



## The Predominant Factors for the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East

**Sana Sajad**

Student, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Turkey

\* Corresponding Author: **Sana Sajad**

---

### Article Info

**ISSN (online):** 2582-7138

**Impact Factor:** 5.307 (SJIF)

**Volume:** 04

**Issue:** 06

**November-December** 2023

**Received:** 03-10-2023;

**Accepted:** 04-11-2023

**Page No:** 892-896

### Abstract

A critical analysis of the authoritarianism that has persisted in the Middle East is presented in this research article. There are a number of elements that have been identified as contributing to its existence. The remains of colonialism, the intricacies of movements, the difficulties connected with ethnic diversity, and the ramifications of military operations are all examples of these concerns. Even though there have been efforts made to advance democratic principles, these impediments continue to impede progress. Specifically, the study underlines the possibilities for women's empowerment and emphasises the significance of adopting nuanced solutions. It also advises tackling the remaining legacies of colonialism and re-evaluating the role that the military plays in landscapes. Additional suggestions are included. The purpose of this article is to strengthen our understanding of the obstacles that are preventing progress in the Middle East and to provide suggestions for a meaningful way forward. This will be accomplished by presenting these various methods.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMRGE.2023.4.6.892-896>

**Keywords:** authoritarianism, democratization, autocracy, colonialism, gender inequality and civic engagement

---

### Introduction

The persistence of autocracy in the Middle East is a highly relevant topic, given its historical linkages to authoritarian rule. Despite several attempts at democratisation, autocrats continue to reign supreme across several nations within the region today. This research paper aims to assess why such undemocratic systems persist despite numerous attempts to establish democratic structures of governance that can provide citizens with greater freedom of expression, thought, and action (Milton, 2011) <sup>[14]</sup>. The first section of this paper will address how colonialism has played an influential role in shaping political climates that support these forms of governance within these regions. Furthermore, this study will try to evaluate the contribution of Islamist movements to hindering democratic progress in attempting to uphold their revolutionary ideals without undergoing the moderation processes required for successful transformation into democratic structures.

Moreover, ethnic diversity is another significant issue affecting democracy within this region as it creates divisions between communities along ethnic lines, thus making it challenging for them all together under one banner, making establishing governance systems a complicated task requiring significant cooperation between different groups (Owen, 2013; Anderson & Stansfield, 2014) <sup>[16, 1]</sup>. A key factor for building a fair and democratic society is empowering women while effectively handling gender inequalities. To understand why democracy has not flourished as expected across much of today's Middle East, we must examine closely how the military interacts within political structures and its relation with civilians. By studying these key factors carefully, we aim to explore why authoritarianism persists in the Middle East.

The Middle East comprises various countries, including Iran, Iraq, and North Africa. It includes Western Asia and ancient territories in North Africa, where civilisation first emerged millennia ago. Israel, Turkey, and other nations make up its contemporary political landscape by complexity – multidimensional, with continuing disputes involving several factions allied in various ways across numerous subjects (Gelvin, 2018) <sup>[10]</sup>. For instance, there is an ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and fights are taking place on Syrian soil. Moreover, Yemen is also experiencing ongoing conflict.

To make matters worse, there is hostility against Iran within the borders of surrounding countries. This region has historically been plagued by interference from outside superpowers (like Russia or the US).

### **The Influence of Colonialism on Political Climates Supporting Authoritarian Governance in the Middle East**

The political environment that sustains authoritarianism in the modern Middle East has been significantly shaped by colonisation. Colonialism made an enduring mark on the political culture of the area, leaving a legacy of authoritarianism and corruption that still impedes attempts at democratisation. European powers erected nations and set artificial borders that did not reflect the socioeconomic and political reality of the region. These fake nations were frequently governed by repressive regimes that the colonial powers established and upheld, favouring their interests and the interests of local elites while restricting popular participation in politics (Massad, 2001) <sup>[13]</sup>. Establishing these authoritarian governments was frequently portrayed as necessary for preserving peace and stability in the area. These administrations did not, however, address the underlying social and economic injustices that led to unrest among the populace and hostility to the status quo (Owen, 2013) <sup>[16]</sup>. Instead, authoritarian leaders employed oppressive measures to stifle criticism, strengthening their hold on power and aggravating social problems (Gelvin, 2018) <sup>[10]</sup>.

In addition to maintaining control over the area, the establishment of false governments and borders sought to preclude any challenges to colonial dominance by fostering ongoing instability. The colonial powers' policies and practices shattered the area's social and cultural fabric as well as its economic institutions. New classes of elites were more closely connected with colonial objectives and eventually rose to power in the newly independent governments; as a result, they were frequently drawn from minority or non-indigenous communities (Massad, 2001) <sup>[13]</sup>. Additionally, colonial powers often used authoritarian governmental systems to uphold their authority over the area while attempting to quell any criticism or challenge to their reign. The newly independent republics took on this legacy of authoritarianism and continued to crush dissent and opposition with oppressive measures (Milton-Edwards, 2018) <sup>[15]</sup>. The fact that many of the institutions created by the colonial powers were either kept untouched or only little altered means that this legacy of authoritarianism and corruption has endured for a long time after colonialism. To persist in power while crushing dissent, autocratic dictators frequently resort to crucial institutions such as the armed forces, bureaucracy and judicial system. Continuing authoritarianism across Middle Eastern nations owes some fault to colonialism's enduring economic influences. Extractive financial practices enforced by colonial powers resulted in raw commodity exports dominating the region's economy while creating a rentier class more reliant upon government-provided income than personal productivity. This reliance on the state makes it challenging to develop a stable and prosperous democracy since it fosters an atmosphere where economic disparity and corruption are commonplace. The Middle East's political and economic development has been influenced by colonialism, which has left behind a culture of authoritarianism and corruption that continues to prevent efforts to democratise the region (Anderson & Stansfield, 2014) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### **The Impact of Islamist Movements on Democratic Progress: Hindrances to Moderation and the Persistence of Authoritarianism**

Given that they do not always embrace intrinsically anti-democratic views, the relationship between Islamist movements and democracy is not straightforward. In some instances, Islamist movements have impeded democratic advancement by endorsing exclusivist ideologies that reject tolerance and pluralism in favour of imposing their brand of Islamic law. These movements might support an Islamic state or caliphate rather than democracy because they see it as a Western import incompatible with Islamic principles (Hinnebusch, 2006) <sup>[11]</sup>. However, in other instances, Islamist movements have embraced democratic principles and sought to advance their objectives inside democratic structures. Individuals seeking to progress their interests can explore electoral opportunities, form political factions, and engage in parliamentary affairs. Specific Islamist movements like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda have effectively risen to power through open democratic channels. These movements have undergone significant transformations from fundamentalist to more conservative parties, embracing democratic ideals and using democratic frameworks to further their objectives. Ennahda has participated in elections, established a political party, and engaged in parliamentary politics to balance their political and religious goals and respect for democratic institutions and norms. This indicates how Islamist movements can change and adapt, possibly advancing democracy (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013) <sup>[5]</sup>. Amidst such challenges lie opportunities for Islamist movements to seek a compromise between their political objectives rooted in religion vis-à-vis democratic systems that require institutions that are transparently guided by fair electoral practices while respecting individual liberty. Despite the intricacy of these competing demands on them, some Islamist groups have not always succeeded in furthering democracy's growth and vitality, often leading to autocratic regimes holding sway over many Muslim-majority countries. Some critics contend that Islamist movements, especially those that oppose plurality and tolerance, may strengthen authoritarianism by offering a narrative that is in opposition to the state's official ideology and eroding civil society (Bayat, 2007) <sup>[2]</sup>. The classic idea of democratisation, which holds that the development of democratic institutions and behaviours will result in the consolidation of democracy, has been unable to explain why authoritarianism persists in the Middle East.

The democratisation theory does not consider Middle Eastern cultural and socioeconomic specificities, such as how Islam influences political beliefs and practices. The region's historical, cultural, and social aspects should be better understood while approaching democratisation. Islamist movements have a complicated and nuanced connection with democracy; they are not intrinsically anti-democratic. While some activities have supported democratic principles and operated within democratic frameworks, others have impeded democratic advancement by endorsing exclusive ideologies and rejecting pluralism and tolerance. Blaming Islamist groups alone for authoritarianism continuation in the Middle East fails to provide a complete picture (Brumberg, 2002) <sup>[4]</sup>. Multiple causes and their interactions need consideration. To develop successful plans for democratic progress, an astute comprehension of the area's history, culture, and social dynamics is essential (Hinnebusch, 2006)

[11].

Nationalism and pan-Arabism have determined the Middle East's political climate. These ideologies first appeared as groups that pushed for Arab country emancipation and unity to reject colonial influences and assert a common Arab identity. It is crucial to note that similar movements have also been linked to authoritarian control (Masroot, 1992). In their goal of a unified Arab country, leaders who supported Pan-Arabism and nationalism frequently strove to consolidate power and centralise authority, sometimes at the price of democratic procedures. These leaders prioritised powerful central management and enforced harsh controls over political opposition and dissent to create an integrated Arab state (Khalidi, 1991). This authoritarian inclination hampered the development of democratic systems by undermining pluralism, repressing independent political movements, and restricting civil freedoms. Although nationalism and pan-Arabism have had noble goals of emancipation and unification, their affiliation with authoritarianism highlights the intricate relationships between ideology, the rule of law, and democratic development in the Middle East.

### **Ethnic Diversity and the Challenges of Establishing Inclusive Governance in the Middle East**

Inclusionary governing has been an uphill battle in the Middle East primarily due to its ethnically diverse population. With various communities, such as Arabs and non-Arabs, having contrasting goals and expectations, meeting everyone's needs through equitable representation remains elusive. As Walker Connor contends, the idea of a nation-state is frequently at odds with the reality of ethnic variety inside a nation, which can result in ethnic conflicts and difficulties in forming a governance system (Connor, 1994). It can be challenging to manage and balance the interests of many ethnic and religious groups while creating multi-ethnic states in the Middle East. Because colonial powers drew borders arbitrarily, they ignored pre-existing social and cultural dynamics, which sparked tensions and conflicts between distinct communities living in the same state. Traditional forms of government based on regional identities were upended by the imposition of external rule, which also splintered the political landscape.

The intense feeling of tribal and sectarian identification common in the Arab world, frequently connected to particular ethnic or religious affinities, has traditionally had a tremendous impact on individuals and communities. It can be challenging to promote a feeling of shared purpose and similar goals within a multi-ethnic state since this tribal and sectarian identity can occasionally eclipse the idea of a single national identity (Brumberg, 2002) [4]. The lack of formal institutional channels for resolving disputes only serves to aggravate the issue of ethnic diversity in the Middle East. Many nations in the region have historically handled ethnic and sectarian conflicts through unofficial networks of patronage and tribal ties rather than depending on well-established legal and political frameworks. These unofficial networks frequently significantly impact maintaining social order and settling conflicts (Marsot, 1992) [12]. However, because decisions are made based on relationships and allegiances rather than on standards of justice and equality, they can also perpetuate a system of favouritism and exclusion. The absence of established institutional processes for resolving disputes could impede the growth of a

functioning democracy that can cater to all individuals' various demands and interests.

Additionally, relying on unofficial networks can perpetuate inequalities and strengthen existing power dynamics (Droz, 2011). Compared to marginalised populations, some ethnic or sectarian groups may have more connections and sway within these networks. This could lead to the exclusion and marginalisation of particular groups, escalating tensions and impeding efforts to advance democracy (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016).

### **Voices of Women's Movements: Challenges Faced and Anticipated in the Fight Against Authoritarian Rule**

Women's movements have been essential in opposing authoritarian authority and promoting change through collective action in the Middle East. Traditional gender norms and power structures have frequently forced women into inferior roles in patriarchal countries in the Middle East, limiting their prospects for political participation and social empowerment. Women's movements, on the other hand, have developed as change agents that aggressively oppose and challenge these standards. They have worked together to demand more inclusion and involvement in political processes, rethink gender roles, and overthrow repressive structures. Women's movements in the area have participated in various activism activities, including planning protests, marches, and neighbourhood campaigns (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016). These movements have brought attention to the problems of gender inequality, discrimination, and violence against women by organising women and elevating their collective voices. To modify public discourse and sway legislative changes, they have contested social norms and argued for recognising women's rights as fundamental human rights.

The Tunisian Women's March was pivotal when Tunisian women came together to organise extensive protests and rallies against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's oppressive regime following the Arab Spring uprisings. The movement was known by two names – The March of Women for Equality and The Women's March in Tunisia – both aimed to end the existing state of gender inequality prevailing within their country while securing fair representation through constitutional amendments. By recognising how issues related to gender intersect with broader social and political struggles against authoritarianism, women were able to highlight that various forms of oppression are interconnected and cannot be separated. Women's movements have strengthened their efforts towards achieving social justice by forging alliances with human rights organisations, labour unions, and pro-democracy groups (Berkovitch & Moghadam, 1999). In the Middle East, women's movements against autocracy and gender injustice encounter several obstacles. The opposition and persecution from authoritarian regimes are significant obstacles that women's groups in the Middle East must overcome. These governments frequently see women's activism as a challenge to their authority. In reaction, they use a variety of strategies to muzzle and undermine the opinions and activities of women. Arrests, imprisonment, intimidation, surveillance, and censorship are examples of state repression. These behaviours discourage women from participating in activism and restrict their capacity to unite and mobilise for change. Women's movements face significant challenges from patriarchal traditions and conservative social norms. These



standards constrain women's participation in the public and political arenas, which impose rigid gender roles.

The opposition from established power structures that want to keep things as they are is another difficulty. Women's social justice and equality demands are frequently opposed by influential individuals, conservative political groups, and religious organisations. These individuals might undermine the legitimacy of women's actions, cast doubt on their objectives, or erect obstacles. Women's Middle Eastern movements encounter various difficulties in their struggle against authoritarian authority. Some of these obstacles are repression by the government, old power systems, and conservative social values. To overcome these challenges, one must be strategically organised, resilient, and aware of the intricate dynamics at work (Milton-Edwards, 2011) <sup>[14]</sup>.

### **The Military's Role in Middle Eastern Politics: Implications for Democratic Progress**

The region's political environment has been affected by various factors such as colonial history, geopolitical tensions and maintaining regime stability, which have resulted in an influential role for military personnel. The military keeps its interests in mind while participating actively in political decisions to maintain its control of society. Whenever under foul play, state or partial governance takeover happens through military coup d'états or similar tactics. This suppresses public opinion while minimising civil democracy-based presence resulting from resistance against being successfully established, furthering their involvement across domains like politics and economics (Bayat, 2007) <sup>[2]</sup>. Nasser's administration saw this happening when Egypt turned its back on the monarchy, replacing it with Republicans at the hands of their highly influential army amidst firm yet silenced protests against them.

Similarly, the military played a big part in running Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Former military officer Saddam Hussein centralised authority inside the military establishment and utilised it to stifle resistance, uphold control, and forward the goals of his dictatorship. Military interventions are frequently followed by authoritarian administrations that obstruct the creation of truly democratic institutions, even though they may initially be motivated by widespread unrest or the need for stability (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013) <sup>[5]</sup>. Because of the military's disproportionate influence in politics, civil society organisations and the views of ordinary citizens may be marginalised, preventing the emergence of pluralistic and participatory democratic systems (Owen, 2013) <sup>[16]</sup>. The Arab upheavals brought about necessary political changes, but the military's influence continued to play a vital role in determining how these changes turned out. For instance, the army was significant in Egypt after the revolt. The military took over the government when President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown. However, the military continued to have a substantial impact on political processes rather than helping to ensure a seamless transition to democracy. This sparked a problematic and ongoing conflict over the country's democratic consolidation. The continuation of the military's political involvement, notably its influence over important institutions and decision-making, posed obstacles to developing a genuinely democratic system. The situation in Tunisia, in contrast, is depicted as having a different dynamic (Connor, 1978) <sup>[7]</sup>. Comparatively to Egypt, Tunisia's military engaged in politics less overtly. As a result, the transition went more smoothly, and democratisation

advanced more quickly. Tunisia's military's less direct engagement in politics helped to foster a more favourable climate for the establishment of democracy by giving civilian actors and institutions more room to influence the transition. The military can provide stability and protection during political change, but its power and influence can also create barriers to forming true democracy. To encourage democratic development in the Middle East, it is essential to balance the military's role and that of civilian control and democratic values (Droz-Vincent, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

Finding solutions to the persistence of autocracy in the Middle East is challenging as it involves numerous complex factors. These include the legacy of colonialism imposed on artificial states with oppressive regimes that foster authoritarian governance structures. Islamist movements differ significantly in approach and sometimes hinder efforts toward democratisation; however, some embrace democratic ideals working within established frameworks for change. The region's ethnic diversity presents a complex challenge to establish inclusive governance systems while women's movements try to effect changes; they face stiff resistance from conservative social norms and traditional power structures reinforced by repressive regimes such as those existing across the region (Berkovitch & Moghadam, 1999). Furthermore, throughout history, military involvement in political matters has commonly ended up restricting civilian participation, leading to dictatorship governments being formed instead of democratic ones. In light of these challenges, promoting democracy across this part of the world necessitates recognizing key issues like overcoming colonialism legacies and promoting inclusivity through dialogue, which is critical if we hope ever to achieve genuine progress. A key factor for building a fair and democratic society is empowering women while effectively handling gender inequalities. In addition, achieving greater participation and democracy requires reducing the military's role in politics alongside fortifying civilian institutions. It is essential to appreciate that achieving democracy in the Middle East involves various facets requiring a comprehensive approach. A more democratic and inclusive future for the region can be realised if we comprehend the present-day historical, social, and political factors.

### **References**

1. Anderson L, Stansfield G. *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy or Division?*. St. Martin's Press, 2014.
2. Bayat A. *Making Islam democratic: Social movements and the post-Islamist turn*. Stanford University Press, 2007.
3. Berkovitch N, Moghadam VM. Middle East politics and women's collective action: Challenging the status quo. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*. 2007; 6(3):273-291.
4. Brumberg D. Democratization in the Arab world? The trap of liberalized autocracy. *Journal of democracy*. 2002; 13(4):56-68.
5. Cavatorta F, Merone F. *Moderation through exclusion? The journey of the Tunisian*, 2013.
6. Cleveland WL, Bunton M. *A history of the modern Middle East*. Hachette UK., 2016.
7. Connor W. *A nation is a nation, is a state, is an ethnic*

- group is a. *Ethnic and racial studies*. 1978; 1(4):377-400.
8. Droz-Vincent P. Authoritarianism, revolutions, armies and Arab regime transitions. *The International Spectator*. 2011; 46(2):5-21.
  9. Ennahda changed from a fundamentalist to a conservative party. *Democratization*, 20(5):857-875.
  10. Gelvin JL. *The new Middle East: what everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
  11. Hinnebusch R. Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique. *Democratization*. 2006; 13(3):373-395.
  12. Marsot ALAS. Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Pp. 458. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 1992; 24(3):501-502.
  13. Massad JA. *Colonial effects: The making of national identity in Jordan*. Columbia University Press, 2001.
  14. Milton-Edwards B. *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011—third edition). Polity, 2011.
  15. Milton-Edwards B. *Contemporary politics in the Middle East*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.
  16. Owen R. *State, power and politics in the making of the modern Middle East*. Routledge, 2013.