Political Legitimacy in the Arab World: The Impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi Arabia and Egypt

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Political Legitimacy in the Arab World: The Impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi Arabia and Egypt

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Abstract: This paper discusses the political legitimacy of regimes in two significant Arab states following the Arab Spring: Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Using the concepts of eudaemonic legitimacy and the rentier state, the paper explores the reasons for which the late Saudi Arabian King Abdullah was able to maintain his regime’s legitimacy with minimal force while Egypt’s Mubarak was ousted at the hands of millions of angry protesters. Economic and social stability, it is concluded, is the major factor in ensuring the continued legitimacy of a political regime. Abdullah achieves this through a successful application of the rentier state supported by a wealthy economy, whereas Mubarak is unable to fulfil the needs of his citizens and thus his legitimacy, although legal-rational, is denied. The result is the enduring strength of one political system and another being thrown into revolution.

Keywords: Arab Spring; political legitimacy; revolution; Egypt; Saudi Arabia

Harold Lasswell famously describes politics as “who gets what, when and how.”1 Lasswell fails to acknowledge, however, who has the power to decide who gets what and, furthermore, by what authority they are able to claim the said power. Political legitimacy addresses these issues. The notion of legitimacy has recently been called into question following the Arab Spring. The fall of regimes in certain Arab countries as opposed to the ongoing strength of regimes in others calls for reflection on the nature, characteristics, and future of political

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legitimacy in many of these states. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, for example, experienced the Spring very differently; the late Saudi Arabian King Abdullah continued his regime throughout the Arab Spring whereas the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was politically ousted. The differences in the government structures of Saudi Arabia and Egypt and their ability, or inability, to survive the Arab Spring provide a platform for investigating how political legitimacy is granted, maintained, and lost. By studying the political and economic environments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt before the Arab Spring and the Spring's effects on both countries, it can be determined that continued political legitimacy is ensured by the economic strength of a government and its appropriate use of force, regardless of the means of authority by which the ruling elite governs.

Before analyzing the cases of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, it is first important to understand political legitimacy. Simply put, legitimacy is “the right to rule.” The “right” is instilled by the citizenry through their acceptance of a ruler’s authority to lead and by the people’s subsequent will to follow the ruler’s commands. In the most legitimate systems, citizens accept government decisions even if the decisions are made without their personal interests in mind. For example, the government of Country A may pass legislation calling for the increased taxation of the wealthy. In this case, Country A’s wealthy citizens would be unhappy. However, in a stable political system where the government is granted legitimacy from the public, the wealthy would comply with these laws and pay the higher taxes. Max Weber describes the idea of compliance as a fundamental aspect to the success and stability of a country by saying that “if the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be.”

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5 Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (lecture to the Free Students Union of Munich University, Munich, Germany, January 1919).
Lasswell’s description of politics, Weber outlines that there must be a strong system of compliance between those who decide “who gets what, when, and how” and those who receive it.

Weber's work on traditional and legal-rational authority additionally can be used to describe political legitimacy in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Weber describes traditional authority as “the unimaginably ancient recognition and habitual orientation to conform.”

Weber's description of political legitimacy offers an understanding of why Saudi Arabia and Egypt give legitimacy to two

6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Weber, “Politics as a Vocation.”
different types of authority. However, they do not explain how legitimacy can be maintained or, as in the case of Egypt, how it can be lost. Joseph Rothschild suggests that “legitimacy has to be re-earned constantly,”\(^{11}\) highlighting the need for an explanation as to how legitimacy can be maintained for years, decades, or, in some cases, centuries.

In his book \textit{Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy, and Survival}, Tim Niblock offers an explanation for the continued legitimacy experienced by the Saudi Arabian monarchy—a explanation that can also be applied to the failure of Mubarak’s regime in Egypt. Niblock’s concept of eudaemonic legitimacy explains how a ruler upholds a continued political reign. In a system of eudaemonic legitimacy, “the right to rule comes from the regime being deemed to constitute the best means for the population to fulfill its needs.”\(^{12}\) With this in mind, Seymour Lipset describes legitimacy as “the capacity of the system to engender and maintain belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society.”\(^{13}\) Together, the ideas of Niblock and Lipset suggest that while initial legitimacy may be granted due to traditional or legal-rational authority, long-lasting political legitimacy must be reinforced continuously through the fulfillment of the citizens’ needs.

Eudaemonic legitimacy can be further supported by the rentier state. Simon Mabon explains rentierism as “the population sacrificing political representation for no taxation.”\(^{14}\) The expectation of this agreement is then that “the ruling elite is responsible for the provision of welfare, in particular offering education and healthcare.”\(^{15}\) Therefore, the government's ability to fulfill the demands of the rentier state relies upon “the capacity of the...economy to withstand

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
this financial burden,” especially if the citizens do not anticipate paying taxes. Thus, a strong economy must exist to support the rentier state and thereby offer the ruling elite a high level of eudaemonic legitimacy.

Niblock neglects to mention, however, the most basic source of continued political legitimacy: force. The use of force, coercion, and fear can create compliance in an otherwise noncompliant population. Weber describes the state as “a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate violence.” Here Weber recognizes the need of force to maintain stability. As will be discussed, the use of force and coercion in Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring was in conjunction with acts to ensure the King’s eudaemonic legitimacy, whereas in Egypt Mubarak eventually had to rely on solely the oppression of his people to maintain his legitimacy, a decision that eventually resulted in his downfall.

Studying both eudaemonic legitimacy and force is useful in understanding the situations of Saudi Arabia and Egypt before, during, and after the Arab Spring. In Saudi Arabia the continued reign of the monarchy after the spring can be attributed to the kingdom’s eudaemonic legitimacy as well as its minimal use of force. In Egypt, the lack of eudaemonic legitimacy resulted in civil unrest, calling for an increased use of force leading up to and during the Arab Spring. The result was the collapse of the Mubarak regime.

Saudi Arabia’s eudaemonic legitimacy was formed by the Saudi government’s success in supporting its people with a strong economy since the mid-20th century. Saudi Arabia’s economic prowess is attributed to one factor: oil. The growth of oil exports reshaped the Saudi Arabian economy and, as a result, the structure of the state. From 1938 to 1946 annual government revenue hovered between $14 million and $16 million, growing to $53 million in

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16 Ibid.
17 Weber, “Politics as a Vocation.”
1948, to $100 million in 1950, and surpassing $300 million in 1960. King Faisal used the nation’s oil wealth to restructure the Saudi Arabian government, allowing it to better serve its people. Toby Jones explains that Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth “is passed along in myriad social welfare programs that include free education, free health care, sweeping employment support, subsidies for industry and business, and even the provision of copious amounts of water.” The practice of Saudi Arabia’s wealth redistribution is rooted in the accomplishments of Faisal throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Between 1962 and 1979 “substantial programmes of planned economic and social development were initiated.” The success of these programmes “reflected and reinforced the power of the state’s leadership.”

Saudi Arabia saw improvements in healthcare, employment, education, and social security, all of which resulted in greater eudaemonic legitimacy for King Faisal through his ability to meet the needs demanded by the rentier state. In terms of healthcare, conditions in the 1960s were rudimentary. However, by 1979 “there were 67 hospitals and 824 health centres” in the country. The government also employed many more citizens in the public sector. In 1962, 36,776 employees were hired by the government, a number rising to 250,000 by 1979. Workers in the private sector were not ignored either; in 1969 King Faisal introduced labour legislation by “revising and improving working regulations and establishing a system of arbitration committees.” In addition to employment, education levels also increased. In 1960 only 22% of boys and 2% of girls attended school, but by 1981 the enrolment of boys and girls in school was

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 53.
23 Ibid., 48.
24 Ibid., 49.
81% and 43%, respectively. Many Saudi Arabians began pursuing post-secondary education as well. In 1964 less than 3,000 Saudi students were attending university, but by 1979 over 36,000 were working on professional degrees. Social security also saw greater expenditures. King Faisal supervised the “establishment of a social security system, making the state directly responsible for the care of the poor.” The government focused on providing for its citizens, especially for those without the capacity to do so for themselves. Domestic spending on social security was 2.6 million riyals in 1964, but by 1978 spending reached 146.5 million riyals in the national currency, the Saudi riyal.

The increased investment in social reform can again be linked directly to the strength of Saudi Arabian oil exports. National revenue reached $300 million by the 1960s. By the 1970s the kingdom was bringing in between $22 billion and $36 billion annually, and Saudi oil exports only continued to grow into the 21st century. Between 2008 and 2010, the Saudi Arabian kingdom brought in “over $500 billion in oil revenue.” Jones describes the use of oil wealth “as a way to assimilate potential dissidents.” Faisal’s ability to effectively use the economic resources of the nation to benefit his people provided a strong source of eudaemonic legitimacy for his regime. As a result, the Saudi monarchy was able to avoid political unrest throughout the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century due to its capacity to maintain the material happiness and wellbeing of its people. King Abdullah’s response to the Arab Spring demonstrates the state’s continued use of economic resources to maintain a stable political system. Growing tensions in the Arab world called for Abdullah to take action. His response was to release a plan

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25 Ibid., 53.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 49.
28 Ibid., 53.
29 Ibid., 52.
30 Jones, “Saudi Arabia Versus the Arab Spring,” 2.
31 Ibid.
for welfare reform totaling $36 billion, with the intention to use a further $94 billion in the coming years.\textsuperscript{32} The promise of more funding helped to calm much of the unrest in the nation and reassert the legitimacy of the kingdom.

In Egypt, Mubarak was unable to create a similar basis of eudaemonic legitimacy for his regime. During the first decade of his rule, Mubarak was successful in gaining support across the nation. He enforced the rule of law and encouraged parliamentary elections, contributing to his legal-rational legitimacy.\textsuperscript{33} He also freed members of the Muslim Brotherhood from prison and allowed them to run for election in the People’s Assembly.\textsuperscript{34} Despite his initial support, Mubarak’s failure came as a result of poor economic planning. In 1979 Egypt received $1.1 billion in foreign aid from the United States and over twice that in military aid.\textsuperscript{35} The American funds were used for “the importation of American arms, capital goods, and food.”\textsuperscript{36} When this aid began to drop, Mubarak continued the infatah (opening) of the economic policies of his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, “with the hope that they would jolt the economy into action.”\textsuperscript{37} However, Mubarak’s liberal economic approach saw little success. By 2005, poverty levels in Egypt were the same as they had been between 1980 and 1990. About 20\% of Egyptians lived in poverty, with 1 in every 5 citizens being unable to meet their basic needs for survival.\textsuperscript{38} The poor economic situation can be attributed to the shift in the government’s economic focus to foreign trade in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{39} The result was a privatization of services such as water, electricity, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Mabon, “Kingdom in Crisis?” 533.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Tignor, Egypt: A Short History, 290.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 288.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., A Brief History of Egypt (New York: Facts On File, 2008), 214-215.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Tignor, Egypt: A Short History 288.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 289.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Goldschmidt, A Brief History of Egypt, 215.
\end{itemize}
telephone.⁴⁰ Khalid Ali, former Director of the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, explains that services such as these, along with education, healthcare, and housing, “were all transformed from rights into commodities, available to anyone who could pay the cost.”⁴¹ Ali quotes Dr. Asim al-Dassuqi in calling Mubarak’s economic approach “a free-market policy that left people to the vagaries of supply and demand.”⁴² The impact on the citizens is highlighted by Ann Lesch, who, referring to a World Bank report, claims that “62% of Egyptians were struggling to subsist on less than $2 a day.”⁴³

Employment conditions were also poor in Egypt. The growth of employment between 1990 and 2005 remained at only 2.6%, a rate unable to create jobs for the new high school and university graduates each year.⁴⁴ The struggle to find employment combined with the difficulty of simply keeping up with the cost of living took away any form of eudaemonic legitimacy from Mubarak’s regime; thus Egypt is a stark contrast from Abdullah’s regime, which continues to provide for its people through its economic strength. While Mubarak’s economic policy did little for the people, Egypt’s GDP experienced a jump from $25.5 billion in 1980 to $84.5 billion in 2006.⁴⁵ In addition, the economic growth rate, steady at 4.2% between 1990 and 2005, saw an increase to 6% in 2006 and 2007.⁴⁶ These economic indicators, combined with the social factors previously discussed, should be taken as a sign of great inequality as a result of Mubarak’s liberalization and privatization policies rather than positive economic growth for the nation.

⁴² Ibid., 21.
⁴³ Lesch, “Egypt’s Spring: Causes of the Revolution,” 42.
⁴⁴ Tignor, Egypt: A Short History, 289.
⁴⁵ Goldschmidt, A Brief History of Egypt, 220.
⁴⁶ Tignor, Egypt: A Short History, 289.
Unlike his Saudi Arabian counterpart, Mubarak was unable to instill a sense of eudaemonic legitimacy in his regime due to the poor employment conditions and widespread poverty in the nation. Whereas Saudi Arabia’s use of eudaemonic legitimacy provided stability, Egypt’s lack thereof caused civil unrest resulting in protest. Ali points out that in 2007, “not one day passed in Egypt without at least one labour protest happening.” In July of 2007 protests spread from Cairo to Giza after citizens did not have access to drinking water for more than 20 days. Ali explains that the lack of water is evidence of the government “neglecting the demands and vital needs of the citizenry,” violating the central requirement for eudaemonic legitimacy. Growing public demonstrations against the living conditions forced upon the Egyptian people were pressure enough for Mubarak to turn to the second form of continued political legitimacy, force, in an attempt to quell the sentiments of the rising opposition that would soon overthrow him during the Arab Spring.

Egypt’s choice of force to maintain the legitimacy of the political system is not the same as in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, the strength of the regime’s eudaemonic legitimacy proved useful in controlling domestic unrest. However, force was still used. Jones recalls how King Abdullah “ordered thousands of security forces to close off spaces for public assembly and to make clear that the penalties for unrest would be severe.” In addition, Abdullah turned to the religious establishment for support during the time of the Arab Spring and, in an attempt to control any rising domestic sentiments, it was declared that all public protests were considered un-Islamic. Therefore, Abdullah’s use of force in conjunction with his eudaemonic concessions

\[48\] Ibid., 21.
\[49\] Ibid.
\[50\] Jones, “Saudi Arabia Versus the Arab Spring,” 1.
\[51\] Ibid.
reinforced the legitimacy of the regime, allowing it to survive the Arab Spring. The use of force in Egypt, however, had a different effect. The absence of eudaemonic legitimacy called for the direct oppression of the Egyptian people in order for Mubarak to maintain his power. The story of Khaled Said is the most prominent example of force used by the regime. Said was beaten to death after being arrested in an Internet café in Alexandria in late 2010. His murder sparked same-day protests from over 70 men and women calling for the punishment of the officers responsible for the crime. The protestors “received the usual response: [being] beaten, dragged along the street, attacked by police dogs, and arrested.” The death of Said proved to be a uniting event across the nation, with 600 in attendance at his funeral and many more protesting silently, violently, and through candle light vigils across Egypt. A Facebook page titled “We are all Khaled Said” was established in support of regime change, attracting “hundreds of thousands of members.” Said’s death mobilized the population to unite, through the means of social media, to call for a revolution.

Due to Mubarak’s lack of economic power, he could not rely on eudaemonic legitimacy in the face of public political unrest as did King Abdullah; Mubarak had only the use of force on his side, a tool that eventually destroyed his remaining legitimacy rather than protect it. When millions filled the streets of Egypt in January 2011 in a united attempt to overthrow his regime, Mubarak had no choice but to relinquish his power. Mubarak’s legitimacy was lost through his inability to provide for the welfare of his people and through his subsequent use of force in the face of political unrest.

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
The events of the Arab Spring caused turmoil for many more countries besides Egypt. Across the Arab world, regimes fell, citizens died, and new political systems were pursued. However, the fact that certain regimes were able to withstand such intense international and domestic pressure raises the question about the continued legitimacy of political systems. Through the examples of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, continued political legitimacy can be determined based on the country’s economic situation and the government’s ability to provide for its people. The absence of this eudaemonic legitimacy will cause such extreme unrest that the use of force becomes insufficient in maintaining legitimacy, as was the case in Mubarak’s Egypt. However, with a strong base of eudaemonic legitimacy, unrest is unlikely and can easily be curbed with economic incentives, as King Abdullah exercised in the wake of the Arab Spring. Despite these two states giving legitimacy to two different types of authority, one thing remains the same: the political legitimacy of any government cannot be maintained without national economic strength.

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