoritarian regimes or transitional democracies trending toward authoritarianism, like Turkey and Sudan. In particular, the chapter illustrates how authoritarian elections are utilized for three major functions: to help release or assuage political pressure, to distribute clientelist resources, and to cultivate political symbolism. All these functions, this chapter argues, serve to buttress autocrats' power and reinforce their regimes. The chapter, then, toggles down to examine how these three different functions manifest in elections occurring at the executive (i.e., presidential or prime ministerial levels), legislative (i.e., parliamentary level), and local (i.e., municipal) levels of political power. Examples from across the Middle East, especially from Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Turkey, and others, are used to show how elections carry out these three different functions.

Introduction

Elections in advanced industrialized democracies – like the United States, Canada, and Western Europe – serve to aggregate citizens' interests, helping the elites who run for office better understand the preferences of their constituencies. In democratic contexts, elections determine which political parties and elites control institutions that wield influence over society and how

that political power can be reordered over time. Elections, as Schedler (2006: 6) and Levitsky and Way (2010 observe, also occur in many authoritarian systems, though irregularities and fraud often mar them. Further, in authoritarian regimes, elections do not necessarily reorder or redistribute power – indeed, autocrats' right-hand men may retain ironclad control over key institutions (e.g., military, police) regardless of electoral results. Thus, this chapter asks what the purposes of elections are in authoritarian regimes if they do not help to genuinely signal citizens' preferences or redistribute power. We address this topic, focusing on the different functions of elections within the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The MENA region differs from other world regions insomuch as, except for Israel (for Israeli citizens, at least), it features only solidly authoritarian regimes or transitional democracies trending toward authoritarianism, like Turkey and Sudan. In recent history, it also includes a handful of Arab states – specifically Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia – that typically have held free and fair elections from a procedural perspective, yet issues of sectarian control, political instability, authoritarian tendencies, and military interference often constrain how much political power gets genuinely redistributed through voting.

Elections in the MENA's authoritarian regimes serve different functions that reinforce non-democratic rule. Drawing on existing literature, this chapter examines these different functions, focusing on elections occurring at the executive (i.e., presidential or prime ministerial levels), legislative (i.e., parliamentary level), and local (i.e., municipal) levels. In a landmark article focused on the Arab world's executive elections, Brownlee (2011b) surveyed the existing literature finding that scholars theorize three main functions or purposes for elections under authoritarianism. These include, as Brownlee avers (2011b: 807), acting as "safety valves, patronage networks, and performance rituals." That is, Brownlee theorizes that autocrats – here, we mean mostly presidential dictators or monarchs in the MENA – utilize elections for three major functions: to help release or assuage political pressure, to distribute clientelist resources, and to cultivate political symbolism. In the remainder of this chapter, we apply Brownlee's theoretical framework to examine three different types of elections in the MENA – those at the executive, legislative, and local levels. We also explore, conversely, the relatively rare circumstances when opponents of autocrats, most notably opposition parties (like Islamists and leftists), may also use elections under authoritarianism as safety valves, patronage networks, or political symbolism to advance their own interests and contest regimes. Some of these functions may be more or less prevalent according to election type, yet they all manifest – to a lesser or greater degree – across all three different levels of elections.

Elections in the "gray" regimes of the MENA

Most regimes in the MENA are considered "gray" regimes, with institutions exhibiting features resembling both consolidated, open democracies (e.g., Canada) and also full, closed autocracies (e.g., North Korea). Their internal institutions, including elections, seem to straddle these two ideal regime types, falling somewhere in between. Some scholars have considered the MENA's regimes "liberalized autocracies" or "electoral authoritarian" regimes (Carothers 2002; Brumberg 2002; Diamond 2006). Moving beyond terminology, the MENA's regimes are similar insofar as they exhibit characteristics of democracies, such as the existence of opposition parties, reoccurring elections, and written constitutions. However, these institutions are limited in power due to their lack of meaningful popular representation, limits on political participation, and widespread corruption (Carothers 2002: 9). Scholars who compare these MENA states with those in other geographic regions view them as non-democracies with an overarching dictator, king, or autocrat possessing absolute (penultimate) ruling powers, while pseudo-democratic

institutions' habits and practices exist at a subordinate, lower level. In short, gray regimes feature parallel institutions: popular elections that are often manipulated and unfair, electing politicians in institutions at lower and subordinate levels of governance, while non-democratic institutions lay above these elected ones, controlled solely by the autocrat and his allies. What this means is that, compared to other authoritarian regimes like North Korea, Eritrea, or Turkmenistan, which are labeled "closed autocracies" without elections at all (Brumberg 2002: 59), scholars see the MENA's gray regimes as featuring at least limited elections containing constrained forms of multiparty or other political competition (Schedler 2006: 6). Yet, because authoritarian rulers and their allies can exercise power outside of gray regimes' elections, they fail to serve as a method of accountability that could be used to take elites to task for engaging in practices or implementing policies contrary to the citizenry's preferences (Schedler 2006: 6).

Morocco provides an ideal example in which such parallel pseudo-democratic institutions operate at a lower level, below more powerful non-democratic ones. Morocco's political system features regular elections across multiple levels of governance, a plethora of political parties, and alternations of power in which different elites control the elected government. Like other Arab regimes, Morocco also has a written constitution that (formally speaking, at least) guarantees citizens' basic rights. Yet, simultaneously, the country's monarch – Mohammed VI – rules over the regime and holds penultimate decision-making power. He appoints the ministers of what are known as "sovereign ministries," like the defense, interior, and finance ministries, that possess power over the most important policy areas (Daadaoui 2011: 56–57). Mohammed VI also turns to an unelected royal cabinet of experts – including elites like Fouad Ali al-Himma, senior advisor for domestic political affairs – for advice before promulgating new policies or decrees. And although citizens have the right to elect local representatives for municipal and regional councils, the monarch simultaneously appoints provincial intelligence officials – what are called Wālis (or préfets) and Caids – who act as his representatives locally and are powerful decision-makers (Hoffman 2011: 8; Daadaoui 2011: 152). These different unelected institutions controlled by Morocco's monarch work in parallel with (but, in reality, above) the elected ones. In many liberalized autocracies of the Arab world, like Morocco, citizens often become confused about this complex web of elected and unelected institutions that simultaneously governs politics and often have difficulty figuring out which ones they can and cannot control via elections at the ballot box. In reality, elected institutions that do exist often have limited authority or perhaps only narrow authority in specific (and typically less important) policy areas.

Elections in the MENA's autocracies: symbolism, safety valves, and clientelism

Executive elections: presidents and prime ministers

Different types of executive elections exist in the MENA. These include direct executive elections for the presidency, as in the cases of Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Mauritania, and Iran. Algeria's, Egypt's, Mauritania's, and Syria's presidents, per their constitutions, need to compete every five, six, or seven years, respectively, for their posts. Iran, similarly, has an elected president. Yet, in the cases of Algeria, Egypt, Syria, and Mauritania, several formal and informal conditions limit who can become president. In all these Arab regimes, for example, the president must be a Muslim and likely must have the tacit backing of the military establishment, which holds true power. Other candidates compete in the Egyptian and Syrian presidential elections, yet their presence is largely symbolic without any real likelihood of success. The fact that, in both Egypt and Syria, incumbent rulers received around 97 and 95 percent of votes, respectively, in the recent 2018

and 2021 presidential elections illustrates the lopsided nature of these elections. In Iran, elections for the presidency are generally more competitive than in Egypt or Syria, though the country's Council of Guardians restricts which candidates are eligible to compete. Although politicians need to prove they meet a variety of criteria to become eligible to run for Iran's presidency, one of the most important is that a candidate must have true revolutionary bona fides, meaning that they actively participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Additionally, regimes often use state-owned media to unequally promote their preferred candidates in presidential campaigns, which disproportionately affects poorer people with less access to satellite television (Blaydes 2011: 112). In sum, citizens of the MENA can often cast ballots for their chief executives, yet unfair electoral conditions produce predetermine winners.

However, if such executive elections are not free and fair, why do regimes hold them and why do citizens participate? The first reason is due to their capacity to exert symbolic (or performative) power over citizens, which helps to reinforce perceived regime authority and legitimacy. By forcing citizens to participate in elections, even when those elections are patently unfair and of limited importance, regimes demonstrate their capacity to manipulate citizens and force their compliance into engaging in activities that rationally they should decline to do.

Lesch's account of Syria's executive elections exemplifies how regimes can create an environment in which symbolic support is elicited from citizens. Examining the 2007 presidential elections, Lesch shows how Syria's regime forced performative support from citizens through voter manipulation and subtle intimidation with the aim of building legitimacy for Bashar al-Assad's re-election campaign. Lesch documents seemingly widespread support for al-Assad in the streets, with pro-Bashar images everywhere (Lesch 2010: 76). And during the actual electoral process inside polling stations, voters were surveilled (Lesch 2010: 77), which means they were less likely to display any kind of opposition. The 2007 election in Syria is a clear example of results being a product of symbolic voter participation. In her earlier research on Syria in the 1990s, Wedeen (1999, 1998) found a similar symbolic power of elections in support of the previous dictator, Hafez al-Assad (r. 1971–2000). She emphasizes that Syrians often have ambiguous – if not outright oppositional – feelings toward their dictators and are not expected to believe their "flagrantly fictions statements" (Wedeen 1998: 506). Yet, the regime ensures that Syrians outwardly behave "as if" they do by compelling their participation in political rituals (like faux elections and campaign rallies) to help legitimize its rule by cultivating the impression of mass support (Wedeen 1998: 506).

Wedeen also utilizes Yemen to illustrate how executive elections can be used to exert symbolic power over citizens. During the 1999 presidential elections, which were the first following North and South Yemen's unification, Wedeen describes how they were largely performative in nature, with the opposition candidates running against dictator 'Ali 'Abdullah Saleh having virtually zero chance of victory. Because the parliament rejected the opposition's original choice of candidate, Salafi Sheikh Muqbil al-Wadi'i, the regime installed its own hand-picked opposition candidate to run against Saleh. The regime's change in candidates made the election appear even more performative, because no legitimate competition existed from a genuinely oppositional candidate (Wedeen 2008: 71). In addition, Saleh's regime drove voter turnout numbers up through intimidation tactics, like checking voters' thumbs to ensure they had participated (Wedeen 2008: 72).

Both Syria's 2007 election and Yemen's 1999 election represent how elections project regime dominance over the population through lack of competition on the executive level and voter intimidation tactics to force citizens' symbolic compliance (Wedeen 1999: 84). Like other regimes in the MENA, Syria's and Yemen's regimes drive citizens to vote in elections, yet their participation is hollow because they either fear declining to participate or genuine opposition

is nonexistent. Therefore, the number of participants in elections is unrepresentative and largely symbolic, but the symbolic power of their support nonetheless reinforces the regime's overall authority and perceived legitimacy.

These symbolic practices have continued despite recent civil wars and ongoing instability. Commenting on his country's 2021 presidential election, a Syrian journalist described the election as a "celebratory kind of pro-Assad great spectacle that has been played and replayed in every part of the country" (Sherlock 2021). Although three candidates were permitted to compete, they were given only ten days to campaign, meaning Bashar al-Assad had a clear and easy path to victory. On election day, furthermore, al-Assad and his wife specifically chose to cast their ballots at a polling station in the Damascene suburb of Douma, a historic seat of resistance to Syria's regime during the civil war. In doing so, they sought to symbolically assert their control and rule over this traditional hotbed of resistance (Sherlock 2021).

The second way by which executive elections enhance regime power includes their capacity to distribute clientelist resources. Examining the case of Egypt in the 2000s, Blaydes (2011) finds that Egyptians' caloric intake increases substantially during election years. She emphasizes that presidential candidates – and especially the frontrunner from Egypt's former ruling party – distributed food (particularly meat) to convince citizens to vote in elections and carry their support at the ballot box. Such practices proliferated during Hosni Mubarak's 2005 presidential re-election, which was Egypt's first multi-candidate contest. The distribution of food to encourage pro-regime voting did not occur equally across socio-economic classes but rather took place disproportionately among voters with lower levels of educational attainment (Blaydes 2011: 115). Indeed, Blaydes' book looks at literacy and turnout rates to find a relationship showing a higher turnout rate among illiterate citizens. Blaydes also mentions how local government officials have threatened citizens with fines or unemployment if they do not vote (Blaydes 2011: 111). Blaydes' findings are not without critique, however. Brownlee (2011a: 959) points out that clientelism is not very telling of the connection between elections and their ability to enhance regime power if the overall voter turnout is low, as occurred in Egypt's 2005 presidential election. Brownlee continues, moreover, that the possible link between illiteracy and turnout may be overstated because of the unreliability of voter turnout data, which the regime doctors to convey higher numbers (Brownlee 2011a: 959). Given new constraints on social scientific research in Egypt under the new reign of coupist-cum-president General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, it is difficult to discern how much this clientelist system continues to exist in more recent Egyptian presidential elections. However, preliminary media accounts from the 2014 and 2018 elections reported citizens receiving a variety of goodies for casting their votes on behalf of the regime: subsidy boxes (of cooking oil, rice, and sugar), cash payments (between $3 and $9 per person), and free pilgrimage trips to Mecca (Walsh and Youssef 2018).

The third way by which executive elections help reinforce regime power entails their utility as safety valves to relieve citizens' discontent. This occurs most often not with direct presidential elections but with indirect executive elections for a prime minister. Morocco and Jordan, for example, are monarchies with kings as the ultimate rulers and arbiters. But they do allow for legislative and parliamentary elections, which result in the election of prime ministers. The prime minister – in the cases of Morocco and Jordan – acts as Head of Government, while the king is the Head of State. If the elected government causes a scandal or makes mistakes, which generate popular anger, the Jordanian and Moroccan kings will often dismiss the Head of Government or his ministers to pacify discontent (Ryan 2002; Buehler 2018: 177). By swapping one prime minister out for a new one, Jordan's regime projects an impression of political change to the population, which is, in reality, of a limited nature. Similarly, in the case of Morocco, the king retains the authority to dismiss the prime minister and often does so, if the country

is experiencing a major crisis (often an unexpected economic downturn). This move helps to assuage citizen anger, and redirects it toward the elected government and elected political parties rather than the unelected king and his elite allies.

Some scholars (Brites et al. 2021: 1–4) have documented a similar strategy to assuage citizen anger in Mauritania's presidential autocracy, wherein unelected military overlords backed rotating in a new presidential dictator, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, for the sitting one, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, in 2019 to project an image (of largely superficial) change. Arguably, a similar dynamic occurred the same year after popular protests in Algeria when the military establishment endorsed removing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and swapping in President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

Legislative elections: parliaments and legislatures

Like most kingdoms of the Persian Gulf, most authoritarian regimes of the MENA include elected assemblies in their political systems that act as law-making bodies. Across the region, these legislative bodies have different names: in some states, like Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan, they are called parliaments, whereas in other states like Syria and Egypt they are termed people's assemblies (*majlis al-sha'ab*). Kuwait, the one Persian Gulf monarchy with a robust elected legislature, calls it the National Assembly (or *majlis al-ummah*). Despite these different labels, these legislative bodies are similarly staffed by deputies who obtain their positions via elections. Like the example of executive elections, elections at this lower level of political power can also serve the three aforementioned purposes: symbolism, safety valves, and clientelist distribution.

While executive elections act symbolically as performance rituals of political loyalty, legislative elections can be symbolic insomuch as autocrats use them to cultivate a sense of faux pluralism. Before their collapse during the 2011 Arab uprisings, Tunisia's and Egypt's presidential autocracies in the 1990s and 2000s used legislative elections to symbolically project fake pluralism to their citizens. Although in both Tunisia and Egypt the regimes' ruling parties – the *Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique* (RCD) and National Democratic Party (NDP) – possessed overwhelming majorities in their parliaments, they still permitted a number of small, weak opposition parties. These parties, though limited in their capacity to authentically resist ruling parties or implement true policy, did help to generate a veneer of debate, contestation, and pluralism within parliaments.

For example, in 2005, Egypt's regime permitted the Muslim Brothers to gain about 20 percent of seats, running as independent candidates. These opposition parties did not have sufficient power within the parliaments to pass laws or enact real change. Yet, as Shehata and Stacher show (2006), they could act as gadflies, criticizing the regime's actions, highlighting its misguided policies, and advocating for investigations. This was particularly true in the case of Egypt's Muslim Brothers. The Brothers called for parliamentary inquiries into the Mubarak regime's mishandling of the 2006 avian flu and its economic fallout, investigating a loss of $217 million and 1 million jobs (Shehata and Stacher 2006). But without a large presence, opposition parties who gained some representation through legislative elections could not meaningfully alter or resist their regimes' policies. However, this veneer of pluralism created by allowing weak opposition parties not only helped regimes partially assuage citizen pressure for reform but also appeased international donors – like the United States, European Union, and World Bank – who periodically threatened to make economic aid contingent on gradual liberalization.

Tunisia and Syria provide examples of how regimes can use legislative elections to cultivate a sense of pluralism. In 1994, Tunisia's regime legalized several opposition parties, allowing them to compete in legislative elections (Angrist 1999: 90). This move built upon the prior

legalization of a handful of socialist-inspired parties, such as *Parti démocrate progressiste* (PDP) and *Ettajdid* (formerly the Tunisian communist party), who gained permits to operate in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These socialist parties, however, were unable to compromise their ideologies or coordinate their opposition, and thus gained little electoral or political influence (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2011: 330–331). Some opposition parties during the Ben Ali era, like the *Parti de l'unité populaire* (PUP), did little to oppose the regime's ruling party and often considered cooperation with it as more beneficial (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2011: 332). These parties' operations were hampered by harassment from the ruling party and financing laws that forced them to reveal their private fundraising (Angrist 1999: 93–95). Despite these restrictions, Tunisia's regime allowed an increase in the percentage of opposition-held seats during this period from 7 percent following the 1994 elections to nearly 19 percent after the 1999 elections, hoping to cultivate a sense of pluralism within the chamber (Sadiki 2002: 64). "Tunisia," as Sadiki (2002: 63) concludes, "gives the impression of having moved a long way from single party rule and exclusivity." Yet, legislative elections "have done very little in terms of tilting the balance of power towards society or away from the ruling party."

One ruling party dominates Syrian politics, much like in Tunisia and Egypt in the 1990s and 2000s. This is the Syrian Ba'ath Party. Yet, the regime has permitted legislative elections – though highly rigged and unfair – to allow the formation and limited electoral representation of nine small, alternative parties to generate a sense of pluralism within Syria's parliament. Compared with the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, however, Syria's opposition parties have even less power and are generally considered "cardboard" opposition. These opposition parties constitute what is known as the National Progressive Front and possess ideological views that differ little from the Ba'ath Party (US State Department 2007). They regularly recognize and defer to the rule of the al-Assad family and even publicly endorsed Bashar al-Assad's candidacy in the 2007 presidential elections. In short, these political parties could barely be called "oppositional," possessing very little interest in genuinely criticizing the regime's hegemony over politics. One exception to this trend appeared in the area of economic policy in the 2000s: some debate occurred among leaders from the Ba'ath Party and various National Progressive Front parties over macro-economic planning, though these discussions were limited to financial and other highly technocratic topics considered uncontroversial (US State Department 2007). Prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings, nearly all serious criticism of Syria's regime occurred among the banned Islamist opposition or secular writers and intellectuals, mostly living in exile (Leiken and Brooke 2007: 115).

In other Arab authoritarian regimes, notably in the Arab monarchies, elections have a role as a safety valve. In these states, unlike in the presidential autocracies, opposition parties have relatively more strength and have greater power to potentially shape policy. Legislative elections and elected bodies, like parliaments, can be used as safety valves in these contexts. Especially prevalent in the Arab monarchies, regimes manipulate and alter electoral rules, laws, and legal permits to practice divide-and-rule against the opposition. Lust, in her landmark book *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*, describes how this process works. She introduces her concepts of *unified* or *divided* "structures of contestation" (2006: 36–40). In unified structures of contestation, nearly all opposition groups are banned, as is the case in the most politically closed Persian Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Yet, in partially liberalized monarchies like Jordan and Morocco, the regimes ban some opposition groups while allowing others to become legal political parties. This is what Lust terms "divided structures of contestation" (2006: 36–40). Fearing that they may lose their legally permitted status, the legal opposition parties often tone down their rhetoric, moderate their tactics, and decline to cooperate with illegal opposition groups. This means that cross-ideological coalitions

become less likely, and fragmentation increases among social groups that may – in theory, at least – have a common cause in resisting authoritarian regimes. Because these regimes allow some opposition groups to become legalized (while keeping others banned), the legalized opposition acts as a safety valve in legislative elections, helping to release society's discontent and demands for liberalization. But the regimes are ultimately able to keep the opposition weak by simultaneously creating incentives for the legal and illegal opposition parties to remain divided and in competition with each other.

Morocco and Jordan provide examples of how legislative elections serve as safety valves. After the 1971 and 1972 coup attempts, Morocco's erstwhile ruler, King Hassan II, allowed different opposition groups to enter the political system in Morocco and compete in elections as a safety valve. These groups were oppositional insomuch as they pressured for greater reform and democracy, yet many were not anti-systemic in that they did not vocalize (publicly, at least) a desire to overthrow Morocco's regime or oust its sitting monarch. In effect, they were opposition parties participating in legislative elections to voice the concerns of the public toward the regime but exhibited a degree of loyalty insofar as they did not question its underlying legitimacy (Lust 2004: 162). By allowing such quasi-loyalist opposition groups to compete in legislative elections, Morocco's regime developed a low-cost method to relieve some social pressure and dissent from the citizenry (Lust 2004: 161). As Brumberg (2002: 64) notes, a regime's inclusion of quasi-opposition parties in legislative elections discourages or minimizes the use of violence by the opposition, because they have alternative methods to voice dissent and advocate for change.

In its most extreme manifestation, this safety valve approach was exemplified in Morocco's 1997 and 2011 legislative elections when the regime permitted the legal opposition parties – in this case, the socialist and Islamist parties – to gain control of the elected government and appoint a Head of Government (prime ministers) from their parties. In both cases, however, the regime limited the Head of Government's powers to bring about only incremental reforms, without undermining the overall authoritarian system. Another example occurred in 1993 with civil society in which Hassan II granted concessions through legislative changes to appease Morocco's women's rights movement, *L'union de l'action féministe*. This process intensified under the rule of his successor, who sought to further enhance women's rights through the reform process of personal status and family laws. Although Islamists and other traditionalists resisted these legislative reforms, Mohammed VI intervened to ensure they were successful. This helped convince women's rights and other progressive activists to support Morocco's regime or, at least, divide them from the more radical anti-systemic leftist opposition, the Democratic Way (*al-nahj al-diyymuqraṭi*) (Cavatorta and Dalmasso 2009: 496–497).

Like Morocco's regime, Jordan's has also used legislative elections as a safety valve to deflate social pressure for reform. Although Jordan's regime permits legislative elections and has legalized dozens of political parties, it has simultaneously manipulated the electoral code to limit the legalized opposition's capacity to drive meaningful reform. This strategy ultimately limited the influence of Jordan's Islamist party, which garnered considerable success in the 1989 legislative election by winning 34 out of 80 seats (Ryan 2011: 375). Following this success of Islamists in 1989, Jordan's regime altered the electoral system from a proportional system into a one-man, one-vote system. This change in the electoral code led to a smaller percentage of Islamists winning seats in parliament, which not only constrained their political power domestically but also facilitated easier passage of an internally important diplomatic treaty. This treaty was Jordan's 1993 peace pact with Israel, which motivated the regime to change the composition of parliament to dilute the power of Islamists (who opposed the diplomatic rapprochement) (Lust and Jamal 2002). After the 1993 peace treaty, Jordan's regime further reformed the electoral code to make it more restrictive, leading to a dwindling of Islamist electoral presence during

that decade. Indeed, by 2007, Islamists held only 6 of 110 seats in Jordan's parliament, even though Islamists were experiencing electoral success in legislative elections in Egypt, Morocco, and elsewhere in the mid-2000s (Ryan 2011). In sum, by using its legislative elections as a safety valve, Jordan's regime successfully projected an appearance of reform without giving up real political power.

Like executive elections, legislative elections can also aid regimes in distributing clientelist benefits to win over citizens' political loyalty. In a pioneering article in the *Journal of Democracy*, Lust describes how parliamentary deputies consider themselves "service deputies" (*nā'ib khidma*) and use their "position and influence to pressure ministers and bureaucrats" within the regimes' federal ministries into "dispensing jobs, licenses, and other state resources to their constituents" (Lust 2006: 124). Lust (2006: 124) describes that they accomplish this, in part, by threatening to use legislative speeches or media outreach to "cast doubt" on these federal ministries' "performance should their requests go unmet." In his book, Corstange (2016) discovers that citizens see elected deputies as carrying out such services in Yemen's and Lebanon's parliaments, while Benstead and Lust (2018), furthermore, find that citizens view female parliamentary deputies as less corrupt in delivering such services in Tunisia and Jordan.

Local elections: cities, towns, and villages

Like the examples of executive and legislative elections, those at the local level can similarly act as vehicles of symbolism, safety values, and clientelism in the authoritarian political systems of the MENA. They, in effect, reflect trends locally that analogously manifest at the national level, in executive and parliamentary elections.

Before proceeding, however, we should note that the political stakes at hand in local elections vary considerably in different countries of the MENA. For countries like Egypt, elections for local municipalities (what are known as *maḥaliyāt* in Arabic) do not matter much for politics, yet in other countries they matter much more, sometimes even surpassing the importance of elections in national-level elections. In Morocco, for instance, elections for local municipalities and communes (what are called there *baladiyyah* or *muqāṭaʿa* in Arabic) carry great importance and have had consistently higher voter turnout rates since the 1990s than those for elections in the legislative realm (Buehler 2018). What seems clear in the case of Morocco, at least, is that citizens perceive more importance in electing their local mayor and city councilors, who control building their community's roads, distributing its public contracts and jobs, and implementing other local projects, compared to electing their parliamentary deputies (who are posted in the nation's capital, and debate more abstract policy topics with less pertinence to their daily lives).

Symbolism manifests in several different ways in local elections in the MENA. Symbolism in local elections, however, is often more important for the opposition parties than for the regimes. In Turkey and Algeria, for example, local elections were harbingers of change in opposition politics that would presage future developments in national-level politics. In effect, symbolic changes can occur at the local level, during local elections, which seem to trickle up as changes in national-level political trends. For example, prior to becoming Turkey's deeply entrenched Islamist president, with autocratic leanings, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan burst onto his country's political scene by winning the Istanbul mayoral race in the local elections of 1994 as president of the Islamist Refah Party (the Welfare Party), which was the precursor to today's Justice and Development Party (AKP). During the 1994 local elections, the Welfare Party experienced huge success, winning a total of 327 municipalities (Akinci 1999). Modeling Erdoğan's leadership as mayor of Istanbul, Islamist mayors and city officials focused on increasing the effectiveness of service provision and Islamist influence on those processes. The Islamists also sought to shift

clientelist benefits toward their supporters, like middle-class entrepreneurs. For example, after the 1994 local elections, the city of Istanbul's electricity, telephone, and transportation agency awarded a newly formed company – the Magic company – a $1.45 million advertising contract to reward its pro-Islamist owner who was a prominent businessman (Akinci 1999). Fearing Erdoğan's victory endangered Turkey's Atatürk-style secularism, military generals (supported by Kemalist political elites) intervened in 1998 to oust him from the mayor's office and ban the Refah party altogether. The Refah party's widespread success in Turkey's local elections posed a threat to the status quo, showing how their pledges to uproot corruption, develop the economy, improve social service provision, and restore public morality could be a persuasive message to ordinary Turkish voters (Kamrava 1998).

Similarly, few recall that, before their controversial landslide election in the legislative elections of December 1991, Algeria's Islamist party – the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut* or FIS) – also achieved unexpected success in the previous year's local elections. Indeed, this Islamist party won 53 percent of all votes in Algeria's 1990 local elections, which presaged their victory the following year in national-level elections. The success of the FIS in local elections showed the decline in support of Algeria's ruling party with the middle class. This trend continued during the parliamentary elections, resulting in 24.5 percent of votes for the FIS and only 12.2 percent for the ruling party (Chhibber 1996). Frustrations with Algeria's ruling party began when it downsized the public sector and opened internal markets in response to the fiscal crisis of the 1980s. The former policy negatively affected low-level government workers, whereas the latter increased transaction costs for small business owners. Thereafter, both voting constituencies switched their support from the ruling party to the Islamist party, initially in the local elections and, later, in the parliamentary elections (Chhibber 1996). Thus, local elections in both Turkey and Algeria demonstrate how they symbolize oncoming, future changes occurring in the national-level politics of the MENA.

Local elections can similarly serve as safety valves. Compared with legislative elections for parliaments, which clearly have stakes at the national level, regime leaders often view local elections as carrying less import, with only local-level implications. Because local elections seem to ostensibly have lower stakes, regimes will allow the opposition to mobilize within them, thereby allowing them to "let off steam" without truly empowering them. The case of Morocco illustrates this point. As Lust (2006), Clark (2010), and Browers (2007) argue, one of the most threatening oppositional activities for regimes is the formation of cross-ideological alliances in which political parties or movements of diverse backgrounds form stable coalitions to contest regimes. Following Morocco's local elections of 2009, such cross-ideological alliances emerged in over a dozen different cities between two important opposition parties, the Islamists (The Justice and Development Part or "PJD") and the socialists (Socialist Union of Popular Forces or the "USFP"). Although Morocco's regime disliked these alliances and sought to break them, it – ultimately – chose to permit them given that they only affected local politics in their respective cities and did not catalyze cooperation between the opposition parties in national politics, like in parliament. Thus, the regime utilized local elections to help contain opposition coordination, confining it to local-level forms of contestation that did not challenge broader regime control or stability.

Wegner and Pellicer (2014) detail these local-level alliances between Islamists and socialists in Morocco. In their account, the PJD had seen the most amount of repression in the 1990s and 2000s, so it had greater incentives to seek opposition coordination with leftist groups. At the very least, tight coordination between Islamists and leftists could provide greater physical protection for both opposition parties. Yet, ideological differences made the USFP reluctant to build coalitions with the PJD, as it did not want to give its voters the impression it had stopped

supporting gender equality or abandoned secularism (Wegner and Pellicer 2014). At the local level, however, the PJD and USFP found commonalities in city governance, given their similar social bases and their desire to implement reforms aimed at benefiting urban members of the middle class and reducing corruption in city governance (Buehler 2018). Both the PJD's leader, Abdelilah Benkirane, and the USFP's leader, Driss Lachgar, recognized their parties as having common interests in anti-corruption and city efficiency reforms (Buehler 2018). One of the clearest examples of collaboration at the local level between Islamists and leftists came in the city of Agadir following the 2009 local elections. The leftist mayor, Tariq Kabbage, sought out the support of the Islamists, led by local leader Ismael Shukri, to oust city councilors seeking to benefit materially from a local real estate project. With the Islamists' support, Kabbage was able to continue his leadership in Agadir, and the city saw improvements in service provisions to the middle class and better city planning (Buehler 2018). In Agadir, Morocco's regime allowed local elections to act as a safety valve wherein the opposition parties could coordinate and win limited reforms to improve governance. These small victories, however, were unlikely to trickle up to drive larger reform or democratization in Morocco's authoritarian system, so the regime found them unthreatening.

Finally, local elections can also act as channels to disperse clientelist benefits and services. Local institutions staffed through local elections – municipalities and local councils – serve as the frontline of the state, delivering services to citizens directly. That is, while legislative and executive institutions are more distant and aloof from ordinary citizens, local institutions based in their neighborhoods or villages have close proximity to them. This close proximity to the citizens makes them exceptionally more accessible than other institutions to traditional clientelist systems that pervade the MENA region (Buehler 2018). Clientelist systems become intertwined in local elections because traditional elites – notables from influential local families or tribal groups – often serve as candidates in such contests. In his book *Why Alliances Fail*, for example, Matt Buehler details how local elections in Morocco's rural countryside are often predetermined by tribal congresses that nominate and decide on a candidate before the elections are held (Buehler 2018: 109–110). These extended kinship networks serve to nominate a tribe's most competitive leader for electoral office, regardless of his or her specific political party list or ideological affiliation. These tribal congresses focus mainly on an individual candidate's capacity to deliver goods and services to their region, rather than their specific party or ideological orientation (Buehler 2018: 109–110).

Lindsay Benstead has also examined service delivery and clientelism in the context of local elections of the MENA. In particular, she looks at how women's quotas enhance female representation within a system with a legacy of clientelism in local elections. In Tunisia, locally elected politicians typically depend on their relationship with regional or central governments for strength and resources. Traditional clientelist networks tend to be built by and for men and are constructed through interactions and socialization under patriarchal norms, minimizing women's participation in network-building and excluding their representation (Benstead 2019). Looking at local elections, Benstead (2019) finds that having a quota system increases the amount of female representation and can increase the provision of services to women from women representatives in Algeria and Morocco. In this way, clientelism within the context of local elections can take on different dynamics, depending on whether or not the elected representative is male or female (and whether they seek to intercede on behalf of either male or female voters).

Similarly, examining Algeria, Benstead finds that trends in clientelism in local elections can manifest differently, given the type of political party and, more specifically, whether the party was pro or anti-regime. She discovers that Algeria's legal Islamist party – the Movement for

Society and Peace (MSP), known formally as HAMAS – works to reach out and deliver services to citizens historically marginalized from traditional patron-client networks, notably women (Benstead 2020). Benstead (2020) finds that the MSP in coalition with the government was able to reach citizens better than the Islamist Islah Party due to its good standing with the government, giving MSP members better access to bureaucratic resources. By contrast, Islah was not trusted to work with the government and so had less access to such clientelist resources. Benstead (2020) argues that Islamist parties are supported by their own members' ideological commitment, which increases the parties' desire to have a direct impact on local communities and transcend patron-client networks by distributing services and resources to the wider population of potential voters (Benstead 2020). They have more access to local communities through local religious organizations; the proliferation of poorly developed institutions that rely on patron-client networks is what creates the large numbers of marginalized communities to which Islamists can cater (Benstead 2020).

Conclusion

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, optimism soared that elections in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) might evolve, becoming more democratic. And indeed, several Arab states implemented largely free and fair elections, which helped signal citizens' preferences, adjudicate between competing elites, and redistribute political power. For instance, Egypt, a country long known for unfair elections under previous authoritarian rulers, held the 2012 presidential elections and several legislative elections in 2011–2012, which facilitated the rise of democratically elected President Mohammed Morsi and an opposition-controlled parliament. Tunisia, similarly, organized the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections to form a congress, which ultimately produced the democratically elected government of President Moncef Marzouki. Thereafter, several elections in Tunisia, like the 2014 and 2019 legislative and 2018 local contests, were free and fair. Today, this momentum behind elections evolving into a method of genuine democratic accountability has largely collapsed. In both Egypt and Tunisia, democratically elected governments have been ousted by new authoritarian rulers, often subtly backed by military forces. Reminiscent of Hosni Mubarak's era, Egypt's most recent 2018 presidential elections produced about a 97 percent victory for General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. A party pledging loyalty to him won over 55 percent of seats in Egypt's lower chamber and 75 percent in its upper chamber, reinforcing his hegemony over the legislature.

Given that elections in the MENA have again turned away from democratic meaningfulness, this essay has sought to explore their different functions and purposes within authoritarian regimes. It has centered on explaining how elections – at the executive, legislative, and local levels – can project political symbolism, act as safety valves, and facilitate clientelism. These three functions of elections, no doubt, operate to reinforce authoritarian regimes and redouble autocrats' authority in the face of opposition from political parties, civil society, and ordinary citizens.

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