



AZMI BISHARA, *Democratic Transition and its Problematics: A Theoretical and Applied Comparative Study* (Doha and Beirut: ACRPS, 2020). Pp. 624.

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Ash-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām ("the people want to overthrow the regime") is perhaps the most famous and iconic chant of the "Arab Spring". It was first heard in Tunisia but soon found its way to the squares of Egypt, the outskirts of Syria, and into the vocabulary of revolutionary crowds across the Arab region. Over a decade has passed since the first protestors took to the streets and squares demanding reform and social justice,¹ followed by another surge (or second wave) of protests in 2019 in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Algeria. These spontaneous upheavals have propelled attempts to transition to democracy.²

In this way, the study of democratic transition (known as transitology) derives its relevance from the aspirations of the common people, elites, researchers, and intellectuals toward democracy. While some researchers³ have minimized the importance of transitology research in the Arab region, recent events have proven otherwise. The topic of democratic transition in the Arab region has gained currency in the last decade due to the successive revolutions that took place between 2011 and the events of 2019. The successes and failures of these Arab revolutions present us with a set of pressing questions: why did such demands of reform take so long to take shape in the Arab region? Why did democratic transition happen in some Arab countries but not in others? And what lessons can we learn from the Arab Spring?⁴

Tackling such questions on the state of Arab democracy, Azmi Bishara, in his book *Democratic Transition and its Problematics: A Theoretical and Applied Comparative Study*, not only probes the literature on democratic transition in depth – a subject that has not received sufficient attention in Arabic – but also critically engages with this scholarship, discusses its trends in light of experiences from the Arab world, and offers insights on (and from) the region that contribute to the wider debate on democratic transition.

Central Headlines and Critical Discussions from the Book

Prior to the first wave of Arab revolutions in 2011, a prominent trend in the political science literature questioned the lack of democracy in the Middle East, which appeared a farfetched prospect. In 2001, Lisa Anderson asked, "Why has the Arab world been so resistant to democratic change, when much of the rest

¹ A popular chant in the Egyptian protests of 2011 was *'ish, ḥurriyya, 'adāla iḡtimā'iyya* ("bread, freedom, social justice"). It indicates the perceptions of economic, social, and political disparities, which were main drivers behind the revolution.

² Democratic transition took place in Tunisia and Egypt, in addition to an early unstable transition in Libya. The former was the only Arab country to consolidate democracy.

³ See, for example, Lisa Anderson's discussion on the state of democracy studies in the Arab world: Lisa Anderson, "Searching Where the Light Shines: Studying Democratization in the Middle East," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 9, no. 1 (June 2006), pp. 189-214.

⁴ The term "Arab Spring" is used to refer to the revolutions and protests that started in late 2010 across the Arab region.

of the world seems convulsed by liberal revolutions?"⁵ Anderson followed up this question in 2004 to ask, "Why have students of the Middle East devoted so much of their attention to an issue [i.e., democratization] of apparently modest relevance in the region?"⁶ Other studies posed similar questions, speculating as to whether the Arab world is immune to democracy.⁷ This tone shifted after the revolutions, opening the door to a more optimistic tenor, at times overtly so. A new line of literature went as far as to (tentatively) consider these revolutions "the fourth wave" of democracy,⁸ following the surge of democratic transitions in the twentieth century that some scholars dub "the third wave" (pp. 220-221).⁹

In any case, it is now apparent that, as Bishara observes, the "study [of democratic transition] has become a pressing topic on the agenda of social sciences specialized in [the study of] Arab countries" (p. 26). After the first wave of the Arab Spring, Tunisia and Egypt were the only two countries to initiate the process of democratic transition, with the former being the sole example that managed a (short-lived) transition to democracy. The success of democracy in Tunisia but not in Egypt, the perceived "failure" of the Arab Spring as a whole, and the recent 2019 revolutionary movements all caused more ambiguities to surface, further substantiating the relevance of democratic transition studies for the region. It is here that Azmi Bishara's *Democratic Transition and its Problematics* becomes indispensable. Critically assessing both the "theory and practice" (p. 13) of transitology as well as its suitability for Arab cases, *Democratic Transition and its Problematics* is composed of sixteen chapters divided into four sections:

1. Transition Studies and the Conditions for Democracy

Bishara opens the book's first section by engaging with the theory of modernization. While the latter did not originate as a theory of democratic transition, the two phenomena were soon linked together. Seymour Lipset's early contribution is perhaps the most significant attempt to elaborate the relationship between modernization theory and the study of democracy.¹⁰ However, Bishara explains how Lipset mistakenly conflates the conditions for democratic transition with those of the consolidation of democracy (p. 50), pointing out that 19th century democracies emerged in fundamentally different circumstances than those of the present day. Such unique historical circumstances facilitated the gradual transition to democracy in the past (p. 65). Nonetheless, the gradual path followed by early democracies does not guarantee democratic legitimacy, which he contends is an essential condition for both regime stability and democratization (p. 92). "Gradual" transition, too, is not synonymous with "peaceful" transition, and while historical democracies indeed developed gradually, Bishara argues that they emerged amid conditions that do not necessarily apply to transition today. This is where the current challenge for democratic transition lies; establishing a democracy is no small task, and the historical pathways that led to it in the past were unique to that time period and its circumstances (p. 68).

⁵ Lisa Anderson, "Arab Democracy: Dismal Prospects," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Fall 2001), p. 54.

⁶ Anderson, "Searching Where the Light Shines," p. 205.

⁷ Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 2010), pp. 93-104; Ibrahim El Badawi & Samir Makdisi, "Explaining the Democracy Deficit in the Arab World," *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance*, vol. 46, no. 5 (February 2007), pp. 813-831; Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2 (January 2004), p. 139.

⁸ Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk, "The Arab Spring: A Fourth Wave of Democratization?: The Arab Spring . . .," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (March 2016), pp. 52-69; Philip N. Howard & Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ali Sarihan, "Is the Arab Spring in the Third Wave of Democratization?," *Turkish Journal of Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 67-85.

⁹ The term "waves of democracy" was popularized by Samuel P. Huntington to describe the major surges of democracy which occurred in history. Huntington expanded on the concept in his book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Bishara disagrees with the notion of "global waves of democracy", explaining how this notion implies that democratic transition is a phenomenon that some countries accept while others fail to do so. In his opinion, "global" waves are "regional" waves.

¹⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 53, no. 1 (March 1959), p. 75.

The main point this section advances is that democracy does not hinge on a set of predetermined conditions. It is not necessarily a gradual process, nor does it demand a capitalist economy or cultural homogeneity. It does not relate to a specific colonial identity or religion (pp. 135, 118, 121, 123). Put simply, "there is no rule determining the emergence of democracies" (p. 125): each case is unique, and different countries will adopt diverging paths to democracy.

2. Transitology Theories

Democratic theorists are teleological – but neither having moral goals nor taking an "ethical stance toward tyranny on the basis of values such as human dignity, freedom, and equality" contradicts scientific objectivity.¹¹ Studies of democratic transition are often driven by the goal of establishing democracy, and while the theory of modernization has been closely tied to the history of Europe and North America, new currents in transitology have begun to challenge it. These are the result of moral motivations that reject modernization's pessimism toward the democratic potential of "underdeveloped" countries, and of theoretical motivations on account of new democracies emerging in the absence of modernization's "inevitable" structural conditions.¹²

Bishara classifies theories of democratic transition into four theoretical approaches.¹³ The first is the structuralist approach, which most famously includes the theory of modernization presented above. Another approach is the institutionalist approach, which highlights the role of institutions in shaping the decisions of political actors. Institutionalists, as well as neo-institutionalists, consider constructing democratic institutions the most crucial point in the transition process. Thirdly, Bishara presents the political economy approach which is mainly interested in the interactions between politics and economy. The final approach is the strategic choice approach, to which Bishara devotes a whole chapter. Emphasizing the path to democracy rather than the structural conditions it requires, this approach poses the greatest challenge to structuralists and particularly the theory of modernization.

Throughout the second section, Bishara highlights the peculiar characteristics of Arab regimes, where power and the regime apparatus (e.g., security agents, ruling party, army, etc.) tend to concentrate around a one-man ruler (p. 290). Here, the regime's ability and willingness (or the lack thereof) to use violence become important factors in promoting or hindering transition (p. 302).

Bishara further presents the main theoretical debates and trends in the study of democratic transition, engaging with the ideas presented and offering critical assessments on the theories' main premises that underscore their importance as well as their shortcomings. The remaining sections of *Democratic Transition and its Problematics* further affirm a point made earlier by the author: there is no single paradigm for democratic transition.

3. External Factors and Political Culture

After a thorough discussion of the varying and most important theories of democratic transition, Bishara devotes a chapter in the third part of his book to an often-neglected element in democratic transition: external factors. Due to the role of external factors in the democratization of Eastern Europe, Schmitter previously concluded that it was time to reconsider the impact of the international environment on regime change, though without elevating it to be the primary factor. According to Bishara, however, a close examination of so-called "external factors" is enough to reveal that most of what is referred to as *external* is in fact

¹¹ Ibid., p. 210.

¹² Mainly in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Ibid., pp. 210-211.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 222-241.

regional (except in extreme cases such as occupation, for example) (pp. 373-374). As we shift our focus to the Arab countries, the role of this regional environment in complicating the democratic process becomes clear, as, for instance, in the interference of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with the course of democratic transition (pp. 374-375) in countries like Egypt, or the growing influence of Iran (pp. 374-375) in places such as Syria.

Bishara also dedicates part of his book to discuss the link between the United States and the idea of exporting democracy around the world which, prior to the Cold War (1947-1991), was not on America's agenda at any level (p. 381). Even following the war, Bishara notes that the United States did not become more supportive of democracies, but rather less supportive of autocrats (p. 378). The country's interventions in the Arab region after the Cold War have been based on strategic decisions rather than human rights or democratization, mainly the preservation of Israel's security and ensuring the flow of oil to the West. The less a country has to do with oil or Israel, the less the international influence on its democratic transition (p. 396). This "Cold War logic", Bishara argues, remains part of the US' attitude toward the Arab region.

The second issue tackled in this section, as implied by its title, is the issue of political culture. Although some scholars hold that a country's popular political culture affects democratic transition, Bishara disagrees; the democratic culture of the public is not a necessary condition for democracy since it does not – and cannot – flourish under despotism (p. 424). On the contrary, he emphasizes the importance of elite political culture in the attainment of democracy. During the transition period, elites must have the aptitude for dialogue and accept democratic institutions and procedures as the best framework for conflict resolution. During the subsequent consolidation period, they must accept the principle of citizenship and fully commit to these democratic institutions and procedures (p. 419).

4. The Arab Cases

The book's final section represents its richest theoretical contribution, wherein Bishara discusses and draws conclusions from experiences from the Arab context. The author describes the revolutions in the region as "reformist revolutions": "an Arab innovation" characterized by demands to change the regime by bringing it down, a rejection of proposed reforms designed to contain popular discontent, and an insistence on regime change without offering an alternative form of leadership (p. 446). Apart from Tunisia, these revolutions did not lead to democracies because the conditions necessary for a revolution to erupt are not congruent with the conditions for a democratic transition. Large-scale change comes not as a result of revolutionary movements *per se*, but of the regime that succeeds such movements (p. 450). Nonetheless, this does not negate the presence of common obstacles that impede transition across the Arab region, such as the unresolved relationship between the nation, ethnic nationality (pp. 345-346), and the state; the failure to integrate the population through a common citizenship; regimes' reliance on sub-national loyalties and political movements that engender supra-national loyalties; and the impact of rentier economies on the political processes of some countries. These common obstacles (among others) are what Bishara calls the "Arab Question", which he has dedicated an entire book to discussing.¹⁴ All that being said, Bishara concludes that the lack of a "transition paradigm" precludes the idea of "Arab exceptionalism": if there is no rule, there can be no exception (p. 454). This affirms the point Bishara makes over and over in the book on the need to look into the specific circumstances of each case when studying democratic transition.

The cases Bishara tackles particularly his discussion of Tunisia's democratic experience and comparisons between Egypt and Chile and Egypt and Tunisia – suggest a series of conclusions. First, the legitimacy of

¹⁴ Azmi Bishara, *On the Arab Question: An Introduction to an Arab Democratic Manifesto*, 4th ed. (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018).

the state as the sole political entity is necessary for democratic transition. Second, cleavages among the ruling elite do not necessarily result from top-down reforms, as proposed by O'Donnell and Schmitter; they may be the result of other causes, such as revolutions. Third, it is crucial that key political elites agree on democracy and adhere to democratic procedures during the transition period. Fourth, democratic transition cannot succeed if the army opposes it or harbours its own political aspirations, and thus it must remain disengaged from the transition period. Fifth, a country in transition cannot be ruled by a narrow majority in the presence of a strong opposition. Finally, the greater a country's geostrategic weight, the greater the weight of regional and external factors upon its transition.

Conclusions from and on the Arab Region

Democratic Transition and its Problematics is a great resource to anyone interested in the study of democratic transitions, whether in the Arab region or elsewhere. Students and scholars of transitology will benefit from the breadth and depth offered by Bishara's discussion and critique of democratic transition theories. For those interested in the topic of transition in the Middle East or other developing countries, this book serves as a candid, Arab perspective on the challenges and aspirations of the region's societies. It is also beneficial to policy-making and activist circles in deepening their understanding of the challenges facing Arab democratization so as to clarify future prospects and formulate improved plans of action.

We can summarize the main takeaways from the book as follows. Bishara challenges the notion of a "transition paradigm", insisting that there are several paths to democratic transition. As such, any serious study of transition in any country must delve into the specificities of the case at hand. The absence of an overarching rule or paradigm also means the absence of exceptions, including so-called Arab exceptionalism as to democratic transition. Arab countries are not immune to democracy, and its absence (or late arrival) relates to unique conditions in those countries. The author also calls the premise of democratic prerequisites into question, proclaiming that the only requirement for a democratic transition is consensus around the state as the sole political entity. Hence, the democratic culture of the people, which cannot flourish under authoritarianism, is not a condition of transition, while elite democratic culture is. Another set of conclusions derived from Bishara's examination of the Arab cases clarifies that the army must remain separate from the transition process and that, as the comparison of Egypt and Tunisia demonstrates, the role of regional and external factors in transition is positively correlated with the geostrategic importance of the country.

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