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## Book Reviews and Notes

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# Changing Political Elites in the Arab World

Massimiliano Trentin\*

*Arab Elites : Negotiating the Politics of Change* / edited by Volker Perthes. - Boulder and London : Lynne Rienner, 2004. - vii, 344 p. - ISBN 1-58826-266-9

This book is the result of extensive fieldwork by a research group at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Institute, Berlin, and represents an original approach to the topical question of changing ruling Arab elites. Now that recent developments in the Middle East have drawn the attention of scholars, politicians and to some extent even public opinion to the general issue of Arab political systems, the new elites are facing both domestic and external pressure to reform.

Because of the longevity of the Arab regimes that were established in the 1960s, the academic interest that developed in the 1970s had declined by the

end of the decade. Nevertheless, elite analysis from the previous period remained largely valid, despite minor political changes, up to the 1990s. The gradual process of elite change started with the attempts at economic liberalisation in the 1990s and the end of the decade witnessed one of the largest leadership changes ever seen in the region. The deaths of long-serving heads of states like King Hussein of Jordan, King Hassan II of Morocco and Emir Isa of Bahrain in 1999, Hafiz al-Assad of Syria in 2000, and Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority in 2004 raise questions about the future of the political systems in the region. *Arab Elites* is one of the first works providing a comprehensive analysis of this change which involves more than just succession from one leader to another. As outlined throughout the different case studies, and

\* Massimiliano Trentin is a Ph. candidate in History of International Relations, University of Florence.

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particularly those of Jordan, Morocco and Syria, the new prime decision-makers may have retained a couple of aides from the previous regime but they have brought in new appointees, new qualifications, new strategies and new world-views.

The various country studies presented in the book are based on a common theoretical and methodological framework which relies on an actor-oriented approach. First of all, it identifies the "politically relevant elite" (PRE) as "all those who wield political influence and power in that they take strategic decisions or participate in decision-making on a national level, contribute to defining political norms and values (including national interests) and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues", (p. 5). Then, after dividing PREs into "core elite", "intermediate elite" and "sub-elite", a so-called "reputational approach" is used to identify to what extent they participate in the decision-making process and are recognised by the public. Finally, the research compares a limited set of political agendas and strategic subjects. The broad PRE concept has the merit that it sheds light on a wide spectrum of actors, reflecting the differences between the national cases and, what is more, the different dynamics that lead to the formation of a certain elite, its composition and its reproduction.

Empirical analysis of the case studies suggests that elite change does not necessarily involve regime change, but rather system reproduction or maintenance through a gradual and incremental pluralisation of the political arena.

Both the so-called "old guard" and the young rulers in Syria (chapter by Volker Perthes), Egypt (chapter by Gamal Abdelnasser) and Algeria (chapter by Isabelle Werenfels) seem to agree on the fundamental rules of the game which guarantee the power of the past and present ruling elite. This means that the supposed western influence on youth does not automatically translate into adoption of related political models or values. Nevertheless, some differences with respect to previous periods were found: on the whole, there is more social differentiation and complexity, that is, a less dominant role for the military, a greater role for professional managers, jurists, economists, private businessmen and to some extent even human rights activists, and eventually a general increase in knowledge/expertise as a qualification for recruitment.

The selective economic liberalisation process, coupled with the growing – although less apparent – social pluralism, is also handled by political cooptation on the part of the ruling elites. This safeguards their ultimate power and makes up for the lack of legitimacy affecting Arab regimes as well as other authoritarian political systems. Although a major elite change is likely to occur in Jordan (chapter by André Bank and Oliver Schlumberger), Morocco (chapter by Saloua Zerhouni), Palestine (chapter by Hans-Joachim Rabe) and Syria as a result of broader participation, the core power structure is not challenged. This is also true in the cases of Tunisia (chapter by Steffen Erdle) and Saudi Arabia (chapter by Iris Glosemeyer), where the new elite is

basically a reproduction of the old. Consequently, the authors assert that the segmentation of the decision-making process into three theoretical "echelons" is skilfully exploited by the different regimes to select new recruits and to limit their influence to the first (lower) echelon of the political system, as the Algerian case illustrates. While social complexity casts the basis for political pluralisation, elites do not allow it to reach the upper echelons of the decision-making process, thus safeguarding the regime's survival and its ultimate decision-making circles.

As for changing political priorities and strategies, regimes established in the context of the Cold War, the Arab-Israeli conflict or the oil boom are now headed by elites who recognise economic globalisation as the main challenge for their survival and need functional cooperation to face world competition. Economic reform and technical modernisation followed by reform of the education system are their top priorities, whereas democracy and human rights are secondary or functional.

The collective work *Arab Elites* is remarkable because it sheds light on the plurality of and differences in political systems in the region which can hardly be defined as simple "dictatorships" or "failed states". It demonstrates the

presence of an ongoing struggle between different actors, challenging the incremental and highly selective strategies of the regimes also faced by increasing international pressure.

In some case studies, the research would have benefited from a structural overview of the particular political system to make it easier to grasp the relevance of the PRE. Moreover, notwithstanding the concrete importance of political elites in regime-building and transition phases, as maintained by elite theories and the present literature, the complexity of national politics cannot be thoroughly understood without a parallel and renewed interest in other social segments and actors such as women, labour, youth and migrants. Although they represent the popular majority and the material base for Arab regimes, their interests and self-perceptions are currently still excluded from the decision-making process, thus preventing any real institutional pluralism or political change.

*Arab Elites* nevertheless represents an original step towards a deeper knowledge of life in the European neighbourhood, which is far from being as socially homogeneous or culturally insensitive to political pluralism as the mass media would currently lead us to believe.