‘Election Fever’ in the Arab Middle East

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The Arab Middle East is today awash in *electoralism* and what I call *election fetishism*.[1] Indeed, it is apt to talk about “election fever” in the Arab Middle East (AME). More than a decade ago, elections were noted for their infrequency. Today they take place with frequent regularity. In fact, not a year passes without at least half a dozen elections. They happen in Arab monarchies and republics, in secular and religious states, in oil-rich and less well-to-do countries, and in political realms with and without rigid ideologies. In 2009 alone, four major polls have already taken place: parliamentary elections in Lebanon and Kuwait, and two sets of provincial elections in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqis will vote again later in the year or in early 2010 to choose parliamentary representatives. Yemen’s parliamentary elections scheduled for this year have been postponed for 2011. Closer to the Mediterranean, Algeria’s April 2009 presidential elections gave Abdelaziz Bouteflika a third term after the National Assembly removed in November 2008 a constitutional provision limiting tenure to two terms. In October 2009 Tunisians will go to the polls to elect a new Parliament. The Maghreb country’s presidential elections will be held concomitantly.

This electoralism, however, insistently begs the question: elections to what end? This very question must be broken down into a series of questions that facilitate a coherent and clear inquiry into a very complex issue. For, the inquiry must account for “specificity.” The Arab Middle East is not a monolith. Diversity of time and space points to a diverse tapestry of electoral experiences. With a vast political landscape from Mauritania on the Atlantic coast to Yemen on the Red Sea, the risk of generalization about Arab electoralism may be unavoidable. This is one reason why the aim in this article is to highlight diversity through stress on the local contexts of electoralism. Whilst there are no neat constructs of how to analyze elections in 22 different settings, investigation of the local experiences may yield some generalizable value as to the “ills” of election “fever” in the Arab Middle East. One notable caveat is that as a student of Arab transitions, in my own investigative style I subscribe to an approach that treats and conceives of “democratic transition” as historically situated, flexible, contingent, fragmented, nuanced, non-linear, and variable. At this current historical juncture, “democratic transition” within an Arab setting can only mean “electoralism.”

Elections are an important democratic institution, but democracy cannot be reduced into a merely periodic electoral exercise. Elections are a positive step in the right direction. They have the potential to “habituate” voters into the art of participatory politics, peaceful contest of power, the ethic of dialogue and consensus-building, and the affirmation of civil and political rights to representation and accountability through elected deputies. Hence, do Arab elections further democracy? In other words, do elections produce a “demonstration effect,” multiplying the deepening and widening of democratic ethics, skills and values of citizenship? Or are they simply “demonstration events” –PR exercises aimed at external consumption? Do Arab elections break political monopolies of dominant ruling parties, ruling houses, and sectarian and ethnic dogmas? Do they produce future political societies and leaders? Last but not least, do they weaken narrow loyalties to tribe, sect, family, and ideology and do they enhance democratic value-sharing and democracy-learning? These queries form a

[1] Sadiki, Larbi. *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

research agenda that will require investigation across geographies and electoral periods in the entire Arab Middle East to unlock tentative answers about the substance of Arab electoralism.

Tentatively, however, one can venture a number of observations by looking at the latest elections held this year in Algeria, Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon and Morocco. They do reflect specific locales. Nonetheless, this does not preclude the presence of shared problems with other Arab electoral experiments.

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Algeria

The country's 2007 elections were marked by a downward trend in voter turnout from 69% in 1997 down to 35.6% ten years later. In the span of one decade voters have become visibly disillusioned with elections. The country is amidst an ongoing war against terror. The other war that the electorate want their politicians to win is that against corruption. Disillusionment is to a large extent due to failure on this front. The so-called *patronat* (business/mercantile class with a "Mafiosi" tendency), whose members come from both the security establishment and the power apparatus, seem to be taking advantage of their positions to make money whilst living standards are hardly improving for the rest of the electorate –unemployment is high and strategic commodities are expensive. Corruption is a hot "political potato" in Algeria. A majority of the country's "people's parliamentarians" opposed a law in 2006 that required state officials and high public servants to declare their wealth. The opposition startled Algerians and the 2007 low voter turnout communicated their disaffection. Close to one million ballots were spoilt or recorded a "donkey vote," again in protest at corrupt officialdom that places itself above the law. Yet Algerian electoralism is a good example of how election fetishism can easily deflect from the social and political realities. Thus far about 13 elections have been held since the cancellation of the 1991 vote in which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) looked certain to win. Except that the army moved first to cancel the second round of the vote. The country has 24 legalized political parties. Beyond the figures there are the political realities of a Presidential Coalition that runs the parliamentary "cavalcade" on behalf of the executive branch. But in this executive system, the President suggests and approves 80% of all laws. Yet elections are held to vote a Parliament whose legislative powers are downsized by the president –who is backed by the army. Plus, there are no robust checks and balances empowering Parliament. Bouteflika, as expected, amended the constitution in November 2008 to run for a third term. Thus he took a leaf from the book of such presidents as Bashar al-Assad of Syria and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and neighbouring Tunisia. This is despite his ill health. He won the presidential election in April 2009 decisively. He received nearly 13 million votes, more than 90% of the valid votes. One notes that the over one million invalid votes (more than 7% of the total vote) outweighed those gained by the second-ranked presidential candidate, Louisa Hanoune of the Labour Party, who received 604,000 votes (4.2% of the valid votes). Indeed, presidential elections take place throughout the region. But like ruling parties, incumbent presidents have an advantage against rival candidates. The incumbent being in charge of state resources, informational, financial, logistical, and political, render presidential elections not by any standards contests amongst equals. There is some generalizable value of relevance to other Arab polities where these kinds of elections have become fashionable.

Kuwait

This is a country that has gone longest in building parliamentary capacity. Moreover, Kuwait's electoral record is deeply rooted, originating in the 1960s when the new Arab socialist republics were dismantling their parliaments. This is on the positive side. The flaws are systemic, however. Elections have historically and paradoxically made the system prone to "reverses." One might mistakenly accuse the Kuwaitis

of "too much democracy." They hold elections with regularity. But they dismantle or dissolve them as regularly. The key structural problem is that Parliament is disallowed to be turned effectively into the "people's chamber." Although largely a providential and benign royal house, the Al-Sabahs remain "guardians" and "possessors" of the state. Largely, there have been three deficits: a gender deficit, a *badun* (stateless Arab) deficit, and a party-system deficit (although the competing blocs function very well and the *diwaniyyahs*, or the politico-cultural traditional forums, can be vibrant as barometers and formulators of public opinion). In the rest of the Arab world, elections produce political "monotony," routine and stability. In Kuwait, elections produce political fervour, polemic, and deliberative atmospherics.

The 16 May 2009 parliamentary election is perhaps the most "democratic" in the country's history. It is the third election in three years: 2006, 2008 and 2009. Since 1992 Kuwaiti voters have gone to the polls seven times: in 1992, 1996, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2009. That is a record of elections on par with the consolidated democracies of Southern Europe such as Greece, Portugal and Spain. The 2009 election has been a triumph for female candidates and the country's vociferous women's movement, which has been at the forefront of the struggle for the franchise. To an extent, the election somewhat lessened the gender deficit –at least in Parliament. This is a first but stunning victory for women, but only future elections will test whether they are a passing "fad" within the electorate or a durable political step-change. For a long time a majority of Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Islamist "bloc" and other independents with strong tribal and religious sensibilities have blocked legislation to enfranchise women. The franchise came in 2005. Four years later, four out of 16 women won parliamentary seats. In 2008, 27 contested the elections without success. Four seats out of 50 is a political milestone. Indeed, four women in a sea of male parliament may not tip the balance of power in any direction. But this feat could modify political behaviour in the long run. In a country where elections happen frequently, this particular gain has to be the most qualitative in the last three elections. What is noteworthy in this election is the fact that women snatched victories in the heart of a strongly conservative –tribal, religious and traditional– electorate across five districts. To win their seats these candidates had to rank amongst the top ten –i.e. secure one of the highest ten shares of the total vote. Ma'suma Mubarak, the first female to be appointed to Cabinet in the monarchy in 2005, topped her district's list with 14,000 votes. The other three women, in order of ranking in their respective districts, are 'Asil al-'Awadhi (second –she missed election in 2008 by about 700 votes), economist Rula Dashty (seventh) and Salwa al-Jassar (tenth). Kuwait's empowerment of women is different from the quota system –affirmative action– employed in other Arab states such as Tunisia. Positive aspects aside, neither the 2009 election nor those to follow it can be expected to address the "structural" or "systemic" flaw in Kuwait's electoral democracy. Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah's royal prerogative to disband Parliament and call for elections gives a strong sense of *déjà vu*. The crisis begins with the deadlock over another prerogative: the right of the elected parliamentarians to question or impeach the Prime Minister, also a member of the ruling house, very often over allegations of economic mismanagement and corruption. In the latest crisis, instead of allowing his Prime Minister, Shaykh Nasser al-Sabah, to be subjected to further questioning and allowing a vote on impeachment to go ahead, the Emir dissolved Parliament. Only in December 2008 did the Emir reappoint his nephew, Shaykh Nasser, to the premiership after a similar round of questioning in Parliament. The Cabinet reshuffle is one mechanism for managing the deadlock between Parliament and the royal family. However, as frequent as they may be, Cabinet reshuffles are no panacea for these kinds of deadlocks. Nor for that matter are frequent elections. In a system where a royal house controls the economy, interior, information, oil, security, defence and cabinet, elected parliaments may not facilitate functional government, much less democratization in the long-term. Ruling houses rely on tribal and sanguine solidarity as the prime source of political and social protection. Thus two possible solutions out of the deadlock are unthinkable: The Emir appoints a "people's Cabinet," a deliverance of government by the people and for the people. This means no questioning of royal members who would never be impeached. That would weaken the Emir himself and perhaps the entire royal house. A blemish against one member may be taken as a blemish against all ("one for all, and all for one"). The second solution is for the premiership to be assigned to the Crown Prince, Shaykh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah. Advocates of this line of action view it as one preventive mechanism against parliamentarians' "grilling" tactics, for the deference

paid to the Emir and the Crown Prince is not extended to other royalty. However, that is a risk that thus far has not been taken. The stakes are too high for the Emir to test this option. His preference is probably, at least for now, for the heir apparent to remain above the political fray.

Kuwaiti electoralism is robust and unique in the Arab Gulf, in particular, and the Arab region, in general. Democratic learning is piece-meal; so is the pluralization of civil society. The entry of women into official politics, a trend begun with the appointment of a female minister in 2005, is likely to embolden the electorate in endorsing female candidates in future elections, and the government in pursuing its inclusive policies and de-gendering of polity. What makes Kuwaiti electoralism particularly healthy is the fact that vociferous, namely, Islamist MPs, stands against corruption by royalty are not punished or ostracised. The country's media boasts some of the most liberal dailies in the Arab world –which is well suited to long-term genuine democratic transition. Human rights fare better than in neighbouring states –although a qualification is that there are stateless "denizens" with no rights, and the electorate is determined by rules of ethnic ancestry. The anomaly is that electoralism poses limitations when there are two systems: royalty and ordinary citizenry. This trait reflects the pitfalls of electoralism in other Arab monarchies, including, to a lesser extent, those of Morocco and Jordan.

Morocco

Like Kuwait, Morocco is the other Arab monarchy that has been a trailblazer in electoral politics. As such, its electoral record is amongst the most consolidated in the Arab Euromed region. Also like Kuwait, its elections have known "reverses." This was prevalent during the reign of the late King Hassan II. Under King Mohamed VI, electoralism is steady. However, in spite of wider space being occupied by a plural and a dynamic civil society –trade unions; political parties, secular and Islamist; and a vibrant cultural scene– the king reigns high and above the "institutional" trappings of electoral politics. They are trappings in the sense that elections or the elected cannot touch the *makhzan* (the centralized monarchical power apparatus). Neither electoralism nor the parliaments that ensue from them equip the people's representatives in the country's two chambers with any checks on the King's powers. Monarchy in the Arab world –and for the matter "presidency"– is self-referential. The steady "democratization" maintained by the King is not going in the foreseeable future to model Moroccan monarchism on Spanish or Belgian, i.e. constitutional and popular.

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One recent development attests to the powers that Mohamed VI amasses. The Authenticity and Modernity Party that won the June 2009 municipal elections mirrors not only "ideational" affinity with the young monarch, but also reveals how kingly "blessing" wins seats and votes. The party is a neophyte to Moroccan politics, having been founded by a confidante of the king, Fouad al-Himmah, formerly a Deputy Interior Minister. Al-Himmah's party swept the board with nearly 22% of the seats and about 18% of the total vote. By contrast, the established Istiqlal or Independence Party, itself a "loyal" party, led by the Prime Minister, came second with 19% of the seats. Despite the hype by the media and political pundits about the country's main legalized Islamist party's "certain" victory, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) could collect only about one quarter of the seats won by the Authenticity and Modernity Party -5.5% of the seats. The Islamists, however, seem to outperform other parties in the big cities, collecting an average of 15% of the urban vote. The PJD's "door-knocking" policies between elections and during the hustings account for a large share of city voters. In this respect, the PJD resembles in political strategies its Islamist counterpart in Turkey, the AKP. Tentatively, the Authenticity and Modernity Party may be labelled the "palace's party," a new force that gives the monarch more control over "popularized" partyism and parliaments. Al-Himmah, too, should his party repeat the same political feat in the 2012 parliamentary elections, could find himself with an unexpected promotion (from the Interior Ministry) to the premiership.

There are positive aspects. Women won close to 3,000 seats, and Moroccans gained additional skills in registering their votes at the local level, considered to be more important in the Arab world than Parliament. It is at this level that expectations are raised, in terms of services in towns and villages and of popular liaison with local governors. However, Morocco's elections are regular but not without irregularities. Dozens, for instance, were linked to a major fraud related to the September 2006 parliamentary elections. What is startling, but not unique to Morocco, is the alleged culprits included individuals from the upper and lower houses (Assembly of Councillors; Assembly of Representatives). Despite regularity, voter turnout, most likely owing to disillusionment with a system where elections reproduce the same power elites, tends to be following a downward trend. The figure of the country's total registered voters seems to be subject to "elasticity." It can vary between 13 and 15 million. It is a "secret" only the powerful Interior Ministry knows. Naturally, it can, theoretically at least, be understated, for instance if power calculus requires evidence of higher voter turnout. Interior Ministries in the Arab world can operate like a "feral abacus." Moreover, votes fetch up to 20 US dollars. Where candidates acquire large amounts of cash to pay thousands remains another "secret" of Moroccan electoralism. Corruption and bribery are rampant, and sadly, this is how a career as an "honourable" representative of the people is launched. This is not specific to Morocco. Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait have gone down this slippery slope of vote-buying.

Iraq & Lebanon

Methodologically, it makes sense to pair Iraq and Lebanon. These are two polities that share several traits that call for close comparative scrutiny. The previous set of case studies represents countries where extraneous factors are totally absent. There is no meddling in the elections of Algeria, Kuwait or Morocco. There is a Shiite "bloc" in Kuwait and no doubt pan-Shiite forces in the region keep an eye on the performance of this bloc. But there is little or no evidence that either the Iranians or the Iraqis next door meddle in Kuwait's elections. By contrast, both Lebanon and Iraq are two polities where politics are "cooked" within and without. Iraq is under occupation, making it a natural theatre for outside meddling. The whole "democracy bandwagon" is driven by the occupying power, the US. The Iranians have acquired a new theatre on which they maximize their power ratio at the expense of Sunni rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Iraq has been a total disaster from a Sunni perspective but not from a Shiite perspective. Khomeini's revolution triumphed in penetrating the Arab world the day the Americans sacked Baghdad. It is oversimplistic to reduce politics in Iraq into a Sunni-Shiite polarity. Nonetheless, Sunnism and Shiism remain rigid templates that motivate and condition the political behaviour of neighbouring states, especially regional powers. How the Sunnis fare in the "new Iraq" is inevitably the business of Saudis, Jordanians (who share borders with Iraq) and Egyptians. Turkey, Syria and Iran have lots at stake in what polity eventually unfolds in Kurdistan. So elections in the Kurdish provinces loom large on their political radars.

How Lebanese and Iraqis vote is coloured by the "layers" of identity. In fact, politics is very much the sphere of identity politics

Like Iraq, Lebanon is a fragmented polity. Sectarianism competes with nationalism; at times, it precedes nationalism as the main template of identity. How Lebanese and Iraqis vote is coloured by the "layers" of identity. In fact, politics is very much the sphere of identity politics. In both countries, the biggest challenge facing the "rationalization" of statehood and nationalism is inextricably linked to how to relegate sectarian identity to a secondary status. However, these are polities that have gained from their sectarian diversities. Yes, deadlocks occur and recur; bloodshed taints the march of nationalism and statehood in both countries. Yet on the bright side Iraq and Lebanon have the most pluralized civil societies in the Arab region. The media scene is plural; political parties are numerous; political ideas and ideologies abound; coalition-making, positive and negative, is a fact of political life; and there is never a shortage of leaders to communicate political difference. Of course, the only problem is that when it comes to the "civic" cake there are no shared values. The only value that seems to stitch the sub-polities and multi-layered identities together is the quest for co-existence. This is a *sine qua non* of any genuine democracy.

There is one similarity and dissimilarity in both countries: there has not been an official census for at least 50 years or more. This is vital for knowing the human resources and demographic make-up of a democracy. For Iraq, census or no census, the political "tsunami" that followed the 2003 invasion placed the Shiite majority in the seat of power. It would require a similar "tsunami" for the Shiite demographic majority, yet a political minority under outdated existing power-sharing arrangements, to be empowered. Note how the Shiites in Iraq continue to make full use of their new powers to claim their rightful place in the political system, at the local and federal levels. The Shiites in Lebanon, for now at least, propose what I call a "normative trade-off": the right to keep their arms and *muqawamah* or resistance in return for not upping the ante, that is, insisting on a new census, new constitution and new electoral laws that do away with the country's blatant gerrymandering. This, I expect, will be the Shiite quest in Lebanon whenever they lay down their arms and a peace agreement is concluded with Israel. Yet this scenario is still a long way off. Hezbollah, in particular, is not interested in the "democratic game" of seat-grabbing. For them, 11 seats are all they need, in coalition with their allies, including the Christians, to project their single normative agenda: sustaining resistance. They partake in elections to "protect" resistance. This is a thesis I advance with full clarity and conviction. In return for deference for the "democratic" disadvantage the current political system dishes out to them, Hezbollah seeks deference to its arms and resistance. The two Shiite parties that contest elections, Amal and Hezbollah, can only gain less that one-sixth of the seats in the 128-member unicameral Parliament. This is not commensurate with the demographic size of the Shiites –conservatively estimated to approximate 35 to 40%. If one adds the number of the Sunnis, which is estimated to be a bit more than 30%, then Lebanon's Muslims should in a truly majoritarian democracy have about 70% representation. But far from focusing on "religious" democracy and its many imperfections, the key question today in Lebanon is that allocation of seats demands the overhauling of the electoral system. Under a proportional system, the results of the elections held on 7 June 2009 give a different reading. The Hariri-led March 14 Alliance won 71 seats. The opposition, led by Hezbollah and the Maronite Michel Aoun's Free Movement or March 8 Alliance, won 57 seats. There is no simple victory in Lebanon's political dictionary, for, in terms of numbers, political weight, leadership, and elites, the latest parliamentary elections have changed nothing in Lebanon. Hezbollah has not been downsized politically. Nor have its rivals, including the Maronite Lebanese Forces of Samir Ja'Ja'. Yet the losing side –by count of seats– are in effect the winners by percentage of popular vote. The March 14 Alliance received 10% less than its rival, the March 8 Alliance, which won 55% of the popular vote. The election was largely peaceful. It was one where Saudi money –hundreds of millions– was spent to ensure that Hezbollah, the putative "client" of rival Iran, does not change the political equation. It is a question of "once bitten, twice shy" –the Saudis consider themselves to have "lost" in Iraq, where Iran pulls many strings.

It is beyond the scope of this article to get into the details of the recent provincial Iraqi elections. By way of summary, however, the provincial elections of January 2009 and those in the Kurdistan provinces in July 2009 display positive and negative manifestations. There are problems of demography, identity, ethno-nationalism and religious politics. There are many imperfections of assassination, fraud, and contest over who gets what or who owns what or who is who, such as in Kirkuk, where Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs have competing claims over the city. Tension is such that elections cannot be expected to resolve this huge problem and blood-letting may be inevitable. The ballot could cede to the bullet. Religion largely determines voters' behaviour. According to a liberal-secular politician who contested the elections, most major political parties lured voters through the popular edict that a vote for the variety of Islamist, Sunni and Shiite parties is a "religious duty." Basically, there is no "Caesar's" votes are for "God."[2] Al-Hakim, whose party is backed by Iran, has not performed solidly. Nor did the former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. The current Prime Minister seems to have made gains owing to a modification of his political rhetoric, recruiting voters on the basis of a "nationalist" and moderate platform, reducing the tone of sectarianism that dominated the 2005 elections. But his gains are also determined by his "possession" of the state. He who runs the state gets a larger share of the electoral "booty." The Sunnis did not boycott the elections, waking up to the fact that political wilderness does not serve their future in a new sys-

[2] Author's interview with Hamid Al-Kifaey, founding member of the Iraqi Society for Democracy, 23 July 2009, London.

tem dominated by Shiites and Kurds. All of the groups, political, sectarian, ethnic, or religious, are divided. There is not a single shared platform of values in the new Iraq. The country's future hangs in the balance. Animosity is such between the federal centre and the Kurdistan government led by Barazani, for instance. In fact, Barazani and Nour Al-Maliki are not on talking terms. Lots have to be settled, including the constitution, electoral laws, final boundaries, oil, Kirkuk, demographies, and security, before a modicum of normalcy can be expected. It will take so many elections and imperfections to master politics as the art of the possible through the ballot and not the bullet.

Final Observations

Only a form of "minimalist democratic transition" seems to be in the offing throughout the Arab Middle East. This democratic minimalism is for now being "manufactured" via electoralism. This democratic minimalism is sufficient for the region to be slotted in the so-called global "march of democracy." It happens in diverse polities for different reasons and according to various political rules and rationales. Perhaps for the populous and impoverished states electoralism is calculated to qualify them for the "affection" of the global donor community –European Union, United States, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, etc. For countries with petro-dollar largesse, which increasingly find themselves under a US security umbrella, elections are minimum concessionary mechanisms aimed at managing vulnerability to American patronage and tutelage (democracy promotion). For others, the age of material providence has long passed. Neither state coffers nor the entrenchment of the "Washington consensus" permit subsidies. Thus the state's distributive function has changed: from a distributor of bread to a distributor of democracy. But this shift in distribution does not mean regulation is democratic. Regulation remains largely coercive –but with some improvement in juridical regulation in some parts of the Arab world. Electoralism is one means also by which EU Arab "clients" could secure "sponsorship" or good will by political benefactors –for instance, France, Germany and Spain for Arab states with Euromed associations.

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For students of democratic transition, electoral data can be one method of verifying the occurrence of democratization. The figures and the numbers that are produced with every election in the AME dazzle researchers. However, elections are still imperfect, new, and partly cosmetic. Like all numbers they lend themselves to manipulation. These are elections where there is no logic that ensures that one plus one equals two. Two elections are equated in the "transitology" of the "prophets" of democracy like Huntington to signal transcendence of a democratic threshold. Kuwait has had three elections in the past two years. Egypt has had a dozen since the late 1970s. Iraq has had four, with a fifth in the offing. For now, the only number that comes to mind when adding elections to democracy is *cipher* (the Arabic word for zero).