
Reviewed by Max Weiss

Scholars and analysts have been consistently fascinated by the rumored demise of authoritarianism in the Middle East. Beginning in the 1980s, political scientists inspired by lessons learned from the so-called third wave of democratization in East Europe and Latin America turned their attention to groups, movements and institutions that were classified under the broad heading of civil society. This approach to the study of the region endures despite pointed criticism from Marxists, Arab nationalists and many other critical voices. Even if some Middle East scholars reject this framework and its one-size-fits-all mentality, analytical categories die hard.

*Civil Society and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts* is one of two recent edited volumes to comparatively analyze the political, economic, social and cultural forces that contribute to the maintenance and longevity of authoritarian rule in Syria and Iran. Picking up the thread where Steven Heydemann’s influential work on “authoritarian upgrading” left off, in an introductory chapter the editors explain their focus on “civil activism” is intended “to examine how societies where authoritarianism has been ‘upgraded’ respond and operate” (3). Meanwhile, in order to circumvent the limitations of what is called “transitology” (i.e. the study of political transformation presuming a unidirectional gradient moving countries from non-democratic towards democratic systems), the book “aims to examine how society deals with and, at the same time, is partly responsible for such an [authoritarian] upgrading” (10).

The meat of the book consists of eight chapters, four thematic pairs of essays on Syria and Iran. The first two grapple with the problematic of how “civil society” engages with social and political transformation. With some references to religious institutions, Line Khatib argues that the Syrian regime engages in “selective” political and economic liberalization that is “intended to contain, control, and shape civic activism and civil society more generally, rather than to nourish its free development” (19-20). Ali Fathollah-Nejad argues that Iranian civil society has been “placed in a state of siege” (63), caught between an authoritarian regime, on the one hand, and external factors—including a hostile geopolitical environment and crippling economic sanctions—that limit their capabilities, on the other hand.

The second pair of chapters looks at the role of businessmen, entrepreneurs and chambers of commerce. In the case of Syria, Bassam Haddad argues, “the development of the private sector and the growth of the correlate business actors have served the purpose of sustaining authoritarian rule by a combination of broadening dictatorship and undercutting possibilities of collective action among excluded sectors” (70). Policies developed in the 1980s and implemented primarily in the 1990s and 2000s have contributed to “privatization” and to the “unraveling of state-centered economies.” In the end, Haddad finds that “no connection exists between the growth of civil society and democratization” (90). Peyman Jafari explores the “ambiguous role” of entrepreneurs amidst “pseudo-privatization” in Iran, where “the private sector...is situated in a complex web of economic relations that involve the state and semiprivate actors” (98).

1 In the interests of full disclosure, I wrote a chapter for the other volume: Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, eds. *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
The following two chapters consider the role played by new media, specifically the Internet and Web 2.0 social networks. Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr and Francesco Cavatorta come to a relatively optimistic conclusion regarding how the Internet promotes civil activism in Syria: “The cat-and-mouse game that dissidents and activists play in terms of developing new technologies and new software is also a testament to the perceived dangers that the Internet can pose for the regime, as it attempts to keep tabs on what is occurring online” (136). In his analysis of “virtual” and “tangible” social movements in Iran during the Green Movement and after (2009-2010), Ali Honari makes the more measured claim that, “it should not be expected that the Internet per se will lead the Green Movement to victory and make Iran more democratic. Nor is it expected that online social networks will function as real social networks that could provide enough incentive to lead to high-risk mass demonstrations” (163).

Finally, the last pair of essays considers the structure and function of government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). Salam Kawakibi discusses the “paradox” of GONGOs in Syria, raising difficult questions about the arbitrary distinction between civil society and the state. In her examination of how civil society activism in Iran is co-opted by the state, Paola Rivetti rejects the same distinction because NGOs can serve government interest and GONGOs can work against the state. The “efforts for control, structuring, and coercion” under both Khatami and Ahmadinejad, “resulted in an effective mastering of organizations on the one side, while, on the other side, they engendered dynamics of independent advocacy” (203).

The book is not without problems. The civil society literature is analytically impoverished, and simply adjusting the relative emphasis or shuffling around the key actors does not fully resolve the problem. If state institutions (i.e. GONGOs) can qualify as instances of civil society activism, then truly the line between “state” and “civil society” has been blurred to the point of the meaninglessness of both. How should we separate the ideological or practical dimensions of authoritarian upgrading through the mobilization of civil society elements by the state from democratization? Without a clearer assessment of the utility (or lack thereof) of its key terms and approaches, the book suffers from a rather dulled analytical edge. Moreover, although every author perfunctorily laments the inadequacy of the category of “civil society” for the study and understanding of the contemporary Middle East, each chapter (and the book as a whole) unwittingly re-inscribes the centrality of the civil society paradigm, even as it pushes back against some of its conceptual limitations.

Overall, the volume is a welcome addition to the literature on comparative authoritarianisms; scholars of Middle East politics, sociology and political economy will benefit from its insights. Furthermore, given the horrific state of affairs in and around Syria at the time of this writing (early September 2013), the chapters on Syria already seem to have an aura of the historical about them that will make them ever more valuable in making sense of the country’s recent past and its possible futures.

Max Weiss (Ph.D., Stanford University) is the Elias Boudinot Bicentennial Preceptor and Assistant Professor of History and Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. He is the author of In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shiʿism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), and the translator, most recently, of Nihad Sirees, The Silence and the Roar (London: Pushkin Press; New York: Other Press 2013). He is currently writing an interpretive history of Syria in the twentieth century, to be published by Princeton University Press, and translating fiction by Fawwaz Haddad. He can be reached at the Departments of History and Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., maxweiss@princeton.edu.